

## Jack Estes

### Essays

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The Siege at Fort Vancouver  
by Jack Estes

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In the early morning of August 30, 1988 Kenny worked alone. It was still dark as he gathered ropes, a grappling hook, ammunition, fuses and blasting powder. He stuffed his pack and bags as thoughts of swat teams and snipers lingered in the air. He might get headshot he imagined but he'd risk it if the country listens. Earlier he placed an anonymous phone call to the Oregonian, telling them something big might happen, then filled the trunk of the beat up car he slept in. He headed North and crossed the bridge and parked near historic Fort Vancouver, long before sunrise. His bags were heavy as he crept through the shadows to the wooden walls. He dropped his gear, tossed the grappling hook over the wall and struggled to get his heavy frame to the other side. He unlocked the gate, brought the bags inside and left a sign that read, "If anyone tries to enter we'll blow up the fort." Then he padlocked the gate and moved toward the cannons. Kenny was a Marine in Vietnam during the bloodiest of years 1968 and 1969 when over 28,000 of America's sons died. He didn't tote a rifle or fire a machine gun or drop violence from the sky but he served as a cook, in a tent during the bloody Tet offensive. He was 19 when enemy rockets tore through the sagging canvas, erupting in a wide swath of dead and wounded. He survived and the guilt left him psychologically damaged - forever. When he came home he was one of thousands of homeless and unemployed veterans across the country. He often got drunk and lived under the Burnside Bridge alongside his countless comrades. One day he decided to change and get sober and serious about his homeless brethren. He set up donated coffee and hotdog nights under the bridges dark and dangerous corners. He fed the homeless, surrounded by the roar of traffic overhead and the stench of alcohol and urine floating through the air. As the sun rose over Fort Vancouver, Kenny worked furiously, fixing fuses, setting cannons with gun power and filling their barrels with his ammunition of crumpled newspaper. He didn't want to harm anyone. He only wanted to call attention to his anguish and the plight of a generation of homeless veterans. A guard came to open the Fort and saw Kenny's sign and called the police. Soon the building was surrounded by cop cars and nervous officers shouting out orders and demands. Kenny starting setting off cannons with loud explosions blasting paper in the air and the camera's came and the reporters came and Swat teams and trucks full of snipers. I-5 was shut down near the bridge. Nobody knew what this "crazed veteran" as one reporter recalled, might do. The siege lasted for hours and moved into the mid day sun. By now with radio reports and TV the one-man siege had blown across the state and nation. The New York Times and CNN picked it up and soon millions would know. The FBI arrived with a hostage negotiator and a two-way radio was lowered into the fort. Eventually Kenny surrendered and held a news conference in which he spoke about the plight of homeless veterans and the trouble with the VA. "It's a national disgrace, he said, to see veterans sleeping under bridges and eating from garbage cans." He went to court and was given 30 days and 200 hours of community service. He was penniless and ironically a group of former South Vietnamese soldiers thought he was a hero and paid his fines and damages to the Fort. After his release Kenny began a decade of volunteer work. He wasn't firing cannons anymore and the Oregonian reported in 1989 "...his ammunition is words and his battlefields are board rooms and the halls of government." He worked with former commissioner Bob Koch to try and find city money to buy and build a homeless shelter for veterans. There was a vacant congregate care center on SE Division he tried to pitch and the long vacant and run down Kenton Hotel in North

Portland. But the money never came. In 1991 he created Vets for Vets and with the assistance of the Red Cross, the Oregon and Washington Employment Divisions and the Veterans Administration he launched Oregon's first "Stand Down" at Delta Park. He arranged for three days of food and tents and cots to sleep on. He brought in medical, legal and housing services for hundreds of veterans. Everything was donated and to this day there is still an abbreviated Stand Down held in Oregon. Last year Kenny developed a brain tumor and the doctors said cancer and 12 months to live. He was treated at the Portland Veterans Medical center that he once despised. His sister Linda Wilson said, "It was a glioblastoma, the most aggressive of brain cancers. Ken thought it was from Agent Orange." "Rose, Kenneth Donald 60 05/26/1948 04/06/2009 Kenneth was born in Portland. He is survived by his wife, Melodina and daughter Alexa." This small and non-descript obituary says nothing about his passing, or whose lives he touched and the scores of homeless veterans he helped lead toward respectability. And that's one of the sad parts about Memorial Day. Soldier's we know and love often leave this world in anonymity. And so it was with Kenny. Sometimes we honor them with small parades, and lightly attended speeches. But the imprint of their lives and what they have done is often forgotten. The way they walked, in war or peace vanishes. In the public's eyes they disappear, like Kenny under the small paper flags that wave across a veteran's cemetery.