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“The Two Faces of Tony,” By George Larrimore



Anthony Handley, also known as Tony Fuller, at Camp Pendleton, Calif. in July 1967.

My letter to Ruth Fuller arrived in her mailbox on Feb. 8, 1982. By coincidence, it was exactly 14 years after her son Tony was killed at Khe Sanh, in South Vietnam. "Was surprised to hear from one of Tony's friends after so many years," she wrote back. Then, a few lines later, she pressed the pen hard to the paper: "God! I hated that war."

Tony and I met in Marine Corps training at Camp Pendleton, Calif., in May 1967. We were posted at a dusty outpost on that vast base called Las Pulgas, where we were undergoing further training before shipping out to Vietnam in July. We thought of it as a kind of California summer vacation and, with Vietnam looming, we were glad to get it. Tony was a little older and worldly, a poker player. He had been to college, had belonged to a fraternity and he exuded confidence, which I did not. So my buddy Frank Klemm and I became Tony's posse. Tony, we also learned, was quick to stand his ground and would not back off from a confrontation.

In the Marine Corps, we knew Tony as Anthony William Handley. But in his hometown of Hot Springs, Ark., he was Tony Fuller. One high school friend recalled a bright, confident, even cocky teenager who "knew what he wanted and knew where he was going." But Tony had a side that was hard to know. Jody Hart, who dated him during senior year, recalled a terrifying high-speed ride in his old sports car. "Tony had a James Dean quality," she said.

Mary Jo Rodgers was Tony's first girlfriend. They were king and queen of their junior high school. Mary Jo's date to the senior prom, for the Class of 1964, was another Hot Springs boy with a lot of promise: William Jefferson Clinton. Years later, Tony's stepfather, Rex Fuller, introduced himself to Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, at a Hot Springs restaurant. According to Rex, the governor smiled and said, "Tony and I used to chase the same skirts in high school." Bill Clinton and Tony Fuller were never close friends. "Tony had his gang from the lake, Bill had his gang from town," Rex once told me. They would all gather at the Fullers' house on Lake Hamilton for water-skiing, hot dogs and Cokes and talk about the future. But Bill and Tony did share this: Each had lost his biological father when he was very young. In Tony's case, he became two people – Tony Fuller at home, Anthony William Handley in Vietnam.

At Camp Butler in Okinawa, as we waited for our assignments, we went to the enlisted men's club to drink beer and listen to the jukebox. Frank and I were still full of boot-camp bravado. We were going to be grunts and we bragged that we could face danger and death and come home heroes.

Tony, for all his daring at home, would hear none of it. He warned us, "Don't do anything stupid, don't volunteer for anything." This next sounds cliché as I write it

but I can still see Tony saying it, sitting directly across from me at a table cluttered with beer bottles: "You know we're not all going to come back."

"Just a note so you won't worry," Tony wrote in a reassuring letter to his parents on Nov. 3, 1967. It was full of news he had heard from college and hometown friends. Then, like an afterthought, there is this: "I got the Purple Heart, but don't worry." A scratch, he called it, from shrapnel. Patched up with one stitch and a bandage. Maybe Tony thought he could make it sound like a little boy's scuffed knee to his mother back home.

At other times his sparse prose revealed fear and anger. On Jan. 3, 1968, one month and five days before he was killed, Tony wrote: "It's raining and pretty chilly. Preparing to move," returning to the field, "living in holes covered with sandbags." Then, "I sent my sea bag and a box home."

Frank was at Con Thien when he found out about Tony. He picked up a muddy copy of Stars and Stripes that someone had tossed aside on the road and turned first, as we all did, to the page with the list of K.I.A.s.

Tony was a radio operator with the First Battalion, Ninth Marines. His job was to call in artillery and air strikes and medical evacuation helicopters. The battalion ("One-Nine" in Marine shorthand) was known as the Walking Dead decades before a television series borrowed that hard-earned name. One-Nine always seemed to get caught in some of the worst fighting of the war.

At the start of the Tet offensive, in late January 1968, the battalion was choppered in to help defend the besieged Khe Sanh combat base. The first platoon of Alpha Company, One-Nine, was assigned to a tiny hilltop outpost that the North Vietnamese would have to get past in order to attack Khe Sanh. In Marine lore it's called Hill 64 because 64 Marines defended it.

At 4:15 on the morning of Feb. 8, the Marines on Hill 64 were attacked by a North Vietnamese Army force five times their size. In a brutal fight that lasted hours the Marines finally drove the North Vietnamese off the hill. Twenty-seven Marines were killed, 24 more wounded. Tony was killed by a grenade while manning his radio inside a bunker. He was 21 years old.

I visited Ruth Fuller in Hot Springs last April. Rex died a few years ago, but Ruth is still spry and feisty at 93. There are photographs of Tony, some in his uniform, all around her small, neat house. She still refers to Tony, her only child, in the present tense.

Over the years I had sent Ruth photographs of my sons Evan and Alex, which she brought out during my visit. When they were young their mother took the boys to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and in one picture they are looking at the camera

while touching Tony's name on the black marble.

Frank Klemm's name is not on the wall although, perhaps, it should be, along with a lot of others. He died after a painful struggle with bone cancer caused by exposure to Agent Orange.

In 1994, Frank and I, along with his oldest son, Justin, met in Washington to visit the memorial. Frank was a courageous and sensitive man and admitted that he had not been to the wall before because the feelings were still too strong. After dinner that night Frank and I went back, just the two of us. It was cold and clear and in the dark we listened to the quiet murmurs of other visitors.

"There's a thousand Tonys out there," Frank said, reading Tony's name with his fingers.

George Larrimore is a Vietnam War veteran.

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