

Ad Hagan
The Mountain's got his back.
Kerrs Creek
By Sarah Clayton

At the end of Taylor Hollow, past the early 19th century Carter home place, past February's yellow coltsfoot, where the rock-strewn creek rushes headlong into spring then dies away in summer's drought, and the last meadow takes its stand as the land steeply ascends into the forested wilderness of the House Mountains, sits the home of First Lt. Joseph Addison "Ad" Hagan III.

"Since I was at VMI, I had a vision of walking up a lane," he says. "It's snowing. Up ahead and to the right is a cottage. It's always gingerbread-like. A candle is alight in each of the two front windows and smoke curls out of the chimney, and I know I'm going to this warm, inviting, welcoming environment. I never get there in my dream, but I'm always walking toward it. It's a very comforting image for me. "

"I was a platoon commander in Vietnam for two years, medivacked out of there to Guam at 23 for complications from a shrapnel wound. I came home at 23. To begin a journey of healing. The image of the cottage never left me."

"I designed it standing in formation at VMI for something to hang on to. From Jackson Arch I could see a small house way off on a hill, smoke floating from its chimney. That was the beginning of my dream. When I was standing in ranks, I would look at that house, and leave VMI behind in my head."

"VMI was a lot of work. I was president of my class all four years. We had tensions in the barracks between pro and con Vietnam war factions. I was very

defensive then about my service. To me it was honorable. And I wasn't going to have anyone telling me otherwise."

Ad has been showing me around his dream house with the enthusiasm of a young man who's just built his first home. And, while a lot of detritus has been swilling beneath his bridge, this is, indeed, the first time in his life for such a project. The house, of 18th century English cottage design, is like something out of *The Hobbit*, all wood and arcing tree limbs and stone and hand-carvings and nothing quite like you've ever seen before. There's an iron spiral staircase and trapdoor with pulley system to the basement, a brick-floored kitchen and a chimney "peopled" with rocks given by friends and family—his granddaughter, Emily, gave him a cobblestone from his native Norfolk. Ad points them all out, mixed in as they are with the local stone off his land, and tells me the story of each.

Some of the cedar shingles on his house have images designed and carved by Ad "to remember someone whose help, in one way or another, in building the cottage, contributed so much to the spirit of the place, and moved me: Jimmy who came every single day for months to work with me, his companionship meant the world; Tracey from the Vet Center in Roanoke who stood by me on the broken road that led me straight to today; Jim, a dear friend, who did all the metalwork on the house; 'The Lady,' I carved from a sketch by my wife to honor her." And, high on the roof, the shingles are arranged to represent the "chevrons of my gunnery sergeant's rank, who was killed in Vietnam."

His house is "completely off the grid" with gas lights, solar panels, a generator and a 1000 gallon propane tank. Many of the cabinets and shelves in the house were

made from the floorboards of a late 18th century cabin/home, a present from the Carters, that Ad had moved into his valley just so he could see it from his desk .

He found the picture of “his house” in a book on his brother-in-law’s coffee table. “When I first saw it, I knew nothing about timber framing, but I knew I’d found the cottage I’d always seen in my dream. In the book, it has a fireplace and a rocking chair. A padded rocking chair. Whoever thought of that?” He looks at me with glee, and could be, at that moment, about 15, except the intensity behind his sky-blue Irish eyes tells another story, and I wonder if we’ll get to it. “I’d never thought of a padded rocking chair. But, if you’re going to be welcome somewhere, you need one. And the house had the two front windows for my candles.” He gestures triumphantly.

“I was so smitten by that picture, I went to timber-framing school in North Carolina. After I’d served my apprenticeship, I learned I better damn well find someone who knew something about timber-framing ‘cause I wasn’t that person. One after the other, you ask people who know something. You create relationships with good people. And you get your house built. “

“There are 309 pieces in this building,” he says. “All pegged. No nails. We raised it Easter weekend 2007. In two days. I had breakfast, lunch and dinner catered. And invited people to a party. If they wanted to get on a line and pull for the raising they could, but they didn’t have to. That was okay, too. It was a party. At one time we had 163 people here. And we got it up.”

I’m standing at the front door, listening to the creek. The gable ends of House Mountain, twin peaks as they are from this angle, the “Saddle” (or “tween the mountains” as the old timers call it) a gentle scoop joining them, stand out in the clear

Spring light, scars and all—the broken snags from winter ice storms, old logging roads weaving across the contours like snail trails. And the rocks. Always the rocks. The leaves haven't come in yet. At least not in the upper reaches. The foothills are awash in a crisp, salad-green froth of foliage, which, in a few weeks, will make its way to the top, and dress the mountain out in its summer finery. I prefer winter, when you see the mountains' bones. And wrinkles. Its aged rocks. Its heart and soul laid bare.

“The most moving part about this house,” says Ad, “is that, except for me, this house wouldn't be here. This is a creation to make something out of almost nothing. But, I was guided, too, by the English critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) who said: ‘When we build, let us think that we build forever...and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time will come when...men will say, as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, ‘See! This, our fathers did for us.’”

“Craftsmen, real craftsmen brought their skills, them *selves*, to this place,” says Ad with reverence, looking around with satisfaction. Into the suspended silence roars one of the many military planes that use our mountains for training. “An Osprey,” says Ad with an upward glance, and goes in. I remain behind, watching the plane disappear, amazed, as always, at the incongruity of these sleek war machines, tearing over our ancient, worn mountains, themselves wrought in geologic violence. Both astound me esthetically. The past and present. Into what future?

We wander over to the massive stone fireplace, above which, in a slab of white pine, is carved the Gaelic *Domhnach Broc* (Donnybrook), the name of the house, and, too, the once unnamed creek, before Ad arrived, rushing beside it.

“It’s a town outside Dublin, Ireland, and means ‘the ‘Church of St. Broc,’ ” says Ad. “In A.D. 1205, King John of England, brother of Richard the Lionheart, authorized a fair be held in the village, which it was until 1855 when parliament shut it down— because of its bawdiness, drunkenness and violence. Good, old, out-of-control Irish people,” he says, side-barring to his own background of a McNamara mother and his father’s O’Hagans. “Tried to straighten these Irish people out but it never worked. Try as they might.”

“A ‘donnybrook’ today,” Ad says, “is a brawl from which you end up friends for life or seriously wounded.”

Ad, the oldest of 11 children, was born in 1946 and brought up in Norfolk, Virginia, to a hardcore Marine family. “ My father was a Marine, my two uncles were Marines, my paternal grandfather was a Marine, and eventually my son, Joseph Addison Hagan IV, joined up. I grew up knowing I wanted to be a Marine. No thinking involved. It was the only thing I knew. I was marching down the street at a year and a half old. Every time a flag was raised, Dad would stop the car, and we’d all get out, and put our hands over our hearts. We went to all the parades and saluted every time the flag went by. It’s just what we did.” The memory melds his face into the same intensity as his eyes to yield a visage of pure anguish.

“At one point, I was going to be a doctor...in the Marines,” he says. “I entered VMI to do pre-med. But later changed to engineering.”

He turns to look at me, face composed, eyes burning. “I’m probably more of a poet than an engineer,” he says. “I’m not a good engineer but I’ve always managed technical companies because I could speak the language. I was an interpreter, so to

speak. All over the world--China, Japan, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, England, South Africa, Canada, South Korea.

“My grandfather was disabled by World War I, so that took him out on a disability pension for the rest of his life. One of my uncles served his time and got out. Another served his time then stayed in the reserves. My dad stayed in the reserves but got out after Korea. Back in the day, they’d get drinking and talk as if they were still in the Corps, even though they’d left 20 years before. It’s who they were,” he says with an edge. “Yes, it was hard to be around, but I didn’t know anything else.”

“I was raised that war was glorious. Thrilling. And about the best thing you could do was to give your life for your country. And, if you couldn’t do that, get wounded. But you had to serve. And so you can imagine the attitude the men in my family had for hippies and the protest movement and stuff like that. That was considered hateful. Absolutely hateful.” A pause. “Good for the protesters, I think now. But that’s just my opinion.

“In Vietnam I was a platoon commander. A company commander. Of infantry. I led. I was decorated. I got wounded for my country. I didn’t come back as a hero. But I came back in high regard to my family. I had done well.” A longer pause. “I had no idea, though, what the cost would be to me.”

The sun is heading down now. Shadows reach for the bottom of the field. The final blaze of daylight on the uppermost reaches of the mountain dies away, and the world greys like a body immediately after death, leaving the mountain bleak and forlorn.

“We have the most beautiful mornings here,” says Ad. “The sun coming over Little House. Glorious.”

In this north-facing hollow, the sun rises between 7:30 and 9:30 a.m., depending on the season, and goes down mid-winter around 2:00 to 2:30 p.m.

“Once I got to Vietnam, I was sick at what was going on. Up to this point, I’d bought the party line. I went over there to fight for these people beset by an atheist, communist government. And, Sarah, once there, all I could think was, ‘I’m doing what I’ve been asked to do, but this is not helping. These people have lived the same way in these huts for a thousand years, sweeping a dirt floor every day. All they want is to be left alone.

“I couldn’t articulate what I was feeling then. I had a job to do. I was a commander. I wouldn’t even have been able to articulate it. But my brain was telling me—this is not for you. Repercussions from a fairly minor—at the time—shrapnel wound put me in the Naval hospital in Guam, then back to Quantico Marine Base in Virginia, where I spent my last six months of duty in the Corps. I’d served my time.”

“And your father?” I ask, imagining hell, fire and damnation descending on him for leaving the Marines.

“He didn’t mind. I hadn’t let anyone down. I led. I was decorated. I got wounded for my country. It wasn’t until I got back to the states that I thought, ‘God help us.’

“I learned in Vietnam that life is one-on-one on a human level. Pointing a rifle at someone is a hard way to learn that. But it’s my path. It’s how I learned it.”

Ad goes quiet again and the hollow responds in kind, except for the creek, a merry descant to the sludge of bad memories. “ I understand what I did. I’d been trained to fight. I’d asked for it. My country asked me to do it. But I wouldn’t go through that again. I would not serve today. Not out of fear for my own life, my own safety. It’s just believing that what we are doing is profoundly wrong on the individual human level.”

He leans forward, body tensed, eyes drilling through me. “Wars are not fought between armies. We think they are, and that’s what helps us be able to fight them. Wars are actually fought between this man here with his rifle, and that man there with his rifle. Once I came to realize that’s what I was doing, I couldn’t live with it. I also learned that God is on both sides. I didn’t know that back then. Coming from a Catholic family, God was only on one team.”

We sit before the unlit, monumental stone fireplace in Ad’s dream house, agitated by thoughts of the Vietnam war. An American folly.

“I was about eight years from retirement from my engineering job,” Ad continues, “when I became immobilized in my chair. Literally. Immobilize at work. I’d been the manager of international construction companies, always on the move from one country to another, doing a very specialized and dangerous kind of work. It kept things at bay. The danger factor is seductive. Like war. This business of the near-death experience. I think some of us try to recapture it once again, like your first kiss. You can’t have that kiss again. You can have another kiss but you can’t have that one. So you go up a 700-foot chimney stack and work. Risk your life.”

His words are tumbling along like the stream outside. He slows down and looks at me, bewildered, almost as if he’s coming out of a trance. “Then...I couldn’t do

anything. I couldn't even sit at my desk. So...I resigned. I told the company president that I could no longer perform in the position for which he'd hired me. That's when I went into treatment. In-patient. For 142 days and 33 years.' I feel like I can live with it now. It's there. It comes and goes but less frequently.

"I still have flashbacks and nightmares. And anger. That's probably the first manifestation of it. But I know what it is now. It's been called battle fatigue, shell shock. It was once considered cowardly. In 1979, the government declared my condition Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I think the government is making big strides in helping soldiers, but it's not really there yet. Eighty-three hundred vets kill themselves every year. I couldn't acknowledge PTSD when I was 23. I was a small unit commander. We were in the middle of a war. I had to keep functioning.

"I was tormented, though, in Vietnam, and eventually hit a psychological wall beyond which I could not go. But it wouldn't be until I was in my 50s that I found out why. At 50, it's been discovered, a lot of people, who've been in combat, lose their ability to cope and they fall apart. I did. It's been a long road back.

"I started looking for my cottage or at least the land to build it on 30 years ago. Then, my son, Addison, and his wife bought this land from your brother. They invited me to come and build. My son and I walked this land and up the mountain. The day before I'd had a total knee replacement. But my son was excited and I wanted to be part of his excitement. I liked the land and the fact that I'd been invited to build my home here. One of the things I wanted to do was write. To have a desk in a place with a particular view. Before we even broke ground, I tied helium balloons from the Dollar Store to clumps of grass, then got on the hill behind at their level, and found the view I

wanted for my desk. Then I knew where my house was going to be. Exactly. And here it is. I've been writing a lot for my children and grandchildren. About the ugliness of war. How it affected me."

While dredging through his memories, Ad can see from his desk window "my meadow," which in season gives forth a garden of bloom—cone flowers, coreopsis, Shasta daisies, sweet Williams, chickory, sunflowers, black-eyed Susans, Indian blankets, Queen Anne's lace, cosmos. "There's a tree line on the left that stretches down to another at the far end," says Ad, pointing. "On the right is a grove of trees on a stony forest floor. I see no one. My neighbors are deer, bear, coyote, ground hogs, gray squirrels and fox. We have a resident hawk and a couple of owls. Oh, and tadpoles, crayfish, frogs, toads, turtles, salamanders and snakes best found by my grandchildren. I can see the log cabin the Carters gave me. And, when it snows, the scene is one of breathtaking serenity. We stay in until Tim Goodbar plows us out. We don't need to go anywhere any way."

"Come look at this," he says, and heads outside to a graceful arch of wood holding up the front porch. "We had an old apple tree we had to take down before we could build, but we made this with it, an apple tree knee brace. This tree gave its life for the cottage and then we gave that life back by incorporating it into the building."

We wander on through this extraordinary house where every inch has been meticulously planned even down to the height of the hearth in the master bedroom so someone lying in bed can see the fire.

"I wouldn't change what I have for anything." He chuckles wistfully. His eyes soften. "There's a country song that says, 'Thank you for the broken road that led me

straight to you.’ I wouldn’t change where I am, so I can’t look back and resent any of those steps along the way because they brought me here—to my fiancé (now wife, Ann Reid Hagan); the close, intimacy I have with my children; the peace. I wasn’t capable of intimacy 10 years ago. I was too busy warding things off.

“This hollow nurtures me.” His voice comes down an octave. “If you picture Little House as one arm and Big House as the other, the mountain puts its arms around me up here. I’m safe. I’m comforted. I don’t have to worry about what’s behind me. From a military standpoint, the enemy is channeled. If it wants to come in, it has to come up the lane, so the battlefield is controlled. When I first sighted this land, after loving the peace and quiet, the response was all military—fields of fire, controlling the enemy, economy of force, maneuverability. I can’t not assess such things. Something’s been changed in my brain and it remains changed. At least I’d thought so. Over time, the scene from my desk is transforming me from a defensive position to one of peace and safety. When I came here, I came for solitude. But having found solitude, those other things—peace and safety--followed close behind.”

“ This is a place where my soul can sit down.”