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Mr. John Raughter
Editor
The American Legion Magazine
P.O. Box 1055
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Dear Mr. Raughter:

Back in 1968, while the Vietnam War was still raging, I wrote an article about the American soldier, Paul V. Healey Jr., who led the counterattack against the Vietcong guerrillas when they held the U.S. Embassy grounds in Saigon during the Tet offensive in January 1968. Healey, virtually by himself, was able to clean the grounds of the Vietcong in what can only be called one of the most extraordinary soldierly feats in the entire war, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

I interviewed Paul when he returned to the United States and recorded those interviews on tape from which I recounted the story in an article. I sent the article to a number of publications, but it was rejected because the anti-war climate of the time was not right for a story of American heroism in Vietnam.

Thirty-three years have gone by, and there is a growing respect for the men and women who fought and died for our country in Vietnam. The monument in Washington, which is visited daily by countless Americans, is an indication of the national memory struggling with the national conscience to make sense of that unpopular war.

I believe that now the time is right to remember the sacrifices that were made by our men and women in Vietnam. Would you be interested in considering the Paul Healey story for your magazine? By the way, I'm not totally new to the magazine, which published an article of mine on America's ongoing reading problem some years ago.

Will look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sam Blumenfeld". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name "SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD".

Portrait of a Young Hero

Anyone who is deeply concerned about the youth of America and tend to see them only as draft-card burners, rioting students, drug takers and disheveled hippies, should meet SP4 Paul V. Healey, Jr., of Holbrook, Massachusetts. He is the handsome 20-year-old soldier who was responsible, more than anyone else involved, for freeing the American Embassy in Saigon from the Vietcong guerrillas in their spectacular attempt to overrun it during the famous Tet offensive launched on January 31, 1968. In the process, he killed nine Vietcong, and on May 4, 1968, was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second highest award for heroism.

"Everyday guys in Vietnam do what I did. But what happened at the embassy got in the newspapers," Paul says.

Despite his attempt to play down the exceptional quality of his heroism, the intensity and drama of those six and a half hours of battle at the embassy are visible in Paul's face as he tells the story.

"I'm scared now telling the story. I'm shaking worse than I was shaking before," he said a week after his return home as he relived each moment of that action. "I was shaking when I got home because I'm a little nervous. It's still very scary. It's very unreal to me."

During that action Paul could have been killed at any moment.

"So could the others," he reminds you. But then he comments in his quick but quiet voice, "It wasn't my time to go. Somebody was helping me. God, I guess."

Others were less fortunate. That day 27 American soldiers were killed in Saigon by the Vietcong, 16 of them in a bloody ambush massacre. But Paul survived.

the ordeal of terror which took Saigon by surprise and has come back to tell the story.

That day in Saigon began like so many others. The city had been secure for months with no incidents of Communist Terrorism to speak of. Paul, then a private first class and assigned to an MP unit in Saigon, had already completed his eighteen months tour of duty in Vietnam and was scheduled to receive orders returning him to the States at any moment. For Paul, who had already seen his share of action and had already earned a Bronze Star of Valor, the war in Vietnam was just about over, and in a few days he would leave it all behind.

At 1:30 that morning of January 31, Paul and his partner, a corporal from California, went out on MP jeep patrol. It was a routine four-hour tour and there was nothing in the air to suggest that the enemy was about to launch a spectacular attack in the city. Only a few hours before, the city had been full of the unnerving noise of firecrackers fired by the Vietnamese in celebration of the Lunar New Year. But now, the streets were calm. The two MPs drove to the PX snack bar near the docks, which was open all night, had some sandwiches, and then returned to MP headquarters in the center of the city where Paul talked with the radio operator on duty. He had brought him a sandwich. All of a sudden, at 2:10 a.m., a call came in.

"Signal 300 at the Splendid. Signal 300 at the Splendid."

The voice was desperate and somewhat hysterical, but the message was clear -- there was an all-out attack on officers quarters!

Within seconds, more urgent calls began coming in from different points in the city. One call came from the Presidential palace saying that it was under attack.

Paul immediately phoned the MP billet at the Capitol Hotel a few blocks away to sound the general alarm. Within minutes, the entire MP force in Saigon was up, scrambling for weapons and jeeps, in flak jackets and steel helmets, ready for action.

A call came in for an ambulance, and Paul and his partner were instructed to get down to the 17th field hospital, a mile away, to sound the alarm and get ambulances ready to pick up the wounded. At the hospital they received further instructions by radio to head immediately to Phoenix BEQ, the senior NCO's living quarters on the main road to the airport. The quarters were under heavy attack.

The jeep, with Paul's partner at the wheel, went flying on its way. As they approached the Philippine Embassy, a few blocks from their destination, they heard two explosions, and Paul caught sight of a Vietcong racing across the street from the embassy wall, taking cover behind a telephone pole about seventy feet away. Without a second thought Paul got out of the jeep and went after him, his M-16 automatic rifle in position at his shoulder. He fired. The VC fell to the ground. Paul then hit the ground himself in case the VC had been holding a hand grenade. But when no explosion occurred, he started crawling toward the body, then got up and walked to it. When he reached the VC he pumped several more rounds into him to make sure that he was dead and then removed a 38 caliber Smith and Wesson pistol which was sticking out of the VC's belt. He then went up to the embassy gate which had been half blown off its hinges and talked with the Philippine guards who told him that the VC had not gotten in and that they were armed and prepared to meet any further attacks. Paul then returned to the jeep, radioed back to headquarters and reported the incident. He and his partner

were instructed to get to the United States Embassy on the double and forget about the earlier instruction.

It took them about three minutes at breakneck speed to get to the front of the U. S. Embassy, a wide, tree-lined street with the wall of the new embassy compound running the length of the block. As Paul and his partner drove up to the corner at the far end of the wall, they could see tracer bullets being fired from the embassy building itself, which was a modern, six-story structure encased in a white concrete sunscreen. Halfway down the block, directly across the street from the main gate, was an MP jeep at the curb with two of Paul's buddies in the front seats. They were dead, having been killed as they reached the scene. But from a block away, and amid the confusion, Paul could not see that they were dead. Meanwhile, mortar rounds seemed to be coming from out of nowhere.

At the corner, Paul and his partner joined the area supervisor, a sergeant from North Carolina, who had been a block or so away when the attack on the embassy started. The sergeant's driver and two other MPs were also there. The sergeant had arrived seconds after a band of Vietcong guerrillas had blown a hole in the compound wall and crawled through into the embassy grounds. He had shot the last ones as they were getting in, but the VC dragged the wounded ones through the hole with them.

At this point, no one knew how many VC had gotten in, or whether they had penetrated the embassy building itself, or whether any of the marines and MPs in the embassy were still alive. It sounded like a small war going on behind the walls. The phone lines were dead, and there was no way of contacting the men inside. Meanwhile, the MPs were plagued by sniper fire coming from different directions.

It was decided to cordon off the area and wait until daylight before moving against the guerrillas. The VC were too well hidden in the darkness of the compound, and the MPs would have been easy targets with the street lights in back of them. The sergeant called in for more patrols. They arrived soon and were spread out around the area. No one, except the MPs, was to be permitted in or out of the area.

No sooner were the check points set up when a black civilian car of old vintage came tearing down the street toward the embassy. The MPs yelled at it to stop, firing warning shots. The driver stopped for a moment, then charged ahead. The MPs opened fire, riddling the car and its occupant, bringing it to a smoking halt as it crashed into the curb. Later, when the dying driver was examined they found a half dozen ID cards on him. He had probably provided transportation for some of the Vietcong in the attack.

Paul was then sent to the supply depot a mile and a half away with another MP to get ammunition. During the trip the radio continued to report horror upon horror. Frantic calls from points under attack were still coming in. When they returned to the embassy with the ammunition, they could hear automatic fire coming from the Presidential Palace a few blocks away. Reports had come in that the palace had been overrun. The reports were untrue, but at that time there was no way of separating fact from fiction from hysterical rumor. This was the situation Paul and the rest of the MPs faced as they looked at the U.S. Embassy, the very symbol of American presence in Vietnam, in enemy hands.

"We thought we had lost half an MP battalion by then," Paul relates. "We didn't know how it would end."

After passing out the ammunition, Paul was told to run a traffic check point a block away from the embassy. Pretty soon it would be dawn and the operation

would begin. What kind of an operation? No one knew as yet. They had tried to land a helicopter with six men on the roof of the embassy, but intense automatic fire from the VC in the compound wounded the gunner in the helicopter, forcing it away. How many Vietcong were in the compound or embassy building? They still didn't know.

The weak light of early dawn began to show. Just about then, Paul's impatience got the better of him, and when two MPs arrived in a jeep at his checkpoint, he told them to man the station, and he returned to the sargeant at his command point at the left corner of the embassy wall. Paul's commanding officer, Captain Michael Chester, had also arrived. It was time to start moving, but first they needed some reconnaissance to find out what the situation was in the embassy grounds. Then they could decide what to do. Captain Chester decided to make a dash to the annex building adjacent to the compound wall and find out what had happened from the men there. He told Paul to stay back. Paul didn't like that idea and pointed out to the Captain that an MP had been shot by sniper fire coming through the front gate.

"I'll cover you," Paul said. He had his M-16 automatic rifle ready for action.

"Okay, let's go," said the captain.

The two men moved rapidly across the street. The captain stooped behind a tree, and Paul went ahead of him. In this manner they moved from tree to tree until the captain reached the gate to the annex, and Paul went beyond him to the compound wall, at which point he started crawling toward the front gate. He got to the sentry box near the gate where a Vietnamese policeman, scared to death, was hiding. A short distance away, an MP was lying against the wall

near the gate trying to see inside the compound. Paul got to him and asked him what he knew. The MP told him that there were VC inside the compound, but he didn't know where they were or if they were in the embassy building. Further down, past the gate, a marine in civilian clothes was also at the wall, lying on his stomach and looking through the hole made by the Vietcong invaders. He was shooting into the compound with his pistol. Paul made a quick dash to the marine and got down beside him. The marine pointed through the hole at two VC bodies a few feet away inside the compound. He told Paul the Vietcong had probably made the hole with a satchel charge of plastic explosive. He said there were from ten to thirty of them inside. There were marines inside too, he said, but he didn't know if they were dead or alive.

"What do you think we ought to do," asked Paul.

"I'd like to go in and get them," said the marine. It sounded kind of rash, since there was no way, as yet, of getting in without getting instantly killed. But the logic of the idea impressed Paul. The VC were in there and they didn't belong there. That was as simple as two and two makes four. So why not go in and get them, he thought. But how to get in. There was only one sensible way in: through the front gate.

While everyone else in the immediate area was either flat on the ground or behind cover, Paul moved back to the side of the gate and fired inside, trying to draw fire from the VC. The objective was to clear as many of the VC as possible from around the gate and the front of the embassy building. The marine covered Paul from the other side of the gate. Paul saw a VC move from behind a waterpool or flower pot. He shot at the figure.

"I put half a magazine into him," he said later.

For fifteen minutes he shot at anything that moved. He knew he killed four VC from the gate. Suddenly the marine yelled over to Paul, saying that there was a VC on the opposite side of the wall. Paul quickly grabbed a grenade from his flak jacket, pulled the pin and tossed it over the wall. He heard it go off. He then went to the other side of the gate and threw a grenade over that side.

At about that time, Paul's platoon leader, First Lieutenant James Case, had driven a jeep up along the wall and stopped before reaching the gate and got out to assess the situation. Paul told the lieutenant that he wanted to try to force the gate open with the jeep. The lieutenant thought it was worth a try. Paul climbed in and eased the jeep up to the gate at an angle, trying to push the gate in. But he couldn't break through the chains. Paul then backed the jeep up and brought it close to the wall. He loaded up his M-16 with a new magazine and jumped up on the jeep windshield, stuck his rifle over the wall and started firing against the base of the foot-high concrete parapet which ran across the front of the embassy building. He then got down and looked over the situation from the side of the gate. He then returned to the top of the jeep and pick-shot at the bodies he had already shot to make sure they were dead. A dead VC was one less threat to his own life. Other VC were still firing at the wall from hidden positions in the compound. But it seemed that the more they fired, the more Paul was determined to pursue them.

Paul got down from the jeep. He told the lieutenant that he was going to shoot the lock and chains off the gate and go in. The lieutenant hesitated a moment, looking at Paul, then said okay.

"It didn't make any difference what he said anyway," Paul relates.

"I wanted to go in. I wanted to go in bad. I had found out that two of my buddies -- the two MPs in that first patrol -- had been killed by these VC. I had worked with one of the guys the night before. I was pretty upset."

Paul told the lieutenant and the sergeant to cover him from both sides at the gate and to fire their M-16s into the compound. This would keep the VC from shooting at him while he was shooting the chains off the gate with his 45.

It seemed odd for a 20-year-old private first class to be giving instructions to a lieutenant, a sergeant, a few corporals and others.

"But nobody knew what to do," Paul says. "Nobody did nothing. Everybody was waiting for somebody to say something, and I said it, and they went along with me."

It took him six rounds to break the chains which he then pulled off the gate. Then he reloaded his M-16 with his last magazine, put two more grenades on his flak jacket, and then swung the gate open.

This was it!

They all watched Paul somewhat unbelievably. Nobody expected him to get far beyond the gate. Paul himself was scared. He knew he didn't want to die, and he knew that he might be living his last moment. Yet nothing could stop him from going in.

He went in. He ran fast and low toward the embassy building. At one point he stepped over a VC rocket launcher lying in his path. The others at the gate watched from behind cover. Would he make it? Would he get to the door? Before they could complete their thoughts, Paul leaped up the ratio steps to the front door of the embassy building.

"I used to run cross-country in school and it helped," Paul explains.
"I ran fast."

When he got up against the building wall, he looked around. Nothing was moving. A dead VC lie a few feet away from him. From inside the embassy a marine looked out at him through the plexiglas window beside the door. He seemed petrified to see Paul there.

"I asked him if everything was all right," relates Paul, "if there were any VC inside. He said nobody got inside, everything was secure. I asked him to open the door, a six-inch thick cherry wood door. He tried but the lock was jammed."

Just then, somebody yelled from the gate. They had seen the "dead" VC roll over and throw a grenade at Paul. Paul had felt the grenade bounce off his leg but he didn't know where it had come from. He saw it on the ground ready to go off. Where had it come from? It was a Chinese Communist grenade with a handle on it, and he had seen many of them. At first he wanted to jump to the grass level, below the concrete parapet of the building. But he knew he couldn't reach that far in time. So he jumped literally on the body of the supposedly dead VC lying a few feet away, rolling behind him to shield himself from the impact of the explosion. The grenade went off quickly and the VC's body took most of the impact. A small piece of shrapnel pierced the back of Paul's hand, and it started to bleed. His buddies at the gate were yelling at him to get away from the VC. It was then that Paul realized that the grenade had come from the VC he was hiding behind. He jumped up, his hand bleeding, and fired his M-16 at the body. He fired at least half a magazine, more out of fear than anger. Then he jumped back up against the building wall, checked

his M-16 magazine and saw that he had only three rounds left.

Paul yelled back to the gate, "I need ammunition. I have no ammunition." Meanwhile, he took a hand grenade, pulled the pin and held it in his right hand. Then he started walking slowly along the building wall toward the left corner.

At that moment, a VC ran from around the left side of the building and made a leap at the compound wall in an attempt to get over it. The marine who had been watching from the hole in the wall shot at him but missed. Paul aimed at him with his M-16, fired his last three rounds, and the VC fell dead to the ground.

Paul was now completely out of ammunition. All he had was the hand grenade.

There was a dead VC lying right in front of him with a Chinese Communist AK-47 automatic rifle. Paul picked it up, checked the magazine. It was full and there was a round in the firing chamber.

He yelled back at the gate again that he was out of ammunition. No one had yet thrown him ammunition.

"I'm going to throw this grenade at the next guy who comes in here without ammunition," Paul yelled.

The men at the gate then threw in several boxes of ammunition to an MP sergeant, John Shook, who had crawled halfway into the compound toward the embassy building. The sergeant threw three of them to Paul. Paul picked up his own M-16 and put a new magazine into it, and then discarded the Chinese AK-47. With the grenade in one hand and the M-16 in the other, he started moving along the wall toward the corner of the building.

At that moment a VC with an AK-47 slung over his shoulder came scrambling around the corner on all fours and tried to take cover behind a flower pot. He must have been surprised to see Paul there only a few feet away, and Paul acted quickly.

"I could have kicked him in the face, that's how close I was to the corner. I shot him up, got him in the face, got him good," he said, feeling the same pang of fear he had experienced at that moment.

At the corner, Paul stopped and thought for half a second. It was all open area, and two VC had just come from behind that corner. How many more were there?

"I wasn't going to take a chance. The grenade was still in my hand. I dropped the pin off of it, changed hands, and threw it."

The grenade exploded. Paul then turned the corner to see the results. The grenade had killed three VC who had been waiting there. It was another instance in which Paul had saved his life by quick thinking.

"If I hadn't thrown that grenade I'd be dead. Someone was helping me. I don't know who it was. It was God," he explains. "I got a lot of confidence after I got those."

By then, the MP sergeant had reached Paul and was moving along the wall with him shoulder to shoulder. After quickly examining the bodies to make sure the VC were dead and the area clear, they headed toward the rear of the building. They rounded the corner slowly, then moved from flower pot to flower pot, until Paul reached the rear door. It was locked.

A marine from atop a building adjacent to the compound called down to tell them that it was clear in back. By then the front lawn of the compound was clear and the MPs had started coming in. Paul and the sergeant called for some MPs to come around to the back. Paul then sent four of them to search through the cars in the parking area to make sure that no VC were hiding there.

Just then the sergeant thought he saw something move among some barrels near a shed. He went in after it, but there was nothing there.

There was still one more building to check on the compound. It was the

white stucco villa in which retired Colonel George Jacobson, the mission coordinator and third highest U.S. civilian in Vietnam, lived. Paul got to the house first and was then joined by a marine sergeant. They found a pair of bloody sandals in the bushes beside the entrance to the villa. A trail of blood and mud led up the stone steps into the building. They knew that something was wrong. Paul and the marine sergeant poked their heads into the entrance. Light was coming from the kitchen. Paul yelled:

"Military police. Is anyone inside?"

"Yes," said a voice from upstairs. "I'm Colonel Jacobson. I'm upstairs but there's somebody downstairs. Watch out."

At that instant, the VC, who had been hiding behind the kitchen entrance, started firing his automatic weapon. Paul and the sergeant got out of the way just as the VC came out of the shadow and into the light. The VC had missed them by a hair. From the outside, Paul and the sergeant fired some rounds at entrance.

Paul called for some men to surround the building and provide cover.

For a moment there wasn't much they could do. Paul and the marine walked around the house looking for a way in. They found a side door but it was locked. Paul shot off the lock. Then he took two grenades and rolled them inside. They went off but they did not kill the VC who was still hiding in the kitchen. Paul and the marine then went inside.

They found themselves in a dining room with a large table and a bar. The windows were open and there was plenty of daylight. They crossed the room side by side, firing their automatic weapons in short bursts as they approached the entrance to the kitchen. Suddenly they heard shots coming at them. Paul saw

the muzzle of the VC's rifle sticking out of the doorway. Paul leapt to the side, but the marine was hit and fell to the floor. Paul fired at the doorway with the rifle in his left arm, grabbed hold of the marine with his right arm and dragged him behind a table for cover. The marine was in great pain.

"Help me out of here, help me out of here," he cried.

Paul called outside for someone to cover the window while he dragged the marine out to the patio. When they were outside, Paul placed his helmet under the marine's feet so that the blood would not leave his head and cause shock. He was badly wounded in the groin and could not be moved.

Paul yelled for someone to bring him tear gas. While waiting, he covered the door with his rifle. When an MP brought him the gas, Paul took one of the cannisters, ran around the front and tossed it in the front door, attempting to get it in the kitchen, where the VC was hiding. The cannister bounced off the edge of the kitchen doorway and went off in the foyer. Paul then ran back to the side door and threw two cannisters inside. He fell back. He had caught a strong whiff of the gas and for a moment was overcome by a sickening, stinging feeling throughout his body. A lieutenant and an MP helped Paul away.

"The picture in Life magazine says I was wounded. I wasn't. I was just overcome by the gas," Paul relates.

The lieutenant wanted Paul to get out of the area. He told Paul that he had had enough. At first, Paul started to leave, but then changed his mind the moment he felt better. He got a gas mask from one of the MPs and started back to the house. On the way he realized that Colonel Jacobson, upstairs in the house, had no mask, so he ran back, dodging the photographers and newsmen who were already swarming over the area, and got another mask from a fellow MP.

He ran back to the house, and threw the mask up to the colonel who caught it at the window. Paul then asked the colonel if he had a weapon. The colonel replied no. So Paul threw him his own 45 pistol and two clips of ammunition. The colonel then told him that there were two others with him who needed gas masks. So Paul ran back to the front to get two more masks and also got hold of some tear-gas cannisters. When he got back to the house he tossed the masks and two cannisters up to the colonel.

"It took me about eight to ten throws to throw all of this stuff up there. My arms were killing me," relates Paul.

When this was done, an MP major, coming to Paul's aid, brought two more tear-gas cannisters. Paul and the major broke two windows in the villa and threw the two cannisters in. This time the VC could no longer take it. He ran up the circular staircase in the foyer, firing his rifle, but Colonel Jacobson shot him twice as he ran up and killed him.

"I got him," shouted the colonel. "Come on up."

Paul and the major hesitated a moment. There was a chance that the VC had a grenade in his hand which would go off at any moment. But when nothing happened they went upstairs. The body lie sprawling halfway up the staircase. The VC was wearing a khaki shirt and green trousers.

"He was pretty shot up," Paul relates. "He was the last VC alive."

Paul checked the body for possible booby traps. He found nothing. And that was the end of it. The battle of the embassy was over.

The colonel congratulated Paul. He owed his life to this incredible young soldier who had tossed him the pistol, who wouldn't give up until the job was done. There were many, in fact, who owed their lives to Paul. He had made it possible

to recapture the embassy compound long before any of the other points in the city were secure from the enemy.

When Paul emerged from that villa, he was a changed person. He knew that he was not the same youth who six and a half hours earlier had gone to the snack bar for sandwiches. He wasn't quite sure what had happened. But he was congratulated wherever he walked. MPs and marines shook his hand, patted him on the shoulder, as he walked back to the front of the embassy.

"I went back to see what I had done," he recounts. "I went back to the gate and I walked around just the same way I went in and looked at everything to see what I had done. I had to think and make sure I did it. I had one of the guys pinch me in the ass to make sure it was real. Nothing was comprehended at the time. There was no time conception at all. It seemed like one minute I had been doing something else at the snack bar, the next minute I had been . . . doing that stuff. I knew I had done it. I was just wondering what had made me do it. And I wondered how many times . . . I tried to count how many times I should have got killed. I couldn't count that high."

He thought of each calculated and uncalculated risk. "First at the gate. Running up to the gate. Then when I got to the gate, I stuck my head in the hole. When I went to the gate again. When I was on top of the jeep. When I went inside. Up to the door when the grenade should have hit me. If there was anybody alive inside of the compound when I went inside When that guy--I was looking right at in the face."

The worst moment, he thought, was near the very end in Colonel Jacobson's villa, when the marine beside him got shot. "Before nobody had got hit so it was okay, just luck. And when he got hit, it was petrifying."

Why had he taken so many risks? Why hadn't he played it safe since he was about to be shipped home any day? "I could have stayed at that check point there and wouldn't have seen nothing."

But the irresistible urge to do something had made him go back to the center of action. What does one think of as one prepares to risk death? What were Paul's thoughts as he was about to enter the gate?

"I thought of a lot of things," he recalls. "First I was scared and I thought I didn't want to die. Then I forgot about that for some reason. I don't know what the reason was. I thought of my buddy who went over when I was in jump school last June, June of '66, my buddy in our town, the kid I grew up with, the kid I played ball with and everything. He got killed. Paul Surette was his name. They named a VFW post after him. And I could think of Paul and the things we used to do and I could think of him being dead. And right then is when I found out the two guys across the street were dead, the two MPs. And I was told that the two MPs inside were probably dead. They were guys I was working with. That's when I knew I was going inside. Later, when I looked at that guy in the face, I could have kicked that guy in the face. I thought of Paul, and it kept pushing me further. I was scared every step of the way."

During that hour immediately following the battle, the reporters interviewed Paul. A press information officer had brought Paul to the reporters. With the background noise of guns from other battles in the city and within sight of Vietcong bodies sprawled out on the lawn, they wrote down their stories quickly so that Americans back home would be able to read about it hours later in their morning papers. In describing Paul, the New York Times reporter wrote:

"His grim face was twitching as he told his story and a major gently put his arm around the youth's shoulders."

The name of Paul Healey would appear in practically every American newspaper. The heroism of one 20-year-old soldier would permit Americans to know that their embassy in Saigon, which had been held under siege by the enemy, had been liberated in six hours. The stories would be full of the inevitable inaccuracies, but the name would be there. And if Paul had not been there, the story would have been very different. The fighting would have gone on for hours longer, and the world, in a state of shock and disbelief, would have watched as Americans inflicted great damage on their own embassy in Saigon in order to dislodge the enemy.

One wonders what goes on in a nation's consciousness when it reads of the heroism of one young soldier who managed to redeem the self-respect of 200 million people in a moment of humiliation. One wonders how much of the significance of these events were understood by a sophisticated, complex nation, so greatly dependent for its existence on the spirit and guts of thousands of twenty year olds giving generously of their lives and limbs. To die at nineteen, to lose an arm or a leg at twenty--these were the sacrifices of an army of generous youths whose fathers demanded the ultimate of their sons for reasons not entirely understood by themselves.

Because of Paul, the embassy was able to open that morning almost on time. When General Westmoreland and Ambassador Bunker went up to see Colonel Jacobson in his office in the embassy building, the colonel called for Paul who was being interviewed by the press. Paul went up to meet the General and the Ambassador--his elders, the representatives of the President, whose decisions he respected and obeyed. He told them what had happened and what he had done. They congratulated him.

Meanwhile, battles raged elsewhere in Saigon, and the fighting was by no

means cried for Paul. He moved on to other battles in the city, hoping to himself that he would encounter no more special opportunities for bravery, opportunities which he would not be able to resist, risks which he would have to take, because that was the nature of Paul Healey.

"I was scared. I was scared for the rest of the time, because if I did it once, I might do it again, and I might get killed the next time. But once I got involved, I just wanted to keep on going."

By all calculations his life should have ended at the embassy. He did not want to die, but he had expected to die. Who would have bet that he would have survived? What insurance salesman, standing at the embassy gate with Paul, would have written him a policy? He had given all and he had survived. It was like being reborn, like being given a second life after having sacrificed the first.

"I had to think and make sure I did it. I had one of the guys pinch me to make sure it was real. Nothing was comprehended at the time. There was no time conception at all. . . .

"Yet," he said later after reviewing the entire incredible experience, "I'd do it again in a minute."

For the next thirty hours or so after the embassy battle there was no time to eat, wash up, change clothes or take a break. He was sent from one place in the city to another, finding a moment somewhere in the middle of it all to go down to the 17th Field Hospital to have the piece of shrapnel removed from the back of his hand and the wound cleaned.

"I wanted to keep on going," Paul relates. "I didn't know I was tired."

When he finally got to bed after thirty-nine hours of uninterrupted action,

most of the Vietcong resistance in the city had been brought to an end.

In these forty-nine hours Paul had killed one Vietcong at the Philippine embassy, eight at the U.S. embassy, and four more in a later action with a bazooka near the Korean embassy. He had run an ammunition shuttle to a half dozen different battle points in the city, including the grisly site near officers' quarters on the way to Tan Son Nhut airport, where sixteen MPs were massacred in a bloody Vietcong ambush. It took twenty-two hours to finally get the bodies out.

For the next few weeks Paul was assigned to driving the duty officer around the city in twelve-hour shifts. On February 16, there was a memorial service for the men killed during the battle in Saigon, after which there was an award ceremony during which Paul and many of his buddies received the Bronze Star of Valor. Later, at another ceremony held by the Vietnamese government, Paul was awarded the Vietnamese Gold Medal of Honor. He was the only American decorated by the Vietnamese government for the action in Saigon. His picture was printed in the Vietnamese newspapers. The Vietcong saw Paul's picture and announced that they had put a price on Paul's head, which meant that Vietcong snipers would be out to get him.

But the orders Paul had been waiting for finally came through, and twenty-four days after the embassy battle, Paul left Vietnam. He left Vietnam alive, the Vietnam which had almost claimed him for good. He returned in one piece.

He had gone away an ordinary American boy. He returned to his town a hero. There were "Welcome Home" signs in Holbrook, signs in store windows. Paul did not come from one of the rich or influential families in town. His family was one of the many large, struggling, tumultuous South Boston families that had migrated to a South Shore town, and they lived in a very modest bungalow near

the Brockton town line. They were the ordinary people who supply most of the fighters for all wars. In fact, the day Paul returned home, his younger brother had just left for Vietnam. Ordinary people. But Paul was not ordinary. He had killed eight Vietcong in one of the most extraordinary confrontations with the enemy of the war. He had survived the ultimate test.

Paul's homecoming happened to coincide with the town's birthday, which was to be celebrated that same week on the leap year. And so it was decided by the town fathers to hold a welcome-home ceremony for Paul in the town selectman's office at the same occasion, so that those townspeople who so desired could come and greet Paul personally.

It snowed heavily that evening of February 29, but the selectman's large office was crowded. Paul arrived with his family, wearing his dress uniform, his airborne boots, and two rows of ribbons on his chest. There was no mistaking that this tall, handsome figure, with the modest, gentle look, was the hero described in the newspapers. His face was tanned from the Vietnamese sun, his black hair closely cropped, his brow furrowed. He had the look of a man condemned to feel deeply every instance of his life.

Paul and his family took their seats to the right of the selectman's desk on which had been placed a large birthday cake. On the opposite side of the room sat representatives of the various town organizations and denominations who had come to greet Paul.

The ceremony was opened by the selectman welcoming Paul home and giving him a framed citation on behalf of the town. Then the pastor from Paul's church, two protestant ministers and a lay representative of the Jewish community each rose in turn and expressed their appreciation for what Paul had done and welcomed him back. Somehow, with the possible exception of Paul's pastor, they all seemed

a bit ill at ease. Were they somewhat embarrassed by the physical presence of a war hero -- by Paul's modest, engaging look -- because their sympathies were really with the war protestors, the draft-card burners, and the peaceniks? One had to admit that even an unpopular war produced the heroic soldier -- whose deeds and actions would have to be measured against those of the same generation who had fled to Canada, or burnt their draft cards, or picketed induction centers. Or perhaps they were simply embarrassed by the heroic itself -- at a time when heroism is considered old-fashioned, passe, incongruous with the way things are nowadays.

A representative of Senator Brooke read a telegram of welcome, and representatives of other politicians read similar statements. The word most often used was "appreciate." "We appreciate what you did." It was a revealing sort of expression. Perhaps it revealed a sense of guilt -- that America's youth was giving too generously of its lives and limbs for a cause its elders only half-heartedly understood or supported. "We're not sure what we want in Vietnam, but would you kindly give your life for the cause?" What else does a young man have to give at twenty but his life, the very thing he values most? Youth is too generous. But will the generation now in Vietnam do any better twenty years from now when their own sons are ready for a war, any war?

Paul had generously given his all. But fate had permitted him to keep his life. He was indeed a very special human being. Perhaps the clergymen sensed this too. After all, they knew that he had killed an untold number of Vietcong, and there he sat before them, alive, in perfect physical condition, virtually unscratched.

At the close of the ceremony pictures were taken and then Paul, his mother and father, sister and brother -- two other brothers were away at war -- formed

a reception line, and the townspeople who had watched the ceremony lined up to shake their hands. The children loved Paul. They loved his tallness and soldierly appearance. Their appreciation of the hero was instinctive and unambivalent.

Is Paul any different from the rest of his generation?

"Every day guys in Vietnam do what I did," he said.

That much is true, although we read more about the hippies and protestors than we do about their peers in Vietnam. Yet, deep in the jungles, in the rice paddies, and on the hills, hundreds of young Americans perform these self-sacrificing acts of generosity known as heroism. They throw themselves on hand grenades to protect their buddies, they risk death to rescue the wounded, they attack the enemy head-on to prevent others from getting hit. You read about them on the obituary pages of the nation's newspapers. There is usually the picture of a young man in uniform, with that quiet formal pose, that smooth, ingenuous face. Extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice in an age of cynicism and hypocrisy, from young men nurtured by a nation supposedly corrupted by material wealth and the frenetic, pointless pursuit of pleasure.

Indeed, Paul is more typical of his generation than the vociferous minority that gets all the attention. And perhaps Paul personifies his generation best. For he stands out boldly in the extent of his moral generosity, in the uncanny purity of his self-sacrifice, poetically combined with the skill of an expert soldier.

"I'm a regular guy," he says. "I don't like this hero stuff. I want to be accepted as I am."

There are thousands like him all over the country, filling the high school and college baseball diamonds, the basketball courts, and the football fields.

Sports is a kind of passion with the Vietnam generation.

"I love basketball. I love baseball. I love football. I play tennis a lot. I love to run," says Paul. "I was pretty tough in cross-country. I had a bad year though. First year I went out was my junior year. Second year was the senior year. I ran seconds and thirds. Never won a first place. I must have run about forty races. But the worst I did was fifth. Second was the best I could ever do. I could never beat this kid who was in front of me, Tommy Ahern. But I worked, I could run 60,000 hours a week, and Tommy could sit home and do his homework every night, and I still wouldn't beat him. Just the way it was. I almost beat him one day, in a race at Bridgewater. It was tremendous. I could see the finish line and I looked around and nobody was there. And now I started to turn on. I was moving the fastest I think I ever went, except for the embassy. And Tommy came out of nowhere. Or else I didn't see him when I turned around. This kid from East Bridgewater was behind me, and Tommy, I guess, was right behind him. He just came out of nowhere. I could have been walking and he could have been running, that's how fast he went by me. That was about the biggest upset I could remember in high school. I almost cried when I got to the finish line. Because I was really working. I had worked all that week. Worked about the hardest I had ever worked."

Paul and his generation. His friend Paul Surette, the one he had thought of at the embassy when looking at that scurrying Vietcong, was one of those whose lives would never be completed beyond Vietnam.

"He was a good kid. Last time he was home on leave, we both had leave together. He had just finished jump school before he was going over. He was small. Everybody liked him. We ran track together. He was usually quiet.

He wasn't different from anyone else, just one of the guys.

"We talked a lot last time we were home. Always talking. There weren't many people home when I was home on leave that time. I used to meet him at the ice cream parlor every day. If he didn't have his car, I had mine. We'd go into town once in a while.

"When we were in high school we used to stand around the same ice cream parlor all the time. All the guys. Not bums like some people say. They work and they get their money, and they go out afterwards and enjoy themselves, because you're only young once. After you get old it's too late."

Paul had started working early in life, being the oldest of five children. At thirteen he had a paper route. At fourteen he worked at a hamburger stand. Before enlisting, right after graduation, he actually held two jobs. He was not lazy. He knew he was not rich. If he wanted something he went out and earned it.

"I've had four cars," Paul says. "I bought my first one for \$15 and put it on the road myself."

To have a car is important these days. The car provides freedom and mobility, a sense of adulthood.

"Sports, cars, and girls . . . and money. No. Girls, sports, money and cars. Or something in that order. Gotta have them all, though," Paul reflects.

He is popular with the girls, handsome, energetic, intense.

"I like a social life. Playboy, I guess you could say in a way. I like a lot of girls, got to have a car, I like a motorcycle."

To Paul and his generation, the Vietnam war will go down as a bad dream, or a strange and tortured interlude. It has not made Paul or his buddies more

violent or less violent. The worst thing Paul can think of is hurting someone. This was true before he went to Vietnam and it is true after his return. His war actions cannot be measured in terms of violence. He and his buddies had been sent there by their elders to do a job. They did not ask for the job, but they performed as was expected of them. Some better than others. When they get back they would just as well forget the whole bad dream.

But 25,000 regular guys won't be coming back. They won't be coming back to the joys of owning a car, riding a motorcycle, wearing loafers and jeans, dating girls, tackling an opponent, or watching the Red Sox. Yet, the least complaints would have come from them, those who trusted their parents and their elders, wise or unwise, those who gave their lives.

Paul knows. Because, deep inside, when the moment came for him to choose, he was one of them.

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