

## Fort Benning (2)

Category: Fort Benning

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Here is what the front page of the story looked like in the Ladies Home Journal. April, 1953

# DEATH OF A SOLDIER

*This is a true story. The soldier described fought in Korea and was there for ten days. He died there, a very short time ago. I can still remember his face and voice. Only his name is changed. If you who know battle think he died in an extraordinary way, I can only say that I do not think any man in combat dies in an ordinary way. If you who do not know battle think the story is gruesome, I say that war is only two things, success or destruction, and there is a little of both in each. Read this, for it happens to many men every day of every war.*

BY LT. DAVID R. HUGHES

PRIVATE WILLIAM TILSON, Jr., replacement, a soldier whose new green helmet had never touched the earth. Private William Tilson, Jr., about to complete his long journey into fear.

I, his new company commander, thought these things when he first knelt in the bunker opening and reported in.

We were on a hill, a battered torn peak that was as close to being a skeleton as a hill could get. The hard bony ridges were pitted with the holes of incessant bombardment, and the inevitable litter of battlegrounds had collected in the ugly scars and drifted down the slope into the shattered trees below. A dusty, hard, bitter hill. One we had been trying to keep from the Chinese for many weeks.

But this new man was young and clean, with short-cropped black hair and a full round face. His fatigue clothes were fresh and his rifle bright and oily. For a few minutes I questioned him and he answered in a clear young voice, about his family and background and his eight months in the Army. I listened and filed his words into mental notes.

Then I made my usual speech about how glad we were to have him, and how important it was to take care of himself, and to listen carefully to his squad leader and platoon leader. It was meant to give him a little confidence and purpose until he learned the game of managing to live between bullets.

But the mortars began screaming down again and I had to turn to command my little island of the battle. I saw the frightened look on Tilson's face before he disappeared down the slope to his new platoon, the First.

This hill was a hell of a place to try to give anybody confidence.

I got down to see him only once in the next few days, days filled with the howling arch of enemy shells, and that once almost cost me my legs. But I did see the boy for a moment, asked him how he was, told him to stay in place even when under attack, and to keep his weapon clean. When I finished he looked past me for a second and then back to my face and spoke in a quiet voice:

"Lieutenant, are you scared up here at night?"

I paused and then answered slowly, "Yes, I think everybody is."

And he turned his head and looked down the hill with a half-smile and suddenly I knew he felt that we were friends, with a secret between us. And I knew he would make a good soldier.

I went on down the line of foxholes, shifting, adjusting, waiting for the Chinese to come.

Come they did, two nights later, a battalion of them against our two platoons. The mortars and artillery had chopped at us all evening, slacking off suddenly at midnight. Then they threw up

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*It was his first battle . . . and he was alone, afraid.*



The actual soldier who died was Cpl Frank Hagen Jr, whom I mention in the Fickle Gods of War piece in Korean War (28).

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By Lt. David R. Hughes, Hill 339, Korea,  
September, 1951

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Come they did, two nights later, a battalion of them against our two platoons. The mortars and artillery had chopped at us all evening, slacking off suddenly at midnight. Then they threw up a red flare and came up,

bugling, howling, shooting and throwing their uncountable grenades. We didn't have a prayer of holding them with a line. They hit both flanks and overran the First Platoon, driving up so fast we barely stopped them at the peak with the radio operators and messengers. I frantically formed a new line, expecting them to hit before it was complete. But something held them up for a few minutes and I heard the unmistakable firing of stubborn American rifles down in the dark patch where the First Platoon had once existed. They hit again, but we had a perimeter now and only had to draw up a little tighter as men fell. They hit two more times, and managed for a few intense moments to pour over the thin line, but the mortar men and machine gunners shot them down between their mortars and we held. When day broke we defended only the very peak. But that was enough, and the attackers melted down the ravines while we pushed out again down the ridges.

We had won.

The morning was difficult as we tried to clear out our own casualties and their dead, because they kept pouring steel into the hill in frustrated vengeance. I had to dive for cover often as I moved around the company front.

I had just topped the last rise of ground near the end of the First Platoon positions, and started down the saddle when the faint chug chug sounds of distant mortars came

to me. I stopped for a second and looked for a place to go. Then the first whispering sent me flying into the bunker ahead. The shells slammed down all around and I hugged the dirt floor.

At last it let up and I crawled forward. There was a crumpled figure ahead. I saw a tan boot.

Private William Tilson, Jr., was lying forward as if asleep, his new boot soles turned up. The new green helmet lay beside him, stained and dark. His bright rifle still rested on the parapet with a shattered stock, and an empty ammunition bandoleer hung limply from a peg. An envelope lay beside him, with the letter in the dirt beneath it.

How did he die? I could guess.

An explosion jabs into the light sleep of Private Tilson. He opens his eyes and lies tensely in the bottom of the foxhole, listening.

Everything is quiet.

Whistle, slam! Another explosion right in front of his position.

Tilson crawls up and looks carefully over the parapet. Blackness. Nothing.

Whang! A jagged flash off to the right and a metallic

explosion.

Somebody is firing mortars at the ridge where his foxhole is. Everything else is quiet except for the click of metal over to the right where Matta and Clark have a foxhole.

Suddenly a red ball rises quickly far out in front of him, arching and burning out as it starts down again. A rifle snaps. Then two more and all along the ridge weapons start firing. Down the ravine a small white glow grows into brightness and light fills the trees and bushes. A flare has been tripped and

Tilson sees figures coming up the hill. They are not shooting yet. They are just a mob in smoking white light. They are the enemy.

Real fear stabs at Private Tilson for the first time.

*Here they come.*

What shall I do?

What shall I do?

He yells to Matta and is answered by a muffled cry. He looks down the ravine again with a rising fear before he remembers his rifle.

Get my rifle ready.

Get my grenades ready.



## *Get ready.*

Jagged thoughts run throuh Tilson's head and his heart pounds. The rustling mass of sound is nearer and the light is out.

Wait. I can't see them. Wait for light. He clicks off the safety on his rifle and points it down the ravine. He stacks some more clips along the parapet. He peers into the darkness below. They are very noisy, he thinks.

His palms are wet.

A parachute flare pops above and in the sudden reddish light firing begins again on his right. Mortar shells whisper down behind him and explode. Then he really sees them. Six figures down about fifty yards. One stops for a moment. Tilson sights and fires. The sound and recoil. startle him. He fires again, and the Chinese below begin shooting back The first rip of fire snaps by Tilson's head. A machine gun replies. The ravine comes alive with red twinkles.

Tilson fires, looking for something definite, something slow, but everything is quick and fluid and the twinkles are lost too soon

in the blackness. A surprising figure looms ahead and fires, but it goes down quickly. Another flare. More figures, crawling. The crackle of rifles mingles with

thumping of grenades and yelling of high-pitched voices.

Something comes looping up toward him and explodes right in front of him.

Then they rush, screaming, as he fires blindly. Slugs tear into the earth beside him. Another flare. Two figures on the right. Throw a grenade. More on the left. They're everywhere. I'm doing what they told me to do! Fire faster, faster! Please, gun, don't jam. Oh, please don't jam. I can't stop them. A blinding flash. Dirt. Throw a grenade, another and another. A figure jumps up, arm back. Tilson fires. The figure falls and rolls. Another flare. They're everywhere. I can't stop them. I can't stop them.

*They are going to kill me.*

The thought drains away as another comes drumming through his head.

Get out. Go back while there is time and run run, run.

It makes him stop firing. He looks back at the dark trench that goes over the hill behind. The enemy fires, yells and moves. He hears a GI yell out a curse and fire his rifle, fast, four times. And he realizes that all along there have been men near him, to his right and to his left. And he knows that one of them is still there.

And William Tilson, Jr., leans forward and begins firing methodically into the darkness. He puts his fear down like

a toy and becomes calm and deadly.

*He is not going to leave.*

For reasons born in the depths of him, unrecognized even by himself, William Tilson, Jr., son of William Tilson, the keeper of a little store, son of Bertha Tilson, the talkative woman, brother of Frank Tilson, the married clerk, makes his decision. He fires again and again, standing in his bunker, and the point of no return goes past in the race of time and bullets. In a dim room where William Tilson, Jr. is alone, a door closes and the black waters of certainty spread across the floor, lapping at his legs.

But for that instant, the world of William Tilson, Jr., is in perfect balance.

*Then the yelling is thunder, and the thunder is death.*

Artillery rumbled somewhere and far to the northeast white smoke obscured a hill for a moment and then streamed off in a long low cloud, leaving the peak sharp and clear against the morning sky.

I picked up the envelope and letter and looked for a while at the clear blue words written across the top:

My Dear Son...

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