

PROMISES

By John F. Hall

A promise is an assurance that one will do a particular thing. I was in Cadiz, Kentucky the other day. My son, John was doing plumbing work in a vacant building, and he asked



me to stop by. I went inside and he introduced me to the new owner of the building, Dan Magraw. Dan was in Trigg County High School with my son, and they are the same age of 56. My son told me that he was tearing out an old bathroom in the vacant building. This is the first time that I can recall ever meeting Dan. He asked me what I was doing in my retirement. I told him that I am a writer. He asked me what kind of stories did I write. I told him that I am a nonfiction

Christian writer, and that I write life stories. Dan told me that he was a retired Command Sergeant Major, and an Army Ranger. I told him that I Was a former paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division.

I told Dan that I enlisted in the Army on my 17th birthday, and the Army was still using weapons and field gear from World War II. It issued M-1 rifles, field gear with two ammo pouches, and steel helmets. I liked the steel helmet, the “steel pot.” I could take out the helmet liner, and pull off the cloth covering over the helmet. I would pour water into the steel helmet, and suspend it over a fire, to heat the water for shaving, or to warm C-ration cans of food. You cannot do this with the modern Kevlar helmet. Because I was an M-60 machine gunner, I was issued a .45 caliber pistol, and a holster for the pistol. This freed up my two ammo pouches. I put a small transistor radio and earphones in one pouch. This allowed me to listen to the local weather and music. In the other ammo pouch, I put a small paperback book. One time, after a snow storm, I burned the book to get a wood fire stated. The Army put a thin box of cigarettes and a book of matches with the C-rations. I did not smoke, and I traded the cigarettes for a can of fruit cocktail. I mentioned to Dan that I have lung damage, mainly from second-hand smoke. Everyone seemed to smoke cigarettes in the barracks and the classrooms in the 1960s.

I told Dan four stories from my days as a paratrooper in the 3rd platoon, B Company, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. In the first story, I was making a night parachute jump out of a Huey helicopter. I was in Recondo School, on Fort Campbell, it was during the month of January, 1963. There was snow on the ground and no moon. The temperature was well below freezing. One soldier, in front of me, delayed jumping out of the Huey for about 20 seconds. He was just looking around and enjoying the view. After he jumped, I put my boots on the helicopter's skids to jump. I looked down and realized that the helicopter had over-flown the drop zone. I was making a combat jump at a height of 800 feet, and I was falling at the rate of 22 feet a second. I knew that in 36 seconds, that I would be crashing into the trees. There was a real possibility that I would be killed, possibly gored to death by a tree branch. There was not much that I could do in 36 seconds. So I crossed my legs, crossed my arms, closed my eyes, and made my peace with Jesus Christ. I crashed into a very tall hardwood tree, and I was snapping branches all the way down. It was pitch blackness as I heard the parachute being torn and ripped

apart. Finally I stopped falling. I was about two feet off the ground, battered and bruised, but happy that I did not break any bones.

There is something that unites soldiers who served as paratroopers. Dan told me that he also served in the 101st Airborne Division. Being a member of the 101st Airborne Division's "Band of Brothers," is a shared experience between soldiers. We speak a language with words that elicit memories of doing things that "legs" (non-airborne) can not appreciate or even understand. In the second story, after releasing myself from the parachute harness, I located the rest of the six-man patrol. The Recondo training continued, as each soldier would hand-off the radio and compass, and lead the patrol, for a certain distance. When it became my turn to lead the patrol, the soldier ahead of me, failed to give me the radio. The Drill Sergeant, supervising the patrol, accused me of losing the radio, which was automatic failure for Recondo School. The next day, we went out to find the radio. He found the radio, where the other soldier had dropped it. That soldier had lied to the Drill Sergeant, and told him that he gave me the radio. Needless to say, the Drill Sergeant sent that lying soldier packing, and back to his unit.

Recondo School has a 50 percent failure rate. We were required to swim across the Red River Watershed in January. There was still several inches of snow on the ground. I was pored off with another soldier. To make the river crossing, we had to take off all of our clothes, and field gear. We put them, along with our M-1 rifles, into our two combined ponchos. The ponchos made a water-tight float. When I went into the freezing cold water, I thought that I was having a heart attack. We swam across the river, holding onto the poncho. On the other side of the river, the Drill Sergeants lit small bonfires. I dried off and put my uniform, field jacket, and field gear back on. A few days later, the weather improved. The class was taken to low ground, in the area before the new hospital was built. I had to crawl, face down, in a mud-filled trench, with barbwire overhead, for about 30 feet. The instructors did what they could to break our spirits, by working us 20 hours a day. My First Sergeant laughed at me, when I first asked to go to the school, because two of the best men in the unit had failed. But the Company Commander recognized the grit in me and let me go. I graduated from Recondo School.

In the third story, I told Dan Magraw that I was sleeping in my sleeping bag, in the Mohave Desert. I was on bounding over watch with my assistant gunner and my ammo bearer. The hill, that we were on, was about three miles from the airfield at China Lake. I don't have a clue why, this Navy installation, is in the middle of a desert. Someone woke me up and told me to wake my machine gun crew up, to have chow, and to load up in the duce and a half truck, and get to the airfield ASAP. At the airfield, 20 other members of the 3rd Platoon, B Company, 327th Infantry, were issued parachutes. We put them on and went into a Chinook helicopter. It seemed like we were in the air for about five minutes, when we received the order to jump. I landed in the hot sand. I rolled up my parachute and wondered what we were doing, in the desert, in the middle of nowhere. After about ten minutes, a Huey helicopter landed at our location. A full bird Colonel got out and walked over to our Platoon leader. He pointed and said to the Platoon Leader: "The trucks are 30 miles away. See how fast you can get the troops there." By the time I reached the trucks, I was out of water, totally exhausted, and about to pass out.

In the fourth story, I told Dan about the time the 3rd Platoon was on a four-mile road march, in the rear training area, on Fort Campbell. It was a very hot and humid summer's day, on a dusty limestone road. Our Platoon Sergeant gave us a ten-minute rest break. I spotted a tall cedar tree inside a small cemetery. The cemetery was elevated above the road, and was all grown up in sage grass. It was surrounded by a three-strand barbwire fence. I decided to seek some shade under that cedar tree. The wooden posts holding up the barbwire needed to be replaced. I easily pushed down two strands of barbwire, and entered the cemetery. There was one large tombstone and three small tombstones. I told Dan that I took off my steel helmet and sat on it. It kept me from getting chiggers and ticks. As I sat under that cedar tree, I kept looking at that tall tombstone.

All that I could remember from that hot summer's day, was the first name and age of the girl, inscribed on that tombstone. Her name is Catherine and she was sixteen when she died. I kept wondering how she died. I felt as forgotten as she was. Then, out of the silence, the Platoon Sergeant yelled out: "Breaks over! Get on your feet, and get back on the road!" I stood up and looked one last time at that tombstone. I really don't know why. Perhaps, because I had trespassed on Catherine's grave, that I made a promise, to myself, that one day, I would return and visit her grave. I planned to put a pebble on the top of her tombstone, as a symbol of respect for the deceased. Dan said that the girl probably has no surviving relatives, and that no one had been to that cemetery in a very, very long time.

I told Dan that my granddaughter, Andrea Hall told me, that when I make a promise, I have to keep it. I made a promise to Andrea, that I would eat lunch with her, every school day, that I was not on a revenue assignment, or on Army Reserve duty. She was in kindergarten at Heritage Christian Academy, in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, when I made that promise. I kept that promise for ten years, until she transferred to Trigg County High School, with her younger sister, Heather, and her younger brother, John- John. Dan told me that he made a promise, to his three year old son, to always hold his hand. He keeps that promise, even though his son is now a young adult. I mentioned to Dan that Catherine died 91 years before I was born. It took me 58 years to finally honor a promise that I made when I was a 17 year old paratrooper.

I told Dan, that in addition to putting a pebble on the top of Catherine's tombstone, I would also put a plastic dogwood stem in the ground in front of her tombstone. Legend has it, that the dogwood is said to carry the marks of Jesus' crucifixion. Its four large petals represent the cross He died upon, and each petal displays four red-tinged that are said to represent four nail holes. And in the center of each flower is a green cluster that is symbolic of Jesus' crown of thorns. It was not an easy task, two years ago, to locate Catherine's cemetery. The family cemetery had no name. I did not recall her last name or the location where she is buried. After reviewing the names of everyone buried on Fort Campbell, I felt confident that I found her cemetery. I contacted the Fort Campbell Archaeologist, Nicole Sorensen-Mutchie, and asked for her assistance.

Nicole told me that Catherine's cemetery is located inside the Sabre Heliport. She made arrangements for us to go through the main Military Police manned gate, and meet with

the Sabre Heliport Director, Bill Zientek. He came down from the tall heliport tower, and escorted me, Nicole, and Nicole's archaeological technician, Claire Woerner, to the tiny, four-person cemetery. It is located just inside the fence, near electric Gate 5. Claire had to complete inspection of the cemetery, because that tiny cemetery is a National Historic Site. The rusty barbwire fence was removed, long ago. It was replaced with a log chain that completely surrounds the cemetery. The dry rotted wood posts were replaced with metal posts. I wiped off the front of the Catherine Collin's tombstone. I put the plastic dogwood stem, in the ground, in front of her tombstone.

I told Dan that he can drive to the heliport, stop on the side of the road, and look through the fence, and see the plastic dogwood stem that I put in front of Catherine's tombstone. He asked if I wrote a story about that cemetery. I told him that I did, and it is called, "The Remembrance." He can go to Google and type: History John F. Hall Stories ajlambert.com. Once he goes there, it will pull up: History John F. Hall Stories. When he taps on that, it will show a list of more than 200 stories that I have written. I told Dan that he can tap on any story that he wants to read, and they are free to copy. He mentioned that he and his wife like to visit cemeteries, and read the inscriptions on the tombstones. Dan said that the next time that he is on Fort Campbell, he plans to drive to the heliport, and look through the fence at Catherine's tombstone.

I write life stories, mainly to mentor seven young adults in my life. But many older adults enjoy reading my stories. As I stood there, listening to Dan Magraw, a retired Command Sergeant Major, with 30 years of military service, I thought about my wife, Paula. We were married on Fort Campbell, at South Chapel, on April 17, 1965. She was 18, and I was 19. She never wore a uniform, but she retired from Blanchfield Army Hospital after 35 years of DOD service. Frank Myers and Gary Baker wrote a song called, "I Swear." These are some of their lyrics: "I see the questions in your eyes. I know what's weighing on your mind. But you can be sure I know my part, 'cause I'll stand by you through the years. You'll only cry happy tears. And though I'll make mistakes, I'll never break your heart. I swear, by the moon and stars in the sky, I'll be there, I swear. Like the shadow that's by your side, I'll be there. For better or worse, til death do us part; I'll love you with every beat of my heart, I swear. I'll give you everything I can. I'll build your dreams with these two hands. We'll hang some memories on the wall. And when there's silver in your hair, you won't have to ask if I still care; 'cause as time turns the pages, my love won't age at all... I'll love you with every beat of my heart, I swear, I swear..." I'm also a Historian. I like to preserve history. Catherine Collins was a 16 year old girl that roamed the Sabre Heliport area, before it became Fort Campbell. "Promises" is a story about promises made, and promises kept.

John F. Hall

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