Cyclics, Souls, Service and Shepherds

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Journal Article | Feb 17 2015 - 7:39pm

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Keith Nightingale

Lost in the noise and emotions of the recent demonstrations in St Louis and New York was a remembrance of the services provided for all those engaged souls by a man who provided them before most of the demonstrators were born. It was the anniversary of the passing of Ed “Too Tall” Freeman, Congressional Medal of Honor winner and a true shepherd of the National flock. With him went the representation of what our many-tapestried Nation is all about. It is worth remembering not only what he did, but why he did it and what it ought to mean for all of us. His life was a coalescence of events, impressions and service over time absent heroics, ego or demonstration. He was given our Nation’s highest award for specific actions on a specific day, but he probably believed his true reward was the continued life and service of those he saved directly and to those others to whom he gave hope by his presence on the worst day of their lives.

Ed was the sixth of nine children in rural Mississippi. By his 13th year, he saw the thousands of citizens dressed in new Army Olive Drab called into service for WW II. He quickly decided this was what he wanted to do—He wanted to serve, and he wanted to wear a uniform. His Mother signed a false birthdate statement for the Navy admission but would not for the Army. His brother was in the Army and had paid for it. Ed sailed on a fleet oiler in the Pacific and became part of something much larger than himself. After the war, he was discharged but joined the Army Reserve. Within an eye blink of a life’s span, he was shipped to Korea as a First Sergeant of Engineers. This was a very difficult time for the US in Korea, fighting vastly outnumbered under the toughest of infantry conditions—a far distance from the relatively sedate and comfortable life of an Able Seaman on a fleet oiler. His combat Engineer unit was attached to an Infantry battalion and was asked to fight as infantry on a scorched, bald, steep piece of ugly real estate called Pork Chop Hill—forgettable to most but unforgettable for those that fought for its twisted contours and fractured ridge lines.

Ed and his engineers attacked, defended and defended again to the point of utter exhaustion but ultimate resolute victory. After several days, his unit that began with 257 soldiers was reduced to 14 effectives, of which Ed was one. The senior US Commander, General James Van Fleet, personally gave Ed a battlefield commission on the reverse slope of the hill that he and his soldiers had fought so bravely to keep. As the new ranking officer, he led his reconstituted force back up the hill to hold what had been so dearly won. At that moment in time, Ed didn’t know that he would again see, smell and feel Pork Chop Hill and the desperate dedicated ghosts of his soldiers, far away in a very different place and time.

Ed had always wanted to fly, and his commission opened that possibility to him. The problem was, as the Army informed him, that at six feet four inches he was too tall for flight school—the name “Too Tall”
remained forever. By 1955, the Army became less picky, and Ed went to fixed wing school and later transitioned to rotary wing. It was as a helicopter pilot that all his previous sailing and Infantry experience would provide the foundation for his incomparable service.

By 1965, Ed was a seasoned pilot and began his third war in service to the Nation. This time, he rode to battle as a pilot for the new airmobile cavalry on a different horse, the UH-1 “Huey”. His stable was Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). He carried the latest generation of conscript and volunteer soldiers chosen to continue the historic lineage of the 7th Cavalry to a dot on a large folded, mostly green map clipped to his kneeboard, circled with a red grease pencil and named LZ X-Ray.

X-Ray, in the arcane language of military map reading, is at Yankee Alpha 935010. It was selected as much by guesswork as by hard intelligence, but it was likely near significant numbers of the enemy, as it was astride a large, looming mountain mass, the Chu Pong Massif, which reached into Cambodia and was probably a major infiltration route to the vital coastal plain. The cavalry would conduct a traditional reconnaissance and “develop the situation.” Ed and his fellow aviators piloting a covey of Huey’s would be the means of transport.

The LZ was fairly open and sloping toward the massif. It was broken by small trees, grasses and large mud termite mounds, reddish pink against the tawny green of the scrub. Bound on all sides by the deep green of the jungle, this LZ was as good as most in the waning morning hours of 14 November 1965. Bruce Crandall, Ed Freeman and the crews of A/229 pushed down their cyclics and swung into a scattered trail formation and touched down on the waving and burning grasses to unload the first of their soldiers from 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry-Custer’s own. The air was fairly heavy with the usual Vietnam highlands’ combination of heat and humidity making the aviators’ density altitude (lifting) issues a problem. The birds shook and shuddered as they weaved their overloaded course into the irregular grasslands laden with sweating, fully-loaded and adrenalin pumped soldiers on their first major mission since departing Ft Benning, Georgia. Thankfully, it was not initially a hot LZ in terms of enemy fire. That was about to change. What also would change was that Bruce and Ed would transition their positions as pilots and become shepherds of their flock--the flock they had just brought to a seemingly serene pasture.

The shepherds would be sorely needed. By noon, X Ray became alive with enemy in all directions. Each subsequent lift brought in new troops to the fast-heating caldron. What had been a benign LZ was now an intense inferno of crossfire, green and red intertwined tracers, “crumps” of grenades and RPG’s with deep resonant throbs of friendly artillery and PAVN mortars. Helicopters were pelted with shrapnel and bullets, crews were wounded, and very quickly a tenuous situation became untenable. What had been an eight ship LZ was quickly consumed by enemy encroachment and interlocking fires.

The shepherds ignored reality and rules and shot a combat approach to an improbable one ship LZ in order to replenish their flock. Steadily, as the day wore on, the hasty perimeters were reduced as casualties mounted. The carnivorous volumes of fire expended the meager sources of ammunition each soldier carried. In the intense heat, combined with adrenalin and wounds, water became an extremely rare and prized commodity.

The red-crossed evac birds, distinct from the lift ships, made an initial entry onto this contested ground. Shortly after noon, the second ship landed, took rounds and hastily pulled pitch and departed. The pilot, with heavy breath and strong emotions, described the condition of the LZ from a pilot’s viewpoint. Quickly, the evac lift commander declared the area too dangerous to land and ceased to respond to requests. At this moment, Bruce and Ed decided that what was happening on the ground demanded their personal commitment to affect the desired outcome. An outcome only they could provide-if at all.
Pilots are constantly drilled on safety of flight, adherence to rules, the unforgiving aspects of physics, crew safety and the necessity to adhere to crew rest. Risking a helicopter and its crew was usually considered a mortal sin and subject for relief. The mission was the helicopter and the helicopter was the mission. Sometimes. But this was different.

The problem with helicopters is that they have no soul. They are an inanimate collection of thousands of moving and non-moving parts usually in conflict with one another and each with fragility and sensitivity of its own and each fighting to go its own way—captured only by circuitry, associations and the symbiosis of the system. Together, they form an object with exquisite sensitivity to the laws of physics compounded by chance. The airframe has a glide ratio of a rock. Each of those thousands of parts, components, circuits, valves and metal is severely affected by the slightest poor judgment or bad luck of a pilot. If bullets and shrapnel are added, they become potentially lethal mechanical distractors.

On any given day, the pilot must perform perfectly for the airframe to properly function at all. These objects do not give a second effort or strive beyond self-imposed limits. No prayer or pilot leadership will make a difference. When a point in the complexities of the whole fail, the system fails and the pilot and crew fall.

The pilot knows this and carefully nurtures the airframe and is extraordinarily sensitive to the system and its demands. By placing that airframe in an environment where the safety of documented limits and common sense are ignored is either extraordinarily brave or foolhardy and arguably a bit of both.

Ed Freeman and Bruce Crandall, both considerably more aware of the truths of flying than most, chose to ignore what they had been taught and to respond to a greater inner personal law—the self-imposed necessity to do what must be done at the recognition for the necessity of that act. The airframe would function or it would not under the new pilot-imposed law. But it would have to fail and falter before the pilots would. The needs of the ground rang the shepherd’s bell and the available tools would respond—or not.

Listening on the radio and watching from above, Bruce and Ed transitioned from being pilots to shepherds of their flock and their flock was calling. Ammo, water, casevac are short words but they are desperate words. In the direst of moments, these are more important than life for the unit requiring them, as they mean life for the many as oxygen for the body or gas for the engine of war. Without the Cav transports the airmobile unit was doomed, helpless, and would soon be at the point of annihilation. Bruce and Ed understood that and cared enough to act.

The shepherds, with no authority other than their own sense of service and self, undertook to do what others would not, could not do. Overloaded with the necessities of combat, these shepherds coursed down through the thickening columns of green tracers, wound across the smoking debris and grassland fires, and landed in the center of the inferno, delivering the life-saving material and taking out wounded. The shepherds nursed the flock and allowed it not only to remain alive but to be held together. The pair did this seemingly endlessly throughout the day and through the descent of darkness.

The airframe was constantly rent by bullets and shrapnel sometimes from PAVN less than 20 meters from the landing. The flight crew was engaging the enemy at close infantry range as the beleaguered soldiers yanked off the supplies and slung on their wounded before the skids had come to rest. The bird would strain and groan, spewing hydraulic fluid and JP4 through newly opened orifices as it struggled for altitude, pulling great gouts of smoke, cordite, sparks and dirt through the cockpit and crew compartment to reach the clear but still bullet torn columns of air that would deliver them back to base. Bruce and Ed lost horses, traded horses and returned again and again to this maelstrom. The shepherds violated all the rules, but safety of the flock, not flight was the foremost thought.
For Ed, this was Pork Chop Hill revisited. The smoke, fear, exhaustion, crack of bullets, spluttering lips, deep-pooled eyes and gasping sounds of the wounded were all too familiar. Once a part of the flock, he was now the shepherd and he understood the terrors, the realities and the requirements. X Ray now had the same burned and blackened exposed dirt look of Pork Chop, the same smells and sights and deep visceral emotions of years ago. At altitude, Ed could not enjoy the distance and separation from the obscure smoky spot below--in his mind, he was there on the ground and this would stay there in his heart. He knew intimately what was going on below and what the needs were--needs that only he could meet. The earlier broad Pacific and the unforgiving close dirt of Korea had prepared him for this moment, and he and his partner made a life choice because they knew there was no other choice for them. They must act. Because of that, the shepherds would return the flock.

In the abrupt and unemotional language of the military bureaucracy, Ed was awarded the Medal of Honor because he flew 14 sorties into a hot LZ and retrieved 30 wounded. But on consideration, he did so much more. Where are those 30 men today? What did they do with their lives? What of their families and children? What future good did those 30 do for all of us? In truth, many more than 30 benefited from Ed’s actions. Regardless of the material things he brought, he brought something equally or more important to the unit at that moment in time--he brought hope. Hope that otherwise would have become despair and ultimately death.

To the soldiers at LZ X Ray struggling in mortal combat, bodies jammed as close into the ground as physically possible, assailed by sweat, smoke, blood, dirt, metal and hot expended cartridges, shrouded by the incredible cacophony of sound that is so much a part of close mortal combat, Ed brought the sweet sound of that unforgettable WHOP WHOP WHOP of the life-saving Hueys. Just hearing it over the din of the battle produced a rush of adrenalin as welcome as a fresh magazine for an empty rifle. It meant: “We care! We are here! We will help you! You are not alone! Hang on! More is on the way!” The sound of Ed’s Huey was as reassuring to the troops as the shepherd’s call or his quiet flute across the still night air. “You will make it. Do your job. Others are doing theirs.” How many soldiers took heart and drew a breath of fresh optimism because of Ed and the sounds he brought? For 1/7 Cav, Ed brought a pearl without price.

Witness to this and the recipient of the sounds and succor of hope was a future shepherd--Rick Rescorla. As a platoon leader that day, he performed exemplary service with the resources that Ed and Bruce brought. Trained by the British Army, serving in Rhodesia and joining the US Army, he brought quality and leadership to a place that desperately needed both. Ed kept the engine of war running for a lieutenant that would have been him on Pork Chop Hill and who would later follow the same summons of the heart.

Much later, hearing the same tocsin sound to his soul as did Ed and Bruce, Rick would find himself running up the stairs of the World Trade Center on 9/11 when all others were running down. The last remembrance people had of him was singing the Cornish battle song, Men of Harlech, as he vaulted up the stairs--a song sung by his distant ancestors at Rourkes Drift. The shepherd brought his own sound to the flock. He was determined to shepherd them as Ed and Bruce had shepherded him. While saving most of his flock, the shepherd died with the remainder.

Ed would probably say that he was just a nondescript guy who was nothing special and just did what had to be done on a bad day. It has always been one of the strengths of our Nation that the ordinary emerge to do the extraordinary, and, in so doing, become unique and very special. Ed overcame not only normal instincts but also his training learned over years of repetitive emphasis. A BIM light on a helicopter indicates the blade is compromised. Bullets compromise blades, and the bird must sit down immediately. Had Ed seen it, along with all the other alarms and signals indicated by a wounded bird, Ed would have ignored it and them because he knew he had people that had to be rescued and boxes of bullets that had to
be delivered. Sometimes, chances need to be taken. This was such a time. If the blades can turn, we will return. This was Pork Chop with a greener shade, and he knew what was needed and knew he was one of the very few that could provide. He sat in a helicopter but his heart was on the ground. He knew what he needed then, he knew what was needed now and he would provide. He could do nothing less. But most of all, Ed provided hope to his flock.

Ed’s anniversary passed while our Nation was awash with the momentary emotions of demonstrations and riots and great media concerns of the direction of our Nation. He had died in a small town in Idaho in the peace of the countryside and the fresh clean air that provides good dependable lift to a helicopter. He had rejected a funeral at Arlington—that was for heroes. He wanted to rest in the land that he loved. On 14 November 1965, Ed “Too Tall” Freeman acted as if the outcome of the whole conflict was the issue at hand and that it depended on him alone to tip the balance. And with the exception of one other, it did. The shepherd flew home to where Rick was again marking the LZ. Our thanks as a Nation go with Ed who stood Too Tall to be forgotten.

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About the Author

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COL Nightingale is a retired Army Colonel who served two tours in Vietnam with Airborne and Ranger (American and Vietnamese) units. He commanded airborne battalions in both the 509th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 82nd Airborne Division. He later commanded both the 1/75th Rangers and the 1st Ranger Training Brigade.


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