

MEMORIAL DAY, 2015
STORY OF AN UNKNOWN HERO
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The memories of war never go away for better or for worse, mostly for the worse. In my case, it took me more than thirty five years to even speak of the war and only because of another group of veterans could speak of it with me. I will not narrate all the nightmares, sweats, screams that woke me from sleep - and much more. One simply does not forget the sights and sounds of combat and the fears that it still conjures. I will not dwell on them here.

But sometimes there are memories of heroism and selflessness that are not forgotten and cause you to remember that not all in that war was dreadful. Such is the memory of one of the finest, most courageous men I have ever met: Captain David Thibadeaux of the 101st Airborne was in charge of the forward patrols near the Mekong River along the Cambodian border. We knew way back in 1962 that the southern insurgents (then called the Viet Cong or soldiers of Vietnam) were being supplied and equipped by the north along the trail that led down from the north, through Cambodia into points of entry all along that Ho Chi Minh trail. It was up to our division to intercept those supplies. We spent most of our time setting up ambushes by patrols all along the jumping off points of that trail.

Thibadeaux was a soldiers' soldier who would ask no one to do what he was unwilling to do. He was right there at the front of the patrols so that even the point man never thought he was alone. He was first in combat and the last to withdraw after he knew that no man was left behind. You just knew that what ever happened, you would never be left behind, living or dead. The Captain was that kind of a leader. I knew because I had first hand knowledge of that courage.

I was a chaplain with the 101st Airborne and I had been there for over three months when the

first episode happened that saved my life. The Captain had an uncanny feeling for danger which saved our lives more than once. He was also a profoundly religious man who was torn between his duty and his faith. He never talked about that split but I knew it from the way he would talk to me - and only to me. Never in front of the men. It was always a kind of confession for him. We had developed a deep friendship there deep in those jungles. The Captain would serve my Mass every day whenever it was possible to celebrate Mass in the jungle when we were on active patrol. But we were never out of danger so that our Masses had to be short and guarded. But Thibadeaux was always there to give the signal that it was safe to celebrate. He served my Masses every day or night. The first time he saved my life was precisely during Mass in a small clearing near the Mekong. I had just started the canon of the Mass when the Captain pushed me aside into a ditch and cried "incoming." We landed in the ditch around the tree stump where I was saying Mass when a direct mortar shell blew the whole area up in a flash. No one was hurt that day due to the keen sense of danger that Thibadeaux had who saved us all from sure death. Those mortar shells did not give themselves away by a whistling sound as do incoming bombs and artillery shells but the Captain just knew the danger even when we others could not hear that incoming mortar that surely would have killed us all. The only thing left that I could find was a clump of metal that used to be my beloved chalice that was a gift from my parents for my ordination. I started to cry at the loss. The Captain came up, held me and said so clearly that I shall never forget his words: "Well the only thing we have is a priest of gold and a canteen of tin with which to say holy Mass." He handed the canteen to me and ordered me to finish the rest of the Mass which I knew by heart. I still do not know why I kept on crying all during the Mass whether it was the loss of a beloved chalice or the beautiful words from a man of God who gave me a wonderful compliment I knew I did not deserve. That was

the first time he saved my life and gave me the courage to continue on my fearful way.

The rest of the week went by uneventfully. We incurred no enemy supply teams coming across the river. There was nothing left to do but to return to camp for a little R+ R and some hot food. Showers were primitive in those areas but anything to wash the dirt and grime of weeks in the jungle was appreciated. And a change of clothes. The clothing was so filthy that they had to be thrown away as they were falling away from our skin. One has no idea what a clean shower and new clothing meant in the field. One simply feels like a new man even when it rained every afternoon. To be clean is a reminder of what I was supposed to be inside. I always thought they were related.

But duty called again after three days of rest, some beer and a good night's sleep when you didn't have to worry about an enemy attack or snakes crawling up your leg while you had to be so silent so as not to give away a position in the pure darkness of the jungle night. Even to this day I can feel the slithering up my leg hoping it was not one of those deadly green serpents which are characteristic of the jungle night. If you didn't move, they slithered away since they did not feel fear to strike at an unknown enemy. Sleep in peace is heavenly when such fears were absent. "Sleep in heavenly peace" was not just a song for Christmas.

Another two weeks in the jungle with no enemy encounter. But sometimes it is the enemy who lays in wait for you and not you for him. The Viet Cong were not only local who knew the terrain better than we did but they could smell us a mile away. Americans are meat eaters and the Cong were not. We gave a distinct odor so that they had an advantage which we did not even suspect. Before we knew it, mortar shells were exploding all around us and we had no idea where they were coming from. We simply had to dig deeper fox holes praying that one would not hit us until the attack was over. Some ate no meat while in the field. I was lucky and unlucky all at the

same time. Over my hole a shell exploded some twenty feet above my position that literally blew me out of the hole. Later the doctors told me that I was lucky that the explosion was from above. If it had hit straight down, I would have been a KIA right into the hole I had dug. I couldn't move because fragments of that shell permeated my back. I thought I was paralyzed because I could not feel anything. The great fear was not death. That happens and you are gone. But to be paralyzed for the rest of your life? That is what we all feared most. My clothes were soaked in blood so I knew that I had received more than a scratch. All of a sudden I felt someone grab me and lift me onto his shoulders. It was the Captain who had called in helicopter gun ships but they didn't know where to fire in the dark for fear of friendly casualties. But a medivac accompanied the gun ships when the Captain called for help. There was the Captain carrying me for some 150 yards through enemy fire to bring me back to the medivac. I knew he had been hit as well because I could feel his blood seeping through the front of my uniform. I knew it wasn't mine since my wounds were all in the back. But we made it and when he placed me on the helicopter he remarked "We are really blood brothers now. Don't you ever forget that, Riga. I always wanted to be a priest. Now I carry his blood." Humor even then. My wounds were serious but I survived in the medical unit set up some thirty miles away. Those fragments are still in my back which reminds me every morning when it takes me fifteen minutes just to get up and walk. But more importantly, the pain reminds me of the Captain's last words to me and how we were now blood brothers. Kind of like Indian tribes in the old southwest. When they proclaimed peace between the men of a tribe, the chiefs would exchange blood so they would never forget or fight each other again. Brother does not kill brother. The Captain and I will be blood brothers till the day I die. His blood was now mine, and mine, his. This remains a great honor for me.

After I returned to the states and was discharged because of my wounds, I found out later by mail that the Captain had been killed coming to the aid of some men from his company whom he would not abandon. Figures that he would die trying to save others who would never be left behind. That's' the motto of the 101st Airborne and he lived it to the end. I have never gone to the wall in Washington, D.C. where his name is there with the day he was killed. I could not bear to see it because it would overwhelm me. Maybe someday but not now. I pray for him every day.

I have written this as testimony not to my courage in that war (I had none) but to the Captain who taught me to do my duty under fire even when I was afraid. His memory is literally in my bones and I wanted everyone to know about the courage of a great American lest his memory fade from history with no one to tell the tale of his bravery. .

May he rest in peace in the compassion given to him by the Lord for that same compassion that he showed to me and to many others on the battle fields of that war in the country that was then called the Republic of South Vietnam. May all those soldiers rest in peace whose memories are now only names on a wall in Washington, D.C. They deserve so much more. I for one will never forget the heroism of that Captain who will never be forgotten for as long as I live. He gave me the courage to live when I thought I deserved to die. *R.I.P.*