

Description of Service



John Shirk is a companion to veterans who are dying in the Hospice Unit of the Veterans Administration Hospital in Houston, TX. Whether just sitting quietly holding the gnarled hand of a grizzled World War II vet – or listening intently as a veteran shares secrets that have been deeply buried for years, John makes sure no veteran dies alone.

The veterans are a diverse group. Patients have included naval submariners and torpedo men, Marine heroes, WWII bomber pilots and crews, infantry men from the Battles of the Bulge, D-Day, Korean and Vietnam Wars, and recent Middle East conflicts too. Their ranks are from Private to General to Admiral. There are men and women. Some spent difficult, hopeless, and lonely, times as Prisoners of War. Others lost limbs, eyes, come from broken families, and have war related psychological and emotional problems. Some arrive with no family members or friends to care for them. John Shirk has learned to sense all these feelings so that he can meet the needs of these brave vets as they slip away.

One World War II Vet took John back to an incident that occurred in the late 1930's that still haunted him as if it happened yesterday. He felt responsible for breaking his younger brother's wagon. John patiently listened and comforted the man. A 57 year old John, "I have 14 days to live. I have liver disease." "Can you read to me?" he asked. "Just wake me if I doze off." The Vet always dozed off but John kept reading without awakening him. Three days before he died, the Vet was sleeping and John was about to leave his bedside when he took John's hand saying, "pray for me." This happened for the next three days. He died on the third day with John holding his hand and praying.

The ward has a capacity of 45. There are usually at least 35 veterans receiving palliative care. All are in the process of dying. Some die in a day. Others linger for months. Some are in their 90's. Others in their 30's or 40's. John tries to have at least 10 extended conversations a week with vets and at least 12 sessions just sitting silently at a vet's bedside. Whatever a veteran's needs are, John assesses them and complies. Some just want to be left alone. Others crave John's companionship, wanting either his ear or just his reassuring silent presence. Because whether talkative or silent, John Shirk makes sure no veteran dies alone.

John spent 10 years in the Navy. He also became a Peace Corps Volunteer in his 60's and served in the English Department at a university in Morocco. He also earned a PhD in Adult Learning from Texas A&M University.