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## Valentine's Day 1969

Jess Lockhart

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Valentine's Day, also known as Saint Valentine's Day, is a celebration observed on or about February 14 each year. Hallmark has made this into a commercial success by making us afraid to not show up at home without a card, flowers, or candy. On February 14, 1969, I'm not sure I was even aware that it was Valentine's Day, much less thinking of flowers and candy. However, I would have loved to have had a bottle of liquor.

This story is not about me, but a friend who gave his life for me, First Lt. Gary Lee Miller, and another of my men, Patrick K. Dugan.

I only knew Gary for about a month before he died. He was born and raised in a small town in the western part of Virginia, Covington, almost on the West Virginia state line. Covington was a typical small southern town where one industry (in this case, Westvaco) was the primary source of income for the surrounding counties. Through the town flowed the Jackson River, with houses built on the steep banks overlooking the plant of 3,000 employees. Children grew up watching their fathers go to work in the plant and knowing that the only alternative to working in the plant was the coal mines of West Virginia.

Gary broke this cycle by graduating with honors from high school and attending Virginia Tech. At Tech, he joined the ROTC program and graduated with an engineering degree and second lieutenant commission in the United States Army. After commissioning, Gary went to the Infantry Officer's Basic course at Fort Benning, Georgia. I don't know what his first duty assignment was, but he ended up in Vietnam assigned to the First Infantry Division, Third Brigade, First Battalion, Twenty-Eighth Infantry (named the Black Lions) in Company A (Alpha Company). In army jargon this would be A/1/28 1st ID.

This is where I met Gary. I was Mike Platoon leader. The time was late January 1969. Although I had only been in Vietnam three months, through attrition I was the senior platoon

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leader (which in retrospect was really scary considering the lives I was responsible for at the old age of twenty-one years). Gary showed up just as we had lost two platoon leaders: one killed, one wounded and medevacked to Japan. Gary was assigned as the replacement to Lima Platoon. I was assigned to mentor him until he was ready to operate on his own.

It's now February 14, 1969. Lima and Mike Platoon were on a joint mission and had been on patrol for three or four days without any contact with the "bad guys." Our ambush site that evening was a trail junction, with the main trail going north-south and an intersecting trail going east-west. The trails weren't that well used. They looked like any cow path you see in a pasture. I told Gary to set his platoon up ambushing the main trail going north-south. We usually set up our ambushes in a straight line boxed off at either end. The main section of the ambush was covered with Claymore mines and the boxed ends were manned with M-60 machine guns.

I set up my platoon (Mike) facing the east-west trail. I didn't expect any activity that evening and was looking forward to some sleep. Well, that didn't happen. About 3 a.m., I was suddenly awakened by Claymores being exploded and rifle and machine gun fire. My platoon lay in their ambush positions waiting for movement in front of them (like a football offensive line waiting for the snap). I got on the radio and asked Gary what the hell was happening. He told me that his platoon had seen movement on the trail and had set off the ambush. I remember thinking that I hoped they weren't trigger-happy because I would be the one to explain to the CO why they screwed up. It was pitch dark, so I called for artillery illumination rounds and walked about fifty yards over to Gary's position. (That was probably not too smart because the guys had just popped the ambush and would still be jumpy.) I was yelling my call sign and telling them to cease fire. I found Gary and could see three or four dead Viet Cong in the "kill zone" with no US

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casualties. Since this was Gary's first ambush, I let him call it into battalion headquarters giving the details and body count.

This is where the mission began to fall apart. The battalion XO (executive officer) wanted a body count confirmed. Gary and I could see three or four bodies, but the XO ordered Gary to sweep (walk) the "kill zone." At this time, I should have told Gary to wait five minutes and report a standard operation reply five VC dead carrying AKs and rice, but I didn't. Hell, it was three in the morning and the bodies would have been there at sunrise. This is what was happening. In the army, information flows up and down the "chain of command" and the battalions report to the brigades who report to the division onto the corps headquarters, and this is where the good folks back home got their daily body count for the six o'clock news. Gary and I lined up a squad from our platoons to sweep the kill zone. As the men were searching for bodies, artillery illumination flares were the only light we had, and that wasn't very much. You could barely make out the profiles of the men. I certainly could not identify which platoon was which. Gary and I were standing together discussing how stupid this sweep was when, out of the darkness, I heard a couple of rifle shots. The shots sounded like an M-16, and I thought the shots were from our men, so I yelled "cease fire" to keep someone from getting shot from friendly fire. The next few moments happened very fast, but over the past forty-six years I've slowed them down and replayed those hundreds of times in my mind.

You have to understand that the only light was artillery illumination and the terrain was thin grass about three feet high. There was confusion and talking about the recent ambush. The men's adrenalin was pumping as we searched for additional dead VC. This was not a damn training exercise; this was combat, and people get hurt or killed if they're not careful. As Gary and I stood talking about how stupid this sweep was and what a mistake the battalion XO made

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while he was five miles away in a safe bunker, something hit me in the chest. It reminded me of my baseball days and felt like I had missed a catch of a ball from a kid and bam it hit me. Next, I yelled something. To this day I don't understand why, other than training and instincts kicked in. I yelled "grenade" and dove to my right. There was an explosion, but it was not loud. It was kind of muffled. I felt something on my back, a burning sensation. I remember later thinking being wounded did not feel like I thought it would. It felt like a cut with a sharp knife.

My survival instincts kicked in and I immediately started looking for my rifle, but through the dirt and darkness I couldn't find it. I looked over at Gary, he wasn't moving. I touched him and immediately knew he was dead. I yelled for a medic and when I turned him over, I could see his shirt was blown open and my rifle lay under him. The doc looked at Gary and shook his head. I picked up my rifle and saw that the magazine and receiver were blown up. I grabbed Gary's rifle, checked it out, put in a new magazine and started looking for the VC who threw the grenade. I knew he was close because he had just tossed a grenade at me. I was crawling on my stomach when I saw him. Luckily for me, his attention was directed at the men on the sweep. I stood up and emptied half a magazine in him at full automatic. I think the reason he was laying in the grass in a depressed hole was probably because he was wounded in the initial blowing of the ambush. He had an AK-47 with a grenade launcher attached. This muffled the sound of the AK to make it sound like an M16, and when he fired I thought he was one of my men.

I went back to Gary knowing that he had just given his life for me. Emotionally, his death didn't really hit me for a couple of days. I've often wondered why I reacted the way I did, but in retrospect I had been calloused by all the death around me and I had had a job as a leader to regroup the platoons to prepare for a counterattack. We didn't know what was out there in the

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darkness. I had the men gather up the VC's weapons, and both platoons formed a defensive position and we moved Gary's body to my CP. In about an hour or so the sun started to rise and I started talking to the battalion CP and requested a dust-off for Gary's body. The dust-off came and we loaded the AKs and Gary on the Huey. Lima Platoon's men were shaken because they had lost two platoon leaders in less than a month, so I had to jerk them back to reality and remind them that we were still on a combat mission with a job to kill VCs.

The next day, February 15, I was told to consolidate Lima and Mike platoons and move out on the east-west trail that Mike had set their ambush on the night before. Mike took the lead and Lima followed. Setting up my formation, I had Patrick Dugan walking point because he was my best and most experienced point man. We had only gone about five hundred yards when all hell broke loose: AK fire incoming and M16s and M60s firing back. I got on the radio and started calling in artillery adjusting and firing for effect. There was a FAC flying over me; he asked if I needed any help ... in so many words I said, "Hell yes." The FAC had two F4s on station with miniguns and napalm. We popped smoke and they rolled in with their miniguns. They were so low that the shell castings were still hot when they fell on us. Two napalm bombs were dropped next. I thought "Hell, that's it, we got them." So we got up but immediately started getting small arms fire. I called in a Hunter/Killer team, which was a Cobra helicopter along with a Loach firing a minigun. They made a couple of runs, and we stopped getting incoming fire. As if enough had not happened, the Loach circling overhead looking for VC lost its tail rotor. It started rotating out of control and came down through the trees. The Loach settled on the ground on its skids almost as if the pilot had landed it. We ran over and I opened the door and asked the pilot if he was okay. He was talking, so we unbuckled him and pulled him out. Just as we cleared the helicopter, it caught on fire and the ammo from the minigun started cooking off. We

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regrouped, and that's when I found out that my point man, Patrick Dugan, had been killed when the VC popped their ambush.

I had lost a friend and a member of my platoon, and it wasn't even lunch time.

I huddled everyone together and called a dust-off for Dugan and the pilot. It's strange how combat puts a twist on emotions, but I laugh about the pilot we pulled out of the Loach. He was scared shitless and was walking around with his .38 revolver cocked. His main concern was that he would have to spend the night with us in the jungle. Before I could get everyone organized and moved out, I got a call that the Battalion was sending in copters to pick us up. This was definitely okay with me because I was tired of playing GI Joe. When the copters picked us up and landed at La Khe the company had a trailer of beer iced down for us. This was the therapy I think we all needed, and I began to let everything soak in only to wait for the next mission. Over the next year, we would have too many moments to reflect upon for eighteen–twenty-one-year-old kids.