

THIS IS MY FIGHT SONG (formerly called “Battle Scars”)
For Some Veterans, the Real Battle Has Just Begun

Under the Vest, Close to the Chest

by Susan Heffner



When I first considered it might be appropriate in honor of Memorial Day to ask a veteran to share a story about a soldier who didn't make it home, I knew it wouldn't be an easy subject. Yet, I never anticipated just how difficult it would prove, even for vets I've known for decades. Some outright refused; others debated for a bit before declining, but all thought it a noble effort.

“I tucked that ‘box’ in the back of my ‘attic’ 50 years ago. I don’t think I could even open the lid now, let alone look inside.” ~ RC

Fortunately, I met a wonderful gentleman who cautiously agreed to meet with me and share some special memories about a very special man. It was a moving experience for both of us, and I'm grateful for his painful forthrightness as much as I'm thankful for the sacrifice and service of all our veterans.

This is their story....

“A Big, Tall Texan”

Q. I know every man matters, but would you—could you—share something about just one special person?

A. How does one sum up a life? Let alone a life that, at the time, seemed larger than life itself? Perhaps the better question, young lady, would be: *‘What is the measure of a man?’*

I suppose it all started with a big, tall Texan [*chuckles*], ‘cause Lord knows everything's bigger'n the Lone Star State: the hats, the steers, the skies....

Q. The men?

A. Yes, the men. *[Sighs]* Let me tell you about one such man. But before I describe him, let me tell you a little 'bout me.

I grew up in 'North Cackalacky'—that's North Carolina to you Yanks—on a mountain in the middle of nowhere, with a clear stream, plenty of woods and hills as far as the eye could see. We lived in a small log cabin built by my Grandpa, and aside from a few farm animals, mostly, we lived off the land.

My Dad taught me how to shoot soon's I was old enough to hold a rifle, and he rationed out shells to my brothers and me. If we came home empty-handed, not only did we all go hungry, but we'd get an ass-whoopin', too.

“Play Me That Mountain Music”

Our house was always filled with music, 'specially bluegrass. My Mom played fiddle, Dad played banjo, and my older brother played harmonica. God, those were good times! We was poor mountain folk, but I felt like we had it all, mostly 'cause my folks gave us their all.

That was where I first learned about the stars, got lost watching 'em trace across the sky. My Grandpa taught me how to navigate by 'em, too, but as I grew older, something 'bout all those stars made me realize there was something bigger; I just had to see more.

Then came the war.

“All Along the Watchtower”

Soon's I was old enough, I enlisted, and they sent me for special training. That's where I met Jesse. He was 3 years older'n me, and he called me 'Wild Bill' on account of I grew up in the back woods, 'backwards' as he used to tease. He trained in Civil Engineering, and although he couldn't wait to get back to Texas, he planned to be career military.

Anyway, we got assigned to the same barracks, and two months later, they 'paired' us up. From that point on, we were inseparable—like brothers, only closer. He had nerves of steel, that boy, 'specially on point. I couldn't have had a better partner.

Despite being a 6'3, 220-lb. monster, Jesse was easygoing. Everything rolled off his back, and he'd give you the shirt off it, too! He definitely had his opinions, but he never forced 'em on anyone, and he seldom shared personal info, 'cept with me.

“We're Gonna Rock This Town”

Where I was the quiet man, Jesse was the opposite, larger'n life. People were naturally drawn to him, 'specially the ladies—boy, did they love him! Laughter, good looks, a sense of humor—he had it all.

One time, after comin' home from maneuvers, he decided we should 'paint' our faces before hittin' the town. Said it would make us look 'mysterious.' So he drew a black stripe alongside his right eye, and I drew one along my left. That was the time I 'won' the girl, and we dated for two years. I didn't know it then, but she would later 'save' me when I lost him.

“Gimme Three Steps”

Despite being a big guy, he rarely got angry and wasn't easily provoked, but you never wanted to back Jesse into a corner because then, all bets were off. Put it this way: I was glad he was on my side!

I remember being in a bar when a fight broke out ‘mongst the locals. All we wanted to do was get the hell outta Dodge, but someone threw a chair at Jesse as we were leaving. At one point, he had two guys in headlocks—one under each arm. Well, the night ended with both of us coolin’ our jets in jail for two days ‘til our CO cut us loose. That’s one weekend I’d like to forget!

“The Snakes Crawl at Night”

As I said, he had a wicked sense of humor. One of the guys owned a ball python. I worked midnight to 8 am; Jesse worked 4 pm to midnight. After I fell asleep next morning, they put this damned python on my bed just to see what I’d do. I’ve never really been partial to snakes. So I feel something heavy crawling up my chest and open my eyes to a forked tongue in my face. Well, I slid outta that bed faster’n a sidewinder, and those two were just laughin’ and grinnin’ their tails off while I cussed ‘em both out! I never did get even for that one....

“Give a Little Bit”

Jesse also had a huge heart. He had friends in a nearby assisted living facility. We’d visit when we were off duty, tryin’ to help best we could, including relocating them. Jesse was always like that, forever makin’ people smile. He definitely made their world—and mine—a better place.

“This is the End...My Only Friend...”

Five great years I knew him. It was that same fierce spirit, independence and big heart that brought about the end. HE thought he was helpin’ ME! It never should’ve happened...but damnit...he wouldn’t listen....

Q. Were you with him when he died?

A. *[Long pause]* No, we split up, and I got shot in the shoulder. I found his body soon after, but I carried him all the way out—my best friend. I weighed 160 to his 220, but I made damned sure he didn’t get left behind! No man should. I never really understood what that meant ‘til then. *[Chokes up and apologizes]* I’ve never told no one that before....

Q. Even knowing the outcome, would you have missed knowing the man to avoid the pain?

A. I’d do it again in a heartbeat. You know why? Because he had SUCH a LOVE of LIFE! He truly believed he was making the world a better place, and he did, but he also made me a better person. Not a day goes by I don’t think of him. *[Tears well up]* When they buried him, they buried part of me, too. He was the last friend I ever made in the service and for many years after.

“By the Time I Get to Phoenix”

I returned to base in Phoenix different: bitter, cynical, still a loner, but now a man to walk around. They gave me a Purple Heart—like that could somehow replace Jesse.

Q. How did they honor him?

A. *[Bitterly]* With a posthumous Purple Heart and a military funeral I was forbidden to attend. I went anyway, quietly.

Q. If you could tell his family one thing, what would it be?

A. That he was a good man...an honorable man.... More’n anyone will ever know....

Q. So what IS the measure of a man?

A. *[Long pause]* It’s about the size of a heart as big as Texas.

“Keeper of the Stars”

Q. I’m overwhelmed by your openness, and I feel your pain, even after all these years. I’ll do my best to give justice to Jesse’s memory.

A. If there was justice, he’d still be here! *[Sighs]* Perhaps, I’ve done an injustice by keeping such a great man to myself all these years.

Q. Did you ever go back to Appalachia?

A. For a time, but the skies were different...and the hills never echoed quite the same.

Q. Do you still look to the stars for guidance?

A. Sometimes, sometimes...and sometimes I imagine a big, tall Texan grinnin’ beside me. But it’s no longer the North Star that guides me. For me, it’s a solitary ‘Lone Star’ that somehow seems to burn the brightest.

“EAR – Express, Address, Resolve.” Please contact me at Susan.Heffner.ForTheVets@gmail.com with your feedback, your stories or anything else you’d like to share. Together, we *will* make a difference.