

## **Kaleidoscope—by Merilee Marsh**

Ernie, a WWII veteran, is 100. He sits at the end of the table, wearing an old uniform adorned with combat ribbons and medals.

A Vietnam veteran stands while giving his introduction as a first timer. He chokes on tears as he tells the 300-plus veterans in the room: “My job was to wash the blood out of the helicopters.”

August 6, 2024, was my first time at the Idaho veterans’ monthly Kilroy Coffee Klatch at the Warhawk Air Museum in Nampa, Idaho. I mentioned being stationed at Travis Air Force Base, California, as part of the 60<sup>th</sup> Aerial Port Squadron. I didn’t share that the squadron’s job was to load airmen going to Vietnam and unload body bags from the returning flights.

From WWII to Afghanistan, all branches of the military had a presence that morning. It was a kaleidoscope of experiences, and individuals—each with a story, each showing a different facet, each carrying specific memories.

The kaleidoscope spins and I remember a friend’s mother from my high school days. Her son Morgan, the brother of my friend, eventually went to Vietnam. Morgan became a prisoner of war. For months, his mom sat in a wooden cage on her front lawn, reminding her world that her son was still a POW.

The kaleidoscope encompasses the divisions of life and death, struggle and wounds. As a military brat, I grew up with the messages. As a military officer, I experienced them. The encounters and the memories whirl, changing the patterns. I look for focus, search for meaning, and yearn for explanations.