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Farewell, COL Puckett

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A Personal Tribute Colonel Ralph Puckett, Jr.

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Many associate death with grief, and while we will all mourn in our own way the peaceful passing on April 8, 2024 of Colonel Ralph Puckett, Jr., I would like to think that those of us who knew him well will smile as we reflect on a life that not only touched us all but, more importantly, left us a better person for having known him, for his was a life not only exceptional in deed but, more importantly, a life uniquely well lived.

While it can be said that Colonel Puckett “led by example,” I would rather say that Colonel Puckett “lived by example.” The difference is that ‘leading by example’ can be defined as modeling the actions and behaviors one wants others to see and emulate, while ‘living by example’ reflects one’s beliefs via actions and daily life, meaning always doing what you are supposed to do, when you are supposed to do it, even when no one is watching.

Professionally, Colonel Puckett was known by the nom de guerre, “*The Ranger*.” It was not a moniker he chose for himself; it was one earned and bestowed on him by others. It was a moniker earned because he remained true to the basics which, for him, started with “You can always do better” and “Be there.” If there were a single phrase to capture his spirit, it would be, “He brought it every day.”

He brought it in Korea on Hill 205, which resulted in his Medal of Honor and a succinct observation from a senior Ranger NCO combat veteran, “That was simply Ralph being Ralph.” He brought it on the field of battle in Vietnam when the resolve of battle-weary Soldiers would stiffen with the mere knowledge that ‘The Ranger’ was with them, earning him in the process a Distinguished Service Cross. He brought it every day by being a social trendsetter and selecting, in a newly desegregated military, two African Americans in 1950 to serve with him in an elite unit and later, in 2015, by quelling rumblings when the first two women graduated Ranger School by simply stating, “They met the standards. They are Rangers.” And, he brought it from 1996 to 2008, as the Honorary Colonel of the 75th Ranger Regiment, by not only participating in numerous Regimental field training exercises in CONUS, Alaska and Korea, but by also visiting his Rangers in Iraq, and even celebrating his 80th birthday in Afghanistan as they fought the Global War on Terror. He brought it every day, literally mentoring and influencing hundreds, if not thousands over the past decades.

While it was noted during the 35th PBS National Memorial Day Concert which paid tribute to the Colonel’s passing that “*He feared no man, he feared no situation, and he feared no enemy,*” when I reflect on who the Colonel was and what he represented, the image that comes to mind from the 30+ years my wife, Judy, and I have been blessed to know the Pucketts is not of the White House ceremony, his Lying in Honor in the Capitol Rotunda, his impressive awards, nor the overwhelming number of ribbons, badges and patches on his uniform, as striking as they are. Instead, it is a singular moment in time, an image taken at the Pentagon the day prior to the White House Medal of Honor ceremony. Though being honored by the Secretary, Chief of Staff and Sergeant Major of the Army, what did this picture capture? It caught the then 94-year-old

Colonel in the corner of the room, speaking one on one with an enlisted waiter. Those of us who know the Colonel, know well that given the choice between a General or a Private to talk to, to mentor, “The Ranger” would always seek out the Private, first.

Much of Colonel Puckett’s service can be captured in what I call ‘Colonel Puckett stories,’ for it seems that the vast majority of us who’ve been honored to know “The Ranger” have such a vignette. Whether unexpectedly encountering the Colonel checking on us during a training exercise in the dark of night, offering career guidance in a taxi on the way to the airport or saying “Hello” as he boarded a C-141 on its way to Afghanistan, the experience was unforgettably ingrained in one’s memory.

While there are many such stories, there is one, in particular, that stands out among the best. Following the White House ceremony, my wife and I were honored to represent the Pucketts for the Colonel’s induction into The Pentagon’s Hall of Heroes. There I was in the front row, a former 17-year-old Private, a PV1, with four recipients to my left, another to my right, and me representing “The Ranger,” sitting there, muttering a mantra to myself, “Lock, you may be with the boys but you ain’t one of the boys!”

That fact would shortly, thereafter, be confirmed for sitting to my immediate left was Major John Duffy, Special Forces, Vietnam, and, yes, he, too, had a story to tell. It was 1960 and Sergeant Duffy was assigned to Bad Tölz, West Germany, where he was being trained as a Green Beret. At one point, he was taken aside by one of the instructors, a Major, who advised the young NCO to seek a commission and offered guidance on how to prepare for it. It was advice that he followed; advice that would eventually lead him to be sitting next to me – or, more properly, me sitting next to him. That Major? Detachment Commander, Ralph Puckett. One Recipient offering career guidance to another future Recipient. A ‘Forrest Gump’ moment. Can’t make that up.

Life can be defined as a collection of stories, both big and small, of those people we’ve touched and been touched by along the way. Of moments, the importance of which may not have been obvious at the time – can you say, “Major Duffy?” The Ancient Egyptians believed that we all die twice. The first is when we take our last breath. The second is when our name and stories are no longer told. If it is true that our lives in the end are conveyed by our stories, then Colonel Puckett will continue to live as his stories resonate through the years.

While it is easy to focus on the Colonel’s professional career, we would be remiss if we were not to comment on his family. “The Ranger” would be the first to admit his success was a team effort that included his beautiful bride of 71 years, Jeannie. As one can imagine, she, too, has plenty such stories but I’ve found the one most endearing to be when she was asked to speak to some West Point seniors who were planning on getting married after graduation. During the question-and-answer session at the end, a cadet bravely asked, “Mrs. Puckett, have you ever considered divorce?” Jeannie paused for a few moments, most likely reflecting back on specific events that included her husband’s extended tour in Columbia when she was sent home to Columbus, GA, for six months to take care of a newborn, and his later volunteering for a thirteen-month combat tour in Vietnam, thus leaving her with three young children to watch over

and raise. Her response was classic Jeannie. “Divorce? No. Murder? Yes.” To steal a line from American Express ... “Priceless.”

From the start, the Pucketts were a perfectly matched couple. The protection, care and love conveyed to the very end by Jeannie, at the age of 91, for her 97-year-old husband, was obvious to all.

That said, I know the feelings were mutual, as conveyed to me by an exchange with COL Puckett in 2020 about, of all things, a poem by Edgar Allan Poe called ‘Anabelle Lee,’ considered by many to be one of the greatest love poems of all time. A poem of life, death, and eternal love that reflected his feelings for his wife, Jeannie, his Anabelle Lee. Who’d have thought that one of the Army’s most decorated Soldiers of valor would still be a lovestruck softie to his final days?

So, in the end, how would the Colonel want to be remembered? As a husband and as a father are a given. But how, would he want to be remembered professionally?

I believe the answer can be found in his initial commissioned assignment when he was selected as a Second Lieutenant to command a newly formed Ranger Company that included two of his West Point classmates; two classmates who had recommended him for the command position; two classmates who were willing to take orders from another classmate. Colonel Ralph Puckett was a **leader**.

There are many characteristics that define leadership but most significant is ‘Trust,’ a virtue granted by one on another as a function of it having been earned. The Colonel lived the example, he lived standards, he lived leadership, and, as a result, he earned everyone’s trust. It was a trust that made a monumental difference to all who knew him. It is a trust that’s established a legacy for others to emulate.

And, to honor his legacy, we need to do more than simply speak tributes and make dedications in his name. If we really wish to honor “The Ranger,” to be of value to the nation, to society as he was, we should commit ourselves to being more like the Colonel, of demonstrating a joy, a celebration for life that is embedded in a passion for people, whether it’s a private on a ridge line in a blizzard, an enlisted waiter in the Pentagon or the President of the United States.

Show an interest, treat everyone the same and seek to leave them a little better for having spent time talking with you. It is an easy, yet powerful, way to honor the Colonel’s legacy.

In the end, it was never about medals, citations, awards or recognition. It was not about rank, position or prestige. It was always about his Rangers, his Soldiers; about people. Colonel Ralph Puckett, Jr., has left a legacy that may be equaled by few but surpassed by none. And because of that, we’re not just better Soldiers, Rangers and Warriors because of him, we are better people for having known him.

Rangers Lead the Way, Sir!

Bio: JD LOCK, Lieutenant Colonel, US Army (Retired), is a graduate and former assistant professor of the United States Military Academy, West Point. A Ranger qualified Master Parachutist, his assignments included the 1st Armored and 82nd Airborne Divisions, as well as serving as the chief NATO SFOR engineer in the Balkans during the Kosovo Campaign. Post active duty, he continues to support C5ISR and AI advanced technologies. Lock is also a published author of works endorsed by the likes of GEN (Ret) Colin Powell, LTG (Ret) Hal Moore and Stephen Ambrose. His 18-year pursuit of a Medal of Honor upgrade for COL Ralph Puckett came to a successful conclusion 70+ years after the event with a White House ceremony on May 21, 2021, making the COL the oldest living recipient to receive the Medal at the age of 94. More recently, Lock was able to lead an initiative to have 'The Ranger,' the last surviving MoH recipient of the Korean Conflict, Lie in Honor in the Capitol Rotunda on April 29, 2024, only the 42nd American in United States history to Lie in Honor/State.