

I first met Lee Hitchins in 1992, shortly after I moved to Smiths Falls. Whenever I move to a new place, I make it a habit to seek out the local bookstores, especially the new and used ones. For me, they're often the heart of a community. It wasn't long before I discovered Readables, the bookstore Lee owned on Beckwith Street.

Like many customers, I initially came for the books, but I soon found myself staying for the conversations. Lee had a way of making people feel welcome. He was knowledgeable, friendly, and genuinely interested in the people who walked through his door. Readables quickly became one of my favorite places in town, and over time, Lee became a friend.

What might surprise some people is that when I first met Lee, I had no idea he was a Vietnam veteran. He never made a point of talking about his service and never sought attention for it. It wasn't until months later, when I was working as a reporter and attending an event that Lee had organized, that I learned the truth. The event was called LZ North, a gathering that brought together American and Canadian veterans in a spirit of friendship, remembrance, and mutual respect.

As I covered the event and listened to the stories being shared, I began to understand a side of Lee that he rarely spoke about. I discovered that behind his easy smile and quiet manner was a man who had experienced things most of us can scarcely imagine. Yet he carried those experiences with remarkable humility.

As our friendship grew, I eventually asked Lee a question that had been on my mind. I wanted to know why a young Canadian would cross the border, go to the United States, and join the Navy during the Vietnam War. His answer was simple and very much in keeping with the man he was. He told me that it felt like something he had to do. There was no long explanation, no attempt to justify or dramatize the decision. It was simply a calling he felt compelled to answer. Looking back, that response revealed a great deal about Lee's character. When he believed something was right, he stepped forward and accepted the responsibility that came with it.

When Lee did speak about Vietnam, he never glorified war or portrayed himself as a hero. Instead, he spoke honestly and thoughtfully about the people he served with and the challenges they faced. Those conversations taught me a great deal about courage, sacrifice, and resilience. They also revealed the depth of character that made Lee such a respected member of our community.

But Lee was much more than a veteran. He was a friend. He was the kind of person who could make you laugh, make you think, and make you feel welcome all at the same time. He cared deeply about people and about preserving the bonds between those who had served.

As the years passed, I came to appreciate not just what Lee had done, but who he was. He lived with quiet dignity, treated others with respect, and never asked for recognition. Those qualities defined him far more than any medal or military service ever could.

Today, we remember a good man, a good friend, and someone who left this community better than he found it. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to know Lee, to learn from him, and to call him my friend. He will be deeply missed, but he will never be forgotten.