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At a state funeral it's inevitable that some of those in attendance will imagine their own memorial someday.

Which of their political enemies will suddenly discover the deceased's wisdom, their integrity now that they are no longer around to make trouble – or at least audit them.

Dennis Richardson would have appreciated the kind regards of his colleagues. He would have kept it all in perspective, however.

While the legislature is sometimes compared to a dysfunctional family, we were not the family that Dennis placed first. We were close behind, though, because Dennis loved Oregon. He wanted the occupants of this building to do their best so the whole state could benefit and prosper.

I first spent real time with Dennis when he invited me – a less senior Ways and Means legislator and a Democrat – into the inner sanctum of budgeting. When I expressed an opinion, I genuinely believed he listened.

We also had something a little unusual in common – helicopters. I used to tease him. While he flew over the hot, steamy jungles of Vietnam with people shooting at him, I flew over magnificent Mount St. Helens.

There is a certain rigor and discipline required in aviation that I think probably served the Secretary of State well. I can't imagine what a pilot needs from a team in a time of war, but I can tell you what I expected from my team during peacetime – trust. Absolute trust.

When you get in a helicopter that somebody else has worked on, you need confidence that the team did their job and took care of the machine. Whether you're flying over a jungle or the breathtaking Cascades, you have to be able to trust that the team did the work and did it right.



Lack of trust has become one of the disappointments in the legislature, and Dennis wanted to restore confidence.

In an unusual occurrence, the same week we lost Dennis, we also lost former Secretary of State Norma Paulus – another Republican and the first woman to occupy a statewide constitutional office. Norma blazed her own trail and was one tough cookie. It was a dangerous time. She took on the Bhagwan Rajneeshee sect when they tried to hijack a Wasco County election by bringing in homeless people from Portland to vote. Norma earned the respect of the men who followed her – including Dennis.

Like Norma, Dennis placed the needs of the state above party. In 2007, Vernonia's schools were literally wiped out by flooding. Dennis – as co-chair of the Ways and Means Committee – was crucial in getting the last \$4.5 million dollars to rebuild. It made no difference to him that Vernonia was served by two Democrats – Rep. Brad Witt and myself.

As Rep. Witt recalled, Dennis never once tried to take credit for his actions to benefit Vernonia.

On the other hand, Rep. Witt and I later took an enormous amount of criticism when we appeared in the Voters Pamphlet thanking Dennis for helping Vernonia. We had sinned by showing our public gratitude towards a Republican. As punishment we were banned from something called the Democratic Party's Executive Committee. I joked at the time that it was like getting kicked out of a club you didn't know you belonged to.

For his part, Dennis responded with an amused smile. When you've flown a combat helicopter in Vietnam, rescuing wounded troops and transporting body bags, it changes your idea of what a bad day is.

If you're of a certain generation, you likely know someone who was sent to Vietnam and came back a changed person – and not for the better. Dennis returned and treated his life as a gift.

When I talked to him at Thanksgiving last year, we chatted about his health a little bit. He believed he was looking cancer in the eye and hoped cancer would blink. It didn't. I believe some of his optimism was because of the fact he was a man of deep faith. But also, because he survived Vietnam.

He had seen the worst that can happen when men are required to carry out somebody else's political decisions. He carried that lesson with him to the end, which came too soon. Dennis Richardson still had work to do.

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