

THE QUIET SOLDIER, FROM A DISTANCE

By John F. Hall

Julie Gold wrote the song “From a Distance.” These are some of her lyrics: “From a distance the earth looks blue and green, and the snow capped mountains white. From a distance the ocean meets the stream and the eagle takes to flight. From a distance there is harmony and it echoes through the land. It’s the voice of hope. It’s the voice of peace. It’s the voice of every man. From a distance we all have enough and no one is in need. And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease, no hungry mouths to feed. From a distance we are instruments marching in a common band. Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace. They are the songs of every man. From a distance you look like a friend even though we are at war. From a distance I just can’t comprehend what all this fighting’s for. Oh, God is watching us. God is watching. God is watching us, from a distance...”



My late neighbor, Ritchie Bridges, lived down the road from me with his wife, Willie Mae and his children: Linda, Bruce, Richie Dale and Ronnie. He was a soft spoken man that sold odds and ends out of a large metal storage building next to his house. By his storage building he had 20 metal barrels for sale. For 27 years, I never knew that Ritchie had served in the Army in World War II. He never talked about it. One day in 2003, I was coming home from Army Reserve drill. I was 58 and getting too old to be a soldier. I had enlisted in the Army on my 17th birthday and I was banged up from jumping out of planes and helicopters when I was in the 101st Airborne Division.

I was still in my Army uniform when I pulled into Ritchie's driveway. I drove up to his two-car garage. He was sitting in his garage and he smiled when he saw me getting out of my car. He told me to come inside the garage and have a seat on one of the folding chairs. I told him that I needed to buy one of his metal barrels. My old steel barrel, that I use to burn personal papers and dead tree branches, had rusted out. I paid Ritchie \$10 for the barrel and I told him that I would pick it up Monday in my old Ford pickup truck.

Ritchie and I began talking about people that he knew, and he talked about a person that was getting VA disability payments. He said that every year a VA representative would meet with the local veterans. This man kept telling Ritchie that he would help him once he received his Army medical records. But he never would tell Ritchie how to request a copy of his medical records. I told Ritchie that my wife, Paula, was the Records Management civilian at the Army hospital on Fort Campbell. I could get her to type up a letter for his signature. The letter would request a copy of his Army medical records under the Freedom of Information Act (FORA), from the National Personnel Records Center in Saint Louis, Missouri.

Several months later, a copy of Ritchie’s Army medical records came in the mail. Ritchie called me and asked me to come to his house. I drove to his house which is a little over

2/10s of a mile from my house on Dyers Hill. Ritchie asked me to help him file a claim. I told Ritchie that I was not a lawyer, but I would do the best I could to help him.

I told Ritchie that I needed to know how he was injured during the war. I told him that I wanted to record our conversation. This would allow me to just listen to him and make notes later. I had an old cassette recorder and I began to record his conversation. Ritchie told me that he was an artillery sound ranger. He was the NCO of a three-man artillery sound ranging team. They would crawl into German lines at night. He would be in the middle. The artillery sound ranger on his left would go a few thousand feet away. The artillery sound ranger on his right would be about the same distance away.

Artillery sound ranging in World War II was a method of determining the coordinates of a hostile battery derived from the sounds of its gun firing. Each left and right sound ranger had a microphone and an EE-8 field phone. A microphone line and a phone line ran from each sound ranger to Ritchie. He would use the aural method in a device that measures the time between the sound arriving at the microphones. He called it the “flash to bang time.”

One night he tried to call the sound ranger on his left over the field phone. He got no answer, so he crawled, following the phone line to that soldier’s position. That soldier had fallen asleep from exhaustion. He woke him up and crawled back to his position. By the time he got back, his sounding device was gone. The enemy had cut the wires. He canceled the mission and got his team back to the American lines. Ritchie’s supervisor told him that he was going to pay for the device that the German’s stole. For 58 years, Ritchie expected to receive a bill from the Army to pay for that sounding device. I told him that was ridiculous. I said that if he had not gone to check on his team member on the left, the Germans would have killed him and taken the device anyway.

Ritchie said that one time he was scouting to find a better place to cross into enemy lines without being detected. He decided to climb a tree to get a better view. By the time he got to the top of the tree, a five-man German patrol came by and stopped under the tree. The patrol leader lit a cigarette. Ritchie smelled the smoke coming up the tree branches. The patrol leader had a MP 40 sub-machine gun. Ritchie said that if he sneezed or his foot slipped, the Germans would have shot him out of that tree.

Ritchie got very silent as if he was reliving a nightmare, and said, “I’ve never told anyone this before. When the Germans and the Americans began firing at the same time, things got really bad. The rounds were exploding all around me. I thought I was going to die. I think I went crazy.” Ritchie choked up and began to cry. He could hardly speak. I turned off the tape recorder. We sat there in silence for awhile. He wiped away the tears and caught his breath. I asked him if he wanted to stop. He said, “No.” So I turned the tape recorder back on. Ritchie continued, “I had to lay on the snow covered ground for 10 to 12 hours every day for six to ten weeks with no relief. I got shell shock, pneumonia, and rheumatic fever. I spent months in hospitals in France and England. I wasn’t well when they treated me at Fort Knox. But I just wanted to go home.” I took Ritchie's medical

records home with me. Before he went into the Army, he could pick up and carry a railroad tie by himself. Now he would be out of breath walking 200 feet to his mail box.

Ritchie fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Approximately 19,000 American soldiers were killed, 47,500 were wounded, and 23,000 were missing. I filled out the claim forms for Ritchie's claim. He signed the forms and I mailed them off. Six months later, the VA denied his claim. I have this cynical view that the VA did not care about the WWII veterans and it seemed to prefer that they just die to save on some paper work. I filed an appeal for Ritchie. About a year later, it too was denied. I began to feel that it was my fault and someone else should have handled Ritchie's claim. I had just one last appeal that I could make. I mailed it to the Veteran's Court in Washington, DC. For three years, we heard nothing from the Court. One day, I was in a restaurant with my wife Paula. Ritchie was there with his wife, Willie Mae. He came over to my table and said, "John, can we talk outside?"

I had this sick feeling in my stomach that Ritchie heard from the Court and that they denied his claim. I felt that he should have gotten an experienced lawyer to fight the VA. But Ritchie had no money. He was barely getting by on his fixed income. I felt really bad because my best effort failed. We talked in the parking lot. He pulled out a check and showed it to me. It was made out to him for \$90,000. He said, "I didn't show this to anyone, what should I do?" I told him to put it in the bank as the government was paying him for the injuries he sustained in WWII. He also had a letter stating that he was also to receive 100% disability pay. He wanted to pay me for helping him. I said: "I won't take a penny. I didn't do this for the money."

Two years later, Ritchie's health began to fail. He was admitted to the Western Kentucky Veterans Center in Hanson, Kentucky. On my last visit to see Ritchie, I went into his room. He said, "John, I will never forget what you did for me as long as I live." He died two years later. I read a eulogy at his funeral. I gave the typed eulogy papers to Willie Mae. I backed up and slowly gave her a hand salute. After the funeral, I gave the cassette tape to his daughter, Linda. For 50 years, the VA did nothing to help Ritchie. That was a both a disgrace and a disservice, not just to Ritchie, but to his wife, Willie Mae, and to his children, Linda, Richie Dale, Ronnie, and Bruce.

For Ritchie's story, I will use the lyrics to a song written by Kris Kristofferson called "Why Me Lord." These are his lyrics: "Why me Lord, what have I ever done to deserve even one of the pleasures I've known. Tell me Lord, what did I ever do that was worth loving You, or the kindness You've shown. Lord help me Jesus, I've wasted it so help me Jesus I know what I am. Now that I know that I've needed You so help me Jesus, my soul's in Your hands. Tell me Lord, if You think there's a way I can try to repay all that I've taken for You. Maybe Lord, I can show someone else what I've been through myself, on my way back to You. Lord help me Jesus, I've wasted it so help me Jesus I know what I am. Now that I know that I've needed You so help me Jesus, my soul's in Your hand."

Since the pandemic began, I got busy writing stories and mailing them to Jade, Lexie, Skyler, Trish, Audrey, Mike, and Dr. Butler. Just when I thought I had emptied the pages of my memories, a new story came to mind.

I'm thinking of writing a story called "Stepping Stones." It has to cook in my brain for awhile before I can put it to the pen. Clay Harrison wrote a piece called, "Beyond Tomorrow's Sunrise." These are his words: "Beyond tomorrow's sunrise, a new year has come, a time for new beginnings with every rising sun. There is hope on the horizon, despite our fears and woes, for we must endure the winter to behold spring's first rose. God grants us many blessings and gives us daily bread, for He who feeds the sparrow provides so we are fed. May you grow in grace and prosper, as old things pass away, and stumbling blocks become stepping stones to a newer, brighter day. Let's build bridges to the future, together hand-in-hand, and tear down walls that divide us across this hallowed land. In this time of new beginnings, fond memories we'll recall. Beyond tomorrow's sunrise, God bless us one and all!"

I first began writing true stories 43 years ago. I felt then, just as I feel now, that if just one of my stories helps one person, then all my efforts were not in vain. Christ has given me the talent, and the grace upon grace upon grace, to write stories. At the age of 76, my mind thinks like a young man, but my body is nearly worn out and done. Seven years after Ritchie died, Congress passed the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Act of 2017. The new law gives the Secretary of the VA the power to remove, demote, or suspend a senior executive or other employee with cause. Regular VA employees are also now subject to removal, demotion, or suspension by the VA Secretary due to misconduct or poor performance.

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