

# Goodbye to Bob



**A Tribute  
by  
Tommy Towery**

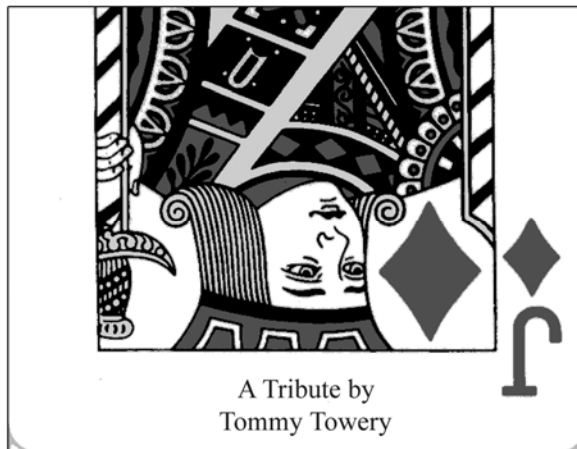
**Printed by Instantpublisher**

**Copyright © 2007**

**Tommy Towery**

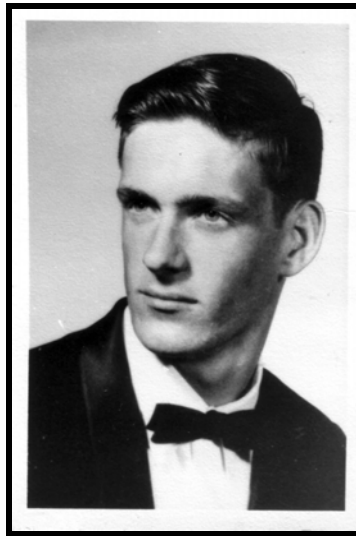


Goodbye to Bob



A Tribute by  
Tommy Towery

*In memory  
of my friend Bob...*



*We cut the deck and drew the Jack of Diamonds -described as a card that  
denotes ambition without focus, sporty, lively youth.*

*Through the years we'll all be friends wherever we may be...*

*ILYM*

*2007*

## **The Phone Call**

“It’s terminal you know?”

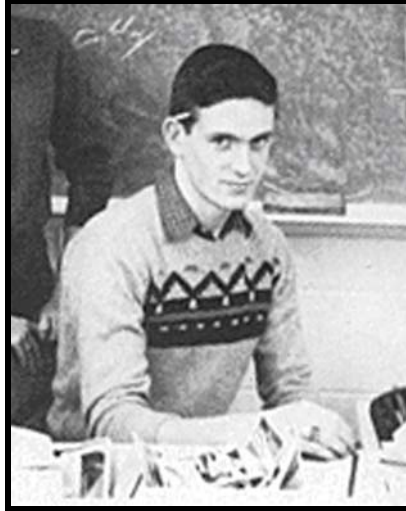
I was speechless. The truth of the matter was that I did not know. I sat silent for what seemed like an eternity to me but was probably only a few seconds in real time. My mind raced for an answer to the question. I have always been quick-witted (some even say smart-alecked) and I always had a snappy comeback to almost every question directed to me. This one caught me off guard.

I finally replied, “Well, Bob, life is terminal for all of us. Isn’t it?”

That was the moment when I found out that I was about to lose the best friend I’ve had since high school. This was a friendship that had lasted almost half a century. It had endured graduations, moves, marriages, children, divorces, and even wars. It had survived despite the changes that occur in the hectic lives which we all live. Sure other people have had friends longer than that, but not me – not real friends. I still kept up with many of my high school buddies, but there was only one in the group that I had always called my best friend and that was Bob.

We were talking on the phone one day in January, catching up on things and events that had happened over the recent holidays, when he posed that question to me. He had found out four months earlier that his cancer had come back and the doctors had only given him six months to live. Even as my best friend Bob had always been a very private person and had kept the diagnosis to himself and in doing so kept me in the dark about the outlook until the phone call that day.

It was a somber moment in my life.



*Bob, at his typewriter at Lee High School.*

## **The Seeds of Friendship**

In 1960, the summer before I started the 9th grade, my family moved across town and I woke up one morning to find myself in a new school district. Most of my friends were left behind to continue at my old school without me. Of course I knew a few people at the new school but Bob was not one of them. He spent his early years in Mississippi and when he was in junior high school his dad moved the family to Huntsville. His dad was a master carpenter and had been lured to Northern Alabama to work at Redstone Arsenal. The “Space Race” created a major population explosion in Huntsville at the time and skilled craftsmen were in great demand. Bob and I both ended up being in the first real class at the new Lee High School that had been designed to meet that growth. I signed up for the typing course offered that fall, and first met Bob when he was in the same class. We learned “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy old dog” together, but we did not become immediate friends.

When I first met him, Bob worked after school as a car hop at a local drive-in café. We saw each other in the classes we shared, but did little with each other outside of school. I loved the cheap 10-cent hamburgers at the place where he worked so we were often brought together in that environment. We always chatted when he brought the tray out and hung it on my car.

It was the year after we learned typing together when our friendship blossomed. It began when we shared a room on a high school newspaper trip to a seminar being held at the University of Alabama. I cannot begin to document all the fun that we had together and all the running around we did, but anyone that had a best friend in high school should be able to relate to our friendship.

In my senior year, I started a journal that became a record of the people and events in my life throughout the rest of my high school days. Somehow the journal survived 12 house moves in the next two and a half decades without getting lost, destroyed, or thrown away. In 1988 it became the basis for my first book - “*A Million Tomorrows... Memories of the Class of '64.*”

Bob played a prominent role in my activities that were documented in the journal and book. In the introduction I explained the people that were a part of my life 25 years earlier. In the chapter about friends I wrote the following:

## *Goodbye to Bob*

*By the time I was a senior in high school there was one true friend with whom I was able to share my innermost secrets as a teenager. I could turn to him for advice and count on him in time of need. We could talk of love and glory and doubts and fears. That friend was Bob.*

We had some exciting and unforgettable times and memorable road trips, especially through the eyes of an Alabama boy who had traveled little in his short life. The trip to the University of Alabama was the first one. In 1962, Bob accompanied his mother to his hometown of Gulfport, Mississippi. I went down later in the summer with his dad to bring them home. That was my first visit to the Gulf Coast and I loved the adventurous atmosphere of the all-night road trip. Gulfport was so different from Huntsville and that visit enlightened me to the environment in which Bob had grown up. To me it seemed like "Sin City" with its all-night coastal bars, cleavage-showing cocktail waitresses, and slot machines and other gambling devices in back rooms or sometimes out in the open. Even an immature looking 16-year-old like me was free to enter the clubs with no questions asked. Bob and I ran around for a couple of days and nights on the coast, doing nothing special, but enjoying the "wild" life of the coastal town.

We continued to run together when we returned to Huntsville, mostly late at night since Bob worked evenings at the hamburger joint. Our primary activity was driving up and down the Huntsville Parkway in his '52 Ford "The Grey Ghost" or my '53 Ford which we called "The Bomb." On the north end of the strip was a Shoney's Big Boy Drive-In restaurant and on the south end was a place called Jerry's Drive-In. We drove what seemed like never ending loops between those two establishments looking for members of the opposite sex, but usually striking out.



*Me and my 1953 Ford, which we called "The Bomb".*

In the summer of 1963, I took another memorable trip with him and his mother to visit his brother in Washington D.C. It was one of the neatest summer road trips I ever experienced, and another large bonding period in our friendship. By the time the all-night driving was finished we were tired and punch drunk. We laughed a lot on that trip. We didn't do all the tourist things we could have done on a first visit to our nation's capital, but I do remember that we went to see the Washington Senator's play the Chicago White Sox on July 29th, 1963. I still have the ticket stub.

Back in Huntsville Bob and I continued with our visits to Saturday night dances, parties, and school ballgames while putting hundreds of miles on our cars cruising up and down the Parkway. We ran around a lot with two other friends, David France and Lewis Brewer. We had a close call with a Halloween "trick" involving raw eggs, water balloons, toilet-papering a yard on the rough side of town, and a carload of angry egg-faced, water-soaked, gang-type fellows who wanted to teach us a lesson in manners. By the end of our senior school year you rarely saw one of us without the other one being close at hand.

## The First Final Goodbye

My mother remarried and moved to Memphis the summer before Bob and I started our year as members of the first graduating class of Lee High School. Because of that move, I decided to attend Memphis State University in an attempt to cut college expenses by living at home. As graduation day drew nearer, I was more and more aware that my time of running around with Bob was drawing to an inevitable end. I almost had a panic attack when I learned that my mother's plans were to come down on graduation day and the very next day head back to Memphis with me and all my possessions accompanying her.

Bob failed English Literature the first semester of our senior year and was informed in January that he would not be allowed to graduate with the rest of the class. Even though he wouldn't graduate with me that night, we still had a memorable activity planned for the evening. Two of the nice girls that we sometimes ran with wanted to see what it was like to get drunk and they wanted us to chaperon them while they did that. Bob got some vodka from a bootlegger and a half gallon of orange juice from Mug's Up Root Beer and mixed up a jug of screwdrivers. We drove Dianne and Carolyn out to a deserted parking area in a new sub-division and granted them their wish. About 3am we finally took them to Dianne's house and sat in the car watching to insure they got safely inside. Not wanting to face the wrath of Dianne's father, we waited until the porch light came on and the door opening and then used our good judgment and drove off into the still night air leaving the two drunken girls giggling on the porch.

When I got home that night, I wrote about the goodbyes in my journal.

*I had never thought about how I would be able to say good-bye to Dianne. If I had not faded into the early morning darkness, leaving her standing giggling on her front porch, it would have been an emotional good-bye that would have been almost impossible for us to say. I was spared from one of the hardest good-byes that I would have ever had to say. I was then faced with the same problem with Bob. The two of us who were such good friends, now had to say good-bye. It was a true good-bye. It was not a "See you tomorrow night," or "See you at school tomorrow." We didn't know when we would ever see each other again. It was good-bye. I would leave in a few hours, with all my possessions. Bob would remain behind for summer school. He was unsure what would follow in his life.*

When I said goodbye to Bob that night, I truly feared that I would never see him again. We were young and the world was big. I was moving away from Huntsville. Places were more distant back then than today – not necessarily in miles, but certainly in time.

My final entry into my journal that graduation night was a philosophical one. It simply stated, "I guess I'm a man now."

The next morning, probably before Bob had crawled out of bed, I saw my childhood days and my hometown of Huntsville disappear in the family car's rearview mirror.

*Goodbye to Bob*

it. I  
in a Tommy,  
and I  
miss  
ived  
May you receive  
all the luck you deserve  
in the future and especially  
in the journalism field. It's  
been a lot of fun knowing you  
these past years and I hope will  
always remain the best of friends.  
Bob Walker

*The comments Bob wrote in my senior yearbook.*

## **The Weaning Visits**

A few weeks after my move to Memphis my homesickness was so bad that I was forced to make a weekend trip back to Huntsville for closure. I visited with all my friends and family and felt better when I returned. There were no sad goodbyes that trip and it appeared life would go on. I had faith that I could still maintain my friendships, even if it was by long distance.

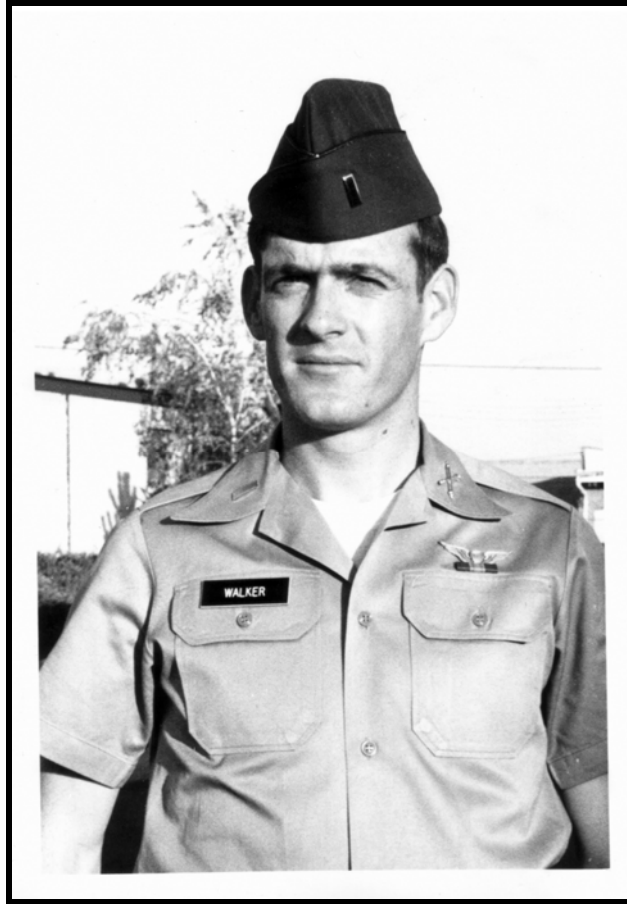
Throughout the rest of the year I made a couple of other trips back to Huntsville to visit my grandmother and friends. Bob had finished summer school and received his diploma and secured his place in the Class of '64. When I went back to Huntsville for New Year's Eve of 1964 Bob was dating Dianne's sister-in-law and she got me a date with her cute cousin. There for a short moment in time it was one big happy family as we welcomed in the New Year.

In the summer of '65 I went down to visit my grandmother again and for the first time since I had moved away Bob was gone. He and his family had finally moved back to Gulfport. I called him and he talked me into coming down to visit him before I went back to Memphis. I made my first train trip that week, from Huntsville to Gulfport, and for several days Bob and I once again were transported back in time and enjoyed carefree times. We reveled in the nightlife of the wild coastal town that I had come to enjoy.

I was unaware that a storm was brewing on the horizon – literally! While I was there a hurricane turned and headed toward Gulfport. Bob and I decided to walk from his parent's house down to the beachfront to see the big waves come ashore. It was exciting then, and we laughed and shouted to each other through the wind and rain as the storm grew more intense. You know, today that seems really stupid! We were walking down the middle of the partially flooded street and the trees limbs were cracking and breaking in front of us and power lines were sparking like the Fourth of July. It didn't matter, the two of us continued on our quest, neither one daring to be the first to chicken out and head back to safety.

Though we survived the night without getting blown away, the railroad bridges between Gulfport and Mobile did not. Every bridge along that strip of the Gulf coast had been washed away by the storm surge, so Bob and his brother had to drive me to Mobile to catch the train back to Huntsville. We had weathered the storm and survived. Once again I had no idea when we would see each other again, but there was calmness I felt with the belief that all would be well instead of the panic I had felt on graduation night.

It would be four more years before Bob and I would get to visit in person again.



*The photo I took of Bob the day he left for Vietnam.*

## **The Second Final Goodbye**

The year was 1969 and the country was deeply engaged in a war in a distant country called Vietnam. As is the inherent nature of all wars, people were dying. In this instance and in this war, Americans were dying in increasingly larger and scarier numbers each week. One's chances of survival depended greatly upon several factors, including God's will or your own good luck depending upon your religious beliefs. I am a firm believer in the saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. Another factor which weighed heavily into the live-or-die equation was the specialty or job which you would be doing in the designated war zone in your service to your country.

Of course, being a foot soldier or "grunt" gave you a bigger chance of becoming a casualty of war than many other specialties. When I first learned that Bob had graduated from junior college and gone into the Army, I was concerned. People in the Army during that period eventually ended up in Vietnam. Even though he would be an officer, Second Lieutenants were known to have a poor survival rate. No one wanted to be a grunt in that war. When I got one of my infrequent letters from him one day and found out he was on his way to school to learn to be an artillery officer, I was a little less worried about him. Chances were that with such a specialty code he would still be headed for Vietnam. My one consolation was that I knew that artillery officers were further away from combat than the front line troops, and that odds were in his favor that being assigned to an artillery unit he would not have to lead patrols into open rice patties or into jungle ambush situations. For that I was relieved.

My relief was short-lived. A few months later I got another letter informing me that he was, in fact, not going to be a field artillery officer after all. As I read the scribbled words in his letter I said to myself "Thank God."

## *Goodbye to Bob*

The words had barely left my lips when I read the rest of the paragraph. He would instead be trained to fly helicopters. It did not take a rocket scientist to realize that helicopters were prime targets in that conflict.

Since Bob had only attended a two-year college and I went to a four-year one, he was at least two years ahead of me in getting the opportunity to go overseas and see combat. I was still in training for what would eventually lead to my B-52 combat crew days when Bob stopped in to see me on his way to fight the war. I was stationed in Sacramento, California, at the time and he was scheduled to catch a flight out of nearby Travis Air Force Base.

My time available to spend with him was limited because of my training schedule but somehow I found the time to pick him up at the airport and take him to my apartment. That gave him his first opportunity to meet my first wife Carol. I had met her in Memphis and since we had only been married a little over a year he had never met her. Bob actually got to spend more time with Carol on that visit than with me, but we did have an opportunity to share some quality time before he had to leave.

The time spent on visiting during that short trip would never have the impact upon me that the goodbye had. I spent 20 years in the military, but never felt the awareness of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse like I did when Bob was getting ready to leave that day. I took him out in the front yard and took his picture with a fear that it might be the last photo I ever took of him. I had my wife put the photo in our family picture album and wrote beneath it "Tommy's best friend Bob Walker, the day he left for Vietnam." I wanted that photo documented so that future generations would understand what it was saying. I later regretted that I had not had one made of the two of us standing together – comrades in arms.

In my 20 years of military service I have seen many other friends go off to war, just as I have gone myself. I never had the feeling of finality that I did that day. For Army helicopter crews in Vietnam, risk was a daily experience. Before the Vietnam War was over 5,086 helicopters were destroyed. The total number of helicopter pilots reported killed in the Vietnam War was 2,202.

It was with great regard that I said what I feared was a final goodbye to Bob for the second time in my life.

The photo of Bob going to war in his Army uniform is still in my "family" picture album.

## **The Military Years**

Bob's departure for Vietnam was closer to a final goodbye than I had ever imagined. I didn't hear much from him while he was there, but each night I watched the news and heard about the number of helicopters that were being shot down. Although I didn't get letters I kept remembering something that he had once told me about our friendship. There's a long story behind that.

For the first few months after we graduated I wrote to him quite often. I was working at a YMCA summer camp, and I wrote Bob telling him about all the fun I was having at the summer camp but how I missed running around with him and chasing girls.

I continued to write long and detailed letters, and he continued to write little ones with long periods passing between the ones he did write. I got mad one day and wrote him saying that if he didn't start writing me more that our friendship was over. I didn't mean it, but I wanted to emphasize my point.

Bob wrote me back and his straightforward logic made me feel foolish. He said in simple terms that just because he didn't write very often didn't mean that he wasn't thinking about me and that it didn't mean that we were not still friends. He told me it would not be much of a true friendship if I cut it off just because he didn't write me letters. I thought about it, agreed, and never fussed at him again for not writing.

So, when he was in Vietnam, he did not write much and I knew not to expect him to. It was many years later before I found out some of the things that happened to him but still he never shared many of the details. For years I did not know about his Purple Heart, Air Medals, or the time he was shot down by enemy fire three times in one day.

I moved three times because of my training while he was overseas and during those moves and address changes we lost touch. That was in 1970. It would be many years before we again made contact, but not a week went by that I did not think of him and the good times we had shared as teenagers.

During that communication-blackout period he got out of the Army and went through many life cycles, including marriage, fathering a son and a daughter, and a divorce. He eventually ended up in Florida, and somehow I knew that, but that was all I knew...Bob was in Florida – no city, no address, no phone number. At least I knew for sure he made it home from Vietnam.

There was a 10-year high school class reunion in 1974, but Bob was not there nor was his name or address listed in the class directory. It's hard to believe now, but in the age before the Internet and web search engines, it was difficult to find someone who moved around as often as one did in the military.

Finally in 1979, at the 15-year reunion, we both were able to attend and saw each other for the first time since the day he left for Vietnam. We visited with Lewis and David who were the two guys with whom we shared the memorable Halloween night when we were seniors. Ironically, when we had our class photo made that night, Bob and I were standing together behind Dianne and Carolyn – who were neither drunk nor giggling that night, but with whom we had some great laughs remembering graduation night episode.



*Dianne and Carolyn on front row, me and Bob behind.*

When the 20th year class reunion rolled around Bob had moved again and I was still in the Air Force but was stationed in England and not able to attend. During that move, I lost touch with Bob once again.

In 1988 when I started writing my book, my desire and need to find Bob intensified. The book would not be complete without an updated story about him. One of my university friends worked for the campus police department and in a conversation one day I told him about the problem I was having locating my old friend. He asked me if I knew his driver's license number, or social security number. I did not. He then asked if I knew his birthday. Yes I did. I had always remembered Bob's birthday. "Beware the Ides of March!" I said. It was March 15th, 1946. I gave him the date and Bob's full name and a couple of days later I walked into my cubicle and found a sheet of paper on my desk. It was a plain piece of paper that had Bob's name and address on it. It was not signed and no one saw who had placed it there. A call to information got me his phone number and after many phone calls I was filled in on enough of Bob's life to continue the work on my book.

## **After The Book**

It was 1991 when I finally got all the edits finished and published my book about the reflections on the events and friends of my high school days. I did my best to get what information I needed to bring my readers up to date on the life of my friend.

I sent a copy of the book to Bob and he was amazed that I had such complete memories of that period in our lives. Even in high school he was quiet about certain things in his life even though we were best of friends. Whenever we were together we usually talked about the trivial good old days we spent together and less about the other times. That was one of the bonds of our friendship, escaping from the troubled world in which we live to the easier times of our happy-go-lucky youth.

We started, or re-started, a ritual soon after we reconnected. Each year on his birthday I called him, and each year on my birthday he called me. Those calls were always made, and many times between those two significant dates we would also talk. Neither of us seemed to be able to work out the time and money needed for a personal visit, but we were content in the arrangement we had and confident that our friendship was secure.

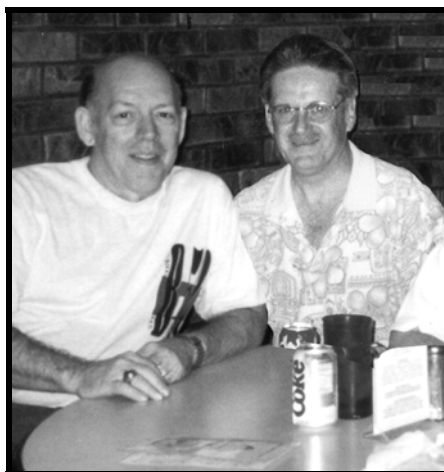


*Me and Bob at 1995 reunion.*

In 1995 there was another high school class reunion and with a little encouragement on my part, Bob showed up. As with any reunion of that sort, we reverted back to our high school habits and activities. I had just gone through a divorce so Bob and I had plenty of time to visit and catch up. We drove around town looking at all the changes and remembering all the places that were the sites of many of our adventures. We cruised the strip, ate at the hamburger joints, and checked out our old high school. We drove to the sites of dilapidated drive-in movies and laughed at the times we had snuck our friends inside by putting them in the trunks of our cars. For that weekend, we were once again as close to teenagers as we could be and still stay out of jail. We were once again reminded why we were best friends and when we departed we knew that this was not a final goodbye.

In the next five years I made two more trips to Florida and on each one took side trips to spend some time with Bob. On the first one I met Bob's friend Lynne. She had only known Bob as an adult and was fascinated with the stories I shared about Bob's past life. Some of them she believed and some she was sure we made up. It was a short visit but we enjoyed walking on Daytona Beach and hanging out at his favorite dive. On the next trip we spent our time chasing balls instead of girls as we played golf for the first and only time together. Bob beat me, but spending time riding around in the golf cart and looking for lost balls gave us plenty of time to chat and laugh. It didn't matter that it was also a short trip, since we were making plans to get together in Huntsville at the end of the summer.

## *Goodbye to Bob*



*Sitting at Mullin's Cafe in 2000.*

That fall at the next scheduled reunion Bob finally got to meet my future new-wife, Sue. We had been dating since a week after I returned from the 1995 reunion and I was anxious for the two of them to get to know one another. Again, the goodbye was more like a “see you later” than anything more permanent.

We let the time get away from us and it was not until a month or so before the next scheduled reunion in 2005 that I found out Bob was having some health problems and would not be attending. Tests showed that he had developed breast cancer, something I didn't even know men could get. He was undergoing chemotherapy and the doctors reported it was under control. I suppose he just didn't feel like traveling at the time and so he just said he wasn't going to be able to attend. He didn't want to make a big deal of his illness and was sure that it was in remission so I elected to believe him. Sue and I went to the reunion, but missed having Bob to run around with.

I really thought it was no big deal. I was wrong. It appears that cancer is always a big deal.

## **The Promise Kept**

Calls between Bob and me became more frequent after his cancer scare. We almost always ended the calls with a mutual desire to get together again before too long. One day in September I checked the caller ID on my ringing cell phone and saw “Bob W. Cell” in the window. I answered it with my normal “Hey Bob!” and heard a female voice on the other end say “Tommy, Honey?”

I froze in panic. This could not be good. There was no reason that was not bad in nature that would make someone besides Bob call me on his phone. I didn’t recognize her voice at first, but it was Lynne and I stopped everything I was doing and listened intensely for the bad news that I knew must follow. I expected the worst. I expected to hear that Bob was dead. I had received a similar call the year before about a friend in Memphis who was found dead in his bed from a heart attack. Lynne told me that Bob had been in a car wreck and was in the hospital. He had not been hurt bad in the wreck, but when they did some tests just to be sure they found another problem. An MRI showed that he had a brain tumor and he needed an immediate operation. They had called his family and suggested they get to his side. She promised to call me back when he got out of surgery.

I waited hours for Lynne to call back with the results of the operation. During my wait I sent e-mail messages to all of our high school friends that I felt should know. I thought hard trying to remember the last time I had seen him and how we had said goodbye. I regretted the times I could have visited him and didn’t. I prayed.

When the call finally came I was informed that the operation was quick and the results were positive, and it looked as if all would be okay once again. There was one complication though. The follow up tests shed light on an even greater problem. The cancer in his body that had been dormant for the last few years had returned. They were going to start treatments again and would put him back on a program to fight the return of the cancer.

In the hours before the phone call I made myself one promise. If Bob pulled through that operation then I would make an extra special effort to go visit him in person as soon as possible. It was not until the January phone call to me that Bob finally opened up and let me in on the whole story about his doctor’s visit. The cancer was no longer inactive and there was nothing that could be done to stop the spreading or to cure it. The doctors told him that the best that could be done was to try to keep him out of pain for the few months that he had left in his life. As I talked to Bob that day I could not imagine how it felt to be told that you only had six months left to live. I promised him I was coming down to see him. I swore that day that my last visit to go see Bob would not be to attend his funeral. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that if the six month prognosis was accurate, I had less than two months to keep that promise.

To get all the ducks lined up and arrangements made put me into mid-February before I could make the trip. I called Bob back to see if the dates I had selected would be okay with him. With his approval, I secured the reservations needed.

I know now that my plans for the trip were a little elaborate. I had hoped that we could spend some time together just visiting, just the two of us. It seemed only appropriate that since our friendship had started on a high school road trip where we shared a motel room that it would be fitting to make our last road trip together end in a similar manner. I reserved a room at The Boardwalk at Disney World because I knew it had a big lobby with easy chairs, a big front porch with rockers, and each room had a balcony or terrace with deck chairs. There were two sleeping areas in case he got tired.

I told him that if he felt up to it, we would go to Orlando and stay Tuesday and Wednesday nights and I would drive him back home on Thursday. He said that sounded like fun if he was feeling okay.

He wasn’t feeling okay. I got into Orlando on Monday night and was walking through the lobby of The Boardwalk Tuesday morning when my cell phone rang. It was Lynne again. Bob had been in severe pain all night and gotten very little sleep. She told me to go eat breakfast and take my time driving over and perhaps he could get a little rest for our visit. By the time I got there around 10am, they were all up.

My mind raced as I pulled up in front of his new house. I knew that Bob had gone through a lot since I last saw him and I tried to prepare myself for how he might look. I was still shocked when he came to the door to greet me. My biggest shock was not how ill he looked, but how much he looked like his dad had looked to me the last time I

saw him. It was eerie that I could not have described Bob's dad if you had asked me before that moment and perhaps Bob did not even look like him at all. However, when I saw him walking up to me my mind immediately associated the face of my friend for the face of his dad. He had looked nothing like that the last time I had seen him. The cancer treatments and the brain surgery had left their marks. Bob's full dark head of hair was gone, and he was almost as bald as I was. He had that "old man" baldness look like my own dad had in the last few years of his life.

Perhaps one of the subconscious things that made me think of Bob's dad at that moment was the environment in which I found myself. That part of Florida, the look, the feel, the smell, took me back to that first trip to Gulfport I made with his dad when I was a teenager. For a boy that grew up in Northern Alabama and had lived there all his life, the coastal atmosphere was significantly different. It was so different that its first impression etched a permanent association of that event in my brain. The feelings that were stimulated when I got out of the car at Bob's new home were so similar to ones from my past that it spooked me. It was almost as if Bob had returned to the place he was born to live out his final days. I am not positive that he did that on purpose, but some natural instinct inside him must have created that need. He felt comfortable there, I could tell.

Bob and I had one of those manly hug moments as we both expressed how good it was to see each other again. Lynne greeted me next and when she took me aside she told me how much she appreciated me taking the time to come down and visit Bob. Lynne was doing a great job of being his caretaker, his private nurse, confidant, and constant companion. Peter, another friend from his past, had also moved in to help out with things that Bob was no longer able to care for. We all went inside and shared morning coffee. Bob had built a nest in a comfortable recliner and I sat nearby on the sofa. The coffee table between us was filled with literally dozens of bottles of pills – a constant reminder of why I was there. Small talk was the topic of the morning. There was a knock at the door and a FedEx delivery man handed Lynne a package which she opened to reveal another eight bottles of medicine. My friend was truly sick.

I soon found out that during my drive from Orlando that morning Lynne had been on the phone talking to the doctors at the Veteran's Hospital. It seemed that our afternoon would be consumed with a trip to the facility for Bob to get another CAT scan performed to determine the cause of his new pain. Knowing hospital procedures, I knew we were in for a long afternoon.

It does not help this story to go into the hospital visit, but anyone that has ever visited a Veteran's hospital will know what we encountered. It was hard to believe that the ones with which we shared the waiting room were ones that once manned the frontline of our military might. We owe so much to their ailing bodies. I did not want to think that someday I might be one of those people.

When we finally got through with the tests we enjoyed a meal at a local Mexican restaurant and a few hours of just visiting when we got back to the house. Bob was showing the strain of the tests and the lack of sleep the night before and finally had to lie down for a nap. Before he went to bed he asked if I would still be there when he woke up. I heard something in his voice that indicated he would like that. I promised him I would.

He slept longer than I expected and I visited with Lynne while he rested. We talked about the history of the health problems Bob had been having and several times I thought I should head on back to Orlando, but I had made him a promise. I didn't have to remind myself that the whole reason for the trip was to spend time with him, not sit in a motel room alone and watch TV – so I stayed. He finally came back into the room after a couple of hours and we talked a little longer. We made plans for the next day and I said goodnight and drove the hour back to Orlando. It was a dark and lonely road. I was glad in a way that I had the trip. I needed the time to both digest and decompress from the emotional day I had spent with Bob and to prepare myself for the upcoming visit. I was all too aware that it might be my last.

## **The Final Visit**

As I was driving through the Orlando morning rush hour traffic, cars in the fast lane next to me came to a complete stop. Wham! One van wasn't paying attention or following too close or something. Whatever his problem, he did not stop until he rammed the car in front of him. I felt lucky that I was not in that lane. I thought how ironic it would be for me to have traveled all the way down to Florida to see Bob before the cancer took him and for me to be in an accident and die before he did. It was a reminder about how fragile and unpredictable life really is. We never know exactly when our time will be up.

I continued my journey and got to Bob's in time for morning coffee again. He had slept better the night before and was not in the pain that he had been. We talked and visited most of the morning. I took my laptop computer with me to share with Bob a slide show that I had subjected all my friends to at my 60th birthday party. It had a photo of me in my graduation cap and gown and my '53 Ford that we used to run around in, and a photo of my dad which Bob had never met. I felt bad that it did not have photos of Bob and me when we were in high school, but I don't remember us ever having our photo taken together back then. I have very few pictures of me with my high school friends, primarily because we couldn't afford to buy film and have it developed and printed.

Bob was feeling good enough to go out for lunch and just the two of us drove north up the coast to a little joint that was right on the beach. It was a beautiful day so we sat on the deck outside and ate our meal while we watched the waves and the sea birds. During the drive and while we ate we dedicated our conversation to our high school days. I brought him up to date on all the friends that I knew to talk about. I filled him in on the guys we cruised with and my first girlfriend. There were lots of things to tell him about her.

We finished the meal and on the way back we took a detour to drive through a nature area called "the loop" as we talked more. We stopped frequently for me to get out and take pictures of the many birds in the area. Bob would get out with me and soak up the sun while I stalked the birds. I could see the enjoyment of those moments in his face. It was like he was standing in front of an open fire on a cold winter's day. He virtually absorbed the sun's rays. He laughed a lot that day, and when he laughed I laughed with him.

He started getting tired so we went back home for him to rest a while. I visited with Lynne again while he slept. As we talked she told me of his final wishes to donate his body for medical research and to be cremated and have his ashes scattered over the Atlantic Ocean from a helicopter. It was a subject I was not comfortable talking about, but it was something that I needed to hear. I felt a pending loss with the knowledge that there would be no grave to visit. On the other hand, Bob would become a part of the ocean, and each time I walked the beach I would be near him.

The day passed too quickly and before we knew it, the sun had set. I was happy to learn that Bob had plans for us for the evening. I hated to think that all of his precious time was spent just lying around in his nest waiting for the inevitable.

We were headed to Daytona Beach and I was told to watch for a place with a sign out front that said "B.F.F.A.R." I spotted the building which could not be mistaken as anything else but a place where pool tables had to occupy a place of importance. It reminded me of the bars my mind associated with Gulfport and my teenage visits to that town. As I pulled into the parking lot I parked the rental car in the back of the building along with several Harley motorcycles.

It turned out that the club's real name was "Bikers for First Amendment Rights" and it was in fact a favorite Daytona Beach biker bar. A buzzer unlocked the front door and we walked in with the smell of spilled beer and cigarette smoke greeting our senses. I halfway expected sawdust floors. The music was loud and vaguely unfamiliar. The room was full of bikers wearing black t-shirts, jeans, leathers, bandanas, and other non-conformist uniforms favored by riders. They tried so hard to look different that that all looked alike. Several of the black clad individuals were sitting at the bar nursing beers while others hovered around the two pool tables in the back. I felt a little out of place wearing a tan jacket with a Mickey Mouse playing golf embroidered on the left breast. I quickly slipped the jacket off, only to reveal the bright blue golf shirt beneath also sporting an embroidered Mickey Mouse. I had dressed for the Moose Club, not a biker bar. I knew that all I had to do was walk up to the counter and order a "Shirley Temple" and I would not leave the room alive.

I smiled at the thought that this would be one of my last social activities with Bob. It seemed so fitting, like the circle of life turning full cycle. Throughout my life I had often related dark, smoky bars to the first one I ever visited without my parents. That one was with Bob and his dad on an unforgettable road trip when I was 16. It was only appropriate that at age 60 our last shared road trip together would lead us to the same type setting. I had to buy myself a B.F.F.A.R. black t-shirt with a Harley on the back as a souvenir to commemorate the occasion.

Bob and I sat down in a booth as he tried to explain the concept of the game while his team mates began the competition. When it came Bob's turn, he was ranked higher than his opponent and thus the handicap scoring came into play. Basically Bob had to sink more balls than his opponent to win the match.

Bob made a lot of early shots, but missed a lot of easy shots as well. I sat and watched, knowing that only a few of us in the room knew the real condition he was in. As he leaned across the pool table to make his shots the lamp above him highlighted the scar that bisected his scalp. He had worn a ball cap during most of my visit and I had not seen his head in that good of light or that clearly before. I was a little shocked. I had told myself that it was the chemotherapy drugs for the cancer that made him lose his hair, but that moment made me wonder whether it might have been the operation for the brain tumor. I'll never know. It didn't matter. It was obvious from the scar that he had survived a major operation. His attempted concentration and prior skill at shooting pool were obvious but the resulting shots failed to reflect the finesse I had seen in his earlier years. He made as good of a run at sinking the balls as he was capable of doing, but in the end he was defeated by the other player who was not hampered by the troubles now facing Bob.

I must say he was gracious in defeat. In a way I hated seeing that. I suppose that I tried to read too much into every action. I wanted him to be upset at being beaten by a rookie in a game he once mastered. He wasn't. But that night I witnessed a trait that I did admire in Bob. He did not give up; he had to be beaten. He fought a good battle. He shook hands with his victor and told him "Good game." He walked over and shook hands with all the members of the opposing team. As he was putting his cue away he did not seem upset or angry. He accepted the loss as if there would always be another game and another time. He had a glint in his eyes that silently screamed "I'll get you next time." I took solace in the fact that I knew my friend had only lost because of the pain drugs and not because of a defeated spirit. Given equal footing, he would get him next time, if there ever was a next time. I wondered if the opponents knew his whole story.

It was getting late as we walked out of the biker bar to head home, and we only had a few hours left together before I said goodbye and headed back to Orlando. As we pulled out of the parking lot I knew we couldn't go straight home. Like on our graduation night, I couldn't let the night end quite yet. We certainly could not let it end with a defeat. We needed a few more minutes for old time's sake. We made a detour on our way home and made a final cruise together down to the Dayton Beach strip. It was not the Parkway, but it was just as good. That was a town famous for its strip. My one regret was that I did not have a recording of the Beach Boys' "*I Get Around*" to play at full volume while we cruised.

No late night cruise in our past could ever end without a feast of hamburgers if we had the money to buy them. That night money was no problem and we picked Krystal hamburgers for our final meal together. It was something we did many times in our teenage years - buy a bag of the little hamburgers and eat them as we drove around chasing girls. Pulling the bag through the open window I was aware that their aroma has not changed in 50 years and it filled the car with the familiar smell of our youth. It was another good memory.

We ate the hamburgers as we left the strip and our fellow cruisers behind us and headed back to the house. It was almost time to once again say goodbye.



*Bob and me in Florida, February 20, 2007.*

## **The Third Final Goodbye**

Once again it was late by the time we got back to Bob's house. We had put in a full day of visiting and I knew he was tired. I was tired as well. Tired, but feeling good about the visit. I was glad I had kept my promise and made time for the trip.

We went inside for a few minutes to finish off the midnight final meal and it was at last time to leave. I told Peter and Lynne goodbye, knowing that Bob would follow me outside for our private time. The other two knew that the two of us needed to be left alone. I was a little surprised at Lynne's statement to Bob as we walked to the door.

"Turn on the emotions," Lynne said directly to Bob.

"What?" Bob replied in his parrot-talking-back voice.

"It's time to turn on the emotions," Lynne repeated.

I thought that was a little odd for Lynne to say, especially when we had tried hard to not think about what this visit had really been about. She said it in emphasis one more time as he was walking with me, making him give her that "Okay already!" look. It took a while for her meaning to sink in. It was her way of telling Bob that this might be the last chance he would ever have to tell me some things that he had been holding inside. In this macho world into which we have evolved, men are not supposed to show emotions. Bob had followed that rule most of his life. She was telling him it was time to quit holding things inside and open up with me. She was giving him permission to do that.

In a way I think her instructions were for me as well. I had wondered how I would hold up telling Bob a final goodbye for the third time. When I told him a final goodbye for the first time, it turned out to only be a couple of weeks before I saw him again. The second final goodbye lasted almost 20 years. Would this goodbye, be a true final goodbye? Lynne was reminding us that it might be, and that if we had anything worth saying it was time to say it. There might not be another final goodbye. That scared me. It scared me because I did not want him to acknowledge that this trip was designed to be a final meeting between us – even though that was its purpose. If he turned on the emotions too much, I didn't know if I could control my own. I knew the parting could get very awkward.

When we got outside alone I came to the point that I had dreaded since I first made my reservations for the trip. It was quiet outside the house – quieter than I expected. My one promise to myself was that I would not break down emotionally. It would do me no good and it definitely would do Bob no good. He had enough on his plate already and didn't need me to make things worse. I had rehearsed this moment a hundred times in my head. I was going to

## *Goodbye to Bob*

try to make it seem like it was no big deal, like it was the same as all the other goodbyes we had already said. If I could hold up, perhaps Bob could as well.

I faced him and looked him in his eyes.

"I'll talk to you next month on your birthday. Beware the Ides of March!" was my attempt at a non-goodbye goodbye. It told him that I at least expected him to still be around then.

His simple reply of "okay" was about what I expected from this man that I have known so many years. He was still holding in his emotions, so I held mine in as well.

Thank God for Bud Light!

Bob reached out and pulled me to him in a big bear hug and I hugged him back and we patted each other's backs. That was not a first time for that, but it was more special at that moment.

"I love you man!" he said as we embraced.

If there had never been a Bud Light beer then there never would have been a Bud Light commercial. The male population would never have seen a character named Johnny sitting on a dock fishing with his dad and getting all emotional in an attempt to get a free beer. "I love you man" was the phrase that made viewers think it was a serious commercial until his dad replied back "You're not getting my Bud Light, Johnny." The country laughed at the attempt, but it also embraced the phrase that validated the right for one male to tell another male something very personal. Before that commercial, we would have never had the right words to say, or the right way to say them. That commercial gave us that opportunity.

I didn't say that he wasn't getting my Bud Light.

Instead, "I love you too man," was my reply.

"I'll hug you and I'll tell you that I love you but I'm not going to kiss you!" I said in jest.

"Well, I'll kiss you!" I heard and I felt Bob kiss me lightly on the side of my bald head.

I kissed him back on the side of his bald head. It was the right thing to do and the right time to do it. The emotions had been turned on. They were done so in a manner that gave each of us a way to say goodbye and yet not a tear flowed. We both knew how the other felt and we both knew what lay ahead for our friendship and our visits. As in the previous two times, there was no room for tears in that third final goodbye to the best friend I had since high school.

## **The Jack of Diamonds**

It was getting into the morning hours and I still faced a long drive back to my hotel in Orlando. For a moment it was déjà vu back to that early morning in 1964 following graduation. That night neither of us wanted to say the final goodbye and we kept dragging out our inevitable parting. We never knew exactly when we could feel that we had said all we could say without repeating things. That morning in 2007, I finally felt comfortable and I was personally satisfied that I had expressed my feelings to Bob about our friendship, as he had to me. Throughout the visit not a word was spoken aloud between us about his terminal illness. I had told him a final goodbye for the third time in my life. I turned to get into the car to drive away from our last visit, expecting Bob to turn and head on into his house for some much needed rest.

“I’ve still got my Jack of Diamonds!”

I heard the words in the still night air and stopped dead in my tracks. Those words came from my friend who for the last few years could never remember any story I started talking to him about until I prodded him with detail after detail. In my recollection of the last decade of visits with him, he never once brought up any old memories first. It was my job to come up with the “Hey, do you remember?” things. He must have told me a dozen times, “I can’t believe that you still remember all that stuff.”

Now, out of the blue, in what might be our last meeting, he came up with that statement. To me it was a concrete testament to our friendship. He remembered something that we had not spoken about in probably 40 years.

The night before graduation and our first final goodbye in 1964, we wanted to find some way to symbolize the end of our constant companionship. In dramatic fashion I came up with a page right out of a Hollywood script. We should take a dollar bill and cut it in half and each of us keep one half of the bill. It was kind of like the sweetheart jewelry that was a heart split down the middle and it took both pieces to make a complete heart. We each would always have half of the dollar bill. Each piece by itself would be worth nothing, and only when we could put the two halves together would there be something of real value. Quite simply, using this method, as long as we were friends, we would never be broke.

We had a little problem putting that idea into motion. We were both broke that night. We may have had our friendship but on that night neither of us had a dollar bill to cut in half. So, we decided to substitute a card from a deck of playing cards for the dollar bill. We cut a deck of cards and came up with the Jack of Diamonds. We took scissors and cut the card into two halves. Bob put one half into his wallet; I put the other half into mine.

I carried my half of the playing card in my back pocket for many years, stuck into one of the many compartments that are built into men’s wallets. It got faded and a little worn on the edges, but each time I searched for something or swapped wallets, I came upon the card half and thought about my shared friendship with Bob. When I had to sanitize my wallet for combat missions in the Air Force, the card had to be moved into a dresser drawer. It moved from drawer to an envelope to a box – but its meaning was never lost and the card half was never thrown away. It was always with me in spirit and like my friendship with Bob, I still had it.

I turned and faced Bob with a broad smile and nodded at him.

“I still have mine too,” I told him.

There was no further response.

For once we didn’t have to explain or expand the statements. We both knew the significance of what we were telling each other with those simple words. We still had that bond between us. We’d still be part of each other. It would always take two halves to make one whole.

I turned again, got into the car and left, waving as I drove off. I had the long drive ahead of me to digest the true meaning of things that had happened during the visit. I will have the rest of my life to think of things I wish I had done or said, but for that evening I think I did the best that could be done.

It’s been almost a month since that night. I talk to him regularly on the phone, but don’t want to make it seem obvious that I am checking up on him. I have to admit that my heart stops and I get a lump in my throat when I

*Goodbye to Bob*

check the caller ID window of my ringing cell phone and see “Bob W. Cell”. I know that one of these days soon when I answer it with “Hey Bob!” I will not hear Bob but will hear Lynne’s voice saying “Tommy, Honey!”

## **The Phone Call**

This tribute was started soon after I returned from the visit in February. Spring came and gave way to summer; summer to fall; and winter was on the near horizon. At 9:15am on November 16, 2007, my cell phone rang while I sat at my desk at work. My breath stopped when I saw “Bob W Cell” in the caller ID window. It was an unusual time of the morning for Bob to call, and as I feared when I first saw it, the voice on the other side was not Bob’s.

“Tommy, Honey. We lost Bob last night.”

It was almost as if I had written the script. Lynne’s voice was broken by tears as she told me how Bob’s health had taken a turn to the worse a week earlier and he was admitted for hospice care. His son and daughter had come down one last time to be with him in his final moments, and she said that he had passed away peacefully during the night with all of them with him.

“He’s out of pain and at peace now,” she continued.

It had been over nine months since our final visit and over a year since Bob was told that his condition was terminal and was given six months to live. He fought a good fight and milked every last precious moment from life. He took trips and visited with family and friends. We talked often on the phone. It was ironic that during those extra months that he squeezed out of his life, I had been required to call Bob to tell him that one of our close mutual friends, David France, had died of a rare blood disease. Bob had introduced me to David and the two of us had shared many memorable times with him and Lewis. Also during that time Dianne’s husband had also passed away. Even after having been given his death sentence by the doctor, Bob had outlived two others from our mutual past.

Those phone calls were only two of many we shared after the visit. I didn’t count them. I made the birthday call to Bob, as promised, on the Ides of March. He missed my birthday and the absence of his call scared me. I feared that something had happened to him and I had not been informed. I was afraid to call and ask. A few days later I talked to him and he apologized for not calling. He said, “I’m sorry I missed your birthday. It’s sometimes hard to think clearly these days.”

During one of the phone calls I got to speak to Bob’s son and his daughter who were visiting him. I was glad to have the opportunity to share with them how important their dad was to me. On the visit I had taken each of them a copy of the book “*A Million Tomorrows...Memories of the Class of ‘64*” that told of our friendship. I think it gave them a unique insight into the childhood of their father, and a testament to the bond between him and me. I am happy that it preserves that period in our lives for others to witness.

Every time he said goodbye to me on the phone during those last few months he would always end the call with “I love you man.”

I would always say the same back to him - that is unless I had said it to him first.

*Goodbye to Bob*



*Almost 45 years earlier Bob and I had cut a card in half and each kept a part to remember the other one by. This photo of my half of the card, which I still have, was taken on the day that I learned that Bob had passed away.*



After the previous pages in this book were printed, I received a letter one day from Bob's son Kenneth. Inside it was a gift for me – the other half of the Jack of Diamonds that was found in Bob's belongings. His half is the top one with "BKW" written on it. He really had kept it all these years, just as I had kept mine. Here they are together again after almost a half century.



**By the time I was a senior in high school there was one true friend with whom I was able to share my innermost secrets as a teenager. I could turn to him for advice and count on him in time of need. We could talk of love and glory and doubts and fears. That friend was Bob.**

**Ironically, three times during our friendship I told him goodbye for what could have been a final time, yet our friendship survived through five decades.**