

DIVINE INTERVENTION

By John F. Hall

In 1984, Melvin Lee Greenwood wrote the song "Proud to be an American." My favorite verse in that song contains the following lyrics, "And I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free. And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me. And I'd gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today. 'Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land, God bless the USA." This story is about six soldiers. One of the soldiers died in World War II. Two of the soldiers fought in that war. One soldier served as a clerk in the White House during the Korean War. One soldier was seriously wounded in Vietnam. I am the six soldier. I began my Army service in June of 1962. I ended that service in June of 2005.

The one lyric in Lee Greenwood's song that hits home to me is this, "And I won't forget the men who died who gave that right to me." My uncle, Private First Class Francis E. Race was killed in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II on August 29, 1944. He died from wounds that he sustained during an artillery shelling in France. His picture in a newspaper article was carried in my mother's purse until the day that she died. She believed that her brother's life should not be forgotten. He died ten months before I was born. My mother gave me my middle name of "Francis" to honor his memory. My uncle did not die in vain. His life was not cheap, It was priceless.

In 1973, a fire at the Saint Louis Records Center destroyed 18 million soldier records. The fire destroyed my uncle's and my active duty medical records. In 1986, my wife, Paula and I drove up to visit one of my cousins who lived in Springfield, Mass. After our visit, we decided to put an American flag on my uncle's grave. He is buried in Saint Michael's Cemetery in that city. We drove to the cemetery office and requested the location of my uncle's grave. We went to that location and found that it was just a manicured patch of grass. We went back to the cemetery office and discovered that other members of my uncle's family are buried there and could not afford tombstones. I contacted the Secretary of the Army and requested that my uncle be issued a death certificate so I could apply to the Veteran's Administration for his tombstone. For 42 years, my uncle, a military hero, was buried in an unmarked grave. It required several months and the payment of \$25.00 to the cemetery to have my uncle's tombstone placed over his grave. It is true that the worst thing for a Veteran is to be forgotten. My mother told me that her brother, Francis Race jumped on a German hand grenade to save the lives of five other soldiers. To quote John, Chapter 15, Verse 13, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Many years ago, my late neighbor Richie Bridges never talked about his experiences as a soldier in World War II. I was coming home late one night, still in my military uniform. At the time, I was the Inspector General for the 85th Division located north of Chicago. I stopped at Richie's house. He was sitting in his garage. I told him that I planned to buy an item from his odds and end shop the next day. We began to talk and he said it just was not fair that a person that he knew was getting help from the Veteran's Administration (VA) and he was getting nothing. He told me that once a year a VA representative would

come to Cadiz to talk to the Veterans. The man told him that the VA would help him once they received his medical records. Yet he never told Richie the procedure to request a copy of his records. This went on year after year for decades. Richie told me that before he was drafted, he could pick up a railroad tie and carry it across the road. Now he gets out of breath just walking across the road to his mail box carrying nothing.

I told Richie that I would help him obtain a copy of his medical records under the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act. He received a copy of his medical records in two weeks. I told Richie that I was not a lawyer, but I could help him fill out his claim form and mail it to the VA. I told him that I needed to interview him and record our conversation so that I would know what he needed to say on that claim form. As he told me about his combat experiences, he began to cry. It was the first time in 50 years that he told anyone what happened to him. I reviewed his medical records, and his records of his treatments in hospitals in France and England. Richie filled out the forms based on what I felt would easily win him a disability pension. Several months after his claim was filed, the VA responded and denied his claim. I felt that was absolutely despicable. I also felt that the VA was just hoping that Veterans like Richie would just die and save the government some money.

I told Richie that we would appeal the denial. I helped Richie file the appeal papers that included most of his medical records. In another few months, the VA replied and denied Richie's appeal. I told Richie that we had one last chance. We would appeal to the Court of Appeals in Washington, DC that just hears appeals of this nature. I helped Richie file that appeal. After not hearing anything for about six months from this Court, I felt that I had failed in my best effort to help Richie. Another month went by and still no word from the DC Court of Appeals. Paula and I were eating at a local restaurant west of Cadiz. Richie and his wife came in and sat at a nearby table. After he ordered his meal, Richie came over to my table. He asked to speak to me privately outside. We walked outside and Richie told me that he received a check from the VA that he did not want anyone to know about. The check was for \$90,000.00. I told Richie that it was okay to cash it. I told Richie that the Army ruined his health during the war. He should have been receiving 100 percent disability payments the day he was discharged from the Army. That is what I had Richie tell the Court of Appeals and that Court concurred.

Richie wanted to pay me for helping him. I told him that I would not accept a penny from him. I told him that I did not help him for money. I helped him because it was the right thing to do. Richie's health began to deteriorate rapidly. He was admitted to the Western Kentucky Veteran's Center in Hanson, Kentucky. During my last one on one visit to Richie at the Center, he said to me, "John, I'll never forget what you did for me as long as I live." I told Richie, "It was my pleasure."

When Richie died, I read a eulogy that I wrote at his funeral. I told those in attendance that I wanted to share three stories that Richie told me. I was wearing my "dress blues" uniform when I told these stories. This is exactly what I said, "As some of you may know, Richie was an artillery observer and the senior member of a three-man team that would crawl into enemy lines. They would measure the effectiveness of the Army's

artillery hitting enemy targets. They did this at night and often they had to crawl through enemy mine fields. One mistake and they would be killed. Richie said that he had some device that helped him determine the effectiveness of the artillery rounds. Since Richie was the senior man, he was usually in the middle. He had one team member on his left and another team member on his right. They used battery operated field phones that were connected by wire to each other.”

“The enemy could not intercept their phone conversations unless they tapped into their phone lines. On one very dark night Richie called the soldier on his left and got no answer. So he left his measuring device and crawled over to the other soldier who was a couple hundred feet away. Richie could see nothing in the darkness and he had to follow the phone line. Apparently, this soldier fell asleep. Richie crawled back to his position and discovered that the enemy had cut his phone lines and stole his measuring device. He felt bad about losing the device and told me that the Army had tried to make him pay for the enemy taking the device. I told Richie that God was looking after him. The enemy wanted the device. And if it wasn't for the fact that the other soldier fell asleep, the enemy would have killed him and taken the device anyway.”

“In another story, Richie told me that he climbed a tall tree to get a better look at the artillery hitting enemy targets. He was up that tree for twenty minutes when a five— man German patrol stopped under the tree to smoke some cigarettes. He could smell the smoke as it went up the tree. He could see that each enemy soldier had a machine gun (MP-40). One sneeze, one slip of the foot and they would have shot him out of the tree. The enemy patrol moved away and he climbed down the tree and rejoined his team.”

“In the third story, Richie was taking measurements when all of a sudden the German and American artillery began firing at the same time. Rounds were exploding all around him. Richie told me, “John, it got so bad that I thought I was going to die, I just went crazy.” Richie was suffering from shell shock. Crawling into enemy lines, laying in the snow for ten to 12 hours a day, week in and week out with no relief took its toll on Richie. From shell shock to pneumonia, to rheumatic fever, Richie almost died. He was evacuated from the field and spent months in hospitals to regain his health.”

“Richie fought in the longest and deadliest battle of World War II, it was called the Battle of the Bulge. The 101st Airborne Division was completely surrounded by the Germans and it took General Patton's Third Army to break through the enemy lines to save the 101st Airborne Division from being destroyed by the enemy.”

When I finished the eulogy, that was in a three-ring binder, I walked over to Richie's daughter. I gave her the binder; stood at attention and gave her a slow salute and walked away. If you ask me to define a true hero, it's a person who crawls through mine fields, and crawls into enemy lines, night after night, and does his job and does not complain.

Recently, a friend, John Juneau, gave me a book to read titled “Please, Jesus, Give Me Three More Minutes To Live.” The person who wrote the book, Harold Hammil, received his draft notice at the age of 19 in 1943. He failed his physical examination three

times. He had five significant medical disqualifications. His examining doctor, merely because Harold looked fit, passed him anyway. He told Harold that he would put him on restricted infantry duty. There was no such designation. Army profiles for restricted duty are issued after a soldier is sworn into service and injured in training, not before. The doctor was dishonest and failed in his responsibility to give Harold the required classification of 4—F (not acceptable for service in the Armed Forces).

Private Harold Hammil fought in North Africa and Italy during World War II. He wrote his book about his 300 days in combat at the age of 80. What he told about the unspeakable horrors that he endured should not have happened. He did not mention any battle wounds or mental problems associated with being in combat that long. He was brave and courageous. He was a person of Christian faith who believed that Divine Intervention saved his life many times. There is just one word in his 274-page book that gave me pause. He wrote, "It was then that I realized how cheap one human being's life is. Each person's life is about as important as a grain of sand is on the Florida beaches that I was to visit many times in my adult life. I would often think of this analogy as I walked the sandy beaches of Florida. I could see where I should improve my personal life by treating other people nicer and not be so critical of their faults. Even though I am not perfect, neither is any human being perfect. I should be more tolerant of all people and not take life so seriously. After all, we are put here on earth by God, and our life span is a brief spell in His master plan. I am just one of his sheep, as is everyone else on earth."

I strongly disagree with Harold Hammil that human life is cheap. It is certainly fragile and perishable. For him to equate the importance of human life as being equal to a grain of sand, fails to accept the fact that each life has a soul that will exist for all eternity. Each soul is priceless in the eyes of Christ. In Mark, Chapter 8, Verse 36, there is this question: "For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his soul? The cousin that Paula and I went to visit in 1986, called me in 2003. She told me that she was in poor health and that a distant cousin that I never met was homeless on the streets of Lexington, Kentucky. She told me that this cousin served in the White House as a clerk during the Korean War. This cousin, James Holmes, had dementia and needed a guardian. His parents died when he was in high school. He never married and had no family or siblings. She asked me to help. He was arrested and put in a nursing home. But he kept walking away and they felt he would wind up dead. So I agreed to help this stranger. It took two court trials for me to be appointed as his guardian. He was drafted during the Korean War but served stateside. I had him admitted to the West Kentucky Veteran's Home in Hanson, Kentucky. He did not know who I was five minutes before I would go visit him or five minutes after I left. In Matthew, Chapter 25, Verse 45, Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me." When James Holmes died, he was given a proper funeral and he was buried in the Veteran's Cemetery West. I laid a wreath on his tombstone at the Wreaths Across America in December 2018. I noticed that someone left a penny on his tombstone. It is a message to the deceased soldier's family that someone else has visited the grave to pay respects.

I always felt that I had a close friendship with Jesus Christ since I was a young child. I say a simple prayer, "Jesus Christ, please protect me today." Unlike the majority of soldiers in my unit in the 101st Airborne Division, that were drafted into the Army, I volunteered to become an infantry paratrooper. I was 17 and this is what I wanted to do. I guess I was fearless and thought, perhaps, that I was invincible if Jesus Christ was for me. When I was at Fort Benning, Georgia and training to become a paratrooper, I was about to make my third qualifying parachute jump. I was sitting under the wing of an Air Force plane, the C-1 19. Suddenly, a truck pulled up and several soldiers began to load M-1 rifles and ammunition into the plane. This was during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the United States and Russia, in 1962 were on the brink of nuclear war. I was told that my third jump would be made in Havana, Cuba. I believed that my life, once I jumped over that city, would be over in a few seconds. I expected to be shot and killed in my parachute as it slowly drifted down to earth.

I believed that it was Divine Intervention that ended the crisis and allowed me to earn my jump wings. Jesus Christ intervened, in my opinion, to stop the mutually assured destruction of the United States by nuclear war. Fifty seven years ago, I thought nothing about being the first paratrooper to exit the plane at 1,000 feet above the ground. As I look at my picture, taken so long ago when I was 18, it reminds me of Romans, Chapter 8, Verse 31, "What, then, shall we respond to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"



One day, I was in my foxhole looking down the barrel of my M-60 machine gun. I felt I was just a gun for hire. My assistant gunner and my ammo bearer were sound asleep. I knew that if I did not get out of that foxhole, that I would never amount to anything. I heard some of the other soldiers talking about transferring to a special unit called the Security Platoon. So I went and talked to the commander of this unit. He liked how I looked in my starched uniform. He said I would have to obtain a secret security clearance to go on missions. My company commander in B Company, 327th Infantry, was not happy about my decision to transfer. He said I would lose the \$50.00 a month jump pay. I told him I understood. I gave him a hand salute and filed the transfer papers. I would miss the hazardous duty pay, but it was more important for me to take a college course at

Austin Peay College.

One year after I transferred to the Security Platoon, my former Airborne unit was deployed to Vietnam. The soldier who replaced me as the M—60 machine gunner was walking across a field with the rest of the platoon. A sniper shot him between the eyes. He died with out firing a single shot. The life expectancy of a M-60 machine gunner in a fire fight in Vietnam was about 11 seconds. Of the 40 soldiers in my former platoon, only three made it home alive. I went to visit one of the survivors. He told me that the platoon was caught in an ambush. One mortar round landed close by and threw him about ten

feet. Another mortar round hit and threw him another ten feet. When the medics got to him, he was a bloody mess. One of the medics told the other medic, “ This poor S.O.B is going to die.” It made my former platoon soldier so mad that he willed himself to live. He lost an eye and was 100 percent disabled.

The life of a soldier, without hope and faith In Jesus Christ is difficult at best. Too many times to list, I have been saved by what I believe was Divine Intervention. I don't believe it was just luck or a coincidence. Jesus knew that I would write these stories before I was born. My thanks goes out Mike Herndon for encouraging me to continue to write stories. To Skyler Crisp, Lexie Crisp and Jade Hakes for keeping my cards, letters, pictures and stories in their “memory boxes.” To Trish and Dawn Cunningham and Dr. Daniel Butler, for telling me they enjoy my stories. To everyone else who reads them, know that it a blessing to share them. Christ gave me what ever talent that I have. To the Good Lord goes the honor and the glory.

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*Read more stories written by John F. Hall at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>