

# The James Hollis Story

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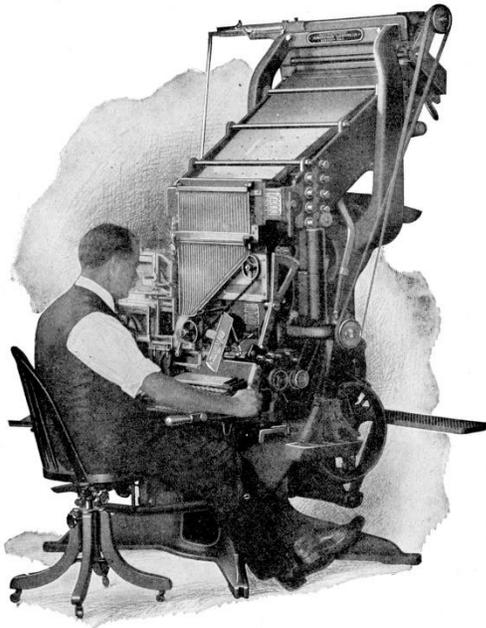
James Sheldon Hollis

**I remember reading once when I was in high school in the early sixties about an offer the Hell Angels made in California regarding the growing war in Vietnam. As I remember there had been a particularly bad week with American casualty statistics leaving many people upset. The Angels offered to go to Vietnam and fight as a unit. There was an anguished letter to the editor in The Sacramento Bee (as best I can remember) expressing puzzlement at why the US Government would not take the Angels up on their offer. The person who wrote the letter could not understand why only the “best” seemed to die in the nations’ wars.**

**Their question seemed silly to me at the time because the general public’s view of the Angels at that time was that they were something of a criminal gang with no discipline. Looking back fifty years, I can see where her view is pretty simple minded. It goes to the core of what makes armies like the one in the United States work. There is a principle that guides military authorities in their recruiting efforts. They are not interested in people who fight all the time: They are interested in people who follow instructions. These people are naturally predisposed to discipline. The former may actually have fighting skills, but they know nothing of discipline and are not inclined to listen to anyone. Those people who listen can be taught necessary fighting skills.**

**This fact of what makes good military manpower policy does put the best of our youth into harm's way. Street gangs and the Hells Angels remain at home while the sons and daughters necessary to carry on the culture leave to carry out the business of the nation.**

**This is not an endorsement of any bodies foreign policy, wars, or a thesis on the much in vogue "Social Justice" that is anguished over so much in this country. Fifty years ago, I lost a friend in the Vietnam War. Never mind whether it was just, necessary, or that mythical "Good War" that so many say they would support. My friend, James Shelton Hollis, was a classmate of mine at C. K. McClatchy High School in Sacramento California. He was one year behind me. I had never heard of or met James Hollis before my senior year at McClatchy. Prior to my senior year we had not taken any classes together, ate lunch together, or went out partying. This absence of social or classroom contact would lead many to wonder why I have such a strong remembrance and attachment to this gentleman. Our friendship grew out of a teacher/student relationship that necessity required us to enter.**



**I was the teacher and James was the student. During my Sophomore year I had become a typesetter for the student newspaper. The machine that was used for this task was something called a "Linotype" machine, aka an automatic type setting machine. To operate this machine, you had to have moderate to good standard typing skills. This was not something in 1964 that was prevalent among members of the male population. I had taken typing in my Sophomore year. Where Hollis learned to type is still a mystery to me. He was an easy student to teach because he was a quality individual. Half of what I taught him he would have learned without me even being around.**

**He was a self-starter, responsible, intelligent, and followed instructions. The perfect soldier.**

**I stayed with him for my Senior year and became an admirer of his. He learned all he needed to know from me and when I graduated in June of 1964 McClatchy had my replacement all set to go. I have no doubt that I was not missed. That is how good James became at working the Linotype machine. I spent the next year and a half at a place called Sacramento State College (Sac State). It would have been a pleasure to see James show up there, but I don't know what he did when he graduated the next year after me. In retrospect I caught a break and wound up in the US Army and was freed from Sac State. It was**

February of 1966 when I left, and I would not return permanently to California until January of 1971. This would prove to be a strategic error, but that story is for another day.

I was schooled in CH-47 (Chinook) helicopter maintenance and left for Vietnam in October of 1966. I returned to the United States for a 30 day leave in December of 1967. At the end of my leave my parents returned me to Oakland Army Base (OAB) which was the main departure point for US Army Vietnam bound troops. It usually took the Army about 72 hours to get you on your way back to the war zone. You spend a lot of time watching paint dry during your OAB stay.

It was during this time that something very interesting occurred. Your world at OAB during your waiting period was very small: No greater than about four blocks in any direction. I was coming back to my warehouse barracks after some nondescript administrative “thing” one day and ran into James Hollis! We stood there on the sidewalk and talked about our time at McClatchy, my past year and half in the Army and Vietnam, and his recent induction into the Army. It became evident fairly quickly that something was very wrong. The anxiety that James was exhibiting cast a pall over the conversation thick enough to obscure your vision. Hollis was clearly a man looking for a friend, any friend. I’m reminded of an episode from the old TV series “Twilight Zone.” A World War Two platoon sergeant could tell which of his men were going to die on any particular day by the glow that he saw surrounding their faces when he talk to them. One morning he looks into the mirror to shave and sees his face glowing. He knows he will not make it through the day.

Hollis wasn’t going to die that day, but his mannerism indicated that something was very wrong. A few months later I found out somehow that he had died in action. I was very saddened by this event and thought back to our encounter at OAB. For decades I have thought of that 15 minutes or so that we talked and shared that story with many of my friends over the years. It is one of those “Encounter of the Third Kind” type of incidents that you never forget.

It has been fifty years since that fateful meeting at OAB. I always thought that I had things, about this incident, pretty well figured out. Then I found out some things that once again verify something I have noticed as I have gotten older: I’m becoming much more aware of what I DON’T know as I get older. Everyone thinks they have things pretty well figured out by their mid-forties. Not true.

“What is he talking about,” is probably what most of you are thinking about at this point in this essay. I draw your attention to a Shakespeare quote that is very famous: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

**In the last year I have discovered that James Hollis was killed on 22 December 1966. That means that my encounter with James was in October of 1966 and not January of 1968 as I remember it. I went out to Vietnam twice through OAB during my 27 months in Vietnam. Once in October of 1966 and once in January of 1968 coming back from a 30-day leave. These were two very distinctive events that I clearly remember. The first time I was just a member of the great unwashed mass of humanity headed to the war. The next time I was a hardened veteran returning to the war zone. A clear majority of the people around me in 1968 were going for the first time and I was given deferential treatment as the “veteran.” Also, the first time I was in a khaki uniform processing through OAB and the second time I was in jungle fatigues. One thing about the jungle fatigues. My mother had washed them several times to get the grease out and when I showed back up in Vietnam with these super clean, starched, and pressed jungle fatigues I was saluted everywhere I went because my visual presence said I was an Officer which I wasn’t. What was that physical presence: Clean cloths!**

**I was wearing jungle fatigues when I talked to James. That was impossible since James had been dead for nearly 13 months when I was walking around OAB in January 1968. There was something else interesting about that meeting that I remember. We did not touch each other. No shaking hands or back patting or any physical contact. We stood about three feet apart for the entire meeting. Interesting interaction for two “friends” and we were friends.**

**Many will say that I simply have my dates mixed up. After all, it was fifty years ago. As the facilitator for my Vietnam units’ annual reunions I am immersed in the history of the unit during those years. I have, after all these years, opened all the file cabinet drawers in my brain from that time period. This has renewed and refreshed many of the memories from that period. War is an intense emotional experience. Everything is larger than life. Boredom is legend, horror is unforgettable, and humor can be off the charts.**

**I make no claims as to what I think happened that day long ago. Did I see what I always thought that I saw? Is my time line off by a whole year? If my time line is right, then I saw something that has been the subject of countless authors throughout human history.**

**Whatever it was, on reflection, I’m am very happy that I had this interaction with James. He was a true gentleman and a true friend. America lost a valuable son. One of many, but I didn’t know them all.... I knew James and I miss him.**

***Rodney R. Brown***