What’s in a Name By Robert Tackett

People often laugh when they hear my name is Robert Earl Tackett. Probably laughing at the Earl part, I imagine. Foolish people. I don’t care. People have never been able to bully me about my name. I am proud of my name. I have great respect for the lineage my name came from.

Individually, Robert means “Bright flame”. While Earl means “Nobleman or Warrior”, respectively. And Tackett seems to be boring. Northern French meaning “Hook buckle loop”. Whatever that is.

But to me, my name is so much more. My father, Donald Tackett, grew up in the south. Tupelo, Mississippi, to be exact. Birthplace of Elvis Presley. His two best friends were Earl and Robert. All three together were a nightmare! Always getting into some type of trouble. If one was in a jam, all three were in the jam! It seemed as if the older they got, the more serious the trouble they found themselves in.

Just shy of graduating, all three found themselves in front of the local magistrate. The community had had enough of their shenanigans. “Go to jail or join the service”! Was the judge’s order. Well now it was an easy choice. Wasn’t much of any jobs around. Viet Nam was in full force and the military needed men. Running moonshine was not much of an option, sooner or later they would be caught and be back in jail or worse.

They found themselves at the local recruiter’s office later that afternoon. They took an entrance exam and everything kinda gets blurry for a bit right about here. But when the dust settled, Donald and Earl scored high enough to join the Navy while Earl settled for the Marine Corp! They sure had nice uniforms.

Earl went to bootcamp on Parris Island heading for Viet Nam. Donald and Earl ended up joining as Navy Corpsman. Respected. And as fate would have it, four months later, they were all assigned to the same company. Donald would be with his best friends in the whole wide world. And they were heading for the meat grinder.

The three were inseparable. The Three Musketeers, they like to call themselves. The Three Stooges, more like it by everyone else! They were assigned to the same company, shared the same tent and ate just about every meal together. Nothing could separate them. Nothing but the jungle. The jungle was the Quang Tri province of Viet Nam.

It just so happened that one dark, rainy day, fate jumped out and would separate them forever. The day was May 16th and the year was 1968. The year I was born. Out on a particularly tedious, long-range patrol, the rain was relentless. Everyone and everything was soaked. The twelve-man LRRP was out for a three day Recon. Everyone was miserable. Visibility through the rain was about three meters. Pitiful.

Just after coming out of the tree line, heading towards a rice paddy, Bam! Bam! Bam! The point man was flung around, his rifle flying away into the bushes and he fell heavily into the mud and vegetation. The squad all kneeled and returned fire.

“Medic”! The squad leader yelled above the roar of the rifles. “Medic up”!

Without hesitating, Donald ran forward, hunched over to make himself a smaller target, he made his way to the front of the line. The point man had taken a round to the chest and shoulder. Blood was everywhere. Donald kneeled at his side and thinking quickly, grabbed the Marines web harness and began dragging him back to the tree line. Back to safety.

Bullets were flying everywhere! Hitting the mud and making sick, thunking noises as they struck the mud. The others whizzed overhead. Voices were shouting. American voices were calling for support fire, directing machine gun fire and calling for a Medevac! Vietnamese voices could also be heard. No one knows what they were yelling, but it couldn’t be good.

“Just twenty more meters”! Donald thought to himself. The hail of gun fire was deafening. Red and green tracers were zipping back and forth, flying by at grass level. “I’m not going to make it”. Donald thought. “I’m gonna get shot in the back by these cowardly sunsabitches”!

Suddenly, two shadows emerged from the tree line and came running out into the rain. They were firing red tracers over his head and around him at unseen enemies. Donald found the strength to continue on and hurried to his two best friends. They formed a shield with their bodies and he passed between them with the wounded point man. They stood stoically, shoulder to shoulder and provided covering fire, ensuring Donld would get to safety.

Robert and Earl were walking backwards, firing at anything that moved, making their way back to the tree line. The rifles blazing away. Green tracers were zipping back. True to their training, they took turns changes out their spent magazines for full mags. One kept firing while the other reloaded and moved.

Donald quickly made it to the tree line, found some cover behind a tree and began treating the injured Marine. Cutting off the shirt he exposed the jagged wounds, The chest wound required a plastic seal and some tape. No exit wound. It was tough to get the tape to stay in place with all that blood in the way. He used large bulky dressings to staunch the flow of blood in the shoulder.

Heavy automatic weapons fire began from the unseen enemy. The rounds making sick, ugly sounds as they struck the trees.

“Man down”! Screamed Robert. “Doc! Earl’s hit”!

Donald stopped his work and looked up. He ran forward, his own weapon finally chattering away. A dreadful feeling creeping down his back. Fear. He practically stumbled over Robert who was crouched low in the mud and grass trying to drag Earl backward toward the same tree line. Donald slung his weapon and grabbed an arm to help drag. Glancing down, he noticed a large hole in Earl’s throat. Blood and bubbles were pouring out, gurgling could be heard with each breath. He noticed more holes to his chest.

“Oh no”! Donald silently screamed. “Not Earl, please not Earl”!

Robert glanced up just in time to see a small, round object hurtling towards them.

“Grenade”! Robert yelled.

Instinctively, Donald dropped and covered Earl’s body with his own. The grenade landed at their feet. Without any hesitation, or final words, Robert dove and landed on the grenade. With a loud, dull, “Thump”! it was over. The explosion concussed the air and the world went silent.

“Doc”! Screamed the radioman. “Medevacs inbound! 10 mikes out”!

“Get everyone ready”. Screamed the Squad leader.

Bending over Robert, he checked for a pulse. None. Looking at the wound in his abdomen, he had been torn apart. Robert’s brown eyes were still open, lifeless. Earl, his hand outstretched was still holding Robert’s ankle in an effort to keep him from jumping on that damn grenade. No more rise and fall of the chest. No more blood pouring out. His eyes were also open. The life fading away.

“Doc. Sorry about Earl and Robert”. Began the RTO. “What about “Ramirez”?

“He’ll be ok”. Answered Donald. Compartmentalize the hate and anguish. The pain was almost too much. Others are counting on me right now. Push it down. Way down. “I’ll be right back”. As he went to turn, his knee burned like fire. Looking down, he noticed that he was bleeding from the knee. It’s gonna need stitches he thought to no one in particular. And silently, Donald went to wrap his two best friends in their ponchos for the long ride home.

As the bird left, the squad leader asked, “How’s that knee, Doc”? Looking down Donald figured he better dress the wound before it gets infected.

An eternity later, small arms fire ceased from the enemy. The rest of the twelve-man LRRP team came forward firing as they ran to finish off any stragglers. The team brought back one young looking enemy soldier. Covered in dark clothes, with grass stuck in multiple bands. He would be damn near invisible in the jungle. The team leader flung him to the ground near Doc Tackett and the wounded pointman. Looking to his two buddies wrapped in their ponchos, the rain still falling. Donald drew his sidearm and slowly walked to the enemy combatant. There would be no prisoners today.

A year later, Donald came home to my mother, my sister and I. We lived in San Diego for a bit. But I was too young to remember any of that. So, growing up, when anyone wants to make fun of my name, I understand that they are just a shallow person who has no idea I am named after two great Warriors. I know my name and what it represents. It is an honor to be named Robert Earl.