

“A Tribute To An American Hero” (Patsy Milantoni)

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My long time friend passed away Saturday, November 30, 2002. His name was Patsy Milantoni. Pat was a retired Lieutenant Colonel who served in the army's prestigious Green Berets. After being captured in Korea, Pat spent many months as a captive. His cancer finally caught up with him. I am a retired Naval officer, and each time we visited he and his family in Pennsylvania, we ended up talking about our military experiences. He was captured when he was a second Lieutenant. He had never spoken of his experiences as a prisoner. The memories were too painful.

During my last visit to his home we sat alone at his kitchen table drinking and telling stories. Pat was teaching me to make gnocchis and we laughed a lot. The more he drank his straight vodka, the mellower he became. He had never told his family about his experiences as a prisoner. I bugged him about telling me the details. He finally agreed to let me record him as we talked about his POW experiences in Korea.

Pat joined the army out of high school in order to get money to support his parents. After assignments in Europe and America he was commissioned at OCS.

He had been sent to Korea in the 7th Infantry. On the day he was captured he had just returned from R&R in Tokyo where had talked to his wife Rita by phone. There had been a happy conversation. He would soon be relieved and was eagerly looking forward to his return home.

That day, he and his sergeant along with eight men went out to investigate a report from a four man patrol that there was Chinese activity nearby. When they got there, they discovered not a small recon unit but a full blown company of Chinese regulars ready to attack. After reporting the situation by radio and ordered to fall back, he radioed that it was impossible. They were just too deep into the situation. The Chinese knew they were there, and the fight began. This is how he told the story.

“I had been hit in the leg with something and was bleeding badly. We were in an irrigation ditch - - ten of us facing 110 Chinese troops. We were fist fighting - - firing point blank. I was pretty excited, and I can hardly remember what happened - - but I heard something hit behind me like a *thunk*. I turned my head, and there lay a grenade. Fortunately, it was a concussion grenade. I had already been wounded in the leg and I saw that — looked at it and the only thing I remember is turning my head, — I think I said “Oh Jesus!”

“I don't remember hearing it go off but I remember a blinding light. A concussion grenade. If it had been a frag grenade, it would have taken my head off.”

“Next thing I know, I woke up and thought. “Man!” My head was bursting. I had never had a headache in my life, but that one was the mother of all headaches. My ears were ringing, and my head was just throbbing, the leg wound was hurting, and I was in this dark thing and thought *thank God, I'm in a MASH hospital and on my way home.* I reached over and felt dirt. *That's not a tent. . it's dirt!* I sat up and . . oh my God! , there was a fire, and there were three Chinese soldiers sitting around that fire eating rice with chopsticks.”

“My heart dropped down to my stomach cause I immediately knew I was a prisoner of war. I just eased myself back down, pretending I was still unconscious and tried to get my thoughts together. Trying to control my fear.. What was I going to do next?”

My friend paused, and after awhile said “I'll be very honest with you. It took me several minutes to get hold of myself. I was in a panic state. I told myself “You're an officer in the United States Army, you're an American. Remember your family name. Remember what you've been taught.” That's it. That's all I relied on.”

“The guards knew I was awake now, and they started poking around. They didn't speak English, and I didn't speak Chinese. They were waiting for an interrogator to get there. They poked me with sticks and rifle butts while waiting. I wondered what had happened to the rest of my men. I didn't find out until about a week later.”

“The interrogator arrived after about two days and started interrogating me. I played the role “Name, rank, serial number, date of birth and that's it. I played the Geneva convention card.”

“He kept insisting that I would do as he wanted and answer questions. That pissed me off, and I told him “I'm sorry, under the Geneva Convention, I've given you my name, rank serial number and date of birth, and that is all you need.”

“He wanted me to write it.”

“I said no! I will not write it. I will spell it for you. You can speak English...you can write it.”

“I told him “I am wounded, and you are also required by the Geneva convention...”

“He interrupted me, and gave me a shot right in the mouth with his fist saying “One thing you are going to learn Lieutenant . The Peoples republic of China is not a signatory to the Geneva convention. To us that does not apply.”

I said “Ohh.. But you are required to give me medical treatment . . .”

“You were warned !” Crack... another punch in the mouth”

“I know now!” I said as I was spitting blood all over the place. He knew that I now understood.

“I had a bloody nose, and knew I would have to forget any Geneva convention with this guy. I’m not going to get any medical attention..I’m gonna need more”

We were laughing with one another about this, but at the time I’m sure it wasn’t funny.

“I didn’t say another word to him. I just took off my fatigue jacket and my T-shirt; ripped open my pants and pulled my boots down a little and used my T-shirt to make a big bandage. He stood there watching me make my own bandages and finally walked away.”

After a short pause my friend instructed me:

“As you know Ed, If you’re going to get any information out of a Prisoner of War, the idea is to get it now - - before it gets too old, and it’s no good anymore. I knew that. All I had to do was hold out for four or five days. There was nothing I had that would be any good to them after that. My unit would obviously look for my body, and when they didn’t find it they would assume I was a prisoner. They wouldn’t know if I was alive or dead though. Then they would worry about moving critical gun positions. They would move them to alternate sights, just in case. “

“In any event , after about five or six days, I don’t recall, they start moving me back”

“How we going ?”

“Walk”

“I can’t walk on this leg. Look at it.”

He gave me a pole, to use like a crutch

“Walk !”

“I can’t walk.”

He says “you want to see how you can walk. I’ll show you” he pulled out a 45 and put it about six inches from my forehead and said “you wanna walk or you wanna stay?”

“I walked. No question about it. I learned how to walk in a hurry with that leg. I found some other sticks and made a splint to put on it. That helped me a lot ..gave me some stability.”

“They moved us about 75 miles north on foot, stopping at night. There were four

other Americans, and when we got to the point where they were putting us on trucks , I saw my platoon sergeant. He and my radioman were both captured.. So they had three of us. The others were all killed. He had a piece of shrapnel...I'm not shittin ya. It had to be two and a half to three inches long about the size and length of my little finger . Jagged like. Sticking out of a muscle in his neck. It was sticking up and he said to me: "Man! can you get that out of my neck?"

He had been like that all this time and nobody had pulled it out for him.

I said "You want me to pull that out?"

"Somebody's gotta do it"

"I know...hold on..."

I grabbed it and yanked it right out

He yelled and screamed then he said "Booooooy! does that feel good"

"It bled a lot but finally stopped and I gave the piece to him. "That's a souvenir.. Keep it....good for a purple heart." He was one tough guy."

"They moved us north near the Yalu river. They had regular numbered prison camps, but I never went to any of those. I went to an intermediate camp that they had set up for reactionaries. I was a reactionary. I gave em a lot of trouble. Tried to escape and gave them a lot of grief all along the way. In the reactionary camp we were supposed to get further training and indoctrination. - - Ya know..they were going to teach us the way to be... Then we even got into more trouble. Cause then you meet other people like you! We banned together--then it was even worse..."

"The Chinese aren't stupid people and I couldn't understand their thinking on this because when you get people who are of that mind-set, you separate them from everybody else. You don't put a whole crew of them together. It don't make sense. They thought they could better control you that way. They put a Scotsman , a Canadian and an Australian...all English speaking people. . and me all together..We were the four officers. "

Now tell me something.. Aren't you going to be even more reactionary to show how tough you are as an American or an Aussie or a Canadian or Scottie...huh? Are you gonna be a whuuus in front of these other people? "No way in hell!"

(Note: Years later, after Pat became a high school teacher teaching Viet Nameese and Chinese history, he was offered a six month exchange teaching job in China. He accepted and went alone. Rita wanted no part of it. Pat loved it and told me many stories about how much he thought of the Chinese people... even though some of them had treated him very badly.)

"We did do that and you know what? We brought more grief on ourselves"

“We got more grief... we used to get pounded so much for that... They hit us with sticks , fists, rifle butts or whatever they found handy.”

(Another long and thoughtful pause before continuing... he remembered it all in detail)

I got a rifle butt in the face ... this whole thing up here (pointing to his right cheek) was fractured and never healed. That’s why I lost all my teeth up here years later cause all that bone up there never healed properly it was crushed, and then it started decaying. When I had all that surgery on my face years later, they took half the bone out of there and had to rebuild my lower jaw with plastic.”

“Stayed in that camp for four months.——...four months!”.

“I tried to escape from there. It was easy. I just planned it out...by myself..I didn’t want to tell anybody I was going. Unlike the movies we did not have an escape committee which you should have. In organized camps you do that, but we didn’t in that camp.”

“Where we were located there was this rather handsome hill...a little mountain.. And my plan was to slip out at night...go up to the top of the mountain and hide during the day. It was a beautiful plan. They would know I was gone..but .they wouldn’t bother looking for one person. The plan was to hide during the day. Travel at night, and head for the ocean. I was gonna see if I couldn’t find some sort of boat or something and then follow the coastline south. Made sense. That way I could avoid all kinds of troop movements and everything “

“I didn’t know this, but the freakin’ little guard saw me and reported me.”

“Remember with the condition of my leg, I couldn’t walk very good. It took me all night to get up there. I finally got to the top of the mountain, and was looking for a place to hide, and there sat the God damned camp commander in his jeep waiting for me.!”.

“That sumbitch made me walk back down the hill... wouldn’t even give me a ride”

“When we got back down, he put me in solitary. . a 4x4x4 hole in the ground. . .

“30 days...boy was that a bitch! It was hot... 30 straight days, and I wasn’t even allowed out to go to the bathroom..had to do everything in there...Eat sleep and everything.”

He paused for a long time then, speaking about the camp commander said.

“He really was a master at his craft. Regular Chinese army. . spoke perfect English. He should - he was a graduate of the University of Oregon class of 49”

When asked how they knew when the war ended, my friend continued.

“We knew the war was over because there were no longer any U.S. aircraft flying

overhead. No more Air Force. No more jets. No more air raid alarms. The beatings stopped and we started getting better food. Before this the main meal was basically a bowl of rice. About as much as you could hold with your hands cupped, and a cup of hot water. They always boiled the water. Thank God! and a bowl of what we used to call seaweed soup...some sort of a green vegetable in a very weak watery broth...no tea or anything else... every now and again we had a small sliver of meat that they said was pork or chicken.. Never could figure out which it was.”

“That’s how we knew the war was over. There were no more aircraft. So we knew the war was over. Our treatment got better. They let us play volley ball . And we were getting lunch too. In fact even during the last week or so they were giving us some of this steamed bread that the Chinese make. That was to try to get some weight on us apparently. And then we were loaded on trucks and went down to Panmunjom.”

“The interrogator in the truck was very frustrated with us... with me particularly. He had tried to break me and hadn’t succeeded. We got there and sat on top of this hill and waited there for repatriation. So many Americans for so many Chinese. We had over 100,000 Chinese prisoners and they had about 3,700 Americans. In any event we’re sitting there waiting. Waiting our turn. I believe it was two days before the end of the exchange when my group got called to go.“

“Let me tell you something... about psychological warfare... the Chinese were masters at this. At brain washing. See if you can picture this in your mind’s eye.”

“We are on this hill in this camp with the Chinese and you see this long sloping road going down the hill, and you see this huge American flag flying down there and every day you watch these trucks going down there. It’s only a mile away. . right? Every day you watch that. Now it’s your turn, and you get on this truck and start to go down and man! We knew we were going home. What a feeling! We get down to the bottom of the hill and the freakin truck made a right turn and instead of going south we started heading north. Man! We panicked and right away I said “Whoa! Whoa! Commander. What are you doing?”

He said “I hate to tell you, but I was just informed you’re going back to be tried as war criminals.”

“All the time he had us he could not break us, and I sat down in the truck and I started to cry.”

“After all this and I’m not going and I sobbed ... crying .broken... “

“That son of a bitch just circled that hill then took us down. When we got off the truck, he was standing there and he said “You know, I told you I’d break you” and he did.

“God! That bothered me for a long time; that he got me. He got me on that. He did get me on that. In fact on the ship coming home I told the psychiatrist about that”

He said “He didn’t get you.”

I said “Nnaaw he got me.”

“No he didn’t...you won”

“He got me! Period! End of story I don’t want to talk about it any more ...”

Years later my friend would serve in Panama, two tours in Viet Nam and finally as recruiting officer in his home state in Philadelphia. There, he was hit in the face with a baseball bat by someone while on a visit in North Philadelphia. He lost all of his teeth. Agent Orange also took its toll in Viet Nam. My Green Beret Lieutenant Colonel friend was on the 100% disabled list. There are no military facilities near his home so he had to use civilian doctors. His second career was that of a high school history teacher. He was teaching the history of China and Viet Nam. He even went to China on a six month teacher exchange program.

A few years ago, during the last Memorial Day holidays, he was asked by his daughters who were both teachers, to speak to a third grade class and show them some of his medals then tell them the meaning of Memorial day. The teachers were so impressed that he was asked to repeat his performance with several other classes. This year was his third year.

Pat was 74 when he passed away. He was the epitome of a forgotten American Hero. One of the many we owe our freedom to.

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I got a phone call from a retired sergeant who was in Pat’s company who raved about Pat saying he was the finest officer he had ever served with. He asked for a copy of this tribute. This was my response to him.

Memo to Doc Brown: You may use this in whatever local newspapers you like as long as they credit me as the author since it is copyrighted. I talked to Rita on 5/16/2005 and read her your letter. She said she would love to talk to you since she knew very little about what happened to Pat. She did write to the Company commander.. A different one apparently.. Who answered but he knew little.

Rita too has since passed away and now only the daughters and sons –who live in a different state --remain. We no longer hear from any of them

This information is current as of Veterans day 2012.

Edgar E. DeLong, LCDR USN RET

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John Edwards

Jan 31, 2013

to me

Tom this gentleman sent this to me today, feel free to share. DeLong told me it was ok to pass on.

John T. (Sonny) Edwards

Begin forwarded message:

From: Ed DeLong <eddelong@verizon.net>
Date: January 31, 2013 9:44:34 AM EST
To: kvetedwards@yahoo.com
Subject: Korean tribute
Reply-To: eddelong@verizon.net

Dear Mr Edwards>

I am Ed DeLong, a WWII veteran and 26 year navy veteran of all those other wars. and although I was in the navy on board ships during the Korean war and legally am a Korean Vet, I did not really serve in that area. I did however have a good friend, a Green Beret Lt Col who came up thru the ranks who died from loads of injuries during his army career. Patsy Milantoni lived in Pennsylvania and his wife and mine were good friends so we became good friends having first met in Germany during the occupation. Pat would never talk bout his time as a prisoner in Korea but one day when his wife and mine were out shopping and Pat was slurping down vodka to keep his pain down and we were making gnocchis over his kitchen table I got him to talk to me about it and I recorded the talk. After he died I gave the recording to his wife and have attached the written version of it to this email. It has been published in several magazines and newspapers and is quite moving I thought. You might have a use for it in one of your newsletters some time. You have my permission to use it as you see fit.

Ed DeLong, LCDR USN (RET), phone: 757-481-0121, 1500 Hidden Cove, Virginia Beach, VA,23454-1418