

REMEMBERING DUGAN

By TERRY NAU

TAY NINH, South Vietnam -- This was back in the summer of 1968. Kevin Dugan ruled the basketball courts of a tiny artillery fire base just north of this province capital. Dugan was a big, curly-haired kid from New York who grew up playing ball on the asphalt playgrounds of his hometown and now he had to contend with the dusty hard-pan of Camp Saint Barbara's makeshift ballyard.

Dugan liked to dribble the ball. He was the only white guy in the battery who would take it to the black canoneers on the basketball court, challenging them with his body and his brawn and his heart.

The games would begin around 4 p.m. as the afternoon temperature dropped below 100 degrees. They would end two hours later. It was timed that way so nobody would be shooting layups when Uncle Charlie started lobbing in his 6 o'clock mortars.

"C'mon, white boy," the blacks would yell at Dugan as he dribbled the ball 15 feet from the basket.

Dugan would be glaring back with a glint in his eye, looking for a lane to the hoop. Kevin played a physical game and when he put the ball on the floor, defenders would part grudgingly, swiping at the ball as he went by.

Dugan's team rarely lost. After awhile he gained acceptance from the "brothers," no easy task in those racially tense days following the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy earlier in the year. We all used to joke (black and white) that somebody shot Kennedy to even the score, racially speaking, among fallen icons.

Dugan got along with everyone in camp. As supply clerk, he handed out all kinds of equipment when the top sergeant wasn't looking, made sure the laundry got done according to specifications, and provided a running commentary on the inner workings of the camp as he went through the details of his work day.

One night – it must have been in late August – Dugan asked me what I planned to do when I rotated back to the states in September and I told him college would be nice, then possibly a career in sports writing.

"College," he sighed. "I coulda had a scholarship to NYU if my grades had been better in high school. Might have been a player there, too. The coach liked my game. I'm what you call a New York player. I could hit that jumper or take it to the hoop. You haven't seen my real game out here. The court's too hard. The ball bounces every which way. The rim stinks ... this whole place stinks."

"Sports writer," Dugan added, rolling the words over in his head. "You don't even play basketball."

"Players play and sports writers watch," I replied.

Dugan nodded.

"Maybe when I get back home, I'll go to a junior college and get my grades up. Then I'll go back to NYU. Vietnam veteran returns home and makes good."

I nodded. Home was a far-away dream for all of us. Just talking about it made things right. Time flew when you thought of home, family, girls, hot dogs, sports and all the other things we missed when Uncle Sam decided there was a war to be fought on the other side of the world.

I don't think of Dugan often anymore. Then I saw this bit on the news Wednesday night. They were dedicating the new Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. The cameras panned a winding monument in the nation's capital which listed all the dead from that godforsaken war, 57,000 and more. Dugan's name was on that wall along with the names of so many others who saw their dreams end far away from home.

Our war has been over for almost three decades now. We've all gone on with our lives. More battles have since been fought. More young people are risking their lives around the world in the name of freedom. And when I see today's young people in uniform, I think of Kevin Dugan, the guy who was always looking for a pick-up basketball game in the late afternoon as the sun cooled down and people forgot about the war for awhile.

END OF STORY