

Death of a Hero - Birth of a Legend

by Jim Morris, 1948–

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I first knew Rick Rescorla when we were writing students in the University of Oklahoma Professional Writing program. We met at a table of coffee drinkers in the Hester-Robertson cafeteria. All of us were writing students. The guys were either veterans or gimps or both. The women were a Seminole Princess, a Ukrainian adventuress and some good ol' Okie gals.

I soon ran out of my own war stories and started telling Larry Dring's, with attribution. Turned out Rick and Dring were OCS classmates.

"Look," I said to Rick. "I knew Dring for three years on Okinawa and for a year in Vietnam. I've never once seen him in the correct uniform. He's a great jungle fighter, but how did he ever get through OCS?"

Rick smiled, "He spent most of his time in a French camo bush jacket and red beret, giving weapons demonstrations to ROTC cadets." That was Larry to a T, and the start of my friendship with Rick.

He was big, good-looking and charismatic. He spoke in enthusiastic rushes of well-chosen words, in an American accent with just a hint of a Cornish lilt to it.

And he was the most conservative looking student on the OU campus. It was high hippie days, but Rick always wore brogans, pleated slacks, usually with a dress shirt, and a short haircut.

My wife, Juanita, loved Rick as a friend, and wanted him to be happy. She introduced him to Betsy Nathan, a beautiful young woman she had met in art class. They married.

Cyril Richard Rescorla was born in Cornwall, England in May of 1939. I only learned his first name was Cyril when I read it in LTG Hal Moore and Joe Galloway's great book *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young*. Good thing for him, too. I'd have razzed his ass until it bled. He hated the name Cyril.

In Cornwall Rescorla was a soccer star and a good student. There was nothing there for a man of his talents. Everybody expected him to become a pro footballer, but he chose the army. He rose to sergeant in 22 SAS on Cyprus, an island in turmoil at the time. He saw a good deal of small-unit combat. This was not like a US unit where the intel goes up the line, comes back down to an operational unit in a distorted form with a restrictive oplan drawn up by higher headquarters, to be acted on after it's too late. The plan was, bring in a terr at noon, encourage him to discuss his associates and their whereabouts in the evening, and roll up his net about 0430 the next morning. Not a lot of messing around.

But, as with Cornwall, the British Army didn't offer enough scope for a bright guy with a lower class background. The officers were all named "Rupert" and "Nigel." They grew up in 300-year-old houses, and their fathers were earls and lords. No commoners need apply.

Next stop, Bobbie school. As usual Rescorla was the honor graduate. "Most boring job I ever had," Rick said later. He was assigned to the Scotland Yard flying squad, perhaps the most prestigious police posting in England. The paperwork nauseated him. He went looking for more interesting work, and found it in Africa.

What is now Zambia was then Northern Rhodesia. The British were preparing to turn the colony over to the Africans, but in the meantime order had to be maintained. Rick's police unit was a paramilitary force, with riot control duties as well as standard police work. Rescorla was also the star forward of the football (soccer) team.

At this point Dan Hill showed up. Hill was a rowdy lad from Chicago who had found a home as an instructor at the U.S. Army Ranger School. Before that he'd had an interesting undercover assignment, running guns and teaching sniping to Hungarian revolutionaries. In Chicago, Hill had picked up fluent German, and many of the mercenaries in Katanga were old Wehrmacht and Waffen SS types. Hill was encouraged by some civilians from Virginia to leave the army and join them. They thought it would be nice if he kept them informed of events in Katanga.

He rather unexpectedly (by them) quickly became a lieutenant in the mercenary force and won a major battle. He and his mercs, and the blacks of his Katangan "police" unit let the UN force, mostly Congolese, get across the main bridge into Katanga. Then they dropped the bridge, closed the road ahead, and opened up. The Congolese mostly jumped into a ravine, which Hill had thoughtfully mined, and died. It was a great victory for the Katangans.

The Feds from Langley had hoped for a lower profile, and asked him to leave.

He left for Northern Rhodesia and met Rescorla his first day in Kitwe. The Northern Rhodesian Rugby team had just beat South Africa, and Rick was the star forward.

Dan congratulated Rescorla, who pretty much responded, "Who are you?" Dan told him he was a U.S. Army Ranger, and that was the start of their friendship. He became Rick's roommate and ate in the police mess. No one questioned it.

A nearby village had been plagued by a lion that was killing off their livestock. They went to the police and Rick went out there with a .577 rifle, and staked out a goat as bait. As the lion approached the goat Rick stepped out. The lion forgot all about the goat. He sprang at Rick and Rick shot him in midair. He wore two of his teeth and the shell from that round on a chain until he gave it to Hill when Dan went off to Afghanistan to fight with the Muj in 1982.

I once asked Rescorla how he happened to decide to come to the United States. He replied, "I considered the U.S., Canada, and Australia." In Bob Edwards's documentary about Rescorla, *Voice of a Prophet*, Rick says, "I was airborne, and the U.S. Army has the best Airborne in the world."

He was always ambitious, and with an open society and a war going on, plus a decent pay scale compared with most armies, the U.S. probably looked pretty good. Besides, Rick, even as a lad in Cornwall, had loved American ideals, movies and the myth of the Old West.

As a foreigner it took Rescorla longer to get a security clearance than it did Dan, so he was a class behind him in OCS. Hill was already a senior candidate when Rick entered. It fell to Hill's lot to yell and scream at his best friend. Once or twice he took him out for punishment runs, which went way down the road to a picnic basket, some decent food and a cache of cold beer. Then back to the compound, where Hill ran Rick to the barracks, shouting verbal abuse.

After OCS Rick was assigned to the 2d Division, from which his battalion was quickly converted to the 2d of the 7th Cav.

I'm assuming that most readers of this article have seen *We Were Soldiers*, and that many have read the book. If you have you'll know that Rescorla was all over the book. It's his picture, bearded, dirty, advancing with fixed bayonet, on the cover. Rick's own copy of the book was inscribed by General Moore, "To Rick Rescorla, the best platoon leader I have known in two wars."

It galled Rick that the contributions of his platoon, his company, and his battalion were glossed over or omitted in the film.

Captain Myron Diduryk's company, including Rick's platoon, was sent out to reinforce 1/7 Cav after its Bravo Company was obliterated the day before. Rick's platoon held against attacks all that night. When things got tense early in the morning, he *sang* to them, old Cornish fight songs, and British battle songs, and of course, *Garry Owen*. The next day, on a sweep, he and his RTO, Sam Fantino, approached a machinegun emplacement with what appeared to be three dead NVA in it. Then one sat up and started firing. Rick and Fantino went down in the grass. Rick borrowed a grenade from Fantino and killed the gunner.

After 1/7 Cav was pulled out, Bravo of 2/7 Cav with it, the rest of 2/7 was sent in to clear the area, and walk to another LZ, Albany. Initially they were accompanied by 2/5 Cav, which peeled off for another LZ, leaving 2/7 to proceed to Albany.

The Cav was still fairly new to Vietnam. Ia Drang was the first big battle. 2/7 Cav had a new commander, Robert McDade, who had just come from a lengthy period of staff duty. He hadn't seen combat since Korea. At the time of the march his battalion had barely slept for forty hours. It is treacherously easy to get careless and make mistakes you'd never make otherwise when you're dead tired and stupid from lack of sleep.

The column moved without flank security.

They had been told the enemy had been pulled out, and most were new enough in country to believe it. When they reached the edge of the LZ, McDade called all the company commanders forward to confer on how they'd set up.

With all its senior officers assembled together, isolated from their commands, and the troops flaked out asleep by the side of the trail, security poor to none, and gaps in the column, it was attacked by roughly a regiment of North Vietnamese. They were surrounded and cut up into islands of Alamos. They fought valiantly, but their situation was desperate.

Back at Camp Holloway Diduryk's company, including Rescorla's platoon, had had a few beers, some chow, and a night of uninterrupted sleep next to their packs beside the airstrip. They were offered blank, clean fatigues, but had elected to keep the old ones, with their Cav patches still on them. The very uniforms they had worn at X-ray had become precious.

They planned to return to An Khe for a stand down. And they were filled with sadness for lost comrades.

Then they got the word. They were going back in. The Cavalry was going to rescue the Cavalry. They couldn't believe it. But no one complained. They shouldered their packs and rifles, and marched to the waiting choppers. They marched proudly, looking good. Rick was never so proud of them as in that moment.

REMFs lined the road, some in Hawaiian shirts, some in mirror shades. "Hey, where ya goin'?" one called.

"To kick ass," Rescorla growled in reply.

When Rick and his platoon dropped into 2/7 Cav's position they found a disorganized mess. A lot of those tiny Alamos had been overrun and the wounded had been executed. One Irish sergeant walked back into 2/7's lines with a hole shot through the back of his neck. An NVA had put an SKS carbine in his mouth and pulled the trigger. He never lost consciousness.

When Rick hit the ground he had a pistol on his hip, an M79 slung on his back, and an M16 in his hand. He looked at the disarray and said, "Good! Good! Good! Good! They'll come again tonight and we'll mop them up."

There was thought of a night patrol to round up the wounded. This was abandoned as possibly causing more casualties than it saved. About 0430 Rick and his platoon sergeant did run a two-man patrol to bring in some wounded they heard moaning.

The next morning patrols rounded up the wounded. There were further scattered clashes and then the enemy just melted into the jungle and went back to Cambodia.

Checking the perimeter Rick saw movement in a cluster of "dead" NVA. He fired into it, and found two dead and one young *bo-doi* dying. The dying boy carried an

old French bugle, made in 1901 in Paris. It also had two Chinese markings scratched into it that translated roughly into "long and faithful service."

After that battle Captain Diduryk approached Rick. Hard Corps had been the nickname of Rick's platoon, and one of his personal nicknames as well. Diduryk wanted to appropriate the nickname for the whole company. And the bugle. Rick agreed. It was his company too, and what greater compliment could his platoon have than that the whole company wanted to adopt its spirit. Today the bugle is on display at the 1st Cav museum at Ft. Hood, Texas.

Not long after the battle Col Moore was promoted to command the 3d Bde of the Cav. Rick became his recon platoon leader. After that it was all soft caps and soft walking for Rescorla. Hard fighting though. This was before the days of the LRRP companies, but Rick knew jungle recon from Africa. I don't think Rick's organization and tactics were adopted by the LRRP companies, but they independently arrived at an organization and tactics that were virtually identical.

Hill had come to Vietnam not long after Rescorla, to lead a platoon in the 101st. They were close enough to keep in touch over their unit radios. They had a private freq. For his R&R Hill went to An Khe and walked point for Rescorla for a week.

Later, a company of the 325, commanded by a captain named Furgeson got into a battle near the Special Forces camp at Dong Tre. They were badly outnumbered, had lost all their platoon leaders and were disintegrating. Hill and another officer volunteered to go in and help them get it together and get out.

The company, what there was of it, split into three separate groups to E&E to a nearby hill with a pagoda on it. There they formed a perimeter. They were low on ammo. There was no tac air available. It looked like they were going to be overrun and annihilated.

Hill called Rescorla to say good-bye. He asked him to look out for the wife and kids.

"Where are you?" Rick demanded.

Dan told him.

"I'll be right there."

Rescorla commandeered helos for his platoon and headed out. He then asked Col. Moore if he'd like to join the party. Moore brought the entire brigade. There were fifty-seven Americans alive on that hill when they arrived. Most of them were fighting with the weapons and ammo of the enemy dead, their own having long been exhausted.

If you get the impression that Hill and Rescorla were hard boys, you'd be right. If you got the impression that they were epic characters you'd be right again. So is McBee. More on him later.

Hill adopted a policy of not getting to know his men personally. He didn't want to grieve excessively when they got killed. Rick remembered every man by name. Most of them died in his arms, and he dipped his hands in their blood, a custom he'd learned in Africa. Rick felt it gave him closure. But the truth is he never got any closure on those men. He grieved for them all his life, and I'm pretty sure he saw them in his dreams the night before he died.

Realizing the U.S. did not have a will to win in Vietnam he left the army. He was a senior tactical officer in the OCS program when he left, and he became the

senior tac of the Oklahoma National Guard's OCS program. Hill stayed in, and returned to Vietnam as a company commander in the 1st Division.

Which pretty much brings us back to the table of coffee drinkers in Hester-Robertson cafeteria.

Rick rented a tiny one-bedroom house in the middle of a half-acre lot. I rode over with him in his red MGB. We pulled in the drive, and as he shut off the engine he reached back and gathered a waxed paper Coke cup and every bit of trash he'd accumulated since he left that morning. By the time we got out of the car it was immaculate. The trash went immediately into the trash can outside. Inside his sparsely furnished home was decorated only with military memorabilia, clean and orderly enough for inspection. I don't mean a cheesy daily inspection. I mean the Annual General Inspection.

For awhile there we made a mob; me and Juanita, Rick and Betsy, Fred McBee and his wife Kathy, and George Murray, the wheelchair athlete who broke the four-minute mile, beat the winning runners in the Boston Marathon, and got his picture on the Wheaties box—and Murray's squeeze *du jour*.

It is widely believed that paraplegics are impotent. Many are not, but the lack of feeling in their lower body makes the act of coitus practically interminable. This young woman had found that to be true on her first date with George and gone immediately home to get her things and move in with him. I found her fascinating. She entertained us all with a lengthy tale of having miscarried while water skiing.

McBee is a quadriplegic. He had ridden broncs and bulls in the rodeo, but when he got tossed he was just riding an old plug horse in a cow lot. The horse took a tumble, McBee took a header into the ground and *crunch...* broke his neck, just like his momma always said he would.

Kathy is a physical therapist. They met in the rehab hospital. Fred was paralyzed from the 6th spinal vertebrae down. He was seventeen, broke, paralyzed and his education consisted of having read the encyclopedia through S. Kathy was beautiful, a dead ringer for the old illustrations of Alice in Alice in Wonderland.

Fred proposed marriage.

Kathy said, "Well, Fred, I don't know... On the surface you don't seem such a great prospect."

"Make up your mind," said Fred, "The offer won't be there forever."

She married him.

He was the best natural writer in our group, and, for my money, the most courageous. For a quad getting through every day is like climbing Everest. When Fred got his new car, an Olds Toronado, he "fell down in the driveway so many times, learning to get from my chair to the driver's seat, that the family next door called me their Home Entertainment Unit."

Fred's arms are not completely paralyzed, but are impaired. Years later he boasted of being the "World's Greatest Quadriplegic Javelin Thrower."

"How far did you throw it, Fred?" I asked.

"Suffice it to say I threw the sonofabitch," he replied.

The night Neil Armstrong walked on the moon we went through a fifth of Tequila in about an hour, mostly Fred and me. Then it suddenly seemed important to me to prove I could still run five miles, so I put on my tennies and lurched off into the night. When I got back Fred was in his chair, in the middle of the street, waving

the tequila bottle and yelling at the horses in the lot across the street, "You did this to me, you sonsabitches!" Neither of us drank tequila again for a long time.

Dan Hill's interest in Islam started in 1958 when the U.S. took Lebanon away from Syria, which it had invaded. Hill jumped in with the Pathfinders, but for the rest of the 11th Airborne invasion turned into an air landing, rather than a drop. Typical Hill. Everybody else gets a vacation by the sea; Hill gets a combat jump.

While in Lebanon, Hill decided to learn about that part of the world. He entered a nearby mosque and was welcomed. The mullah asked him for tea. They struck up a friendship. The mullah gave Dan what he considered the most authoritative translation of the Koran, plus some commentary. Dan has a facility for languages. He learned Arabic.

After Hill's return from his second tour in Vietnam he attended the Infantry Officer's Career Course at Ft. Benning. As a class exercise he was asked to assume the persona of the Chairman of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and come up with a plan to start WWII.

His plan was simple. He would load a C47 full of explosives and have a suicide bomber fly it into the Capitol during the State of the Union address, thus eliminating all the American leadership at once.

Next thing he knew he was talking about it to a couple of generals and a bunch of solemn people in suits. Then he was ordered to forget it. Later he learned that anti-aircraft defenses around Washington had been beefed up. So, he thought, maybe he had done some good.

"You evil bastard. Don't ever tell them stuff like that," Rescorla told him. "They'll just think you have a deviant mind."

With the compassion for which it is famous, the Army passed Hill over for promotion after Vietnam, based solely on his having a birthday prior to 1940. He became a contractor in Florida. The job kept him away from home for extended periods. He started drinking too much. One morning he awoke to hear Muslims at prayer outside his trailer. They were building a mosque across the street. He joined them, and not much later converted to Islam. He took the name Abdullah al Amin.

Rescorla had no hesitation about putting the deviant mind to work for his employers. When he went to Dean Witter as chief of security he saw immediately that the World Trade Center was vulnerable to terrorist attack. He then hired Hill as a consultant. Hill's mission was to come up with a plan to blow up the World Trade Center. The plan Hill came up with was essentially the same one the terrorists used when they bombed the WTC in 1993.

Rescorla developed a defensive plan for the WTC which he took to the Port Authority, the agency which managed it. "You handle security on your floors. We'll handle the building," he was told. Rick took the position that having his floors secure would do no good if those under them were destroyed. So he devised an evacuation plan and held frequent drills. They weren't very popular with the Dean Witter employees until the bombing of '93.

Again, Rescorla brought Hill in for an after action evaluation. As Abdullah al Amin, Hill prowled the mosques in Jersey and Brooklyn. McBee did the research. He and Rescorla knew the terrorists would strike again. Rescorla recommended that Dean Witter, and later Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, leave the World Trade

Center. At the time of the 2001 attack Morgan Stanley was suing the Port Authority for damages due to carelessness in '93, and to be let out of their lease so they could move.

Meanwhile Al Qaeda had attacked Khobar Towers in Saudi, and the Embassy in Tanzania, and the USS COLE. The U.S. had put a fifteen million dollar bounty on Osama Bin Laden, and Hill, through his mujahedeen contacts, devised a plan to collect it. The plan was simple enough. Osama wasn't concealing his movements in Afghanistan. All that was necessary was to ambush him, lop off his head and hands, and skyhook out with them as proof. All he needed the Feds for was the skyhook. He approached the FBI. After about six months of mulling, they turned him down.

So Rick went to work everyday, to his office on the 42d floor, knowing the attack would come, and having a pretty good idea of how it would come. The only thing missing was when. For him it was like eight years of waiting for the attack, a long night in that foxhole in the Ia Drang. Even so, if the attack had come two weeks later, he and Susan would have been in Italy, for Susan's daughter's wedding. Maybe you don't believe in fate, but this sure feels like it.

When Rescorla took up with Betsy they drifted away from our group. They weren't the only ones drifting away. Juanita and I separated and divorced. Rick made the decision that the uncertainties and loneliness of the writer's life weren't for him, and wrote instead a criminal justice text. I, on the other hand, took the writer's life as a holy calling. My ex had introduced him to Betsy, and, suddenly he was married and I was not, which I felt kind of sheepish about. I was working on a masters in journalism while he went to Law School. We moved in different circles.

And it was college. People graduated and left. Rick moved to Columbia, SC and then Chicago. The truth is I never laid eyes on Rescorla again after Norman. We kept in touch, mostly through McBee, and then by phone.

We even worked in the same town for several years, New York City. But he lived in Jersey and I lived in Brooklyn. We were both working hundred-hour weeks. We made lunch plans several times, and every time they were pre-empted either by a crisis in his work or in mine.

Oddly enough our friendship grew stronger with distance. In 1990 I moved to Los Angeles for another editorial job, for a company which quickly went bankrupt. I was alone in the city of film and television, looking for something to do. A friend in Texas and I formed a company to produce a video on Special Forces. Rick told Dan Hill about it and he was my first investor. He made a friend and lost his money.

Then a couple of years ago another friend, a retired airborne lieutenant colonel who had become a film and television producer, asked me to write a script about the life of Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier of World War II, and later a star of Western movies, on spec. That is to say if the movie got made, I got paid. I had long sworn never again to write for film on spec, but he's a pal, so I offered to do a treatment, about a thirty-page synopsis.

Rescorla, as it turned out, was more than a fan of Audie Murphy; he was a scholar on the subject. McBee told him I had written the treatment and Rick called. He asked for a copy and I emailed it to him immediately. Much to my

surprise two weeks later I received a completed script that he had written, based on it.

Over the next few months we batted it back and forth through several drafts.

In September of 2001 I was visiting my sister Shirley, at her farm in Cabool, MO. On the morning of September 11 I got a call from a friend whose plane had been diverted to Phoenix. "Are you watching TV?"

"No, I'm writing."

"Well, watch it. We're under terrorist attack."

When I turned on the TV one tower was still standing. Then it came down and the director cut away to a shot of people running away from a great cloud of gray dust boiling out of the concrete canyons after them.

I didn't realize at the time that I was watching my friend die.

Just to see what would happen I called Rick's office number. Strangely, it rang, but, of course, there was no answer.

I stayed glued to the TV for an hour. Then I called again. There was already an 800 number to call for information about casualties.

Rick was a senior vice president, and he lived in Jersey. Maybe he wasn't in yet. I should have known better. He was at his desk every morning at seven. But there was great confusion. I was told that Rick had been identified among the living.

I checked my messages and had a call from Dan Hill. I phoned him in St. Augustine. "Rescorla's gone," he said.

"The Morgan Stanley eight hundred number..."

"It's wrong. He's gone."

Rick saved the lives of all but six of the 2,700 Morgan Stanley employees in WTC II. He and his deputy were two of the six. When the Port Authority was advising everyone to stay at their desks he led an orderly exodus down the stairs. Morgan Stanley occupied the fortieth through the 73rd floors and when Rick was last seen he was on the 10th floor, going up to look for stragglers. Without his efforts, and his decision to evacuate, the casualties would have been double.

Before he started the evacuation he called Susan and said, "If something happens to me I want you to know you made my life."

Dan Hill quoted Rick on that 9-11 phone call. He said, "Guys like us shouldn't go out in bed, with a bunch of tubes in our bodies. Guys like us should go out doing some great impossible deed."

Yes.
