

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Faded Flowers

Guest editorial by Robert Serra, editor
The Siuslaw News in Florence, Oregon

A few days ago I was driving north on New Mexico Highway 68 heading to Angel Fire, whizzing by white crosses covered with faded pink and blue plastic flowers dedicated to the dead of the road.

I passed chocolate-colored pueblos ringed with coyote fences. In the background, the Sangre de Cristo mountains loomed like the contour of a giant reclining woman dressed in bright yellow quaking aspens, olive-gray sage, piñon junipers and red maples.

Out of the blue I passed a sign announcing the Vietnam Veterans National Memorial. This whirlwind fall retreat to the enchanted circle did not include visiting memorials, but I just couldn't drive by without paying my respects. After all, I made it out of that hell hole alive, and those soldiers up on the hill paid the highest price.

Ascending the hill I saw the memorial chapel's stucco walls half buried in the red dirt like giant emerging white wings. I parked and was greeted by an olive-green Huey helicopter angled just feet off of the ground as if the pilot was making a rocking landing. Inside were unnerving pilot and co-pilot mannequins in full air force chopper gear.

I was jolted right back to my 13 months in Vietnam with the 1st Infantry Division and could smell the acrid, burning fumes of helicopter fuel and could hear the whip, whip, whip of the rotor that was disturbingly constant over the Vietnam landscape.

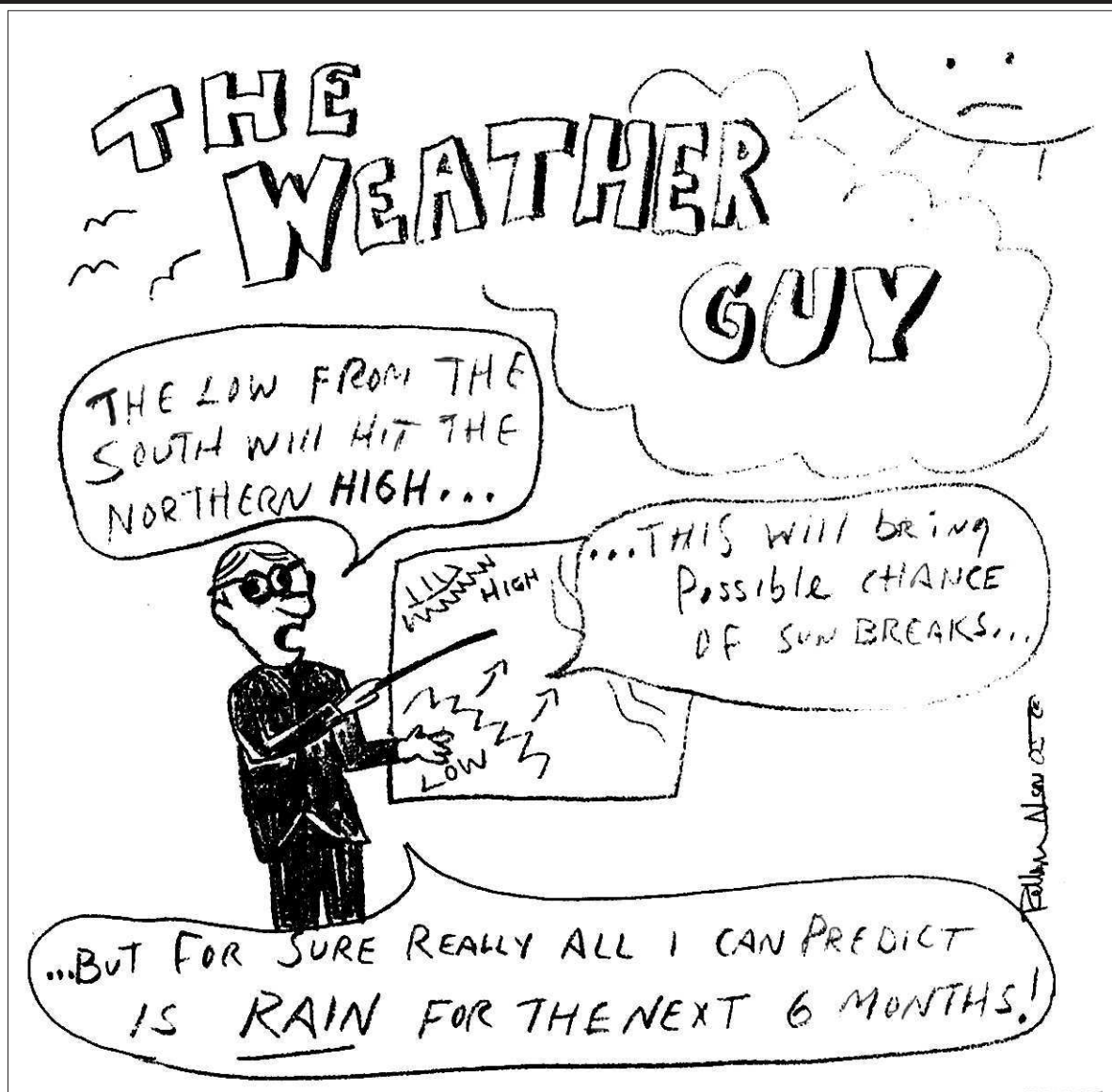
Once inside the memorial, giant mural photographs hung like somber black and white drapes from the ceiling. Photos of GIs in the old slant-pocket all-green fatigues entertaining laughing Vietnamese children riding piggy-back, soldiers walking patrol with their M-16s slung upside down over their shoulders, photos of GIs in anguish over the brutal, unnecessary death of one of their own.

In the next room were two long rows of albums containing biographies and photos of each of the 58,000-plus soldiers killed in that long-ago yesterday war. Near the center of the top row, one album was open to a photo of Richard Allen Noelke in his Class A uniform as a fresh GI. Remarkably, he was born the same day as I. He was killed in action Nov. 6, 1965. I recalled the 1960s Pete Seeger song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

Those who would say the Iraq war has no resemblance to Vietnam are foolishly wrong. Neither Vietnam nor Iraq posed a threat to our country. Each time, our political leaders lied to us about justification for the wars. Both wars became quagmires that swallowed up our innocent children, our national treasures, our sense of national pride and our hopes. Those who spoke out against these wars were referred to as enemies by those who believed "my president or my country right or wrong."

Just as there are crosses draped with faded plastic flowers on the side of the road, just as a sacred white stucco building in Angel Fire honors my dead brothers of Vietnam, marble memorials will someday pay fitting homage to the unlucky innocents sent to do the dirty work of war in Iraq.

When will we ever learn?



By Dale Webb, member
Nehalem Valley Chapter, Izaak Walton League



My deer season ended on opening day this year. Dad, Don Tiffney and I hunted Eastern Oregon. We arrived three days before the season opener. We got the tent set up for the most part on the day we got there and finished the finer requirements on day two. We stocked up on firewood and settled in to a nice camp. We were hoping the weather would change and the forecast had been for some rain on opening weekend. Well, let's just say the weatherman would have been pleased with himself!

Usually, the weather in Eastern Oregon is dry and warm, and if there is moisture it usually comes as snow. This year was a little different. We could hear the rain falling in the middle of the night, "good," I thought to myself. We got up well before dawn and it was still raining, hmm I thought; better wear the waterproof clothes today. I took off about an hour before sunrise, trying to get ahead of the hordes of other hunters. I thought I knew my route pretty well, but soon found myself wading through waist high buck brush with windfall trees buried amongst the brush. Oh, I was having fun now! Well, at least the waterproof clothes worked.

I was navigating by flashlight, no full moon like I had last year. I saw a flash of light up ahead

and thought another hunter had aced me, so I turned my light off. I soon realized the light was from some hunters across from the deep draw in front of me. So I flipped the switch back on my flashlight, poof, the bulb blew out. Hmm...great, I did have another flashlight in my pack, but I just didn't want to dig around in my pack in the dark. So I waited, for the gray dawn to poke its head above the eastern horizon.

My old red felt hat was leaking in the back where I had the rim turned up, drip, drip, drip down my neck. I grinned, thinking of all the other hunters getting their behinds wet; at least I had some good clothes on. Finally I could make out the old truck road I had climbed through the brush to get to. Slowly I made my way forward and crossed through a barbed wire drift fence that the local cattle grazer had put up this year. Light was stubbornly gaining over the darkness and I got on one of my favorite trails and pushed on. The key to my success was to get ahead of the other hunters and into a position where some better bucks would get pushed. I was almost to where I wanted to go when two horsemen came up behind me. Seeing me, they dropped into the draw on my left, went around me and then back in front. They pushed a small herd of deer out from in front of me and the small buck that went with the herd was soon the object of some shooting after they went out of sight. I wasn't exactly pleased by this turn of events, but I had a back-up plan.

I cut behind the horses and made my way to

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