

Heroes I Have Known (Part 1)

On Memorial Day, I reflected on the friends I have known who lost their lives while serving in the uniform of our country. It is only natural for those of us who returned safely from a combat zone having lost friends to experience varying degrees of remorse. We do not know why some suffer fatal wounds and others survive.

On this Memorial Day I recall Heroes who looked death in the eye and lived to receive the Nation's highest honor: The Medal of Honor.

I hired Freeman V. Horner during the mid 1970's as a U.S. Army Civilian at Ft. Lee, Virginia. He was a quiet, easygoing middle-aged man who worked well with others on a staff of about 35 civilians with a military boss. A few days after he reported for duty he presented me with a ball point pen with the Medal of Honor seal and his name engraved on it. That was when I first learned he was a true hero. I treasure that gift to this day.

Freeman was raised by his grandparents because his mother was unable to take care of him. When his grandmother died, neighbors helped his grandfather with the raising. He joined the army shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Staff Sergeant Horner was shipped to England with the 119th Infantry in the spring of 1944 to train for the invasion of Europe. He landed at Normandy the week after D-Day. His unit fought through France, Belgium, and Holland on its way to Germany.

On November 16, 1944, his platoon was moving forward through an open field near Wurselen, Germany, when it ran into a hornet's nest of German machine – gun fire. The platoon was pinned down in a flat, exposed area, as artillery shells began causing serious casualties.

Realizing that his men would be killed if they stayed where they were, Horner jumped up and charged the Germans carrying a heavy load of ammunition, several grenades, and a Tommy gun he had taken off a dead American tank driver. As he rushed into concentrated fire coming from two gun emplacements in a farmhouse, he was shot at from the side by a third gun that had been silent until then. He turned toward it and, firing the Tommy gun, killed the German gunners.

He hunched down and ran zigzagging toward the two remaining machine gun nests in the farmhouse.

Both guns seemed to have him in their sights, but neither was able to hit him. Unable to stop his advance, the Germans abandoned their machine guns and ran to the basement of the house as Horner smashed through the front door. He threw two grenades down the stairs and called for them to surrender. One German was killed and the four others came out of the cellar with their hands in the air.

Horner's unit continued to advance into Germany and was approaching Berlin when the war ended.

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Freeman Horner was back home in Pennsylvania in October 1945 when the call came informing him that he was to receive the Medal of Honor.
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President Truman presented the award October 12, 1945. Truman reportedly said to all Medal of Honor winners that he had rather have the Medal of Honor than be President. Horner said he kept quiet, but the thought occurred to him: "I'd rather be President."

Freeman Horner attended the ceremony when I retired and sometime after that reportedly suffered a light stroke and required a wheel chair. Freeman was residing in Georgia in 2003 and was featured along with 234 other living Medal of Honor recipients, in a publication of the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation titled, Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the Call of Duty.

Next: Lewis L. Millette, the "court martialled hero" that ordered his troops to "fix bayonets" and charge the Chinese Army.