

MAGNIFICENT MEN

BY John S. Halbert

---Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

It was at about five-thirty on a Saturday morning in October, 1965, while I was delivering the early-morning news on WVNA, that there came the first hint that something terrible had happened. When I had prepared the broadcast, I hadn't paid any particular attention to the name mentioned in a story about the death of a Birmingham soldier in Vietnam. I recognized his name while I was speaking before a live radio microphone. The story began with an anguished quotation from a father whose son had just been killed in action, whose name was "Lieutenant Felix King", a recent graduate of Florence State College. When I came to the name, I felt a sudden alarm, paused for a second, and said, "*Felix King?*" right on the air.

Surely, the report couldn't be about the "Felix King" who two years earlier had been the Company Commander of my ROTC unit at Florence State.

As soon as I finished the newscast and started the regular program, I grabbed the telephone and called the Associated Press in Birmingham for further details. At the State Desk, the editor confirmed that the story was indeed about the Felix King I had known a couple of years earlier. According to the report, he was leading his unit on a patrol when they were ambushed by the Viet Cong. In the firefight, he was shot twice and killed.

I remembered Felix King as the capable, ambitious commander of our ROTC "D" Company, of whom everyone understood was undoubtedly destined for great things in his future Army career. The young, handsome officer, in his mid-twenties when I knew him, had had an attractive wife who occasionally brought their two little children to watch us parade on the drill field.

Several months after King's death, I was in a Psychology class at Florence State, and the instructor, an older man named Mr. Woodward, discussed Felix King and the Vietnam War. By that time, in the Spring of 1966, the conflict had greatly intensified---hundreds of thousands of Americans were now there and the casualty lists were getting longer by the day. Mr. Woodward brought up the subject of the war with a lament that some of the best and most promising American young people were going to die in Vietnam, and he was not sure of the reason for it.

"For example," he said, "we had a fine young man named, 'Felix King', who went to school here and was recently killed over there. He left a wife and little children behind . . . and it was so sad . . . so sad---" I remembered the disconsolate, faraway look on Mr. Woodward's face.

No one at the time could have foreseen just how sad the war would eventually become, but Mr. Woodward's doleful premonition was absolutely correct.

Florence State (now the University of North Alabama) would eventually contribute a disproportionate number of men to the national casualty lists. At the time, the school had the second-largest cadre of ROTC students in the state---only the University of Alabama, a much larger school than Florence State, had more men in their program.

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I can still see the young men I once knew who later died in Vietnam:

----**Felix King**, standing tall and ram-rod-straight, with perfect military bearing, projecting manly virtues of strength and integrity, loudly calling out, "D-Company! Fall in!"

----**Frankie Wallace's** solemn face belied his mental and physical strength. At one time I had considered Frankie, who was my platoon leader in D-Company, to be almost too low-key for an officer, yet, from accounts, he distinguished himself in action and his death in Vietnam saddened me and also reiterated how sometimes unprepossessing individuals were the ones who stepped to the forefront when the situation demanded it.

----**Larry Evans** was a conscientious student leader who became a fine officer. According to the official report, he was possibly killed by "friendly fire".

----**Chad Barber** married one of the prettiest girls in school---and was promptly shipped overseas. I didn't really know Chad all that well; I had seen him around the ROTC offices and on the drill field, and from time to time in the Student Union. His bride was one of the most decent and wholesome girls around. How sad to consider that they were married only a short time before he was killed in Vietnam.

----**Bob King** I had known from the time he was in the class ahead of me in high school. Even in those days he had shown a flair for leadership which stood him in good stead in his ROTC time at Florence State, and during his tragically-short Army career. What really affected me about his death in particular was that I had gone out with a girl named "Sharon", just before she became involved with Bob. Soon after their wedding, he got his Vietnam orders. In no time, Sharon was a widow.

----**Don Boston**. I had also known Don in high school. (He was in the same class as Bob King.) Don had a wonderful sense of humor. He had always wanted to become a Navy Frogman---later called "Navy Seals". I only got the story about what happened to Don many years later at a class reunion. According to what I was told about the report, Don was killed laying underwater mines in a North Vietnamese harbor. His group was discovered by enemy gunners and they were shelled in the water. They pulled him back aboard the submarine, but he didn't make it.

----**Don Childers** was the first Vietnam casualty from Florence State. As he had graduated before I entered college, I never knew him personally, although his name had been spoken very highly by the instructors and the Army officers who remembered him

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Many times I have speculated as to what could have happened to me had I completed the ROTC program and became a U.S. Army officer. At the time that Colonel Reese had offered me

a chance to take the Advanced ROTC course, in the Spring of 1965, the Vietnam War was still just an obscure little conflict in a land far away. But within a few months, Felix King would be dead over there. Would I have suffered the same fate? Or, would I have been sent to a post other than Southeast Asia, such as Germany, or to somewhere in the 'States, as were some others? What *were* the criteria that the Army used to select those officers assigned to Vietnam? What fate or destiny was it that sent several of my friends over there to their deaths? Was I spared from all that simply because my grade-point average had barely kept me out of the Advanced program? How do I account for the fact that I had a relatively high draft lottery number that had kept me out of the clutches of the Draft Board?

As for my friends who died over there---there remain endless questions that will never be answered. If there had been no Vietnam War, or had they not been sent there, where would they now be? What would they be doing? How many children and grandchildren would they now have? Those are heartbreaking questions with no possible answers.

The most striking aspect from this later point in time is that it all happened so long ago. At this writing, the war began about fifty-years ago and it has been more than a third of a century since it ended. In the meantime, the Vietnam War has become for the most part just another footnote of history. Over half of the people now living in the United States were not even born when the war started, and thus have no recollections of the momentous events and the contentious political issues that so divided the country in those fateful times.

Nevertheless, the actual battles of the war were fought by the likes of Felix King, Frankie Wallace, Larry Evans, Chad Barber, Bob King, Don Boston, Don Childers and all the others, who either volunteered for military service, or who were drafted and were ordered to go there to ultimately give their all in the jungles, in the rice paddies; in the air, and on the rivers and the seas of Southeast Asia.