



A SILVER LINING TO STORMS OF SORROW

"I have lived, Sir, a long time; and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this Truth, that God governs in the Affairs of Men." --Benjamin Franklin

There are many reasons why I look forward to Veterans Day, one being that it affords me the opportunity to write about Patriots who have sacrificially served our nation, honoring their sacred oaths to support and defend our Constitution.

So, each year at this time, I have the privilege of profiling friends whose conduct and lives are personal inspirations to me.

Adequately portraying the extraordinary service of these individuals within the confines of a single essay -- men like Roger Helle and Roger Ingvalson, the subjects of previous essays -- is difficult.

In honor of all Veterans, however, I will attempt once again to do so and, moreover, to provide a sketch of not one, but two Patriot friends who are an inspiration to all who know them, and to anyone who has ever served beside them.

At the end of this composition, you'll discover the connection between these two Americans -- wait for it.

About 15 years ago, I hitched a ride to a national security briefing in Thomasville, Georgia, with a fellow I had only recently met. He had just retired as an Army officer after Desert Storm, and we were serving in a reserve capacity with a civilian agency. It was a five-hour drive, which gave us time to become well acquainted, and I am grateful for every minute of that trip.

His name is Don Rodgers, and he is one of those people who has never met a stranger.

Don is a fellow Tennessean, a Vet with 34 years of service including combat tours in Vietnam and support tours in Korea and Germany. He served as CO of Fort Gordon and Fort Huachuca, and concluded his military career as a

lieutenant general, Director of the Defense Communications Agency and Manager of the National Communications System -- which is to say that at one time Don knew more about C4 (Command, Control, Communications and Computers) than anyone else on the planet.

"Having the opportunity to serve as an officer in the U.S. Army was the greatest honor of my life," Don says. "I could never have imagined how committed and capable the young men and women of our country really are. In the Army you find that out very quickly. Our country is so fortunate that so many of our young citizens choose to enter military service. During my 34 years of active duty, my most vivid memories are not the isolated tours, the wonderful experiences nor the great jobs, but the great men and women who make our Army second to none."

Of his success, Don affirms, "Every one of those young people is a hero to me and any success I enjoyed in the military, I owe to them."

Don married his teenage sweetheart, Faye, during their senior year at Tennessee Tech, and they both lived lives that exemplified their faith, "preaching the Gospel without using words."

"My grandmother insisted that I be in the church if the front doors were open," Don recalls. "Of course, this does not assure that you are a person of Faith but does put you in the correct environment. Since those early days when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, I have always tried to live by that commitment, not always successful, but it has been the anchor in my life. Military service is among the most honorable and moral callings of all occupations, so a person of Faith has a lot of company in the service. Faith is my life's compass."

Don is a most humble servant, a man who has been in positions of great responsibility and power, but unlike many of his peers in corporate positions with 50,000 employees, he is plainspoken and a loyal friend to any Patriot from any walk of life. He is one of those people who always wears a smile, and means it.

Let me leave Don for a moment and tell you about another great Patriot and friend, June Kent. She is not,

technically, a Veteran, but she was the wife of a career Air Force officer. To be sure, the spouses and families of those in our Armed Services bear a heavy burden in the absence of their loved ones, but there are no medals for that. They may not be Vets, but they most certainly are Patriots.

June was born in Alabama and raised in abject poverty, the daughter of an itinerant carpenter and a frail mother who was hospitalized for years at a time. Consequently, June spent much of her childhood living with grandparents, other relatives and even in foster care, moving dozens of times around the Southeast.

Through all that transition, her children's Bible was her most prized possession.

During June's traumatic early years, she devised a code by which to live, conceived out of necessity. She refers to it as her ABCs -- A: Attitude, approach problems as challenges; B: Believe in God and myself; C: Commitment to make a positive out of a negative. "I was sometimes labeled Pollyanna, goody two-shoes, a dreamer, wishful thinker," she says. "And I met lots of naysayers."

Despite the odds stacked heavily against her, June's strong and abiding faith and her ABCs created a pathway to triumph over many trials.

June married her high school sweetheart, a young Airman who was an aircraft mechanic, and she went on to complete her bachelor's degree followed by her master's and then a Ph.D. from Texas A&M. She became a mother to Rich and Kathie, and a professional educator, her life's aspiration, teaching every grade level from K through college. She says on the day she was awarded that last degree, "My husband took a little paint brush to our rural mailbox and wrote 'Mr. and Dr. Scobee.'"

But the greatest trial of her life would come on 28 January 1986. On that day, she would need every ounce of courage and faith she could muster, all of her ABCs, to endure the tragedy that she, and our nation, witnessed.

June recalls: "On the rooftop viewing area of Launch Control at Kennedy Space Center, my children and I stood, waiting for Challenger to lift off with Dick Scobee, my husband and their father, in command. I could only imagine what Dick was feeling now. I recalled his joy in telling me what it was like to fly in space. Next to me stood Steve McAuliffe, husband of Christa, the beloved New Hamp-

shire schoolteacher who had been chosen to be the first teacher in space, and their two young children. Nearby were the families of the other five crew members."

Finally, liftoff: "We cheered as the solid rocket boosters ignited and the shuttle carrying its precious cargo lifted off the pad. I imagined Dick in his ever-so-calm, matter-of-fact, take-charge mode. I imagined Christa in her excitement, nervously waiting for the solid-rocket boosters to separate, the engines to cut off, and the buoyant lift of weightlessness to signal their safe arrival into earth orbit.

"My teenage son, Rich, lovingly and protectively put his arms around me and his sister," says June. "As I reached to help my daughter Kathie with her baby, the unspeakable happened. Standing there together, watching with the entire world, we saw Challenger rip apart. It shattered into a million pieces, along with our hearts. My memory fails after that."

Utterly devastated, June somehow managed, by way of the faith and perseverance that had sustained her so many times before, to turn tragedy into triumph. A year after the death of her husband and his Challenger crew, she and the surviving families launched the Challenger Center for Space Science Education to continue the crew's educational mission. There are now more than 50 Challenger Learning Centers nationwide.

In 1988, June was attending an Easter Sunrise Service at Arlington National Cemetery. "I stood in the chilly pre-dawn and watched the dark give way to light. As I listened to the sermon, I asked God to let the True Light shine within me until the darkness of fear and loneliness had subsided. I wanted to let go of the vulnerable self within and reach out to the people weeping softly beside me."

At the end of the service, a fellow she had just met, Lt. Gen. Don Rodgers, announced plans for the group to meet and walk a trail along the Potomac River that afternoon. It was on that walk that June learned from Don of the recent and unexpected death of the love of his life, his wife, Faye.

"Don's loss was not public like mine," says June, "but just as tragic for those who loved Faye. Each of us understood the other's pain and concerns for the future. Our conversation was a comfort to both of us."

The next week, Don informed his assistant at the Pentagon that he had met "a wonderful woman who would make some lucky guy a great wife." He was still reeling

from the loss of his own wife. A few months later, his aide convinced him to call June, and soon thereafter he convinced June to become his bride. They were married in the little Chapel at Arlington, near where they had met.

June says of that day, "Our families and friends were joined with us and I discovered joy as great as my sorrow had been deep. God blessed me with another chance to love and be loved, but more important was my rekindled spirit. I had learned that, with God's help and by walking the path with our Savior Jesus Christ, we can rise above our personal needs and become dream-makers. We can create opportunities for others and help them discover their silver linings within their clouds."

No narrative of the lives of Don and June would be complete without mention of their children and grandchildren, whom they adore. Don's son Eric and his wife Anne are the parents of three children. Eric is a successful northeast regional manager for an auto manufacturer (one that managed to survive). June's daughter Kathie and her husband Scott have three children, and she is the senior project manager for our Chattanooga mayor's office. June's son Rich and his wife Alene also have three children. He is an Air Force colonel who just left command of Kirkuk Air Base in Iraq for command of the 301st Fighter Wing in Texas. Rich has more than 3,200 hours in the F-16.

These days, when I have the good fortune to visit with Don and June, it is with a deep sense of gratitude for the example of their lives, which is a reflection of their faith. They are Patriots, individually and united, of the first order.

Semper Vigilo, Fortis, Paratus et Fidelis!

Mark Alexander
Publisher, PatriotPost.US

Veritas vos Liberabit -- Semper Vigilo, Fortis, Paratus, et Fidelis! Mark Alexander, Publisher, for The Patriot's editors and staff.

(Please pray for our Armed Forces standing in harm's way around the world, and for their families -- especially families of those fallen Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen, who granted their lives in defense of American liberty.)