



STORIES OF THE CEDAR TREE KEEPER

By John F. Hall



The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. Psalm 29:5

This is a story about the cedar trees that line the right side of the two-tenths of a mile road leading up to my Antebellum house. It is also a story about one cedar tree on Fort Campbell. It all began 55 years ago when the Tennessee Valley Authority was forcing all of the residents out of the land between the rivers. I was 20 years old and an Army veteran. My wife, Paula and I were living with her parents on a farm in Golden Pond that belonged to Paula's grandmother, Ivy Oakley. I was salvaging barbed fence wire and taking it over to a farm that Miss Ivy had purchased. The farm is located five miles west of Cadiz along Highway 68/80. Miss Ivy's husband, Chester had died from stomach cancer and her son, Andrew operated the farm. The fences on this farm were not good and the cattle were constantly getting out. They wanted to eat the grass on the Highway right of way.



On this farm was a dilapidated Antebellum farm house that was built around 1859 or 1860. It is two tenths of a mile from the highway to this house. The fence row along the dirt road leading to this house was in very poor condition. Cedar trees were growing up all along the fence row like weeds. The fence posts had out lived their usefulness and needed to be replaced, but money was scarce. I decided to leave a cedar tree every ten feet and cut out the rest. The cedar trees that- were not cut out would become "Mother Nature's" fence posts. The cedar trees would some day grow tall and help secure the barbed wire fence and keep the cattle in the pasture. In addition to maintaining the fences and feeding the cattle, I would bushhog the fields. The bushhog is a three-blade mower that operates off the tractor's PTO. It can cut down bushes and small trees. It was Andrew's tractor, but I purchased a tractor radio so I could listen to music as I was bushhogging.

I can recall a story when I was in the 101st Airborne Division that involved a cedar tree. The Louisville newspaper, the Courier Journal, in its February 26, 2015 edition contained a half page article titled "The Big Chill of 1963." The sub heading read, "Blizzard brought the biggest temperature drop that the Louisville area has ever experienced." I had forgotten the exact time in January 1963 when the blizzard hit Fort Campbell. The article mentioned that the late January storm began a period of incredibly cold weather including a low of 20 below zero on January 24th. No mention was made of the wind chill temperature.

I remember, like it was yesterday, what happened to me that week. I was 17 and assigned to the 3rd platoon, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. I graduated from Jump School at Fort Benning the previous month. I was assigned as an ammo bearer for the M-60 machine gun team. Since the 3rd platoon was being reconstituted, the machine gunner and assistant machine gunner positions had not been filled. My platoon sergeant called the platoon together for a meeting. He informed us that the company would be going to the

field for a Field Training Exercise (FTX). On January 23, 1963, I was told to sign out an M-60 machine gun, a 45 caliber hand gun, a holster and a sleeping bag from the supply room.

The platoon loaded into “Duce” and a half military trucks for the dusty ride out to the rear area training site. The warm weather was very deceiving that day. It was cloudy with a high of 40 degrees. Our platoon leader was a new Second Lieutenant and a graduate of West Point. The FTX began that afternoon.

Our platoon did not last very long. The FTX Umpire ruled that our company had been destroyed and we were taken out of the FTX, and sent to a bivouac area. On a side note, three years later, the 101st was deployed to Vietnam. Only a few soldiers in the 3rd platoon returned home. My enlistment was over in 1965. I was a civilian when I received word that most of my “Band of Brothers” were killed.

A light rain set in the bivouac area. The company did not sign out any tents. The rain turned heavy as it started to get dark. The platoon sergeant told us to eat our C-Rations and get into our sleeping bags. I watched as my fellow soldiers pulled off their muddy and wet boots and went inside their sleeping bags. I did not want to rest on the wet ground or get my sleeping bag muddy.

I spotted a tall cedar tree. It appeared that lightning hit the tree about half way up. It split the cedar tree nearly in half. The top half was still partially attached. It formed a lean-to. Everything that we are told about lightning is true, all trees attract lightning. In most trees, the area just under the bark layer contains moisture in the form of sap and water. And since water is a better electrical conductor than wood, lightning striking a tree tends to travel underneath the bark. Overall, the oak tree appears to be the most vulnerable to lightning strikes. It is true that a tree is a better target for a lightning strike after it has been thoroughly soaked by rain. I also remember getting out of a van, on a dry day and seeing lightning strike the outside of a tree less than 70 feet from where I was standing.

To be honest, I never thought about lightning striking the split cedar tree again. The fact is lightning can strike any location more than once. Even in a car, during a lightning storm, a person is safest pulling over to the side of the road, turning off the engine and putting their hands in their lap until the storm passes. In the Army, cover and concealment is the rule. I decided to get under the damaged cedar tree and just sit on my sleeping bag. My poncho (rain cover) was keeping me dry. I rested my head on my crossed arms that were supported by my knees. All night long I could hear the patter of what I thought was rain hitting my poncho. I woke up the next morning, January 24, 1963. I uncovered my head and came out from under the cedar tree. To my surprise, the ground was covered by at least six inches of snow. I observed a hand coming up from under the snow. It was like watching a horror movie. Then I heard a sad voice say, “Oh, No!”

Because I was told to sign out an M-69 machine gun and not my M-1 rifle, I had two empty ammo pouches. I put a paperback book to read in the left ammo pouch and a small

battery operated transistor radio in the right pouch. This radio had a single earphone so I could listen without giving my position away. In 1963, things like cell phones, iPads, laptop computers and VCRs had not been invented. Coin pay phones were installed in the barracks if we needed to call home. I was just a private, but I took the initiative to find some dead tree limbs to start a fire. I tore up the paperback book and used gun cleaning oil to get a fire going. The Army put matches in the C-Rations that made a difference since I did not smoke. The company cooks came by with the usual powdered eggs, cold biscuits and watered down orange juice. When you put the eggs in the metal mess kit, they just turned cold.

My platoon sergeant told me to set up a check point at the intersection near our bivouac site. I was standing at the dirt road intersection with the M-60 machine gun. I observed a M-60 tank coming down the road.

The driver stopped when he reached my check point. He opened the driver hatch and smiled at me. Steam was rolling out from inside the tank. The driver asked if I was cold. My jump boots were not insulated. My leather gloves did not keep my fingers from getting cold. The wind gusts were getting worse. I firmly told the driver to move on. Little did I know that 23 years later I would be in the Army Reserve going through the Tank Commander Certification Course on Fort Knox to learn how to drive, shoot and command the M-60 tank.

As I manned the check point, I had in my earphone listening to the Clarksville, Tennessee radio station. Every hour the meteorologist at the radio station kept reporting that the temperature was dropping. Around noon, the radio disk jockey announced that we had no temperature. It was zero degrees. The temperature that started out that morning at 40 degrees had crashed to zero by the noon hour. An arctic front turned into a blizzard with wind gusts of 40 miles an hour.

The snow packed dirt roads became ice covered before the day would end. Fort Campbell would endure the biggest one day temperature drop that it had ever experienced. That night the temperature dropped to 22 degrees below zero. Thankfully the FTX was called off. We loaded into the trucks that took us over the treacherous dirt roads back to the barracks.

The concrete block barracks at that time had open bay platoon areas. We had no privacy. We had twin size metal beds, full size metal wall lockers and wooden foot lockers. We had large walk-in showers. I would come out of the field; remove my jump boots and walk into the shower fully dressed and in my field gear. I would turn on the hot water and slowly peel out of my uniform and field gear. I washed myself along with the M-60 machine gun. I would dry off everything and put a light coat of oil on the machine gun. Later on, when I became the machine gunner, I taught myself to disassemble the M-60 machine gun blind folded. I remember looking out the third floor barracks window that was almost covered over in ice. I was thankful not to be out in the field that bitter cold night.

I remember looking out from my second story bedroom window to see a winter wonderland. Snow was frozen on the top of the antique red bell in my front yard. One hundred and fifty odd years ago they would ring this bell to have the farm workers come in from the fields to eat lunch. Many years ago my grandchildren would put on their winter coats, gloves and boots to come outside and build snowmen and lay on their backs to make snow angels. They would get out their sleds and slide down the hill. The ice and snow on the road has prevented the mail carrier from driving up the hill to deliver-the mail. Snow drifts blocked my car under the carport. My grandson John-John is delighted that they canceled school. My day would normally start by driving over to his house to take him to school. Before the heavy snow began, I observed several red cardinals playing in my driveway. They shelter in the tall cedar trees and get nourishment from eating the tree's blueberries.

I miss the days of summer and watching my grandchildren ride their bikes and drive their electric cars down the road. Their voices and laughter have long since faded away with the wind. They became cherished memories witnessed by me as I look out over those cedar trees. I like the lyrics of a hymn written by John Fawcett hundreds of years ago, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like that above. Before our Father's throne we pour our ardent prayers; our fears, our hope, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares. We share each other's woes, our mutual burdens bear; and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear. When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain; but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again."

This is the summer of 2020, and heat index will reach 103 degrees. The cedar trees have grown to almost 60 feet in height. The barb wire fence and the cattle are long gone. I will end this true story by changing one word in a song written by Tom Springfield decades ago when I was working on the fence row: "It's a long, long journey so stay by my side. When I walk through the storm you'll be my guide, be my guide. If they gave me a fortune my pleasure would be small. I could lose it all tomorrow and never mind at all. But if I should lose your love, JESUS, I don't know what I will do. For I know I will never find another you." The Lord has blessed those majestic cedar trees.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:
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