

## SIGNAL MOUNTAIN AND STAYING ALIVE

By John F. Hall

This is a story about my 33 years of battling skin cancer. It's still an ongoing battle. I weave my nonfiction life stories around melodies, scriptures, and short pieces written by others. I mix in these things to make my stories interesting. Every now and then, I will add a picture or two, to enhance the theme of the story. I always depend on the grace and inspiration from Christ, to help me write my stories. He is, and He will always be, the power behind my words.



This story begins in 1990, during Operation Desert Storm, on Fort Knox, Kentucky. I had previously completed a two-week Mobilization/Deployment course at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. I was ordered to active Army duty as the Liaison Officer for all Army Reserve and all National Guard units being mobilized on Fort Knox. The United States was about to go to war against Iraq. I had the authority to authorize these units to come and train on Fort Knox, before they were to deploy overseas. Once a unit was trained up, I would have that unit commander sign a Certificate of Training document. I would then take that document, to the Assistant Division Commander, for his signature. I would then follow the unit from Fort Knox to the civilian airport in Louisville, Kentucky. I would stay until all of the soldiers boarded the commercial planes and departed.

On one particular, very long 20-hour duty day, I decided to go to the Emergency Room at the Ireland Hospital on Fort Knox. My wife, Paula was concerned about a suspicious spot on my back. She felt that I should have a doctor examine it. I was directed to an exam room and an Army doctor came in. I told him about the spot on my back. He told me to take off my uniform shirt and tee shirt. He seemed to be taking his time, as he slowly examined my back. I guess that he was as tired as I was. Then he said: "I will tell you about another soldier that had a similar spot on his back. His wife had been after him to have it examined by a physician. He kept putting it off, for months. By the time that soldier came to me, it was too late. The Melanoma skin cancer had spread, and six months later, that soldier was dead."

The Army doctor told me to lay, face down, on the examination table. He did not numb the spot around my back. He just swabbed it with some kind of antiseptic. Then he used a scalpel and cut into my back. I nearly jumped off that table in pain. The Army doctor stitched it up and told me to not to get it wet for three days. He did not give me any pain medication. I guess he just wanted me to grin and bear it, and get back to duty.

In addition to working with the Army Reserve and National Guard units, I had to give a daily briefing to the Division Commanding General, on the number, and status of units training on Fort Knox. One day, a Criminal Investigation Division (CID) unit, that was stationed on Fort Knox, pulled out, over night, without giving any notice to the Division Commanding General. He was angry and he wanted to know why no one told him they were leaving. So he turned around in his front row, briefing chair, and said: "Captain

Hall!” “Why did that CID unit not give me any advanced notification, that they were leaving my command?” I was standing up, in the back of the briefing room. I was about to vomit from the pain, caused by the Army doctor cutting out the skin cancer in my back, and not giving me any pain medication. I had to grit my teeth. I replied: “Sir! That unit pulled out last night. They took everything, not signed for. They left the keys, to their buildings, on one of the desks in their orderly room. As they were leaving the Post, they informed the Military Police, at the main gate, of their departure. The unit is not under your chain of command. It reports directly to its Headquarters at Marine Corps Base Quantico, in Virginia.” The Division Commander did not like my answer.

I was working at my desk, in the Division Headquarters, G-3 section, on Fort Knox,



when I was informed that my promotion order to the rank of Major came in. The G-3 Officer said that he would conduct a promotion ceremony, and he wanted me to have my wife, Paula attend. She drove from Cadiz to Fort Knox with my son, John. The G-3 promoted me, as another Officer read the Promotion Order. My wife pinned the new rank on my uniform. I had a picture taken with my wife and my son. I was wearing Army Armor Branch Insignia, because I had completed the Tank Commander Certification Course. At that time, Fort Knox was an Armor Division.

For 11 years, I was cancer free. Then, one day, I noticed a spot on the left side of my face. Singer-song writer, Jimmy Buffett, kept a secret from his fans, that he had skin cancer. After fighting the disease for four years, he died. Jimmy wrote a song with Milton Brown called, “The Christian.” These are some of their lyrics: “It’s a hell of a time to be thinking about heaven, don’t you forget the golden rule. You’ve been acting like Jesus owes you a favor, but He’s a little smart for you to fool. You complain how you forgets the gospel, you remind them seek and you shall find. Maybe youth will have a time for seeking, after they clean up what you left behind... You were right there when the plate was passed last Sunday. That’s the second time you’ve been to church all year. Could you really call yourself a Christian, if charity cost half as much as beer, hey? You pray a little more as you grow older, you get religion as your hair turns gray. But you don’t need to worry about the tomorrow, just worry about what you are going to do today...”.

I believe that the Good Lord is keeping me around, to write another story or two. In Isaiah, Chapter 55, Verse 8 are these words: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord.” I’m just a writer of simple nonfiction life stories. From my experiences and observations, I’ve seen young adults who are depressed, lonely, and unhappy. They don’t seem to have a purpose, and some don’t have faith in themselves or in Christ. In 2021, I had an appointment with a dermatologist in Madisonville, Kentucky. He told me that he could remove the skin cancer on the right side of my face with Mohols surgery. I drove up from my work in Hopkinsville. I asked the doctor if I should take off my shirt and my tie. He said that was not necessary. He

started shaving off layer, after layer of my skin cancer. He was having to go deeper and deeper. He hit a blood vessel and it bled onto my shirt and tie, and they were ruined.

When I went back to Madisonville, for a follow-up appointment, I was told that the dermatologist had left his practice. He returned to the Navy, where he continued to serve as a Naval surgeon. The surgery that he performed was successful. Then, many years later, a spot came up on the left-side of my forehead. I made an appointment to see a dermatologist in Murray, Kentucky. I did not realize that he was not a Mohols surgeon. He would freeze off the spot on my forehead, but it kept coming back, and back. He told me that I just needed to watch it. I felt that this doctor was putting my life in jeopardy. I don't know why he just did not refer me to a Mohols surgeon in Paducah, Kentucky.

My wife and I drove down to a Retired Military Police Officer Association (RMPOA) reunion that was held at The Villages, Florida. On the way back to Kentucky, I decided to visit my niece, Joan. The last time that I saw her was in 1970, she was just a little girl. I called her home. She is a nurse and she lives on the top of Signal Mountain, which is about five miles north of Chattanooga, Tennessee. She gave me directions to get to her home. I considered myself to be a highly skilled driver, but going up the 180 degree and 360 degree hair curves, to the top of that mountain, scared the heck out of me. The road was treacherous. We made it to the top and we stopped at a large metal gate. Joan lives in a gated community. I called her and she gave me the combination to open the gate.

Joan's house on Signal Mountain is a large cabin. The mountain has a colorful history. It was used by Native Americans, to include Creek and Cherokee. Paula's great, great grandmother was a full blooded Cherokee. In the past, the Indians on the mountain would send smoke and fire signals across the Tennessee Valley. The mountain was originally known as Signal Point. During the American Civil War, it was a communication station. It was about the only high ground controlled by Union troops during the siege of Chattanooga between September and December 1863. Joan's husband was out of town, and we spent the night in Joan's cabin.

I asked Joan to let me look at her Yellow Pages phone book. I found several listings of dermatologists that practiced in Nashville, Tennessee. I randomly picked out the name of a woman dermatologist, Natalie Curcio. I called her office to make an appointment. They just had a cancellation, and they could work me in the following day. I told Joan that the skin cancer on my forehead was getting worse. So we cut short our visit. Getting off Signal Mountain was a nightmare. Several times I had to completely stop. One time I nearly slid into a guardrail. I held my brakes nearly all the way off that mountain.

I made the appointment to see Dr. Curcio. She did a biopsy on the spot on my forehead. She confirmed that it was cancer. She scheduled the surgery, two days later. She performed the Mohols surgery in one of the examination rooms. By the time she was finished, she had removed the skin down to my skull, the size of a silver dollar. She previously scheduled a referral to a plastic surgeon, located a short distance from her office. I was still sedated, so my wife, my son, and his wife, Lori, drove me to Dr. David Gilpin's office. He told Dr. Curcio that he could make the skin repair in his office.

We walked into Dr. Gilpin's office and he removed the bandage that was wrapped around my head. He told my wife that I need to go to TriStar Hospital, for immediate out patient surgery. I was already sedated, but he gave me another sedation, to prep me for surgery. By the time we arrived at the hospital registration desk, I was not feeling any pain, and was high on the medication. Dr. Gilpin performed the repair surgery. He is unquestionably, one of the best plastic surgeons in Nashville. He did not use any skin graph, and he left no scars. He was also very proud of his surgery. He asked if he could use pictures of me to advertise his skills. I gave my permission.

Following the surgery, Dr. Curcio scheduled 20 radiation treatments at TriStar's Cannon Cancer facility. It is part of the hospital. They made a face mask to target where the cancer was removed. On one of my follow-up visits to Dr. Curcio's office, I told her that I believe that she saved my life. Without looking up, from her laptop computer, she quietly said: "I did." I schedule appointments to see Dr. Curcio, every three months, because I am a high risk of a re-occurrence of skin cancer.

One lesson that I learned is that skin cancer can turn into melanoma, if not caught at an early stage. Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from sunlight is what caused my skin cancer. Maybe, if Jimmy Buffett had spent less time in the sun, down in Key West, Florida, he might still be with us. He died at the age of 76, from a rare skin cancer that often begins as red, shiny nodules on the face, hands, and neck. I'm 78, and I wear gloves when I drive to protect my hands from UV. I wear a hat to protect my face and neck from UV. I use sunscreen. Sometimes I wonder, if I had not made a visit to see my niece, on Signal Mountain, would I still be around writing this story? I'll end this story with a question that was asked over 2,000 years ago, and with a few words. Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6. Chris Stefanick wrote: "Remember, you are the only church some people may ever visit."

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