

Digging Fox Holes



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When I graduated from college, I was commissioned an officer in the United States Army. I was an infantryman.

After completing some training, in early 1965 I was assigned– with my bride of a few months– to an infantry battalion of the 25th U.S. Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

My wife and I were thrilled with this assignment and looked forward to three years of life amidst the sun and the surf and the wonderful people of Hawaii.

We rented a little duplex right on the beach on the North Shore of Oahu. You could step out of our back door onto the sand; it was literally like something out of a movie.

In October of that year, our battalion received a new commander, Lt. Col. Thomas U. Greer– “Tug” Greer, as his peers called him.

Tug Greer was a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Class of 1951. In 1951, the Korean War was raging.

Most of the West Point class that year was assigned immediately to the combat zone.

Many of Tug Greer's classmates died on the rugged slopes of that land. But Tug had survived and remained in the army. And now, 14 years later, he was assigned to command our battalion.

No sooner did he assume command, than Col. Greer took the battalion on a week-long training exercise in the rugged Kahuku Mountains of northern Oahu.

For those of you who have not been to Hawaii, let me describe these mountains. They are steep slopes of volcanic rock with little topsoil and covered with thick, green vegetation.

For five days, we struggled up and down those slopes in one infantry maneuver after another. Finally, it was Saturday morning, the last day of the exercise.

All of us looked forward to returning early to our battalion headquarters, turning in our equipment and hitting the beach.

After all, we were young, and what was the point of being stationed in Hawaii if you could not go to the beach! I remember gazing down early that morning from my perch on the side of one of those mountains at the shimmering sand and sparkling ocean. I could hardly wait!

About that time, Col. Greer came to our rifle company's position. To our company commander, Capt. Jim Andrus, he said, "As the last exercise of this training, I would like Charlie Company (that was us- "C" Company) to establish defensive positions.

Now, among other things establishing defensive positions meant digging foxholes. You know what a foxhole is. It is a

hole in the ground where a soldier can seek shelter from enemy fire. But this was volcanic rock! And we were only equipped with those little folding shovels (which the army calls "entrenching tools")!

So, as Capt. Andrus gathered us platoon leaders around to give us the orders for establishing defensive positions, he said, "Since we want to get this over with quickly, we won't actually dig foxholes.

Instead, we will simply do "simulated foxholes"— we will just mark out on the ground where we would put the foxholes."

So, that is what we did. A little while later, Col. Greer came around to inspect our "defensive positions". I remember it like it was yesterday! As he came to the first of these "simulated foxholes", he asked Capt. Andrus, "What are those?"

Clearing his throat a little nervously, Capt. Andrus responded, "Well, sir, those are simulated foxholes." "Simulated foxholes!!" roared Col. Greer. "I ordered this company to prepare defensive positions, and that means digging foxholes!

This company is going to stay out here and dig until it learns how to dig foxholes that look like the came out of the training manual!"

And so, as the rest of the battalion packed up weapons and equipment and headed back to the base and an afternoon at the beach, Charlie Company remained out on that hillside.

And we dug, and we dug, and we dug.

Col. Greer's name was on every one's lips that afternoon, and I can tell you that he was not winning any popularity contests that day! But by evening, we had foxholes that really looked just like they came out of the training manual.

But, you see, there was something that we did not know
that beautiful Hawaiian Saturday.

When Col. Greer had been given his orders assigning him as
our battalion commander, he had also received some other
orders that he could not share with us– top secret orders–
sending our battalion to Vietnam.

We did not know it at the time, but this would be our last
training exercise. And Col. Greer, with his vivid memories of
his fallen classmates on the rugged hillsides of Korea was
determined to do all that he could to save the lives of those
men entrusted to his care.

In a manner of speaking, Hawaii was the “season” for
learning those skills that would save our lives. Vietnam
would be too late.

What happened next I did not personally observe, arriving
in Vietnam a few days after the rest of the battalion; but it
was reported to me by my comrades-in-arms.

They reached the spot in the division’s defensive perimeter
assigned to our battalion late in an afternoon. Col. Greer’s
order went out: Establish defensive positions.

Our men dug in because that is what you did in Tug Greer’s
battalion. Another battalion next to ours, arriving at the
same time, only scooped out some shallow cavities in the
ground– not unlike our Hawaiian “simulated foxholes”–
planning to dig real foxholes the next day.

But that night, the Viet Cong enemy launched a ferocious
mortar barrage into the green troops.

Our men were safe and secure in their foxholes; but the
men of that neighboring battalion were not so fortunate. I

am told that the next morning Tug Greer's name was again on everyone's lips- but this time with reverence and respect.

I still regard him as one of the great men I have known. From him I learned one of life's most powerful lessons: There is indeed a "time for every purpose under heaven"- even a time to learn to dig foxholes.

Like most parables, the "Parable of the Foxholes" has multiple teachings. But today I draw upon it for just one of them.

The Parable of the Foxholes teaches the truth of the timeless maxim: "When the time for performance is present, the time for preparation is past."

While that teaching is relevant to us all, it has particular application to you, my young friends, who are in life's springtime- nature's season for planting and preparation.

And so I would like to ask each of you- personally- three basic questions as though you were on the witness stand in a court of law. No one will know your answers except you and the Lord. But then, you are the only two that matter!

And you must answer truthfully for the simple reason that there is no concealing the truth from either of you. So it behooves you to answer each question with complete candor.

Lesson: Prepare for things while you can