

# ***RILEY M. RUSSELL***

## ***Gentle Hero***

*(1927-2009)*

by Bryan Luton

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Among the combat decorations for Mr. Riley Russell's service during World War II is the bronze star. According to the textbook definition, the bronze star is a medal awarded for "heroism" during combat. In my first acquaintance with Mr. Russell, however, I did not recognize him as some "hero" but merely as a kind man who was a band parent while I was a student in the Springfield High School band. Mr. Russell always loved music and had been in the band himself while a student at Akron Central High School. Naturally, therefore, he saw to it that his children would be actively involved in the high school music program as well. I can well remember first meeting him in summer band camp. Whereas most adult chaperones there tended to keep to themselves, Mr. Russell was not afraid to involve himself personally with us students. I can still clearly remember sitting up late at night with the other guys in our tent, and there was Mr. Russell laughing and

telling jokes along with the rest of us. To all of us teenagers, we knew Mr. Russell simply as “Mr. Russell”—a nice parent who liked kids. We didn’t have a clue, however, as to the character of the man, nor of the seasoned, battle-tested warrior who was sitting in our midst. It wouldn’t be until some 35 years later that I would actually get to know the man and develop a close friendship.

After I returned to Springfield High School following college graduation and began teaching math, I had the pleasure of having as a student the Russell’s youngest daughter Carol. Carol was actively involved in Springfield’s Campus Life Youth For Christ club with which I assisted, and I remember Mom and Dad Russell opening their home for teenagers to fill their living room for Youth For Christ meetings.

After 30 years of teaching math, I was completing a master’s degree in history and preparing to teach it at the high school when I had the occasion to learn from Mr. Russell his combat experience during World War II. Eager to have someone share with my classes their perspective of having been a participant in the events we were discussing, I was overjoyed when he agreed to come and talk to my

**classes. There was never a year that he ever declined my invitation. And when he did share, it was not just once before a combined group, but rather with each of the six history classes individually. On some occasions, when I happened to have an algebra class as well, he would happily agree to share with them, especially when it was apparent that they were eager to get out of doing math that day. Never once did I ever see a student yawn, nod off to sleep, or fail to pay attention. In fact, some students asked for his autograph. It was during our breaks between classes, however, that I had the chance to really get to know this man, to learn much of his combat experiences that he couldn't share publicly. We discussed anything and everything from faith and religion to politics and history, and we did so as comfortably as two kindred spirits. Now some perhaps much younger than myself, might know him on a first name basis, but the more I got to know him, the more I came to respect him, and the more I came to respect him, the more I felt it appropriate to continue to address him as "Mr." Russell.**

**Ecc. 3:1,2 says, "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven; a time to be born and a time to die. . ."**

**Yet for all who trust the Lord, there is great comfort in Ps. 31:15 which says: “My times are in Thy hand.” It was just last week that Mr. Russell called me on the phone. I hadn’t been in touch with him for the last couple of years since I had retired from Springfield schools and began teaching all math again, this time at Lake Center Christian Schools. He told me about his condition and seemed to know that this was his “time,” and thus was making preparations for his funeral, and asked me to give his eulogy. I thought afterward that this is so in keeping with the character of this man, who faced life’s harsh realities, not by shirking his duty, but by facing it squarely and making preparations to discharge it honorably. It was thus that he had faced death many times over 64 years earlier.**

**The war in Europe was winding down by April of 1945, with only a few weeks left before Germany would surrender. Yet the Nazi war machine maintained a fanatical obsession with continuing the conflict until the bitter end. It was on a routine patrol that Riley Russell encountered three young German soldiers who sought to surrender. Indicating that they should put their hands over their heads, he was about to receive their surrender when three gunshots**

**rang out and those three Germans fell dead—shot in the back by Nazi SS units from behind as a warning to any other German soldiers who might be thinking of surrender. Such was the treachery and danger that was lurking at every turn during those desperate days. Villages had to be taken one house at a time with SS units often embedding themselves among the civilian population.**

**It was on just such an occasion that Riley encountered a pitiful group of civilians huddled together in the cellar of one house where he inquired if anyone spoke English and if any soldiers were present. An SS officer then made a move for his gun. And in a showdown, reminiscent from a scene out of the Wild West, Riley Russell shot the gun out of his hand, leaving the German slightly wounded but saving his life.**

**Despite the fact that it was in keeping with his professional obligation as a soldier to fight—and kill, he never wanted to talk about this to students. Instead, there is an episode that helps define the kind of man that we memorialize today. It was on another routine patrol that a standoff occurred between him and a couple German soldiers. Sensing that they wanted to surrender, he shouted**

to them to drop their guns and put their hands over their heads. But, something was wrong. They didn't respond. From behind him, one of his buddies cried, "Shoot 'em Russ! Shoot 'em!" But something else (or perhaps, some "ONE" else) told him that they simply didn't understand. Seconds later, they dropped their guns and he received their surrender. I asked him if he ever thought about the fact that somewhere in Germany there are probably some elderly white-haired gentlemen who are enjoying playing with their grandchildren—all because he made the right decision. Such is the character of the man I came to know, appreciate, and respect as a friend. I saw in him a man who was guided by a desire to do what was right—not that which was merely expedient.

Now I know that on occasions like this, it is common to throw flowers and to elevate the departed almost to sainthood. Riley Russell was not perfect. He had his faults and his flaws, as do we all. During my acquaintance with him as a friend, however, I did not observe them, but he shared one or two with me. During his basic training, he had conducted himself in such a manner that earned him the position of "squad leader" over a group of men each of

whom was older than he—not bad for a 18-year-old kid. And it seems that on his passage across the Atlantic on the troop transport ship *USS Heritage* he became concerned over the lack of adequate rations for his men all of whom would soon face combat in Europe. They had voracious appetites as can be well understood, having just completed boot camp. Having discovered a stash of fruit, apples, bananas etc. in a supply room, Riley took it upon himself (in his words) to “liberate” these precious supplies and give them to his men. Some might point the finger that such action was “inappropriate.” What impresses me, however, is that regardless of whether it was appropriate, his concern was not for himself, but for his men. Shortly afterward, these same American GIs would encounter the ravages of war-torn France and hundreds of homeless children who were starving to death. Now, it was against regulations for GIs to give their rations to these refugee children, but according to Mr. Russell, he and the GIs with him were never able to deny these children a portion of their rations. Such was the character of this man, as well as so many others of what has come to be referred to as “The Great Generation,” who focused more on their moral

**responsibilities than on their personal rights. Perhaps my baby-boomer generation chafed at times while growing up under their strict discipline and conservative ways (I know that I did), but there can be little doubt that their intentions were always within the context of what they believed to be best for those under their authority.**

**It is therefore quite understandable that on that fateful 21<sup>st</sup> day in April 1945, when the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division of Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> army continued to press into Germany, that his company commander should give him the order, "Russ, take the point." Now, the "point" position of a patrol was unquestionably the most unenviable position to have, because the point man is the one who leads the patrol and is thus the first one to be targeted by the enemy. Of course, that is exactly what happened when he came into the crosshairs of a German sniper's rifle. The bullet entered below one ear, passed through his neck and exited the opposite side. He pitched forward face down and was given up for dead, because such wounds are usually fatal. After the position was secured, however, a unique series of near-miraculous events took place, apart from which Riley**

**Russell would be unknown today and would instead be lying underneath one of thousands of white crosses that dot the landscape in European cemeteries for American servicemen. And none of his descendants would ever have existed. Here's the story:**

**Lt. Joe Sallo was the first to come upon the scene, and seeing his buddy lying face down in a pool of blood, lifted his shoulder and turned him over in order to assess the damage. Believing him to be dead, Joe Sallo proceeded on, not knowing that his simple act of kindness in turning his comrade onto his back prevented him from drowning in his own blood. It would not be until a reunion some 50 years later that Joe would see the man he thought was dead. Mr. Russell told me, "We hugged each other and just cried like babies on each other's shoulders." Such is the bond of brotherhood forged by men who face death together on the field of combat. But Lt. Joe Sallo was not the only one who contributed to Riley Russell's salvation that day.**

**His body was picked up and laid in rows with others who were dead and lay there for three to four hours until someone happened to notice a slight movement and yelled, "This one's still breathing."**

**By intervening on his behalf for a medic to begin administering first aid, this unknown individual also helped save his life. But then there was that unknown blood donor, without whose vital contribution we would never have heard of the name, "Riley Russell," because it was that blood that literally gave him new life. Someone had willingly shed his own blood as a gift, as an offering, that someone else might live.**

**During the course of World War II there were over 671,000 American servicemen whose families were notified that they had been wounded in action, but nowhere in America could two parents have been more overjoyed at reading that Western Union telegram than the parents of Riley Russell, because just a short time earlier they had received another telegram from Western Union that carried those dreaded words, "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son, Pvt. Riley M. Russell was killed in action." I have mentioned to Mr. Russell several times, "You are quite literally a dead man on furlough." There can be little doubt that this man viewed life from a perspective that only those**

**who have faced death can understand. He could appreciate so much of what the rest of us only take for granted.**

**It was after talking with Mr. Russel last week that I was immediately impressed with a profound spiritual parallel to his experience with death by which we are afforded at his expense a very precious—and costly—object lesson and spiritual insight. Life experiences invariably serve as a template for spiritual realities so that we might understand them when we view them through the eyes of faith. You see, we also have incurred a fatal wound—a wound that the Bible identifies as sin, with which we came into this world. It can be traced back to a battlefield called Eden where our first two parents came into the crosshairs of our mortal enemy and the archenemy of God, Satan. It was his success in convincing them to believe a lie that resulted in their rebellion against God, and at that moment the spiritual light of their lives went out. Then it was then just a matter of time before the physical body would itself break down and die.**

**Like Mr. Russell's experience, our fatal wound brought us into this world facing the wrong direction. Only when we turn around to**

**the opposite direction do we stop drowning—drowning in our own self-interest, self-absorption, self-pity, and just plain selfishness. This “turn-around” or about-face is exactly what is meant by the word “repentance.” Jesus said in Luke 13:5—“Unless you repent, you will all perish.” How often God has to sometimes “put us on our back” in order to get us to look up? But repentance itself is not enough. Someone needs to administer the emergency first aid of the gospel of Jesus Christ and usually does so as a result of someone else who sees our need and intervenes on our behalf. But the most important agent in securing our salvation is the blood donor. Someone—as was the case with Mr. Russell—had to willingly offer up His blood as a gift, as an offering, for those who desperately need life. And it is when we by faith appropriate the life-giving source of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that we are indeed “born again.” God said in Leviticus 17:11—“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I [God] have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.”**

**Now in Mr. Russell’s experience that blood that saved his life had, unfortunately, also become contaminated with a strain of**

hepatitis, but I John 1:7 says that the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son purifies us from all sin.

Gen. Douglass MacArthur said, "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away." I don't believe this to be the case with Mr. Russell. Some believe in the unscriptural notion that when we get to heaven, we will sit on clouds playing harps. Personally, I can't imagine Mr. Russell playing a harp sitting on a cloud. Rather, this man, who so loved life, but always viewed living life within the context of doing his duty, I can imagine is right now kneeling at the feet of his Supreme Commander, the Lord Jesus, and then being raised to his feet, standing at full attention and saying, "Pvt. Riley M. Russell reporting for duty Sir." Jesus said in John 14:1-3—"Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Ye believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself that where I am there you may be also." If a toolbox can be found anywhere in heaven, that is where I imagine Mr. Russell to be—carrying a pair of pliers, a wrench, and a

**screwdriver, as happy as a little child, following His Commander, tightening up a screw here, a loose nut there, doing his duty by helping his Lord prepare a place, and smooth the way for his loved ones who he knows will eventually follow.**

**He was a faithful & loyal husband and a devoted & loving father, a trusted employee and a capable leader, a noble warrior and a public servant, a man of faith and loyal patriot who saw nothing shameful in being devoted to God and country. He left a worthy example and was a personal friend; leaving those he met better off for having known him. That was the case with me.**