

## THE PARATROOPER AND THE MYSTERY GIRL

By John F. Hall

In 1963, I was a Private First Class paratrooper assigned to B Company, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. I just had my trusty M-60 machine gun to keep me company, and, trust me, she was cold as ice. I was a 17 year old lonely soldier in a place with other soldiers. We talked about fast GTO muscle cars and pretty girls, but few of us received letters. Because I was a machine gunner, I did not carry an M-1 rifle. The 23-pound machine gun was heavy enough. I was issued a black holster and a .45 caliber semi-automatic hand gun. My two ammo pouches were empty, so I put a small transistor radio in one and a small paperback book in the other. I had an ear plug to listen to the radio. The humidity on that day almost made me pass out. I liked the Army issue steel helmet for cooking and shaving, but I hated to wear it. It gave me a headache. I would enjoy listening to rock and roll songs. I enlisted in the Army on my 17th birthday, so I never complained about being too young to drink; too young to vote, or too young to die.



Bobby Vinton and Gene Allan co-wrote the song “Mr. Lonely.” The song comes very close to expressing how I felt on that depressingly hot day. After I completed Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia, I was asked to select where I wanted to be assigned. I wrote that I wanted to go to Germany so I could visit Europe during my annual leave. The instructors must have laughed all day long, because they sent all of us to Fort Campbell. These are Bobby’s and Gene’s lyrics: “Lonely, I’m Mr. Lonely, I have nobody for my own. Now I’m so lonely, I’m Mr. Lonely, wish I had someone to call on the phone. Now I’m a soldier, a lonely soldier, away from home through no wish of my own. That’s why I’m lonely, I’m Mr. Lonely. I wish that I could go back home. Letters, never a letter, I get no letters in the mail. I’ve been forgotten, yes, forgotten. Oh, how I wonder, how is it I failed? Now I’m a soldier, a lonely soldier, away from home through no wish of my own. That’s why I’m lonely, I’m Mr. Lonely, I wish that I could go back home.”

Like some old soldiers, I have a few things left in my “bucket List” that I would like to accomplish before they play “Taps” over my grave. I made advance reservations at the Kentucky Veterans Cemetery West in Hopkinsville. On January 21, 2021, at 9:00 am, it conducted its 5,000th Interment. I will not be forgotten, because I will be buried near to some of my “Band of Brothers”. After I’m gone, people can come by and put a penny on my headstone. This is a customary way to let others know I had a visitor. My wife, Paula will also be buried there. We will share the same grave. If I die first, I will be in the bottom of the grave. Then when Paula dies, she will be buried on top of me. We were married on Fort Campbell in 1965. She worked at the hospital and retired after 32 years.

This story can be summed up in one sentence: I made a teenager’s promise to myself, to one day, go back and visit the grave of a mystery girl. The only information that I knew about the girl in the family cemetery is that her first name is Katharine; that she was 16, and she died in the 1800s. When I began to write this story, I had to deal with some

incredible odds that even I did not realize that I would have to face. My late Christian friend and mentor told me: "Believe the incredible and you can do the impossible."

But so much has changed on Fort Campbell. Roads that were once gravel are now paved. Places that I could go to are now fenced-in and guarded 24/7. There are 131 historic family cemeteries on Fort Campbell's 106,700 acres. Over a half dozen times, I traveled the road where I thought Catharine's resting place might be. I would later learn that I was right. The cemetery was hiding in plain sight.

Once a month, I travel to Fort Campbell to pick up a controlled medication for my wife, Paula. I have to sign for the medicine. Depending if it is a refill or a new prescription, my time on Fort Campbell may vary from two to five hours. Recently, I had to spend five hours to obtain all the medicine that Paula and I needed from the Town Center Pharmacy. Having time on my hands, and after having breakfast at the on-post Burger King, I decided to go, for the seventh time, in search of Catharine's cemetery.

To give some additional perspective on this story, I will explain, in detail, what happened on that day nearly 58 years ago. Word came down for the company to put on our combat gear and go on a road march to one of the training areas. It was a very hot, sunny day. We had to march in our jump boots. After the company formation, we marched to the training area. I remember marching on a dusty gravel road. The limestone dust, whipped up by passing trucks, covered the grass and weeds on both sides of the road. The platoon sergeant called out and told everyone to take 10 (a ten-minute break). I spotted a cedar tree in a small cemetery that was surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Tall broomsedge grass covered most of the neglected cemetery. I climbed over the barbed wire fence and walked over to a cedar tree. I took off my steel helmet and sat on it. I did this to help avoid ticks and chiggers. I rested my back against the cedar tree. Sweat was running down my forehead and the back of my neck. A soft breeze was blowing and it was a welcome relief.

There was no name to identify this family cemetery. I remember looking at a tall tombstone and I began reading the inscription. I remembered the first name "Catharine." According to the dates on the stone, she died when she was only 16 years old. So I spent ten minutes resting and keeping watch over this girl's grave. I wondered how she died? She became my mystery girl. I made a teenage promise, to myself, that someday I would return and place a stone on top of her headstone. This is an ancient custom that reminds a person that someone came to visit their memorial. Then I heard the loud voice of my platoon sergeant telling us to get back on the road and continue the march. I climbed back over the fence and joined my platoon. My oldest granddaughter, Andrea, told me that if I make a promise, that I must keep it.

Several times in the past, I tried to locate the cemetery where that mystery girl is buried. I suspect, due to the neglected condition of the cemetery, that no family members had visited in a very long time. I drove over to the Pratt Museum, which is about three blocks from the Burger King. I went into the gift shop portion of the museum and talked to Erika Gillium, to inquire if they had any maps of the cemeteries on Fort Campbell.

She talked to her supervisor, John O'Brien, the museum Director. He came into the gift shop and handed me a small post-it note. It read "Cultural Resources, Nichole, (270) 798-9104." He told me that I needed to contact Nichole at Cultural Resources. I called her number, but she was out of the office. I left a message and requested that she return my call. Nichole's full name is Nichole Sorensen-Mutchie. She is the Fort Campbell archaeologist. Nichole returned my call and I explained what I needed. She said that she would be happy to assist me to find the cemetery that I wanted to visit. Most of the cemeteries in the rear training areas are located near impact areas. She said she would get us clearance to visit the cemetery. I asked Nicole if she had a map of where all the cemeteries are located, and the names and dates of the people buried there. She told me to go online for a map and a list of the names.

I down loaded a list of 856 names. I believe 1,200 people are buried on Fort Campbell. Some have no Headstones. The only other thing that I could remember is that this girl had a tall tombstone. I went down the list of the 856 names. I was looking at the list and I had gotten down to the second to the last print-out page, and it stood out: "Collins, Catharine B. sex F, birth year 1838, death year 1854." I remember that there was a lot of other information on her tombstone. So this old soldier was getting closer to finding the mystery girl's grave.

Looking back, had I not decided to climb over that barbwire fence, to sit under that cedar tree, this story would never see the light of day. In 1898, over 44 years after Catharine died, Eliza Hewitt wrote the hymn, "When We All Get to Heaven." These are some of her lyrics: "Sing the wondrous love of Jesus; sing His mercy and His grace. In the mansions bright and blessed He'll prepare for us a place. While we walk the pilgrim pathway clouds will overspread the sky. But when travelin' days are over, not a shadow, not a sigh. Onward to the prize before us! Soon His beauty we'll behold; soon the pearly gates will open; we shall tread the streets of gold. When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be! When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory!"

On my desk, under the staircase of my old Civil War era home, are two miniature cannons. These are souvenirs from my visit to the battlefields in Gettysburg, PA. President Abraham Lincoln once traveled to the blood soaked grounds to consecrate the fields of war to the soldiers lost in battle. As a student I recited Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Yet I did not know the names of the teenage souls that carried the flags of the Confederacy and the Union flags as they charged and lost their lives in a hail of cannon fire. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery contains an inscription, "Here rests in Honored Glory an American Soldier known only to God."

I've been writing non-fiction, mainly Christian stories since 1978. I admit that I write stories to please myself. Jesus has counted all the hairs on our head. He knows everything about us. The Apostle Paul wrote that he is fully known by God. Not only does Christ know each of us, He will not forget us. "God's knowledge of each of us gives us reason to overcome our natural fears of being insignificant and forgotten.

Christ knows Katharine is buried in that tiny family cemetery on Fort Campbell. He knows who is buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

In Hebrews, Chapter 6, Verse 10 are these words: "For God is fair. He will not forget what you have done. He will remember the love you have shown Him. You showed it when you helped His people. And you show it when you keep on helping them." I am amazed that I can remember anything from 58 years ago. I was a young teenage soldier taking a ten-minute break and sitting next to a teenager's grave as she lay sleeping under the silent earth. I gave her ten minutes of my time, watching over her grave. To the world she was forgotten and insignificant. I just resurrected knowledge of her existence. God knows each of us. Regardless of how much attention we have received in this life or how well we are remembered, our own significance, and that of every individual is great in the sight of Christ.

Johnny Mercer, in 1941, wrote the lyrics to the song, "I Remember You." Frank Ifield made the song popular in 1962. These are a few of Mercer's lyrics: "I remember you-ooh. You're the one who made my dreams come true a few kisses ago. I remember you-ooh. You're the one who said I love you, too. Yes, I do, didn'tcha know? I remember, too, a distant bell and stars that fell like the rain out of the blue-ooh-ooh-ooh-hoo-hoo-hoo. When my life is through and the angels ask me to recall the thrill of it all, I will tell them I remember you-ooh..."

I retired from the military in 2005, at the age of 60. I remember back in 1964, I graduated from the 101" Recondo School. I liked to rappel facing down. I guess the school instructors thought I was .crazy. There was a very high failure rate for that school. As I was waiting to pick up Paula's controlled medicine, I drove over to the 101St Airborne Division Association's National Headquarters. I asked if they might have any of the white 101 Recondo patches in stock. I was told they were out, but to check back with them in a few weeks. I planned to give one away as a gift.

Nichole Sorensen-Mutchie returned my second call. Any writer, worth his salt, will acknowledge the assistance that he receives from others. Erika Gillium and John O'Brien put me in touch with Nichole. I told her that Fort Campbell was so fortunate to have her. I thanked her for all the assistance that she gave me. She helped me do the impossible to find Katharine. In the future, Nichole and I may travel to Sabre Air Base. You see, my mystery girl's cemetery is inside the base fence, in a clump of trees, hiding in plain sight. The US National Grid Coordinates of the cemetery is 168 DP 571164 7936. And, the Good Lord willing, this old, retired paratrooper may write another story about that mystery girl.

John F. Hall

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