

## The Honored Dead

Richard I. Lauf

The plot of the movie, *Casablanca*, really gets underway when we learn that two German couriers were murdered for the letters of transit they were carrying. The small change hoodlum, Signor Ugarte, tells Rick Blaine, the world-weary owner of Rick's Cafe, "Too bad about those two German couriers, wasn't it?" Rick answers, "They got a lucky break. Yesterday they were just two German clerks. Today they're the honored dead." Ugarte observes, "You are a very cynical person, Rick," and indeed we conclude that his term of "honored dead" was meant completely cynically.

Nineteen centuries before *Casablanca*, the Roman poet Horace penned the line "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*" (It is sweet and becoming to die for one's country.) Unlike Rick Blaine, he meant it! Sentiments like Horace's are easy to find whether in literature, movies or on monuments. In our own Memorial Hall, if you look at the virtues inscribed in gilt lettering over the stage, among the virtues you will find "Martyrdom." With Memorial Day upon us, it seems becoming for us to ask what we should make of all this.

Let me begin by returning to a night in February or March, 1970 at a Ponderosa Steakhouse right out the gate from Fort Benning. Our Infantry Officer class had spent the previous five days on a field exercise to the accompaniment of a cold, often freezing Georgia rain. We got back to post Saturday afternoon, cleaned and stowed our equipment, took hot showers and headed out to get the largest steaks on offer. The dinner at Ponderosa included ten of us. The jukebox was playing Brook Benton's hit, *A Rainy Night in Georgia*, with some regularity and it was easy for us to identify with rainy nights in Georgia. To this day, when I hear that song, tears run down my face as I recall that night and the fact that within little more than a year, two of the ten at that dinner were dead. Let me recount those two.

Steve Thormodsgard (his given name was Arvid) was a lieutenant from a very small town in South Dakota. He kept you laughing with his humor, albeit with a

sometimes dark edge to the humor. After Infantry School he served at Fort Carson, CO along with another member of our class, Marty Meyer. As on every post in those days, the senior sergeants all had two or three Vietnam tours behind them and loved to rag on the new lieutenants about to serve their tour there. Steve would put the sergeants up to asking Marty, "Say, sir, can I have all your left boots? Lt. Thormodsgard says you won't need them when you get done with your Vietnam tour!" "Can I have all your right gloves? Lt. Thormodsgard says you won't be needing them when you get home." Now at a time when casualties were high, there was plenty of this dark humor bandied about, but Steve was a master.

Steve got to Viet Nam on December 23, 1970, two weeks after I had arrived. Yes, December 23 - some Christmas present from Uncle Sam. He served in the same division as me - the Americal in Quang Ngai province. He died on March 4, 1971, when hit by small arms fire. Given that probably three weeks at least would have elapsed between his arrival in country and his deployment to an infantry platoon in the field, I estimate he survived something less than two months in the field.

Shortly after I joined P&G in Green Bay in January of 1972, we held the annual management dinner featuring a speech from some Cincinnati big-wig. We all had name tags and at the break between dinner and the speech, I noticed another recent hire standing there with the name Thormodsgard, admittedly an unusual name. Perhaps rashly, certainly without fully considering the possible answer, and no doubt neglectful of the appropriateness of the occasion, I asked if he was related to Steve Thormodsgard. He said, "Yes, he is, was, is my brother." I said I went to Infantry School with him and added some poorly stated sympathy. The encounter shook us both. Steve was not "just some American lieutenant" to paraphrase Casablanca: not to his brother, not to his family, not to me.

In the Infantry School we lined up in our training company's formation alphabetically. Once so organized on the first day, the formation order persisted for all the months of training. Many of the training exercises occurred in pairs. The order of formation determined who paired with whom. On overnight field exercises, you spent the night with the same comrade again and again. The

Roman army even had a special word for this - your *contubernalis* - the guy you shared your tent with.

My *contubernalis* was Paul McKenzie. He had grown up in North Carolina. He was, as I recall, the only son, perhaps the only child, in his family. He was also the first person in his family since forever to graduate from college. He occasionally chuckled that his parents probably annoyed all their friends and neighbors by rehearsing his college degree in a milieu where that was the exception. Annoying maybe, but one cannot help but realize the enormous and justifiable pride his parents took in his accomplishment.

Compared to Steve he presented a more subdued demeanor. He did not keep the gang amused on breaks or off-hours. He grumbled at some of our discomforts of training, but not as vehemently as many of us. He was steady and a great partner for such events as night map and compass courses. To succeed on the course, you had to find numbered signs in the forest in pitch black cloud covered nights. The course came complete with Georgia mud, ample wait-a-minute vines, and forest litter that ensured everyone took several tumbles in the mud before finding the end point of the course a couple of kilometers away. On bivouac, we would chat at length before retiring. You couldn't ask for a better partner for the various miseries infantry training inflicts.

Paul arrived in Viet Nam on January 3, 1971. While serving with the 101st Division in Thua Thien province on April 15 he was killed when hit with small arms fire.

On August 11, 1971 I was also hit with small arms fire while serving, like Steve, with the Americal Division in Quang Ngai province. I came within a hair's breadth of death myself, but I lived. I have had forty eight years that Steve and Paul didn't get. I have spent those years with the love of my life, Susan. I contributed to the economy - the modest asset base that funds our retirement living says that so far I contributed more than I consumed. I think I have had a good influence on younger people's careers, sometimes perhaps even a sizeable one, as a mentor and teacher. I have seen my younger siblings grow up. I have been a part of my

nieces' lives as they grew up. I have helped some non-profits in town. I have seen a lot of operas.

None of this is particularly noteworthy - it is what we call Life. When the history of the western world is written, I won't merit even a footnote. But, for forty eight years I have both contributed to life and enjoyed that life. Who knows what Steve and Paul would have accomplished? We'll never have a chance to learn, but we can safely say the world is all the poorer for their lost years. Clearly they and their families are poorer for their loss. Not long ago while a niece visited, we were recounting family stories. Afterwards, Susan pointed out that I have been a part of their lives, but had I not been here I would now be to them only a handful of fading childhood stories recounted by my brothers and sisters.

Rick Blaine was wrong - I am the one that got the lucky break!

Where does this leave us? The two comrades I have sketched were much more than "just two American lieutenants." They were young men with their entire lives ahead of them. And yet, memories do fade. As I write this paper, I realize how many details of those two lost lives I have forgotten. Paul in particular I knew very well. Yet without something to hold onto, and as life intrudes, as time passes, the memories and details fade. That is the tragedy of it all. For families the loss is utterly irreplaceable even across many, many years. Among our Club's archives is Peter Brigg's very moving paper memorializing his brother, lost in World War II, a full generation before the time I describe. No passage of time can fully eliminate the enduring sense of loss for the families.

All this holds true for the almost 58,000 other names etched on the black granite of the Vietnam wall. Each had a story; each had a family; each had a life to live. As to "the honored dead," each name on that wall does indeed deserve some measure of honor. They did what they saw as their duty. They responded to their country's call, whether historians conclude that call was misplaced or not. Each knew they were risking everything. Some went proudly, even enthusiastically; some went grudgingly, heels dragging, as the draft decided for them that they would go - but go they did.

At the time the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall was built, many people argued that it failed to convey proper honor. When compared to many of the monuments to the dead in our country, it is indeed very subdued. Think of the Marine Memorial Statue depicting raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. Now that is heroic - "the honored dead" writ large. But as we consider that statue, let's also remember that the photographer who took the underlying photo was killed on Iwo Jima shortly afterwards and his body never recovered. Of the six Marines in the statue, three were killed over the next few days. These two memorials bracket our dilemma in honoring the war dead. By all means, let's remember the sacrifices of those who died. Just as importantly, however, let's not overly romanticize or glorify the horrific human costs.

Perhaps Rick Blain's cynical irony is in fact the best way to consider the tensions we face as we remember the casualties of war. As the years pass, I increasingly identify with the British war poet, Wilfred Owen. His poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* gives his sharp retort to Horace. He tells of the horrific death of a comrade who proved a few seconds too slow getting his gas mask on. The poem ends bitterly with the lines "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori."

### References:

- Casablanca script can be found at <http://www.vincasa.com/casabla.pdf>
- Brook Benton. A Rainy Night in Georgia. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDRbF80NKDU>. If you look at comments posted here, you will find several stories from people who trained at Fort Benning recounting their reactions to this music.
- <http://virtualwall.org/dt/ThormodsgardAP01a.htm>
- <http://virtualwall.org/dm/MckenziePx01a.htm>
- Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. *contubernalis*.
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising\\_the\\_Flag\\_on\\_Iwo\\_Jima](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_the_Flag_on_Iwo_Jima)
- Owen, Wilfred. Dulce et Decorum Est. (In Ward, Candace. *World War One British Poets*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1997.)

Arvid Palmer Thormodsgard

First Lieutenant  
D CO, 1ST BN, 6TH INFANTRY, 198TH INFANTRY BDE,  
AMERICAN DIV, USARV  
Army of the United States

[Alcester, South Dakota](#)

March 07, 1947 to March 04, 1971

[ARVID P THORMODSGARD](#) is on the Wall at [Panel W4, Line 22](#)



Paul Mc Kenzie

First Lieutenant

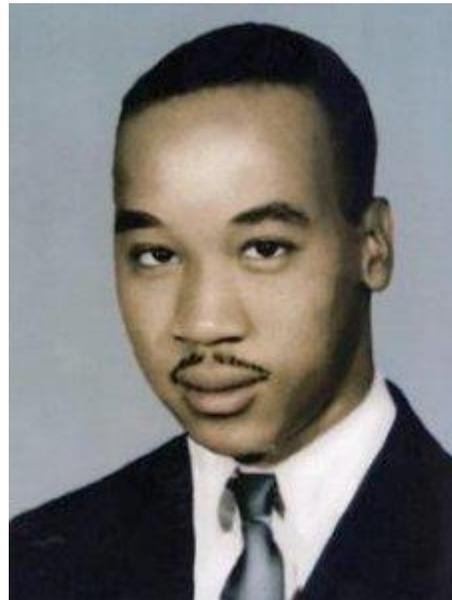
D CO, 2ND BN, 501ST INFANTRY, 101ST ABN DIV, USARV

Army of the United States

[Asheville, North Carolina](#)

June 30, 1947 to April 15, 1971

[PAUL Mc KENZIE](#) is on the Wall at [Panel W4, Line 126](#)



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