

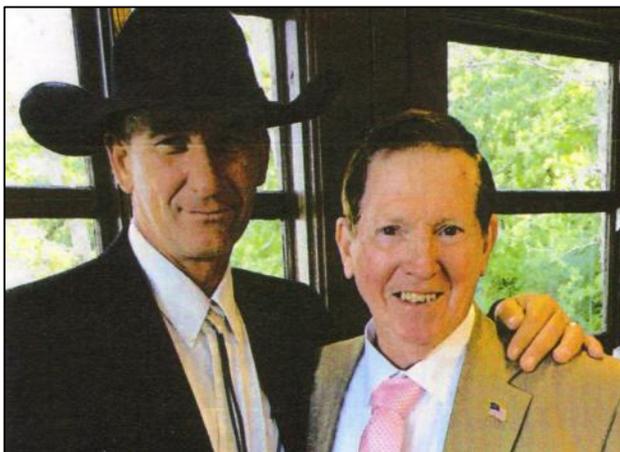
## THE COMPANY COMMANDER

By John F. Hall

Over the years, I have written stories from my exploits in the military. In this story, I go into greater detail about some of those exploits and share with the reader some stories and pictures from my days as a paratrooper in Baker Company, 327<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I also share pictures from my two years as the company commander of the 614th Military Police Company, Murray, Kentucky. As I begin this story, I share a few words about my favorite general, Douglas MacArthur. This man served 61 years on active duty. In his farewell address to the US. Congress on April 19, 1951 he spoke these words: "...but I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barrack ballads of that day which proclaimed most proudly that old soldiers never die; they just fade away. And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty."

I put a picture from the movie "Saving Private Ryan" This World War II epic movie was written by Robert Rodat and directed by Steven Spielberg. Matt Damon played the role of Private First Class James Francis Ryan. I can relate to three things about PFC Ryan. We shared the same rank when I was an enlisted soldier in the third platoon, Baker Company, 327<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. We were paratroopers. We disliked wearing the 3 pound M-1 combat helmet (steel pot) that was standard Army issue from 1941 to 1985. The helmet, once the liner is removed, can be used to cook food, to boil water for shaving, to be used as a hammer to drive tent pegs in the ground, to bail water out of a boat and to be a stool to sit on. You had to fasten the chinstrap tight when you jumped out of a helicopter or an airplane. Most of the time, I did not fasten the chinstrap because the helmet gave me a headache.

My oldest military friend is Command Sergeant Major (CSM) John Vicars. We are members of the "Band of Brothers" as we served in the 101st Airborne Division.



(Pictured John Vicars and John F. Hall). He became my son's friend 25 years ago. They both love to hunt and fish together. He calls my son his brother and he calls me dad. He also served in the 327<sup>th</sup> Infantry. CSM Vicars gave me a souvenir from his deployment to Iraq. It is a metal playing card that has a black three-leaf clover (clubs) with a small 101st Air Borne Division patch in the center of the card. On the top and bottom of the

card is the unit's coat of arms. The Palmetto tree represents the state of South Carolina where the unit was organized in 1921. The red bend comes from the coat of arms of

Lorraine in France. And the three flu-de-lis represents the unit's credits during World War I. The words Honor and Country is the unit's motto.

In previous stories, I wrote about my exploits as an M-60 machine gunner in the third platoon, Baker Company, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. There is one detail that I missed. After being promoted to Private First Class, I went into the orderly room and requested to go to Recondo School. This on Post school had a failure rate of more than 50 percent. The First Sergeant (Top) looked at me and started to laugh so loud that the Company Commander came out of his office and demanded to know what all the laughter was about. Top told him that two of the company's best men had just failed that school and Private Hall wants to go. He said there was no way on God's green earth that Hall could pass that course. I remember the Company Commander looked at me for a long time. He told Top to let me go and he walked back into his office.

There is a creek on Post called the Red Creek. In certain places it is wide and very deep. One of the requirements of the school is to have two soldiers pair up and cross the creek without getting their uniform and equipment wet. To add to that difficulty, it was in January of 1963 and snow was on the ground. So I was paired up with another soldier. We took all of our clothes off and used our ponchos to make a raft. All of our equipment, uniforms and our boots were put in the ponchos. On the other side of the creek the school instructors had built large fires. When I got into the icy water to make the crossing, I thought my heart was about to stop due to the shock of trying to swim that icy creek. Some how the other soldier and I made it across to the fire. We put on our clothes and boots as fast as we could to keep from getting hypothermia. None of our equipment or our rifles got wet. We then had to pull feathers and gut a dead chicken provided by the instructors. I took the helmet liner out of M-1 steel pot along with the outside cover. I got water from the creek to fill my steel pot. I built a small fire and used my chinstrap that was braced above the fire to cook the chicken. I did not have any salt to season the cooked chicken. To my surprise, and Top's surprise, I graduated from Recondo School. I never forgot that my Company Commander had confidence in my ability to pass that school.

I was married at South Chapel, located on the Tennessee side of Fort Campbell on April 17, 1965. My three-year enlistment was up on June 29, 1965. After being assigned to Control Group (subject to being recalled to active duty), I received my Honorable Discharge from the Army effective June 29, 1968. This should have been the end of this story. I had no further obligation to serve in the military. Then in April of 1977, a friend persuaded me to enlist in the Army Reserve in Hopkinsville and try to obtain a Direct Commission since I had a degree from Murray State University. After trying for two years, I felt it would not happen. In addition, I was almost 34 years old and might not be approved for an age waiver. Without getting into another long story, I was given a Direct Commission in the Kentucky National Guard as a First Lieutenant. I was assigned to the 198th Military Police Battalion in Louisville, Kentucky as a Battalion staff officer in April 1979. My day job was working as a State Trooper in Trigg County. One day District Judge Chapell Wilson wanted to talk to me after court. He was a full Colonel and

a Brigade Commander in Owensboro. He needed an Executive Officer in Delta Company in Murray, Kentucky. He wanted me to take the position. Since Murray was a lot closer than Louisville, I transferred to the 100th Division Training, Army Reserve. It was a good assignment.

In 1981, I received a phone call from the 198th Military Police Battalion. They had a real problem with the 614th Military Police Company Commander, Captain Huffman. They wanted to relieve him. He was a professor at Murray State University and the President of the college, Dr. "Deno" Curriss denied him tenure. I was caught in the middle. The Commissioner of the Kentucky State Police, General Billy G. Wellman, was also the Kentucky Adjutant General. He was the Major General that approved my Direct Commission in the Kentucky National Guard. I also had Judge Wilson who wanted me to remain in Delta Company. I was also a friend to MSU President Dr. Curriss. The National Guard asked me to become the Executive Officer in the 614th. I had been an officer for only three years. Capt. Huffman was, in my opinion, not fit to command. He wanted to arm his soldiers to help with traffic control during Murray State's Homecoming. He was trying to cause an incident to get back at Dr. Curriss. I met with Dr. Curriss and warned him to watch his back as Captain Huffman was not stable. As I suspected, Captain Huffman ordered me to arm our soldiers. I told him that it was not a lawful order and it was not legal and I would not comply with his order. As suspected, he wrote on my Officer Efficiency Rating (OER) that I was insubordinate. The 198th Military Police Battalion Commander did not agree and stated that I relieved Capt Huffman of his command of the 614 Military Police Company.

The Kentucky National Guard relieved Captain Huffman of his command. We had a good Change of Command ceremony. At that time, Murray did not have a National Guard Armory. The unit rented the former Bunny Bread warehouse on KY 121 south. It later moved to a warehouse just east of Murray State University. Then in 1984, a new Kentucky National Guard Armory was built near the Calloway County High School. When I assumed command on May 1, 1982, the unit had transitioned from an Armor Detachment in 1980. All the enlisted soldiers had to be trained to become military police soldiers. The 614th had a total unit strength of 115 soldiers. Of that number, 46 soldiers were in Military Police Schools. The actual number of soldiers available for MP missions was 69. The Kentucky National Guard consisted of more than 8,000 soldiers in 1982. It decided to involve all of these soldiers in a Field Training Exercise (FTX) down in Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Since the 614th had only 69 soldiers available for duty, out of a required 167 soldiers, it was down to 41% strength, which means that it was not deployable. So the 614th was selected to be the enemy in this FTX. Sixty six soldiers against 8,000 soldiers.

This should have been an easy task for the 123rd Separate Armor Brigade Colonel to destroy this enemy force. After all, the 614th had a green company commander in the rank of a First Lieutenant. I was not briefed and I did not know that the FTX Scenario called for all of my soldiers to be captured. Ignorance is bliss and who ever designed the FTX miscalculated what I would do. I was under the supervision of a Colonel. He gave me four M-60 tanks, We used 16 of our jeeps. Each jeep had a M-60 mounted machine

gun. Each jeep had a three-man combat MP team. I trained them to exit the jeep in less than 5 seconds upon contact with the enemy. Counting myself and my driver, we were an enemy force of 50 MP soldiers. Each M-60 tank had a four man crew. So the total Opfor came to 66 soldiers. The other soldiers in my unit were cooks, admin, medics, and supply personnel and they did not participate in the FTX.

My supervising Colonel tasked several Huey helicopters to fly my junior officers and senior NCOs to fly us around Camp Shelby. After about two hours, I told the Colonel that it was a waste of time. To get the feel of the terrain, my senior soldiers needed to drive the roads and the fields to get that feel. The Colonel agreed and he turned me loose to do my thing. He went back to his air conditioned office. After returning to the air field. I told the tank commanders to hide their tanks a good distance away from my jeeps. Their tank tracks could be seen from the air and I did not want them to lead to my jeeps. I told my 16 jeep drivers to hide their jeeps under the trees near the air port. I felt they would not be looking for us there. The 100th Division Training, Army Reserve send one of its soldiers, Staff Sergeant Alan Fugate, to assist me. He wore a Russian uniform and he knew Russian tactics. One thing that I never forgot, when I was soldier in the 327th Infantry in the 101st Airborne, was that my company commander did exactly what he expected his soldiers to do. If they slept on the ground, he slept on the ground. If they had to march 20 miles, he told his jeep driver to follow the formation. He walked up front and led the formation. I learned many valuable things from that officer.

My soldiers frustrated those 8,000 soldiers. We would attack them at night. The 100th Division Training sent evaluators to judge what we did. When my soldiers went to sleep on the hood of their jeeps, I went to sleep on the hood of my jeep. Then one day, one of my scouts told me that we could sneak up to a headquarters that had no perimeter security and wipe them out. At about the same time, a two—star, Major General with an Evaluator came down the road. It was about 10 A.M. The General got out of his jeep and walked over to us. He was from a higher headquarters in Texas. In the course of our conversation, He asked SSG Fugate what the Russians would do in this situation. SSG Fugate got a big smile on his face and said, “Sir! They would attack.” The General turned to me and asked, “What are you going to do?” Now I was just a green First Lieutenant, but I knew what he wanted to hear. I said, “Sir, we are going to attack.” I assembled all my men, except for a security detail. We crawled up to the unprotected Headquarters and had the Evaluator confirm that we destroy it. The Major General got a big smile on his face and drove away with the Evaluator. Day after day we repeated doing things like this.. Then one day, our luck ran out. Our Opfor was surrounded and it would be just a matter of minutes before we would be taken as prisoners. I talked to my junior officers. Two of them served in Vietnam. I asked them if they had any suggestions as to how we could avoid being captured? They had this look like a deer gets at night when blinded by a car headlight.

I called SSG Fugate and we walked away from my junior officers so they could not hear our conversation. I asked SSG Fugate what the Russians would do if they were in my situation. He did not hesitate for one second. He said, “Sir, they would drop a tactical nuclear weapon.” I asked him if he could simulate that type of explosion. Once again, he

smiled and said, "I just have such a simulator. I told him to set it off. After the loud bang, I told SSG Fugate to follow me. I was going to play the role of a mad Colonel and I am going to be chewing you out, so don't smile. We walked over the hill and observed tanks and at least a hundred soldiers. I called out, "Who is in charge here?" A captain walked over and said, "I am!" Then I got angry and said, " I am sick and tired of officers not knowing what they are doing. The Russians have just dropped a tactical nuclear weapon. Your soldiers are walking on contaminated ground. I suspect that you have not made an NBC report and notified higher headquarters. I don't think you know what you are doing. Do your job." I then began to yell at SSG Fugate as we walked back over the hill. It worked. They began to pull back. Word got back to me that a really angry Colonel was yelling at the tall Russian soldier.

Later that day, the FTX was winding down. The 123rd Armor Brigade Commander was in the air conditioned Officers Club, when he got the word that the Russians had dropped a tactical nuclear weapon on his soldiers. It looked bad because, at the heat of the battle, he was enjoying himself in the Officers Club. He was angry because the FTX did not call for that to happen. He stormed out of the officer's Club and went looking for me. My cooks were preparing the evening meal. They were in their tee shirts when the Colonel walked up to them. He angrily asked if they were in the 614th . They were not stupid. They all said "No." He continued looking for me. I was walking in the woods and there he came. He read my name on my uniform and asked if I was in the 614th. I came to attention and said, "Yes, Sir!" If stares could kill, I would be dead. He continued, "What you did was not in the FTX." All I could say was, 'Yes! Sir.'" He got in my face and said, " I remember when I was a S.O.B First Lieutenant like You." He then walked away. Several weeks after the FTX, Major General Billy G. Wellman, the Kentucky Adjutant General, sent me a letter of appreciation for making the FTX a good training exercise for his soldiers.

My soldiers had trained so hard for that FTX. They went above and beyond what I asked them to do. More importantly, they knew that I cared about them. I would not allow them to be captured. My dad, Charles J. Hall died March 23, 1983. My mom died April 30, 1983. My world was falling apart. The 198th Military Police Battalion Commander, that supported me against the false allegations by Captain Huffman, consoled me in my grief. I never forgot his kind words in the card that he gave me. Nineteen years later, I would return to assist the 198th. I began this story with some of General MacArthur's words: "An old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty." My light is Jesus Christ. He gave me the way and the truth and the life. John 14:6. I am His soldier and His servant. He is my Savior.

John F. Hall

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