

THE HONOR GUARD

By John F. Hall

The 3rd U.S. Infantry is traditionally known as the “Old Guard,” and is the oldest active—duty infantry unit in the United States Army, serving the United States since 1784. The Old Guard conducts memorial ceremonies to honor fallen comrades, and participates in special events to represent the Army.

In 1964, I heard about the Fort Campbell Security Platoon, which at that time was the Honor Guard for Fort Campbell. I was giving some thought about getting an interview with the commander of that unit, I was in Recondo School at the time. The two-week course had a failure rate of over 50%. During the course, I made my last parachute jump, out of a Huey helicopter. To my horror, I crashed into some hardwood trees. There I was, hanging from some broken tree limbs in the bitter cold, January weather, in near total darkness. I was the first one in, which made me last soldier out of the helicopter as it flew beyond the drop zone. My parachute was ripped to threads after the crash landing. It was at that point in time that I made the decision to see if I could be accepted in the Honor Guard unit. I was able to release myself from the parachute and I fell to the ground. Somehow I was able to link up with the other members of my patrol. The NCO instructor wanted to know what happened to my parachute. I explained that it was destroyed when I crashed into the trees. He told me to fall in with the rest of the night patrol. When it came my time to lead the patrol, the soldier that I relieved was suppose to give me the radio. He did not. When my time was up leading the patrol, the NCO instructor asked me what I did with the radio. I told him that I was not given the radio. Even in the dark, I could see his face getting red. He said the soldier that I relieved told him that he gave me the radio. Then the NCO instructor got mad and said, “Hall, when we get back to the barracks, you are to pack your gear into your duffle bag. You failed Recondo School. And after morning chow, we are going to go back and find the radio that you dropped.”

Two of the best soldiers in my infantry company had failed the course. I asked to go to Recondo School. And now I was going to have to face my First Sergeant, who first laughed at me when I request to go to the school. But it was my Company Commander, who took a chance on me, that I would have to face. The next morning, after chow, the NCO instructor told me to get into the quarter ton (Jeep). He drove to where I assumed leadership of the patrol. We got out and began looking for the radio. After we arrived at the point where someone else took over the patrol, the NCO instructor got a puzzled look on his face. We walked back to where I took over the patrol and then the NCO instructor walked back to where the soldier, who failed to give me the radio, started his command of the patrol. Halfway into the portion of the patrol, the NCO instructor found the radio. He said to me, “I have never apologized to a Spec 4 before. But I apologize for not believing you. When we get back to the barracks, that soldier who lied to me has failed the course. You are still in the course and put your gear back into the barracks.

The Company Commander that allowed me to go to Recondo School, which I passed, had completed his command time and was given orders for another assignment. I went over to the Honor Guard unit for an interview. They could use me for Honor Guard

missions, but I could not go on security missions until I received a Secret security clearance. You see, the real mission of the Security Platoon was to provide security for



classified weapons that the Navy assembled on Clarksville Base on the southern part of Bell. Someone took a picture of me with six other members of the Honor Guard. Our uniform consisted of jump boots and pistol belt, holster and 45 caliber handgun. Depending on what each member did, those members dealing with the American flag, had white boot laces, white pistol belt and large brass buckle.

(Pictured: Fort Campbell Honor Guard 1964: (arrow points to SP4 John Hall).

In October of 1964, our Honor Guard team was given the mission to perform military honors for an active-duty soldier killed in a motorcycle accident in Benton, Kentucky. This was the first of many military honors ceremonies that I helped conduct. The significance of that first one is what happened on the team's travel back to Fort Campbell. We stopped in the former town of Golden Pond to eat at the Sunset Inn Restaurant. I was sitting at a table and I watched as a young lady, wearing a Murray State College sweat shirt, walk in to pay for a to-go order. Her name is Paula Andree Oakley and, after dating her for six months, we were married at South Chapel on Fort Campbell. I wrote a story about that night titled, "Soldiers in Golden Pond." Had I not been in the Honor Guard, this story may not have been written.

On January 1, 2000, Section 578 of Public Law 106-65 of the National Defense Authorization Act, and Section 1491 of Title 10, United States Code (U.S.C.), of December 26, 2017, states, "Upon a family's request, every eligible Veteran receive a military honors ceremony, to include folding and presenting the United States burial flag and the playing of taps. The law defines a military funeral honors detail as consisting of two or more uniformed military persons, with at least one being a member of the Veteran's parent service of the armed forces." In the not too distant past, I attended military funerals for members of my church at the Veteran's Cemetery West in Hopkinsville. Active-duty Honor Guard soldiers from Fort Campbell participated along with American Legion Honor Guard Veterans from Cadiz and Hopkinsville. By law, after the flag is folded, it is presented to an Honor Guard member in the same military branch as the deceased Veteran who subsequently marches the flag to the next of kin and presents the flag to them.

On January 4, 2020, I attended a memorial service and military honors ceremony for Major Anthony J. "Tony" Thomas (Retired). Two Air Force Honor Guard personnel from

Wright Patterson Air Force Base and eight local American Legion Veterans conducted



the military honors ceremony. My mind drifted back to the memories from 56 years ago. I held the M-1 rifle and fired, along with six other Honor Guard soldiers, the three volley salute. I watched as the two Air Force personnel, Airman First Class Aubrey and Airman First Class Cristina Gutierrez held the unfolded American flag. These airman in their sharp, crisp, dress blues, had a round cloth emblem on their uniforms. The words Honor Guard on the top and the words "To Honor With Dignity" on the bottom. The cold wind whipped out of the north as the two airman stood their ground. (Pictured: Airman First Class Aubrey Hodge).

Before it was revised in 1999, The United States Air Force Honor Guard Creed was written by Staff Sergeant Al Turner. This is what he wrote, "I am a proud member of the United States Air Force Honor Guard. My standards of conduct and high level of professionalism place me above all others in my service. I have earned the right to wear the ceremonial uniform, one which is honored in a rich tradition and history. I am superbly conditioned to perfect all movements through out every drill and ceremony. The level in which I perform will not be dictated by the type of ceremony, the severity of the temperature, nor the size of the crowd. I am constantly driven to excel by a strong sense of dedication that runs deeper than patriotism. While on ceremonies, I stand sharp and crisp, motionless by choice, for I have chosen voluntarily to represent every member past and present of the United States Air Force. I am a Ceremonial Guardsman."

In my conversation with the two Air Force Honor Guards, I learned that they travel five hours from their Air Force Base. I asked Major Thomas' widow, Nancy, if she wanted me to take pictures of the memorial service. She said yes. Over the years, as the unofficial photographer for the church, I have taken hundreds of pictures of church events. I asked Nancy to stand with Airman. Hodge and I took my first picture. During the memorial service, I took pictures and videos of family members singing and giving eulogies. As the memorial service concluded in the church, everyone marched outside and over to the pavilion for the military honors ceremony.

The weather was frigid and the cold wind was biting as Major Thomas' grandson, stood at attention and sang the American Anthem. A1C Hodge and 1IC Gutierrez unfolded the American flag and let it rise fully to the sky. It was a picture that I wanted with the airman's arms fully extended holding the flag. The American Legion Honor Guards fired the three-volley salute with their M-1 rifles. Taps were played. Then, with precision, the airman made the 13 folds of the flag. A1C Hodge presented the folded flag to A1C Gutierrez. She gave the slow ceremonial salute. A1C Gutierrez marched over to Nancy Thomas, got down on one knee and with eye to eye contact spoke these words, "On behalf of the President of the United States, The United States Air Force, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service." Then coming to the position of Attention, A1C Gutierrez gave the final slow salute to Nancy Thomas.

Major Anthony J. “Tony” Thomas put in over 6,000 flight hours in service to our nation.



His legacy is found in the picture that I took of his wife, Nancy, his children, his grandchildren and his great grandchildren. I asked A1C Hodge and A1C Gutierrez to stand by a picture of Major Thomas. These airmen, in faith to their Honor Guard Creed, honor Tony. I sang with Tony in the church choir. We were friends and we saluted each other as fellow officers do. The most important thing that Tony did was to instill in his children and his grandchildren, a

strong faith and belief in Jesus Christ. That faith will sustain them as they face the challenges of this life. (Pictured: Service for Major Anthony J. “Tony” Thomas).

Jack Tomalewicz also sings in our church choir. He is a Marine Veteran and he was one of the local Honor Guardsmen participating in the military honors ceremony for Major Thomas. He was one of the riflemen that fired the three-volley salute. The end of the ceremony came as the bugler presented Nancy Thomas with three spent cartridges that were fired that day. At the reception after the military honors, the church fed all those in attendance. The two Air Force Honor Guards and some of the local Honor Guard riflemen joined in the fellowship. They were treated like family. This writer did what I do best in writing about the ceremony for Major Thomas. He loved history and he studied extensively about the Civil War. President Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, used only 272 words. I will borrow 30 of his words, “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion...”

There is a bond that I share with A1C Hodge and A1C Gutierrez and all those who have served as Ceremonial Guardsmen. We gave our best effort to honor our deceased Veterans with dignity, respect and sincere appreciation for their honorable and faithful service to our nation. I lived this experience because I was an enlisted Honor Guard soldier, once, and young.

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*Read other stories by John F. Hall at:
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