

Memorial Day Memories: Medic Tom Jones Played A Deadly Cat-and-Mouse Game In Vietnam, Then Struggled To Adjust To Civilian Life

by Dr. Mark DePue
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SPRINGFIELD - When meeting Springfield resident Tom Jones on the street or in a restaurant, you could always count on an infectious smile and a hearty laugh. It said a lot about Jones's character, for those who knew about his past could only marvel at his buoyant optimism and friendly nature.

Jones came of age on the south side of Chicago, learning to be tough while growing up in the projects. Nevertheless, he excelled in school and when it came time to take his U. S. Navy entrance exams in 1965, he scored very well. "You should be a corpsman or dental tech." said the Navy recruiter. Jones's response? "Why would I want to be a dental tech and mess around with people's mouths?"

He chose corpsman instead, having no idea what a Navy corpsman did. He found out soon enough; corpsmen were navy medics, and they often found themselves attached to Marine Corps combat units.

That's how Jones ended up assigned to a Marine Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol in June 1967, working in the dangerous I Corps region of South Vietnam. The unit's mission sounded simple enough. Their job was to be inserted, usually by helicopter, deep into enemy territory and collect intelligence on the enemy, all while avoiding being discovered.

Jones reached the disturbing conclusion that he was now playing a deadly game of cat and mouse, and he and his patrol mates were the mice. He learned that survival depended on all of his senses operating at the maximum. Success depended on moving through the terrain with perfect stealth, revealing nothing about their presence to the enemy.

"You can't beat the jungle when moving through it, unless you're hacking through it," Jones said during an interview for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum's Oral History Program. "And you couldn't hack through it because no one is supposed to know you're there."

Avoiding detection even extended to their diet.

"We didn't want to smell like Americans and have heavy beef droppings because ... whatever you eat comes out in your sweat, comes out in your urine, comes out when you take a crap. And you can smell it." That was how thin the line was between mission success and death for Jones and his patrol mates.

When asked what was real for him while in Vietnam, he didn't hesitate.

"When's the next time you're going on patrol? The real world is going on patrol, coming off patrol, going on patrol." Life on patrol made sense to him while his life back home was merely an abstraction, albeit a pleasant abstraction. As Jones explained it, "home was a mental construct in my head."

By July 1968, Jones's tour in Vietnam was complete, and he returned to the place he had dreamt about for 13 months. But as he wrote years later, "Living on the edge in Nam and coming home so suddenly was like driving a car off a cliff, then slamming on the brakes."

“It took me a time to realize I was different,” he said in his interview. “When you come back, you’re not the same person that left. ... My whole ‘who I was’ had been redefined because I’ve seen things; I did things I couldn’t even conceive if I had stayed home ... All of a sudden you come home, and your normalcy is totally different than what you considered as normal before you left. You’ve been redefined to adjust and survive in .”

And just as Jones struggled to readjust to civilian life, his wife and friends struggled to comprehend what had happened to him.

Part of Jones’s years-long journey to adjust to life back in the “real world” included writing a book based loosely on his experiences in Vietnam, “Lost Survivor.” He followed that with a play about the difficulties of readjusting to life back home, aptly entitled “A Long Way Home.”

Not surprisingly, the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., carried a special meaning for Jones. Seeing the names of those he knew on the memorial’s polished granite wall resonated with him.

“You could see men and family members just on their knees and crying, reading their names on the wall. That made the wall almost like a live, living thing,” he said.

Sadly, Jones passed away in October 2017, but when he did, no one could quibble with the fact that his was a life well lived.

Mark DePue is the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. You can listen to Jones’s entire interview at www.oralhistory.illinois.gov and follow the ALPLM on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).