

Reflecting on Heroes

From chopper jock Jim **Bracewell**

Now that I am pushing seventy, I spend a lot more time reflecting on the past ... probably a lot more than I should. But I'm at the age where there's a lot more past than future to think about. I decided to write a few words about some of the memories I don't want to slip from my consciousness. Too many already have.

I wouldn't even consider anything autobiographical, because I doubt if I could entice even my own family to read it. Most of my adult, working life was spent in the Army, so the majority of my thoughts are of those times.

I suppose I am prone to hero-worship, because during my childhood I idolized all of my relatives who served in the military ... my dad and an uncle, who served in the infantry during WWII, a cousin who flew P-51 Mustangs and shot down four German ME-109s, and others too numerous to mention.

I grew up hearing about my great grandfather, for whom I was named. He was a dentist who joined the confederate infantry early in the civil war. He never revealed his profession for two reasons:

- 1) He had heard stories that anyone with any form of medical training (even dentists) eventually were pressed into service as emergency surgeons. He would rather fight in the infantry than perform amputations.
- 2) When he signed up, he was with three of his best buddies from his childhood, and he didn't want to be separated from them. Just before his regiment shipped out from Pensacola, FL, he and one of the other fellows were stricken with some sort of "swamp fever." They were so sick they were mustered out of the army, and sent home. Their mothers nursed them back to health. Now here's the part that has stuck with me all these years ... he and his friend hitchhiked (no small feat in the early 1860s) from Quincy, FL to Virginia to rejoin their regiment! He was shot through the chest at Fredericksburg, hospitalized, contracted pneumonia, and somehow survived. Once again, he was considered unfit for service, and mustered out. He was taken to the coast and placed on a barge to Savannah. A physician (family friend) took care of him until he was able to travel back to Quincy. His mother once again nursed him back to health, and he hitchhiked back to Virginia! He was captured and spent the remainder of the war in prison at Ft. Monroe.

That bit of family history took on new significance to me during the Vietnam era when people were scampering off to Canada and Sweden to avoid the draft. Great Grandpa is one of my family heroes.

I have other heroes. Some were individuals I knew personally -- fellow pilots, who in peacetime may not have been ideal soldiers in terms of mischief and rowdy behavior. Many lost their lives in efforts to save others. It almost seems funny how a bunch of young men, some as young as nineteen, whose military bearing was practically nonexistent, whose goofy antics and seeming irreverence drew sneers and frowns from some higher-ranking career soldiers, could almost instantly transform to serious professionals who were willing to risk all for their fellow soldiers. Of course, this observation doesn't apply to all, but those to whom it does apply are heroes in my book.

I have always stood in awe of the infantry. I grew up hearing stories from WWII and Korean War infantry veterans. I remember thinking these men were larger than life. I dreamed that someday I would have what it takes to be like them. I can't remember when I didn't want to be an infantryman. As I grew older, I became interested in aviation, and although I chose the Army for my career, I went into aviation instead of the infantry.

When I went to Vietnam for the first time, I was delighted to learn that I would be supporting the First Cavalry's infantry troops. It wasn't long before I realized that even my high regard for the infantry fell short of what they deserved. I was so impressed with their demeanor, even when they knew we were taking them into certain combat. I was amazed at their calmness. The only times I remember any sign of apprehension was when they were in my aircraft. I saw it rarely, but I attributed the "wide" eyes to concern about flying, rather than concern about where they were going or what awaited their arrival.

It never occurred to me that there could be anyone or any group of men who could be higher in my esteem than the infantry. In a sense that is the case, because the one group that has reached that point is made up of infantrymen. I had the privilege of providing helicopter support for them from the inception of their unit, and I saw firsthand the courage and determination of the men of the First Cavalry Division's Long Range Reconnaissance Company. While I supported the LRRPs only in 1967, there is no doubt in my mind that those who followed the originals were just as courageous, just as dedicated, and just as skilled as those who came before them.

When I reminisce about my times in the Vietnam War, oddly I don't immediately think of my aviation exploits, such as they were. My first thoughts are of the infantry in general, and specifically the LRRPs. To paraphrase the original LRRP commander, CPT James D. James, every LRRP mission was an act of premeditated heroism. I wholeheartedly agree.

So, now when my grandchildren ask me about our country's heroes, I tell them there were many, but none were greater than the LRRPs.

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