

ONE TIN SOLDIER

By John F. Hall

In 1969, Brian Potter and Dennis Lambert wrote the anti-war song “One Tin Soldier.” I served three years, when I was a teenager, on active duty in the 101st Airborne Division. My three-year enlistment was completed one day before my 20th birthday. After a break in service for college, I served in the Kentucky Army National Guard and the Army Reserve until I was mandatorily retired at the age of 60. I wanted to serve another 10 years, but my battered and worn out body had taken its toll. I was pushed out to pasture and I am spending my retirement years sitting on my front porch writing stories. My brother—in-law, Roger Garner came walking by. He was holding a rope harness and leading his brown horse from his house to a nearby pasture. His only child, Dale was killed in a car accident with six other high school students 25 years ago. His death went against a natural order.

I waved at Roger and told him that his horse has him trained well. I looked out at the green fields of grain. The temperature reached a high of 83 degrees. I felt that it was too warm for the 3rd of May. There was a slight breeze. It was the calm before the storm. Weather alerts started coming over my smart phone. The National Weather Service issued a severe thunderstorm watch for Cadiz and Trigg County. It called for hail and high winds. The green grain will lay down and be damaged if it is hit with hail. I have three maple trees in my front yard. They are about 50 feet tall. High winds could knock over the very old trees.

Thankfully, the brunt of the storm went south. It hit Nashville, Tennessee with a vengeance. More than 130,000 people lost power due to down power lines and broken power poles. The storm headed towards Cookeville, Tennessee. Sadly, the 3rd of May marks two months since the deadly and devastating tornado ravaged Cookeville and Putnam County. For the second time in two months, Putnam County was hit again. Pictures were shown on Nashville television, Channel 5 of dozen of trees snapped off at their roots. The up-rooted trees reminded me of the three trees in my front yard. There is so much foliage on my trees and the saturated ground makes them vulnerable to high winds. Another weather notice came over my smartphone. It stated that the weather would be calm the rest of the night, but more storms are in the forecast.

During these days of the pandemic, I increased the number of stories that I write. I mail them to my journalistic friend, Mike Herndon; Jade Hakes, Lexie and Skyler Crisp; Dr. Daniel Butler; Trish Cunningham and Audrey Lambert. I had been sending a story to a church in far western Kentucky. The Governor closed all the churches. What happened to freedom of religion? It cost me one postage stamp to mail a one ounce letter.

One stamp will allow me to mail five sheets of copy paper in a business envelope. Lately, I have been pushing the envelope (pun absolutely intended) and mailing seven sheets of copy paper. I think it may have something to do with the weight of the recycled copy paper that I use.

The pandemic changed the way I see my long time family physician, Dr. Daniel Butler. I had my first webcam with Dr. Butler. It was interesting to sit in my living room and talk to him as he sat in his office looking at my lab results.

Several decades ago, a late friend in Fancy Farm, Kentucky, asked me why I write stories. I was not prepared for his question and I did not give him a good answer. Lois Huffman asked several hundred writers the same question. He wrote an article titled, "101 Reasons 'Why Writers Write,'" based on his interviews with those writers. I selected five answers, from those unknown writers, that might apply to why I write. The first, "To tell a story and hopefully, to tell it well." The second, "To tell stories. Hopefully stories that are just as compelling/interesting on the last page as they were on the first page. The goal, to hold the reader's attention all the way through, leaving them thinking: Now that was a great story." The third, "I have so many grand tales...from my childhood; growing up in the South...My dad...My guru, now gone...And so much fun, to embrace my soul and write." The fourth, "I write for transparency and honest self-expression; to attempt to communicate truly. I write for love." The fifth, "It is very relaxing and takes my mind off some of the negativity in the world. I also like to glorify God and give praise to Him when I write. It is a great way to witness to others as well." I believe that putting Christ in my stories does more than just attempt to witness for Him. It redeems me to Him.

Before the pandemic hit, I would drive to Fort Campbell to pick up medications for Paula and myself. After I drove into Gate 4, I would have to stop at the gate house to have my military identification checked. I would usually ask the Military Police soldier, "How are you doing?" Most of the time they would reply, "Living the dream, Sir!" The soldier would scan my military ID with his hand-held scanner. The soldier would give me back the ID card and come to the position of attention; give me a sharp salute and say, "Thank you for your service, Sir." I would return the salute and thank the soldier for his/her service.

As I drove through the gate house and towards the Town Center Pharmacy, I would usually have to stop at the first traffic light. Waiting for the light to change to green, a little nostalgia always sweeps over me. It was 58 years ago when I first came to Fort Campbell in a Grayhound bus. It was filled to capacity with other paratroopers fresh out of Fort Benning Jump School.

I was just 17 and thin as a rail at 130 pounds. No one knew me. I was in a place that I had never been before. I was a Private with a few dollars in my pocket. But I had faith and a friend named Jesus Christ. Now, 58 years later, I am a retired Lieutenant Colonel and my fellow soldiers, at the gate, salute me.

As I mentioned in a previous story, my plan was to finish my three-year enlistment and return to Florida to enroll in a community college. I think my dad wanted me to live with him. He would help me with the tuition as there was no GI Bill at that time. His brother, Jack paid for everything for my dad to go to MIT. I guess he was disappointed when I told him that I was not coming back to Florida, except to visit him. He did not want me to get married. But parents cannot relive their life through their children. They cannot keep

their children from making mistakes. My dad was very generous to me. He gave me good advice and I loved him. Most of us have known someone that made a difference in our life. That person might have inspired or motivated us. That person might have been a friend, a family member, a teacher, a mentor, or a Pastor. When that person's time on this earth was over, that person was fondly remembered and sadly missed. Each person has a choice to be a stepping stone in someone's life.

Some times I can draft a story in a few days. Other times, I am not satisfied with how a story is flowing and I will set it aside and work on another story. In 1895, Katherine Bates wrote a poem titled, "Pikes Peak. Her poem was paired with music in 1910. The name was changed to, "America The Beautiful." I started this story by mentioning the green fields of grain in front of my old farm house. Those fields are turning into amber fields of grain. These are only a few lines from Bates' ' poem, "Oh, beautiful for spacious skies, for amber fields of grain, for purple mountains majesties, above the fruited plain! America! America! God shed His grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shinning sea..."

I finished this story during the Memorial Day weekend. My mother was pregnant with me when her brother, Private First Class Francis Race was killed in the Battle of the Bulge in World War 11. She gave me my middle name to honor him. All but three of the soldiers in my former infantry platoon in the 101St were killed in Vietnam. Rickey Fay Cossey lived in Golden Pond. He would talk to me a lot when I came home from Fort Campbell in my military uniform. I don't recall if he was drafted or if he enlisted in the Army. He was killed in Vietnam. I think about him, especially on Memorial Day. I have visited his grave many times in the Elm Grove Cemetery located east of Murray, Kentucky. Anyone can leave a penny on the top of a soldier's tombstone. It lets the soldier's family know that someone came to visit.

You can call me an old tin soldier. I know a thing or two about being in the Army. I put a picture with this story from when Paula and I were married at South Chapel on Fort Campbell. We obtained a marriage license from Clarksville, Tennessee because South Chapel is located on the Tennessee side of the Post. Chaplain Frank C. Riley gave me a note that read, "John and Paula Hall, married today, April 17, 1965, Chaplain Frank C. Riley." We were teenagers but looked more like high school students. I guess he felt that if we had trouble getting a motel room, on our honeymoon to Miami, Florida, that the note would help.



Soldiers and their families are a very important part of my life. Few people appreciate the sacrifices and hardships that the soldier's family have to endure. The constant moves, the stress of constant deployments and training takes their toll. There is a bond that

exists between soldiers. In the 101st we are a “Band of Brothers.” Skyler's and Lexie's dad, Jason Crisp is still on active duty in the Army. My bond with Skyler and Lexie began when Jason was deployed to Iraq.

In a previous story titled, “China Lake,” I wrote about finding a paperback book under a rock, on a mountain, when I was a paratrooper training with the 101st in the Mohave Desert, California. Potter and Lambert's song, “One Tin Soldier,” mentions a stone. These are their lyrics, “Listen children to a story that was written long ago. About a kingdom on a mountain and the valley folk below. On the mountain was a treasure buried deep beneath a stone. And the valley people swore they'd have it for their own. So the people of the valley sent a message up the hill, asking for the buried treasure, tons of gold for which they'd kill. Came an answer from the kingdom, 'with our brothers we will share all the secrets of the mountain, all the riches buried there.' Now the valley cried with anger 'mount your horses, draw your swords.' And they killed the mountain people so they won their just rewards. Now they stood beside the treasure on the mountain darkened red. Turned the stone and looked beneath it, 'peace on earth' was all it said. Go ahead and hate your neighbor. Go ahead and cheat a friend. Do it in the name of heaven, you can justify it in the end. There won't be any trumpets blowing come judgment day. On the bloody morning after, one tin soldier rides away.”

On Memorial Day, I said a short prayer, “Lord, hold our troops in Your loving hands. Protect them as they protect us. Bless them and their families for the selfless acts they perform for us in our time of need. I ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.” One day, this old tin soldier will fade away. My stories will be remembered by those that received them.

John F. Hall

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