

SOLDIERS, SONGS, AND STORIES

By John F. Hall

There was a boy named John Clem. His mother was killed by a train when she was crossing the railroad tracks. Clem's father soon remarried. Friction developed with his step-mother that may have prompted Clem to run away and attempt to join the Union Army, before his tenth birthday. At first, no regiment would accept him because of his age. Finally, one regiment accepted him as their drummer boy. Two years later, after numerous battles, Clem was allowed to enlist at the age of 11. He fought, and he carried a musket that was trimmed down to his size. He was wounded twice. After the battle of Chickamauga, he was promoted to sergeant. He became the youngest soldier ever to be a non commissioned officer in the United States Army. While guarding a bridge, he was captured by the Confederate Army. He was set free at a prisoner exchange. He was appointed a second lieutenant by President Ulysses S. Grant when he was 20 years old. Two years later, he was promoted to First Lieutenant, and then up the ranks to full colonel. John Clem is America's youngest soldier. He served for more than 46 years and he retired at the age of 64. Because he retired as a colonel, he was promoted to brigadier general. Congress later awarded him an honorary promotion to major general (two stars).

On a warm summer's day, when I was still 16, I passed an Army physical and entrance exams. This was at the Army in-processing enlistment center in the city of Jacksonville, Florida. My dad, Charles J. Hall, always wore a white-sleeved dress shirt. He warned me to be careful about being in the sun too long. I am fair skinned and can easily get skin cancer. He was right. Three times I was treated for skin cancer. The third time, it nearly cost me my life. I was wearing an over-sized white shirt that I felt made me look older. I weighed 129 pounds at that time. About 30 other young men were waiting with me in the open area in the enlistment building. Someone called my name and told me to come to the podium. I first thought that I might have failed one of the entrance exams. The sergeant at the podium had this exasperated look on his face. He asked me my age. I told him that I would turn 17 the following day. He was none too happy. He said to me, "Hall! You get the hell out of here. Go back to your hotel room and stay there. Come back tomorrow and be sworn in." The next day, I returned and was sworn in. I was given a train ticket for a train bound for Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I was the youngest soldier in my basic training company.



After basic and advanced infantry training, I became a paratrooper assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. After three years, I was a Specialist 4th Class (Promotable). That rank is equivalent to an Army corporal. My three-year enlistment was almost up and I was offered a promotion to sergeant, a non-commissioned officer position and \$1,000 enlistment bonus (because I had a secret security clearance). I declined the offer so I could help my wife's dad on his farm in Golden Pond. Unlike John Clem, I was never a sergeant or a second lieutenant. Major General Billy G. Wellman, the AC of the Kentucky National Guard, helped me get a Direct Commission as a first lieutenant at the

age of 34. I commanded a Military Police company in Murray, KY for two years. I transferred to the 100th Division in Louisville and was promoted to captain.

During Operation Desert storm, I was mobilized and called to active duty on Fort Knox, KY. I was promoted to Major. I served six years as the Assistant Inspector General in the 100th Division in Louisville. I served three years as the Inspector General of the 85 Division in Arlington Heights, Illinois. My final two years in the Army Reserve, I served as an advisor to the 198th Military Police Battalion, Kentucky Army National Guard, in Louisville. I retired from the Army Reserve in 2005, at the age of 60, in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. My military service spanned 43 years.

In 2 Timothy, Chapter 2, Verse 3, are these words: "Join with me in suffering, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." In 1865, the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould wrote the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers." He wrote it overnight, so that children could have a song to sing as they marched on the road to Yorkshire. The children were carrying crosses and banners. This children's hymn has been used by various organization. These are his lyrics: "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before! Christ, the Master, leads against the foe; forward into battle, see his banner go! At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee; on, then, Christian soldiers, on to victory! Hell's foundation quivers at the shout of praise, Brothers, lift your voices, loud your anthems raise! Like a mighty army moves the church of God; Brothers, we are treading where the Saints have trod; we are not divided; all one body we, one hope and doctrine, one in charity. Onward, then, ye people, join our happy throng, blend with ours your voices in the triumph song; glory, land, and honor, unto Christ the King; this thro' countless ages men and angels sing. Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before!"

I would normally end this story with the above hymn. But I wanted Jade, Lexie, and Skyler to become familiar with a modern hymn that, according to the CCLI, 40 to 50 million people sing in church services each year. In 2002, Stuart Townend, in collaboration with Keith Getty, wrote the hymn "In Christ Alone." The hymn encapsulates the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. I watched Keith Getty's wife, Kristyn in a 2008 YouTube sing that hymn. She was backed up by a large Church choir and an orchestra. It was not her beautiful Irish voice that caught my attention. Before she began to sing, she opened a small Bible and read to the audience, John, Chapter 1, Verses 1-16. When she got to Verse 16, she read: "For of His faithfulness." She closed the small Bible, looked at the audience, and then said: "we have all received grace upon grace upon grace upon grace." She added four words to John's scripture. She is so right that Christ has given us so much grace, upon grace, upon grace.

These are Townend's and Getty's lyrics: "In Christ alone my faith my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song this Cornerstone, this solid ground firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when striving cease, my Comforter, my All in All here in the love of Christ I stand. In Christ alone - who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless babe. This gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones He came to save...).

“Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. For every sin on Him was laid here in the death of Christ I live. There in the ground His body lay, Light of the world by darkness slain; then bursting forth in glorious day, up from the ground he rose again. And as He stands in victory sin’s curse lost its grip on me. For I am His and He is, mine brought with the precious blood of Christ. No guilt in life, no fear in death this is the power of Christ in me. From life’s first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, nor scheme of man, can ever pluck me from His hand. Till He returns or calls me home here in the power of Christ I stand.” I feel Christ’s power in me when I search for hymns that magnify the grace upon grace that He gives all of us. I told Dr. Butler that I don’t understand how people can live without Christ in their life.

I’ve been writing almost one story a week since the Pandemic of 2020 began. I do this more to mentor Jade, Lexie, and Skyler, then I do to inspire Trish, Audrey, Mike, and Dr. Butler. It challenges my mind to be able to write so many non-fiction stories. One day, perhaps, I might hear the words mentioned in Matthew, Chapter 25, Verse 23: “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter the joy of your master.’”

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*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>