

The Sniper With a Steadfast Aim

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The academics write their mighty histories. The politicians dictate their memoirs. The retired generals give their speeches. The intellectuals record their ironic epiphanies. And in all this hubbub attending wars either lost or won, the key man is forgotten -- the lonely figure crouched in the bushes, wishing he were somewhere else: the man with the rifle.

Such a man has just died, and his passing will be marked elsewhere only in small, specialized journals with names like Leatherneck and Tactical Shooter and in the Jesuitical culture of the Marine Corps, where he is still fiercely admired.

And in some quarters, even that small amount of respect will be observed with skepticism. After all, he was merely a grunt. He was a sergeant who made people do push-ups. He fought in a bad war. He was beyond irony, perspective or introspection. He made no policies, he commanded no battalions, he invented no colorful code names for operations. But worst of all, he was a sniper.

Gunnery Sgt. (Ret.) Carlos N. Hathcock II, USMC, died Monday at 57 in Virginia Beach, after a long decline in the grip of the only enemy he wasn't able to kill: multiple sclerosis. In the end, he didn't recognize his own friends. So it was a kind of mercy, one supposes. But he had quite a life. In two tours in the 1960s, he wandered through the big bad bush in the Republic of South Vietnam, and with a rifle made by Winchester, a heart made by God and a discipline made by the Marine Corps, he stalked and killed 93 of his country's enemies. And that was only the official count.

It's not merely that Vietnam was a war largely without heroes. It's also that the very nature of Hathcock's heroism was a problem for so many. He killed, nakedly and without warning. There is something in the mercilessness of the sniper that makes the heart recoil. He attracts vultures, not only to his carcasses but also to his psyche. Is he sick? Is he psycho? The line troops call him "Murder Inc." behind his back. They puzzle over what he does. When they kill, it's in hot blood, in a haze of smoke and adrenaline. And much of the other death they see is inflicted by industrial applications, such as air power or artillery, which almost seem beyond human agency.

But the sniper is different. He isn't at the point of the spear, he is the point of the spear. He reduces warfare to its purest element, the destruction of another human being. He's like a '50s mad scientist, who learns things no man can learn -- how it looks through an 8x scope when you center-punch an enemy at 200 yards, and how it feels -- but he learns them at the risk of his own possible exile from the community.

But maybe Hathcock never cared much for the larger community, but only the Marine Corps and its mission. "Vietnam," he told a reporter in 1987, "was just right for me." He even began sniping before the Corps had instituted an official policy.

And one must give Hathcock credit for consistency: In all the endless revising done in the wake of our second-place finish in the Southeast Asia war games, he never reinvented himself or pretended to be something he wasn't. He remained a true believer to the end, not in his nation's glory or its policies, but in his narrower commitment to the Marine code of the rifle. He never euphemized, didn't call himself an "enemy troop-strength reduction technician" or "counter-morale specialist." He never walked away from who he'd been and what he'd done. He was salty, leathery and a tough Marine Corps professional NCO, even in a wheelchair. His license plate said it best: SNIPER.

"Hell," he once said, "anybody would be crazy to like to go out and kill folks. . . . I never did enjoy killing anybody. It's my job. If I don't get those bastards, then they're going to kill a lot of these kids. That's the way I look at it."

Though he was known for many years as the Marine Corps' leading sniper -- later, a researcher uncovered another sniper with a few more official kills -- he took no particular pleasure in the raw numbers.

"I'll never look at it like this was some sort of shooting match, where the man with the most kills wins the gold medal," he once said.

Ironically, the only decoration for valor that he won was for saving, not taking, lives. On his second tour in Vietnam, on Sept. 16, 1969, he was riding atop an armored personnel carrier when it struck a 500-pound mine and erupted into flames. Hathcock was knocked briefly unconscious, sprayed with flaming gasoline and thrown clear. Waking, he climbed back aboard the burning vehicle to drag seven other Marines out. Then, "with complete disregard for his own safety and while suffering an excruciating pain from his burns, he bravely ran back through the flames and exploding ammunition to ensure that no Marines had been left behind," according to the citation for the Silver Star he received in November 1996, after an extensive letter-writing campaign by fellow Marines had failed to win him the Medal of Honor for his exploits with a rifle.

But he was equally proud of the fact that as a sniper platoon sergeant on two tours, no man under his command was killed.

"I never lost a person over there," he told a visiting journalist in 1995. "Never lost nobody but me, and that wasn't my fault."

Hathcock was an Arkansan, from a dirt-poor broken home, who joined the Marine Corps at 17 and quickly understood that he had found his place in the world. He qualified as an expert rifleman in boot camp and began quickly to win competitive shooting events, specializing in service rifle competition. In 1965, he won the Wimbledon Cup, the premier American 1,000-yard shooting championship. Shortly after that he was in Vietnam, but it was six months before the Marines learned the value of dedicated sniper operations and a former commanding officer built a new unit around his talents. Hathcock gave himself to the war with such fury that he took no liberty, no days off and toward the end of his first tour was finally restricted to quarters to prevent him from going on further missions.

After the war, he suffered from the inevitable melancholy. Forced medical retirement from the Corps in 1979 -- he had served 19 years 10 months 5 days -- led to drinking problems and extended bitterness. The multiple sclerosis, discovered in 1975, certainly didn't help, and burns that covered 43 percent of his body made things even more painful, but what may have saved his life -- it certainly saved the quality of his life -- was the incremental recognition that came his way as more and more people discovered who he was and what he had done. Even in the atmosphere of moral recrimination in the aftermath of the war, enough people far from media centers and universities were still attracted to the spartan simplicity of his life and battles and to the integrity of his heroism.

His biography, "Marine Sniper," written by Charles Henderson, was published in 1985; it sold over half a million copies. In the brief blast of publicity that followed, he stood still for interviews with The Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune and others. The general population may have soon forgotten about him, but in the world of target shooters, hunters and police and military shooting, he was a revered figure. And particularly as shooters came to perceive themselves under attack from mainstream culture, he became a symbol of the heroic man with a gun. He connected, in some atavistic way, to other American heroes, like Audie Murphy or Sgt. Alvin York, perhaps even Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. They were all men like Hathcock who grew up on hardscrabble farms far from the big cities and learned early to shoot, read sign and understand the terrain.

Other gun culture enterprises kept him visible in a specialized universe unmonitored by the media, and put some money on the table. He authorized a poster that showed him in full combat regalia, crouched over his Model 70 Winchester, his face blackened, his boonie cap scrunched close to his head, the only identifier being a small sprig of feather in its band. In fact, a long-range .308-caliber ammunition was sold as "White Feather," from the Vietnamese Long Tra'ng, his nickname. He consulted on law enforcement sharpshooting, a growth area in the '80s and '90s as nearly every police department in America appointed a designated marksman to its de rigueur SWAT team. He appeared in several videos, where he revealed himself to be a practically oriented man of few but decisive words, with a sense of humor dry as a stick. He inspired several novels and at least two nonfiction books, and his exploits made it onto TV, where a "JAG" episode featured a tough old Marine sniper, and even into the movies, even if he was never credited.

In both 1994's "Sniper" and, more recently, "Saving Private Ryan," heroic riflemen dispatch enemy counter-snipers with rounds so perfectly placed they travel the tube of the enemy's scope before hitting him in the eye. In both cases, the shooters are tough Southerners (played by Tom Berenger and Barry Pepper), very much in the Hathcock mold. According to "Marine Sniper," Hathcock made such a shot, dispatching a Viet Cong sniper sent to target him specifically.

Also according to that book, he ambushed a female enemy interrogator, a North Vietnamese general and a VC platoon that he took down, a man at a time, over a 24-hour engagement.

Finally, and perhaps best of all, he ascended to a special kind of Marine celebrity. The Corps named the annual Carlos Hathcock Award after him for its best marksman. A Marine library in Washington has been named after him and a Virginia Civil Air Patrol unit named itself after him.

In 1990 a Marine unit raised \$5,000 in donations to fight multiple sclerosis and presented it to him at his home. They brought it to him the old-fashioned way, the Marine way: They ran 216 miles from Camp Lejeune, N.C., to Virginia Beach. It was a tribute to his toughness that Carlos Hathcock understood.

According to the account in the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, the old sniper told the men, "I am so touched, I can hardly talk."

In the end, he could not escape the terrible disease that had afflicted him since 1975. But death, with whom he had an intimate relationship, at least came to him quietly -- as if out of respect.

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