

HONOR GUARD SOLDIERS IN GOLDEN POND

By John F. Hall

Two years ago, I wrote "One Tin Soldier." In that story, I did not go into the details on the improbable things that led up to my meeting my future wife, Paula Andree Oakley, for the first time. This true story plays out in the Sunset Inn Restaurant in the former town of Golden Pond, Kentucky.

The story begins when I was a M-60 machine gunner in the 3rd Platoon, B Company, 327 Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. I was in a two-week Recondo School. The school had a 50% failure rate. I was in a Huey helicopter about to make a night combat parachute jump at 800 feet. By the time I put my boots on the skids and jumped, the pilot flew beyond the drop zone and I crashed into trees. I thought I would be killed, but the Good Lord had other plans for me. I passed the course. I like to do Australian rappelling, which is not part of the school's training. This is rappelling facing the ground and not looking up at the rope as you decline down to the ground.



I asked the school instructors to let me demonstrate it. I guess they thought I was crazy. But they invited me back a few times to give a demonstration to the incoming class.

The crash into the trees made me decide to do something else in the military. I heard two soldiers talking about a special unit called the Security Platoon. It provided escort security to the Navy that operated Clarksville Base. It was a classified base inside Fort Campbell. The Security Platoon also provided Military Honors to Third Army units attached to Fort Campbell. It was attached to a Military Police (MP) Company for administration, supervision, and logistics. I went for an interview with the MP Company Commander. He told me that I could only go on Military Honors missions, and no escort missions, until I was given a background investigation and I was granted a Secret Security Clearance.

I received notification that I would go on my first Military Honors mission for a soldier that was killed in a motorcycle accident in Benton, Kentucky. I was the newest, the youngest, and the shortest soldier in the Security Platoon. We arrived in Benton. The Military Honors Ceremony begins with three rifle volleys being fired. Then our bugler played the haunting Taps. I was standing with five other Honor Guard soldiers as we began folding the American Flag that we lifted off the soldier's casket. I always felt that it was an honor to fold the flag over the fallen soldier. I heard once, that a soldier is not really gone until he is forgotten.

The family and the friends of the deceased soldier were grateful that we came. Following the folding of the flag, our Team Leader walked over, got down on one knee and slowly handed the folded American Flag to the soldier's mother.

He said these words to her: “On behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Army, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service.”

The family invited us to a reception following the funeral. Our Team Leader wanted to make our presence at the reception very brief, but it lasted longer than expected. It was dark when we stopped in the sleepy town of Golden Pond, for supper. At that time, I was taking a night course at Austin Peay College in Clarksville, Tennessee. I would take a Greyhound bus from the Post depot to the Clarksville depot, and walk the few blocks to the campus. I would miss class that night. I ordered my favorite meal of a plain hamburger and French fries. About the time I finished eating, two teenage girls walked in to pick up a to-go order. What caught my attention was the older girl had on a Murray State College sweatshirt. Those two colleges had a basketball rivalry. I was 19 and I assumed the girl in the sweatshirt was 18. I kept looking at the college girl until both girls left the restaurant. I guess my fixation on the college girl did not go unnoticed by some of the Honor Guard soldiers.

Being the low soldier on the totem pole, two of my fellow Honor Guard soldiers decided to pick on me. It goes with the territory. I watched as one of them went over to talk to the waitress who was behind the counter. I suspect that he was up to no good. The soldier was smiling as he came back to his table. He said to me: “Why don't you ask the girl wearing the college sweatshirt for a date?” I thought to myself that was an absurd question. I answered: “How can I ask her for a date? I don't know anything about her. Heck, I don't even know her name. I don't know where she lives.” Then my suspicions about the waitress being in cahoots with my fellow soldier were validated. The waitress said: “Her name is Paula and she lives across the road in the red brick house.”

Then the soldier that instigated the charade said: “Why don't you call her and ask her for a date?” I replied: “First of all, I don't know her phone number. And second of all, she does not know me.” I suspect that the soldier who talked to the waitress must have given her a big tip. The waitress said: “Her dad's name is Andrew Oakley and his phone number is listed in the phone book.” The second soldier at the table said: “Are you afraid to call her?” I really thought that was a stupid question. I was a paratrooper and I did not see any jump wings on their uniforms or see the white Recondo patch that I had on my uniform. The only person that I fear is Jesus Christ, and I was certainly not afraid to call a college girl that might only weigh 95 pounds. The waitress chimed in and said: “You can use the restaurant phone and call her house and ask to talk to her.”

I was getting a little tired of their harassment. Then the waitress said: “You can use the restaurant phone behind the counter.” I felt that the only way to get them off my case was to call this girl. I know that I would sound stupid and tell her that my fellow Honor Guard soldiers told me to call you and ask you for a date. I got up from my table and walked around the counter. I opened the phone book and found Andrew Oakley's phone number. I dialed his number on the restaurant's phone. The number was busy and I told the two instigator's that Mr. Oakley's phone was busy and I went back to my table. Five minutes later, the ring leader said: “Call her again.” So I went back around the counter and called

Mr. Oakley's number. For the second time, the phone was busy. Then another soldier said: "Call the Operator and ask to have the phone checked." I dialed zero and got the operator on the line. She checked and said that it is a working number, but the phone is off the hook. I told the soldiers what the operator said and I walked back to my table.

The Honor Guard Team Leader, who had tolerated this foolishness, gave me an order. He said: "Hall! Go across the road and tell Mr. Oakley that his phone is off the hook. Be quick about it. We are leaving in five minutes." I got up, paid for my food, then I walked across the road to the girl's house. There was no moon and no street light. The porch light was off. I did not know if Mr. Oakley had a vicious dog that might attack me. I went onto the front porch and knocked on the door. I assumed that it was Mrs. Oakley that came to the door. I said: "I tried to call Paula but your phone is off the hook." I guess she assumed that I knew Paula. She said: "Thank you for telling me. Paula is next door at her grandmother's house. You can talk to her over there." I thanked her and I started to walk back to the restaurant.

When I got close to the grandmother's house I stopped. I thought to myself, since Paula's mother said I could talk to Paula at her grandmother's what did I have to lose? At least I could tell my two fellow Honor Guard soldiers that I asked her for a date to shut them up. I went onto the grandmother's front porch and knocked twice. Paula opened the door. Even in the dim porch light, I could see that she was angry. I said: "I told your mother that I tried to call you but your phone is off the hook." Paula came out onto the porch and said: "Your banging on the door almost woke my grandmother up." I started to back up and across the porch. She kept getting closer and closer. I stopped and she was almost face to face with me. I could see that she was very pretty and her beautiful eyes mesmerized me. I guess I let my guard down as she put her hands on my uniform, chest high. I had backed up and was standing on the edge of the porch. I thought that she was going to reach up and kiss me. I never expected her to get so close and touch my Honor Guard uniform. Suddenly, with no warning she pushed me off the porch.

I fell backwards onto the ground. I looked up at Paula and said: "Don't be mad at me. My fellow Honor Guard soldiers dared me to ask you for a date. I apologize if I almost woke your grandmother up. We are leaving now." I got up and brushed my uniform off. I could not believe that I let a 95-pound "Wildcat" get the best of me. I started walking towards the restaurant. For some unknown reason, I stopped. I turned around. Paula was standing on the porch and her sister, Marsha. I yelled out: "Can I write to you?" She did not answer right away. I expected her to say no. Then she said: "Yes." I asked: "what is your address?" Her sister answered: "It's Box 56, Golden Pond." I ran back to the restaurant and told the soldiers that were harassing me that they almost got me killed. That girl is a spitfire and she threw me off her grandmother's front porch.

I did not own a car, so I took a Greyhound bus to visit Paula on the weekends, when I was not on other missions. SFC Teeters was the Security Platoon's First Sergeant. He is from Benton, Kentucky and he gave me a three-day pass when ever I requested to visit Paula. I would borrow her daddy's Plymouth to take Paula to the movies and to roller skating in Murray. The passenger side door was damaged so I insisted that Paula sit close

to me. I would sleep on the couch in the living room when I came to visit Paula. We would explore the hills surrounding Golden Pond and drive down to the banks of the Cumberland River before it was ' impounded to make Lake Barkley.

During one visit, Paula was driving her daddy's Jetstar Oldsmobile up a dusty road, east of Golden Pond. I was in the passenger seat. She was speeding going up a hill and the



road came to a “T” intersection. I thought she was going to drive us off a cliff. I ducked under the dash and expected to be killed. Some how Paula slid the car sideways and it came to a stop. After going on several classified escort security missions, Paula and I decided to be married on the Tennessee side of Fort Campbell at South Chapel. My best man and I would fight each other, then we became good friends. I was honored when all of the Honor Guard soldiers, in the Security Platoon came to our wedding. Paula's sister, Marsha came. We could not afford a reception. I wore my military uniform. My best man wore his best civilian suit. I used some of the money that I was saving to buy a used car. The Army Chaplain that performed the marriage ceremony was concerned that we might have a problem getting a room on our honeymoon to Miami, Florida, because we looked like high school students. He gave me a note that had these

words: “John and Paula Hall, married today, April 17, 1965, Chaplain Frank C. Riley.” This Easter Sunday, we will celebrate our 57th wedding anniversary.

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

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