

The Home Front May 68

It had been a normal spring in middle Tennessee. Everything was in bloom, my allergies were killing me, but my allergy capsules were keeping me dried up and spaced out during the daytime. Farmers were proud of the spring calf crop and the first cutting of hay was well on its way to maturity. At Middle Tennessee State University the mini-skirts were shorter than ever as the pale bare legs of winter gave way to the early tans of late spring, but the semester was winding down and finals were upon us. Most of my fellow dorm dwellers had left on Thursday in anticipation of a fine spring weekend, but I had a final exam on Friday afternoon and was still in my bed when the sole pay phone on my floor started to ring at 6: 25 A.M. on Friday May 10, 1968.

I remember it as if it were yesterday. The dorm was more quiet than usual and the ringing of the phone seemed amplified, but no one was answering it. After about ten rings I got up, looked at my clock, opened my door and noted that not a soul was in the hall or headed for the phone booth. I slowly walked toward the ringing sure that it would stop or that someone would step out of their room and catch it before I got there. I answered the phone and to my amazement the voice on the other end was my mother who was equally shocked to hear me answer. As if time stood still, my mind went into slow motion and processed the moment. I first thought about the unusual odds of my answering the phone (I never had before and did not after this instance) and hearing my mother on the other end of the line. I knew something was dreadfully wrong and I wanted to hang up before she had time to tell me. In fifteen seconds I received news that would change my life forever just as it had changed the lives of Huffman and Louise Stephenson.

Just as day was breaking on the morning of Friday May 10, 1968, two army officers removed their hats and knocked on the door at 109 Pickle Street in Shelbyville, Tennessee. Major Fullerton and Captain Gorman were survival assistance officers sent from the ROTC Cadre at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee to meet the Stephenson family at home before they began their work day and inform them that their only child, twenty year old Specialist 4 Donald R. Stephenson, had been killed in Viet Nam. They brought with them a short telegram which simply stated that their son had been killed during a firefight on May 5, 1968 near the South Viet Nam city of Ahn Khe. The terse message said he had died as a result of burns.

Across the street neighbor Ruby Dixon watched through a window in horror realizing what was happening. As the officers left the Stephenson home, Mrs. Dixon ran over to check on the Stephensons and got the grim news....within ten minutes she had called my mother and by 6:30 A.M. I received the word that my best friend was dead. I've never felt emptiness equal to that in my life. I walked back through the empty hall toward my room and stood in the spot outside my door where Donny and I had our final conversation before he left for Viet Nam the previous December. It seemed so strange to me that our final promises to one another and the coming of the word of his death had both taken place in that cold, sterile dormitory hall.

I sat stunned in the darkness of my room and reflected on the promise he had required of me in December.... that I stay close to his parents while he was gone and look after them if anything happened

to him. My parents were waiting for me to call and tell them when I wanted them to pick me up so I could get to the Stephenson's house as soon as possible. At that moment I needed a friend instead of a parent so I called one of our (Donny's and mine) running buddies, and he agreed to make the thirty mile drive to pick me up. Keeping the promise to Donny had to start right then and I knew it, but denial was already settling in, and I needed proof that this news was accurate.

After hastily dressing, I headed for the ROTC building to get the news straight from the horse's mouth. I was currently enrolled in a class on battle tactics that Captain Gorman was teaching, so I went straight to his desk. He told me about the telegram and the visit he had made to Shelbyville earlier that morning. His manner was incredibly matter-of-fact in my estimation. I was sure that there was more information than had been relayed to them but was astonished to learn that he knew nothing more than the words on the telegram that he had delivered. He advised me that it might be days before we heard anything more about the return of the remains, but told me my friend's body would be accompanied by a soldier, and I could feel free to check back with him anytime. I left his office very much cast down.

An hour or so later two of my friends arrived and as we drove back to Shelbyville, I replayed the morning's events like a news cast. How could he be dead? I had just received a letter from him the day before that was dated in late April. Why had it taken so long for the news of his death on May 5th to get to his family? When would his body get home? How did he die? Did others die with him or was he alone? Would we hear anything from other soldiers or officers in his outfit that explained his death? It would be years before most of those questions were answered, but the most pressing question was what could I say to his Mother and Dad who I had seen the previous Sunday?

My friends dropped me off at my Mother's office so I could pick up her car and drive to Donny's house. Before going there I decided to go home and talk to my Dad who was a decorated World War II flyer. I hoped he could offer some comfort and advice on how to deal with this situation. Dad had been very fond of Donny, and as soon as I saw him I knew that he was as upset as I was. "War is hell son, war is hell", was about all he would say. He had never been able to talk much about his own war experiences, and I knew that Donny's death was bringing back a lot of memories. He just told me to do the best I could and remember that Donny was counting on me to be there for his parents. I had to look past my own shock and grief to do those things Donny had faith in me to do when he needed me most.

As I drove to his home at 109 Pickle Street, I felt that he was with me, and I just asked him to help me do things the way he wanted them done. Through the years I continued those conversations and always felt his presence....I still do as I write these words. I was hoping that the Stephenson's would be alone when I got there, but a crowd of family and friends had gathered, and they would keep the vigil with them during the eight days and nights which passed while they waited for Donny's body to return. Five days would pass before they received another visit from the survival assistance officers who had received word that the body would be returning to Tennessee around May 17th or 18th. They indicated that a telegram would be sent to them so they could advise the family and the local mortuary as to the day and time the coffin would arrive at the airport in Nashville and be ready for transport home. Unfortunately they had no answers for the family's most urgent questions about the particulars of their son's death, but both officers were Viet Nam veterans, and they brought some maps and afforded the

family as much understanding as they could about the mission of the 1st Battalion 50th Infantry and the 173d Airborne Brigade. The family watched the national news every morning and evening which was dominated by talk of the Viet Nam War and the Tet Offensive in particular. They had a new awareness and appreciation for the meaning of the KIA statistics that were given each day.

I spent as much time as I could with the Stephensons during those days. I met all the members of the extended family and was always introduced to them as "Don's best friend". I helped out with chores at the Stephenson farm, and generally did anything I could to be of comfort. I spent a lot of hours just waiting with the family for the word on Donny's return. As we waited, the need to understand the particulars of his death became prominent in all the conversations that were taking place. Surely the government would provide his parents with more information so they could appreciate their son's sacrifice.

Finally the day came when his body was to arrive home. The soldier accompanying the body, a Sergeant Lewis had already contacted the funeral home and told them that the coffin was not to be opened. In those days there were a lot stories about bodies being mixed up or empty coffins being sent with orders that they not be opened. Mr. Stephenson demanded that someone be allowed to see the remains just to verify that it was his son that had been killed. The Sergeant called his superiors and received permission for the coffin to be opened briefly for identification. Five people including me were selected to look at the body but the Stephensons declined to be present. When I arrived at the funeral home, the other four men had already identified the body and encouraged me to accept their verification that it was Donny. They said he was badly burned but they knew it was him and that viewing the remains would be extremely upsetting to me. His cousin David Perryman took me aside and gave me the details, saying Donny's body was in a body bag and a new uniform and envelope full of medals was on top of the body. They unzipped the bag in the area of the face and could readily tell that it was Donny.

His flag draped casket was taken to a viewing room and a copy of his official army photograph was placed on top of the casket. Thousand of flowers were sent and surrounded the casket. The funeral was scheduled for two days later and hundreds of people came to comfort the family. The night before the funeral, Donny's cousin Ed Perryman and I asked to be allowed to stay in the funeral home with the casket and permission was granted. Somehow it was important for us to spend his last night on earth with him. I developed a special bond and affection for Ed that night as we sat and talked, laughed about his nature, and cried over his death; but mostly we wondered if we would ever know what really happened.

As soon as the funeral home staff arrived, I went home and took a short nap, then dressed and went back to the funeral home. Donny's girlfriend Valerie Brown and her mother had driven in overnight from Missouri for the funeral. The rest of the day is a blur for me. I was a pallbearer and rode to the cemetery, which was about six miles away, with Valerie. People said the funeral procession was two miles long, and I remember folks lining the streets as the procession passed. There were full military honors, and I particularly remember "Taps". I left as the grave was being covered and stopped and told the Stephensons of my promise to Donny and my intent to keep it. I spent as much of the following day with Valerie until her mother took her home that afternoon.

For years we wondered what really happened because no more information was forthcoming from the Army. I continued to try and with the advent of the internet came the development of the website for the 1ST Battalion 50th Infantry which was Donny's outfit. As a result of the efforts of some caring surviving members of his outfit, I found out that he had been killed in a terrible battle where all of the officers had been killed as well. Through the kindness of those fine brave men, those of us who want Donny's memory kept alive have blessed us in more ways than they will ever know.

Paul Cross



Copyright 2010 Paul Cross

Contact for copy permission: via e-mail: rpaulc@comcast.net