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WAR *and*  
MORAL INJURY  
A Reader

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MICHAEL PUTZEL

## Survivors' Guilt and Recompense

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On August 4, 2005, Ricky Miller sat up all night writing a long email to the officers who had led him in Vietnam.

“Thirty-five years ago today I flew into a place called Three Rivers,” he began, as he set out to describe an incident that would dog him probably for the rest of his life.<sup>1</sup> Miller was the crew chief aboard Gunky, a battered black Huey helicopter he regarded as his personal pet. He recounted a mission to extract a reconnaissance team from his unit’s “Blues” platoon, a small, quick-reaction infantry force. Miller and the Blues were part of C Troop, 2/17 Cavalry, made up mostly of flight crews for scout, gunship, and transport helicopters flying armed reconnaissance for the 101st Airborne Division. They called themselves the Condors.

The grunts on the ground that day were surrounded by North Vietnamese regulars in the notoriously hostile jungle valley called the A Shau. The enemy used the valley as a supply route from the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos through the mountains to the populous coastal plains of South Vietnam. They fought to protect that lifeline throughout the war.

The American soldiers, three of them already severely wounded, were under attack from all sides. The first two Hueys got in and out without serious

1. Email message from Former Specialist 5 Ricky Miller to Major General (Ret.) Benjamin L. Harrison, Major (Ret.) James T. Newman, Major (Ret.) Malcolm Jones, and former C Troop Warrant Officer scout pilot Steve Karschner, August 5, 2005, used by permission.

damage and extracted most of the team, but the third took several hits from small arms and .51-caliber heavy machine guns. Gunky was number four, the last ship in. Miller saw enemy soldiers climbing the hillside toward the small clearing where Gunky's pilot was trying to land. The Huey's machine guns rattled off streams of fire left and right to buy the Blues precious moments to reach the aircraft as it set down.

Miller saw that one of three Americans shooting back at the North Vietnamese was only a few feet from the aircraft but was blinded by blood covering his face and couldn't see to aim his rifle.

The crew chief abandoned his machine gun, grabbed a pistol, and jumped off his helicopter to help pull people aboard. He recognized the closest of the wounded as Private First Class Ed Long, who had been hit back and front by mortar shells and was crawling toward the ship, feeling for the skids with outstretched arms. Miller scooped him up with one arm and boosted him onto the floor of the chopper. He turned and saw another familiar soldier from the Blues platoon and ran toward him, zigzagging to dodge enemy fire. It was Larry Bandon, a short, stocky, blond corporal. Miller dragged him toward Gunky and hoisted him aboard. Banton landed on top of Long, who told Miller years later he thought it was a dead body that fell on him. At the edge of the landing zone, perhaps thirty yards away, Miller saw the unit's radioman struggling to pick up another fallen soldier. He ran through the incoming fire to help and glanced over his shoulder to see enemy soldiers firing their AK-47 assault rifles in his direction. When he reached the wounded soldier, he looked down and recognized twenty-two-year-old Paul A. Johnson, the acting platoon sergeant and Miller's best friend.

"He had been hit directly in his back, and there was a hole so big that you could see all of his insides—his lungs, everything," Miller wrote. He shouted at the radioman to run for the chopper, saying he would carry Johnson. "From then on my world went quiet. . . . I got down on my knees, held Paul up. He opened his eyes but didn't say anything but gave me a big grin. . . . I tried to keep the tears down as much as I could as I didn't want Paul to think he was that badly wounded. It was hard though. . . . I told him I was going to carry him back and for him to just try and relax so the bleeding would slow down. Paul was a pale white. . . . I stumbled one foot in front of the other trying to keep my wobbly knees locked in place so as not to fall down with Paul on my back. All I could think of was, 'Why, God? Why my friend? Why did you get me to come here today?'"

He remembered being knocked down by the concussion of a mortar round exploding nearby, getting up, and going on, then being knocked down again. As he approached the helicopter, he could see the co-pilot, Warrant

Officer Mark "Mighty Mouth" Minear, watching him from the cockpit. He stumbled and went down again, exhausted. He thought he would die there with his friend and started to signal Minear to take off without them. Then he heard Sergeant Johnson speak, just enough to tell him to save himself and leave Johnson behind.

"My back was killing me, and I could feel my heart beating so hard that I could feel my heart hitting my chicken plate" body armor, Miller's email recounted. "I remember back in high school when I ran the five-mile, I think it was, the taste I would get in my mouth about three-fourths of the way through the run. I had that taste in my mouth now, and I knew then I was pushing myself to my fullest."

Eventually, they reached the chopper, boosted Johnson's limp body aboard, and Miller told the aircraft commander—too soon—to take off. The ship shot upward, and Miller just managed to grab the skid with one arm to keep from being left behind. With the aircraft rising out of the trees, he swung his body over the skid, reached for the barrel of the mounted machine gun, and grabbed a solid metal canister on the Huey's floor. He knew it held two thousand rounds of ammunition for the M-60 machine gun and wasn't going anywhere. Miller pulled himself on board as Gunky headed for Phu Bai and the Army's 85th Evacuation Hospital.

He opened the craft's first-aid kit, took out a couple rolls of gauze, and stuck them in Johnson's gaping wound without bothering to unwrap them first. The sergeant opened his eyes, motioned for Miller to bend toward him, "and he told me to make sure that his mom and dad and brothers and sisters knew that he loved them all and he had thought of them in his last moments. I told him to shut up. 'You're not going to die on me.'"

Gunky was flying so fast the whole aircraft began to shake as the crew raced its cargo of wounded to the hospital.

"Paul again woke up and pulled my head down again. 'Promise me, Rick, that you will tell my family I loved them and I thought of them. . . .' I told him I would but that he could tell them himself because he wasn't going to die now. . . ." Miller wrote. Tears swelled in the crew chief's eyes, and he pulled the dark sun visor on his flight helmet down to hide his face from his friend.

"I stroked his hair, tried to clean up his face somewhat," and in minutes the helicopter landed at 85th Evac. Johnson clutched Miller's hand as the orderlies loaded him onto a gurney, and as Miller freed his grip, the sergeant told him, "Bye, my friend. We were the best, weren't we?"

The crew chief's Army green flight suit was so soaked in blood that medics tried to put him on a gurney, too, but he pulled away and sent them

after the other wounded. Johnson died a couple of hours later on the operating table.<sup>2</sup>

Minear told Miller afterward that he would put the crew chief in for a Medal of Honor for the heroics he had shown during the rescue mission, but the paperwork never got completed. Twenty-five days later, on August 29, Minear, who had been promoted to aircraft commander in the interim, was flying a mission to insert a team of five Rangers into the jungle not far from where the earlier incident had occurred. The North Vietnamese were waiting for them, and as the Huey set down, a blast of fire from a .51-caliber machine gun ripped through the cockpit and killed both pilots, Minear and his co-pilot, First Lieutenant John Frederick Shiefer, and two of the Rangers. Only three Rangers and two crewmen seated in the back of the aircraft survived.

Ricky Miller kept Gunky flying for another year, extending his Vietnam tour to twenty-two months, most of that time with C Troop, 2/17 Cavalry. The Army eventually awarded him a Bronze Star with V for his actions in rescuing the Blues riflemen that day. He tried several times to get it upgraded, if not to the Medal of Honor, at least to a Distinguished Flying Cross that would recognize his service in aviation. In the fall of 1971, he went home to Texas and was stationed at Fort Hood, but he couldn't find the excitement and pride he had felt during the war. He talked to some shadowy recruiters about flying black operations in Central America, but nothing came of it, and he decided to leave the Army. After his discharge, Miller "just sort of disappeared," as he put it. He left friends and family behind, ignoring attempts to contact him and hung around an abandoned airfield outside the West Texas town of Big Spring, where he took up dirt-track car racing to get his adrenaline pumping. He said he was trying to emulate the exhilaration he got from combat. He also drank a lot.

Miller eventually settled down and took a job with a large discount jewelry chain. But he couldn't bring himself to keep his promise to tell Sergeant Johnson's family about his friend's final thoughts of home. Johnson's last wish hung over him for years. After the company he worked for was sold, he traveled through the South doing consulting work for smaller jewelers. At Christmastime, about twenty years after Johnson was killed, Miller found himself in Nashville, Tennessee, and realized he was less than two hundred miles south of Johnson's family home near the village of New

2. Details of the battle, in addition to those in Miller's email, came from interviews with Ricky Miller, Ed Long, Major (Ret.) Malcolm Jones, former WO Harvey Rients, and Trina Judson, the unpublished book *Four Condors* compiled by Jones, and incidental accounts by other members of C Troop, 2/17 Cavalry, 101st Airborne Division.

Haven, Kentucky. On Christmas Day, he drove north to find the family at last and fulfill his obligation. He didn't know the way, however, and pulled into the wrong driveway, where he encountered a bunch of bootleggers, who came toward his car carrying rifles and shotguns. He explained who he was looking for, and they sent him off with directions to a family named Johnson. When he arrived, three generations of Johnsons were gathered for the holiday and welcomed him in to talk about his friend. They had never known what happened, only that their soldier was killed in action.

Miller showed them pictures of the platoon sergeant in uniform from a C Troop photo book he had with him and gave them the printed sheet he carried from a memorial service that the troop held for Johnson at its headquarters in Phu Bai the week he was killed. Then he asked if their mother was around. No, he was told, she had died the year before. He felt awful that she never heard the story of her son's last hours and his final thoughts of love for his parents and siblings. Despite his guilt, however, Miller simply hadn't been able to summon the strength earlier.

Perhaps because they didn't know Miller or why he had come to them, or maybe because they didn't question the snapshots they saw or the different first name, no one told Miller he was talking to the family of the wrong Sergeant Johnson.

On his way to the house, he had tried to find his friend's gravestone in the local cemetery, but without a map or identifier, he didn't know where to look. He stopped at one small graveyard he came to on the road and saw a Vietnam veteran's grave marker with a similar name, but the date of death was August 13, 1970, and Miller concluded it had to be someone else. Indeed, it was. On the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, the name of another Sergeant Johnson from the same tiny town in Kentucky is carved into the same polished black stone panel where Paul Johnson's name appears among more than 58,000 others. He was Staff Sergeant Nicholas G. Johnson, killed in the Mekong Delta, far to the south, just nine days after Paul Johnson was mortally wounded up north in the A Shau. The two men even shared a birthday, October 1.

The family Miller visited gave him directions to their soldier's burial site, and on his way out, Miller pulled off the road at the cemetery where he had stopped earlier that day. He sat in the car for quite a while but didn't get out. He was too emotionally wrought to go see. Nor did he realize that his whole visit involved a case of mistaken identity.

Early in 2013, twenty or more years after that visit to New Haven, Miller received a tip that someone had posted a note on an enhanced, Internet version of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. A young woman was asking for information about Paul Johnson from anyone who



knew him in Vietnam. It was from Trina Judson, who identified herself as Johnson's niece.

"I am looking for any servicemen that had served with Paul," the posting said. "Myself and his family would be forever grateful if someone could reach me that knew of Paul. Please contact me anytime via email. Also, just want to say thank you so much to Ed Long whom posted such a beautiful piece about Paul. Unfortunately, there was no contact information so I could reach him. Please Please contact me if you have any information at all regarding Paul. Again, I would be forever grateful. Bless to all that had served."

She knew about Long, who was severely wounded in the firefight in which Johnson was killed, because eleven years earlier, he had added his own post to the web page for Johnson on the same site.<sup>3</sup> In a remembrance entitled "my sgt.," Long said, "I just wanted to give a long overdue salute of respect to my sgt. paul Johnson. He was only 22 and I was 19. I often think of him and of that fateful day as I was injured and sent to a hospital in Japan. Fortunately for me I survived but the memories continue to be difficult. I was there that day. If any family member wishes to contact me I would be honored to speak with you and perhaps answer some questions that have remained unanswered for so many years. Rest assured he was indeed a hero in every description of the word and for that you can be proud. Respectfully, edward long." He probably didn't realize that he hadn't attached an email address or any contact information to his remembrance.

Trina Judson wasn't the only relative to post a message on the remembrance page. Three years earlier, her aunt, Paul's kid sister Maggie Jackson, put up a note under the heading "Gone but not forgotten."

"Paul was my older brother," she wrote. "We created lots of memories throughout our childhood. He is most definitely a hero and will always be in my heart. If anyone that knew him has any information that they would like to share, please email me." She did include an email address, but she never received a response.

When Miller saw Trina Judson's appeal, he contacted her to tell her about her uncle's death and pass along contact information for Ed Long, whom he hadn't seen since he heaved the wounded rifleman onto his Huey under fire. Long was living in Maryland, only about an hour's drive from Washington, and Judson was in Virginia, also not far from the capital. She hastily arranged to meet Long at The Wall on Memorial Day the following week, and they persuaded Miller to fly up from Texas to join them. They met at the Metro subway station on the National Mall, Miller wearing his

3. <http://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces/26322/PAUL-A-JOHNSON>

beloved black Stetson Cav hat and Long a floppy "boonie hat," favored by grunts such as those in the Blues Platoon. He also wore his old Army field jacket. Long's gray hair and nearly white mustache made him instantly recognizable as a vet from the Vietnam era. As they walked the well-trodden dirt paths to The Wall, nearly everyone they passed expressed the now-standard gratitude the troops always felt was denied them when they came home: "Thank you for your service."

They stopped to be interviewed by a crew from a local television station, and Trina Judson presented each of them with an American flag, flowers, and an angel statuette she said would keep watch over them. Both men told her they still felt terrible guilt that her uncle had died and they had survived.

Long also told Miller, his long-ago buddy, "I want to say thank you for my life." He had been quietly grateful to his aging Army buddy for forty-two years.

The three then approached The Wall to find Paul Johnson's name on Panel 8W, Line 82. They brushed their fingers over the polished black stone and felt the depression of the capital letters etched deeply into the slab. A volunteer helped them make rubbings of the name to take home.

Miller recounted for Trina Judson his attempt to save and comfort her uncle.

"I know I'm gonna die, Rick," the platoon sergeant told his friend. "I said, 'No, you're not. Be quiet. Think about Kentucky. Think about something nice at home.' He said something, and I couldn't hear him. He grabbed hold of my shirt, and he said, 'I want you to do something for me.' I said, 'Sure, buddy. What?' He said, 'When you go home, if you make it back, I want you to go by my parents' house in New Haven and tell them I love them.'"

Miller's voice broke, and the big West Texas cowboy began to cry, but he forced himself to finish his confession: "I told him I would. I got back. They asked me if I would escort Paul back, and I said, 'I don't think I can.' I felt like I let Paul down. He died. It was my fault, I thought. I couldn't do it. Twenty years later I did make it up there. His mother was already passed away. That's it."

Trina Judson tried to comfort them. "I beg each of you to let any guilt you feel go," she told both men. "There was nothing you could have done. . . . You are truly heroes in our eyes. You have our undying gratitude, and you'll always be the heroes in our lives. And there's no way we can repay you for not only going beyond the call of duty, but also spending the last few moments of Paul's life and making sure that he was comfortable and that he

knew that he had friends around and someone there with him. That means more to us than anything. And we can never repay you guys for everything.”

“He was wounded pretty bad, and I don’t think he was in pain,” Miller offered. “We gave him morphine.”

“I know he wasn’t in pain when he died,” Long added. “When he was taking his last breath and just letting it out, he was not in any pain. He seemed to be at peace. And the nurses and the doctor that was on the floor with him worked, I mean, like, you know, banshees to try to save Paul. And, when he passed away, it was no pain, no crying or yelling out. It was just peace, like he went to sleep.”

Miller and Long left The Wall in fine spirits. Just seeing each other after all those years gave them a big boost, and Trina Judson calling them heroes in the Johnson family’s eyes helped a lot. But Ricky Miller still felt he had some unfinished business in New Haven, Kentucky; he wanted to visit Paul Johnson’s grave and say his farewell. It ate at his gut.

Sometime after her meeting, Trina Judson told her Aunt Maggie about it and put her in touch with Miller on Facebook. She got him to promise he would return to Kentucky.

Worrying about going back wasn’t as bad as the aftermath of his first visit, when he left the cemetery without getting out of his car. That experience—and his anxiety about it—had drained him terribly. The buildup of stress about the trip to visit his friend’s family was so intense that he developed Bell’s palsy a day or two afterward, and the paralysis of the facial muscles it caused made the left side of his face sag dramatically for months.

He didn’t realize until August 2015 that the family members he saw on that first trip were related to a different soldier with a similar name. Miller had never actually met any of his friend’s ten brothers and sisters.

He has now, but even all these years later, it wasn’t easy.

Miller, sixty-five, and battling several serious health problems traceable to his combat experience, vowed to return to Kentucky to visit his lost friend’s grave and meet with any of Paul Johnson’s family members who wanted to see him. Maggie Jackson, three years younger than Paul and still devoted to the memory of her big brother, rounded up all but one of her nine surviving siblings to welcome him.

Miller and his wife Ruby drove nearly 1,000 miles from their home in Clyde, Texas, to meet Paul’s family on the forty-sixth anniversary of that awful day in the A Shau. Without Ruby’s encouragement and support, Miller said, he would not have been able to go through with it. In his hotel room before going to meet the family, he lay on the bed, struggling with his torn feelings, doubting he was capable of getting up and going to the restaurant where Paul’s relatives would be waiting. Ruby helped him get there.

"They were very appreciative," Miller said afterward. "I was thinking they'd be mad at me. The reason I never went back: I thought it was my fault that he died." But instead, the Johnson family greeted him as a hero, the warrior who wouldn't abandon his friend and got their brother back to be buried at home and not left behind as missing in action. Maggie Jackson, the sister who had posted her unrequited appeal on the web all those years before, escorted the couple to BJ's Steakhouse in nearby Bardstown for a celebratory dinner and hours of exchanging memories.

There were presents and pictures and plenty of talk. Brother Jesse makes wine and gave the Millers two bottles of his best. His wife made a batch of her special salsa. Maggie was proudest of her present, a period box that she found with her granddaughter at Goodwill. The granddaughter thought it contained a French harp and asked if she could see it. When the box was opened, they found a Vietnam War commemorative knife with a Huey helicopter emblazoned across the yellow field and three red stripes of the South Vietnamese flag and Vietnam veterans' service ribbon.

"It melted my heart," the kid sister said.

The next day, Maggie and Ruby accompanied Miller to the cemetery and showed him where Paul Johnson was buried. Then they left him alone to be with his friend.