

The Courage of Sam Bird

By B. T. Collins

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"I didn't learn about leadership and the strength of character it requires from an Ivy League graduate course. I learned by watching one tall captain with proud bearing and penetrating eyes." – B. T. Collins

I met Capt. Samuel R. Bird on a dusty road near An Khe, South Vietnam, one hot July day in 1966. I was an artillery forward observer with Bravo Company, 2nd/12th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, and I looked it. I was filthy, sweaty, and jaded by war, and I thought, "Oh, brother, get a load of this". Dressed in crisply starched fatigues, Captain Bird was what we called "squared away" ramrod straight, eyes on the horizon. Hell, you could still see the shine on his boot tips beneath the road dust.

After graduation from Officer Candidate School, I had sought adventure by volunteering for Vietnam. But by that hot and dangerous July, I was overdosed on "adventure," keenly interested in survival and very fond of large rocks and deep holes. Bird was my fourth company commander, and my expectations were somewhat cynical when he called all his officers and sergeants together. "I understand this company has been in Vietnam almost a year and has never had a party," he said. Now we officers and sergeants had our little clubs to which we repaired. So we stole bewildered looks at one another, cleared our throats and wondered what this wiry newcomer was talking about. "The men are going to have a party," he announced, "and they're not going to pay for it. Do I make myself clear?" A party for the "grunts" was the first order of business! Sam Bird had indeed made himself clear. We all chipped in to get food and beer for about 160 men. The troops were surprised almost to the point of suspicion - who, after all, had ever done anything for them? But that little beer and bull session was exactly what those war-weary men needed. Its effect on morale was profound.

I began to watch our new captain more closely. Bird and I were the same age, 26, but eons apart in everything else. He was from the sunny heartland of Kansas, I from the suburbs of New York City. He prayed every day and was close to his God. My faith had evaporated somewhere this side of altar boy. I was a college dropout who had wandered into the Army with the words "discipline problem" close on my heels. He had graduated from The Citadel, South Carolina's proud old military school. If ever a man looked like a leader, it was Sam Bird. He was tall and lean, with penetrating blue eyes. But the tedium and terror of a combat zone takes far sterner qualities than mere appearance.

Our outfit was helicoptered to a mountain outpost one day for the thankless task of preparing a position for others to occupy. We dug trenches, filled sandbags, and strung wire under a blistering sun. It was hard work, and Sam was everywhere, pitching in with the men. A colonel who was supposed to oversee the operation remained at a shelter, doing paperwork. Sam looked at what his troops had accomplished, then, red-faced, strode over to the colonel's sanctuary. We couldn't hear what he was saying to his

superior, but we had the unmistakable sense that Sam was uncoiling a bit. The colonel suddenly found time to inspect the fortifications and thank the men for a job well done.

Another day, this time on the front lines, after weeks of awful chow, we were given something called "coffee cake" that had the look and texture of asphalt paving. Furious, Sam got on the radiophone to headquarters. He reached the colonel and said, "Sir, you and the supply officer need to come out here and taste the food, because this rifle company is not taking one step further." "Not a good way to move up in the Army," I thought. But the colonel came out, and the food improved from that moment. Such incidents were not lost on the men of Bravo Company.

During the monsoon season, we had to occupy a landing zone. The torrential, wind-driven rains had been falling for weeks. Like everyone else, I sat under my poncho in a stupor, wondering how much of the wetness was rainwater and how much was sweat. Nobody cared that the position was becoming flooded. We had all just crawled inside ourselves. Suddenly I saw Sam, Mr. Spit and Polish, with nothing on but his olive-drab undershorts and his boots. He was digging a drainage ditch down the center of the camp. He didn't say anything, just dug away, mud splattering his chest, steam rising from his back and shoulders. Slowly and sheepishly, we emerged from under our ponchos, and, shovels in hand, we began helping "the old man" get the ditch dug. We got the camp tolerably dried out, and with that one simple act transformed our morale.

Sam deeply loved the U.S. Army and traditions. Few of the men knew it, but he had been in charge of a special honors unit of the Old Guard, which serves at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery and participates in the Army's most solemn ceremonies. He was the kind of guy whose eyes would mist during the singing of the National Anthem.

Sam figured patriotism was just a natural part of being an American. But he knew that morale was a function not so much of inspiration as of good boots, dry socks, extra ammo and hot meals. Sam's philosophy was to put his troops first. On that foundation, he built respect a brick at a time. His men ate first; he ate last. Instead of merely learning their names, he made it a point to know the men. A lot of the soldiers were high-school dropouts and would-be tough guys just a few years younger than him. Some were scared, and a few were still in partial shock at being in a shooting war. Sam patiently worked on their pride and self-confidence. Yet there was never any doubt who was in charge.

I had been around enough to know what a delicate accomplishment that was. Half in wonder, an officer once told me, "Sam can dress a man down till his ears burn, and the next minute that same guy is eager to follow him into hell." But he never chewed out a man in front of his subordinates. Sam wouldn't ask his men to do anything he wasn't willing to do himself. He dug his own foxholes. He never gave lectures on appearance, but even at God-forsaken outposts in the Central Highlands, he would set aside a few ounces of water from his canteen to shave. His uniform, even if it was jungle fatigues, would be as clean and neat as he could make it. Soon, all of Bravo Company had a reputation for looking sharp.

One sultry and miserable day on a dirt road at the base camp, Sam gathered the men together and began talking about how tough the infantryman's job is, how proud he was

of them, how they should always look out for each other. He took out a bunch of Combat Infantryman's Badges, signifying that a soldier had paid his dues under fire, and he presented one to each of the men. There wasn't a soldier there who would have traded that moment on the road for some parade-ground ceremony. That was the way Sam Bird taught me leadership. He packed a lot of lessons into the six months we were together. Put the troops first. Know that morale often depends on small things. Respect every man's dignity. Always be ready to fight for your people. Lead by example. Reward performance. But Sam had another lesson to teach, one that would take long and painful years, a lesson in courage.

I left Bravo Company in December 1966 to return to the States for a month before joining a Special Forces unit. Being a big, tough paratrooper, I didn't tell Sam what his example had meant to me. But I made a point of visiting his parents and sister in Wichita, Kan., just before Christmas to tell them how much he'd affected my life, and how his troops would walk off a cliff for him. His family was relieved when I told them that his tour of combat was almost over and he'd be moving to a safe job in the rear. Two months later, in a thatched hut in the Mekong Delta, I got a letter from Sam's sister, saying that he had conned his commanding officer into letting him stay an extra month with his beloved Bravo Company.

On his last day, January 27, 1967 - his 27th birthday - the men had secretly planned a party, even arranging to have a cake flown in. They were going to "pay back the old man." But orders came down for Bravo to lead an airborne assault on a North Vietnamese regimental headquarters. Sam's helicopter was about to touch down at the attack point when it was ripped by enemy fire. Slugs shattered his left ankle and right leg. Another struck the left side of his head, carrying off almost a quarter of his skull. His executive officer, Lt. Dean Parker, scooped Sam's brains back into the gaping wound.

Reading the letter, I felt as if I'd been kicked in the stomach. I began querying every hospital in Vietnam to find out if Sam was still alive. But in June, before I could discover his fate, I was in a firefight in an enemy-controlled zone. I had thrown four grenades. The fifth one exploded in my hand. I lost an arm and a leg. Nearly a year later, in March 1968, I finally caught up with Sam. I was just getting the hang of walking with an artificial leg when I visited him at the VA Medical Center in Memphis, Tenn. Seeing him, I had to fight back the tears. The wiry, smiling soldier's soldier was blind in the left eye and partially so in the right. Surgeons had removed metal shards and damaged tissue from deep within his brain, and he had been left with a marked depression on the left side of his head. The circles under his eyes told of sleepless hours and great pain. The old clear voice of command was slower now, labored, and with an odd, high pitch. I saw his brow knit as he looked through his one good eye, trying to remember. He recognized me, but believed I had served with him in Korea, his first tour of duty.

Slowly, Sam rebuilt his ability to converse. But while he could recall things from long ago, he couldn't remember what he had eaten for breakfast. Headaches came on him like terrible firestorms. There was pain, too, in his legs. He had only partial use of one arm, with which he'd raise himself in front of the mirror to brush his teeth and shave.

He had the support of a wonderful family, and once he was home in Wichita, his sister brought his old school sweetheart, Annette Blazier, to see him. A courtship began, and in

1972 they were married. They built a house like Sam had dreamed of - red brick, with a flagpole out front. He had developed the habit of addressing God as "Sir" and spoke to Him often. He never asked to be healed. At every table grace, he thanked God for sending him Annette and for "making it possible for me to live at home in a free country."

In 1976, Sam and Annette traveled to The Citadel for his 15th class reunion. World War II hero Gen. Mark Clark, the school's president emeritus, asked about his wounds and said, "On behalf of your country, I want to thank you for all you did." With pride, Sam answered, "Sir, it was the least I could do." Later, Annette chided him gently for understating the case. After all, he had sacrificed his health and career in Vietnam. Sam gave her an incredulous look. "I had friends who didn't come back," he said. "I'm enjoying the freedoms they died for."

I visited Sam in Wichita and phoned him regularly. You would not have guessed that he lived with pain every day. Once, speaking of me to his sister, he said, "I should never complain about the pain in my leg, because B.T. doesn't have a leg." I'd seen a lot of men with lesser wounds reduced to anger and self-pity. Never a hint of that passed Sam's lips, though I knew that, every waking moment, he was fighting to live.

On October 18, 1984, after 17 years, Sam's body couldn't take any more. When we received the news of his death, a number of us from Bravo Company flew to Wichita, where Sam was to be buried with his forebearers. The day before the burial, his old exec, Dean Parker, and I went to the funeral home to make sure everything was in order. As Dean straightened the brass on Sam's uniform, I held my captain's hand and looked into his face, a face no longer filled with pain. I thought about how unashamed Sam always was to express his love for his country, how sunny and unaffected he was in his devotion to his men. I ached that I had never told him what a fine soldier and man he was. But in my deep sadness, I felt a glow of pride for having served with him, and for having learned the lessons of leadership that would serve me all my life. That is why I am telling you about Samuel R. Bird and these things that happened so long ago.

Chances are, you have seen Sam Bird. He was the tall officer in charge of the casket detail at the funeral of President John F. Kennedy. Historian William Manchester described him as "a lean, sinewy Kansan, the kind of American youth whom Congressmen dutifully praise each Fourth of July and whose existence many, grown jaded by years on the Hill, secretly doubt." There can be no doubt about Sam, about who he was, how he lived and how he led. We buried him that fall afternoon, as they say, "with honors." But as I walked from that grave, I knew I was the honored one for having known him.

Note: At the time that this article was written, Mr. B.T. Collins had recovered from severe war wounds to become the highly acclaimed director of the California Conservation Corps and later chief of staff to the governor of California. He later became California's deputy state treasurer. He is now deceased.