

## A True Hero

David Van Kavelaar

Because of the nation's mishandling of returning Vietnam veterans a half century ago, thankfully America saw the errors of her ways and, now, we blush with pride for our veterans. My perspective on returning home in 1970, after being wounded, was that the America I left in March of '69 had morphed into a hostile environment for returning veterans as they were verbally abused and TV cop drama shows painted us as heroin addicted crazies perching on rooftops clad in a military field jacket and sniping at innocent pedestrians below with a high powered weapon. It was a tragic portrayal of some great men. (I was in a ground forces regiment; no women were involved in our operations). We were a proud bunch, but the slashes and cuts of voiced assaults against us played negatively on our collective psyche. But that ship has sailed and, over fifty years, most of us have adjusted and, lo and behold, we are all heroes now. Yep, heroes one and all. The treatment of veterans has drastically improved since the Vietnam days and the pendulum has swung from the extreme of neglect and indifference toward vets to a caring, all embracing citizenry toward military personnel. I am very happy and proud of the men and women serving, or who have served, in our military but the nation has assigned the term "hero" to all. As for me, I respectfully decline that title. An explanation of why now follows.

No way to sugar coat this, folks. The dangers and perilous operations of Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment (the most decorated USMC regiment in RVN) of the 1<sup>st</sup> MARDIV will never be forgotten by me. We were all infantry so things could get pretty nasty very quickly in the bush. When these situations did occur, you could not predict someone's reactions to dangerous encounters. Let me tell you about my brother Oscar. He was my brother because we were both 0311's, infantrymen, grunts in the Corps. Oscar Austin was a Texas born black kid who attended schools in Phoenix and, after his high school graduation, enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in '68. After his boot camp and infantry training, Brother Oscar was assigned to Echo 2/7, 1<sup>st</sup> MARDIV (soon to be my unit) as an assistant machine gunner. The last day of Brother Oscar's life was on February 23, 1969; his last minutes on Earth are summarized below.

*"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life and beyond the call of duty while serving as an Assistant Machine Gunner with Echo Company, Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment of the First Marine Division in connection with operations against enemy forces in the Republic of Viet Nam. During the early morning hours of February 23, 1969, Private First Class Austin's observation post was subjected to a fierce ground attack by a large North Vietnamese Army force supported by a heavy volume of hand grenades, satchel charges, and small arms fire. Observing that one of his wounded companions had fallen unconscious in a position dangerously exposed to the hostile fire, PFC Austin unhesitatingly left the relative security of his fighting hole\* and, with complete disregard of his own safety, raced across the fire swept terrain to assist the marine to a covered location. As he neared the casualty, he observed an enemy grenade land nearby and, reacting instantly, leaped between the injured marine and the lethal object, absorbing the effect of its detonation. As he ignored his painful injury and turned to observe the wounded man, he saw an NVA soldier aiming a weapon at his unconscious companion. With full knowledge of the probable consequences and thinking only to protect the marine, PFC Austin resolutely threw himself between the casualty and the hostile soldier and, in so doing, was mortally wounded. PFC Austin's indomitable courage, inspiring initiation, and selfless devotion to duty upheld the highest tradition of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country." Richard M. Nixon*

With this declaration, he was posthumously awarded this nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor. Private First Class Austin's actions, to me, reflected the ultimate definition of heroism. His sacrificing of his

own life speaks volumes of his character and love for his wounded brother. In recognition of his heroism, the U.S. Navy has subsequently christened an Arleigh Burke class destroyer, the USS Oscar Austin, in honor of this brave Medal of Honor and Purple Heart recipient. PFC Austin was a hero who protected a wounded marine and died doing it. I believe the term "hero" should not be awarded to all like a participation trophy. As stated earlier, I truly appreciate the intention but humbly decline that title as, to me, it is not applicable to all. I prefer not to encroach into that golden light that rightfully shines brightly upon those true heroes. Me? It was a privilege to serve this nation and an honor to be a lance corporal infantryman in the United States Marine Corps; just call me a patriot. That'll be just fine!

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