

One of the rough, good men who guard peace falls

By JAMES L. NOLES JR.

Rustling through my morning paper on a recent Saturday, I scanned a short article on an inside page, "No Survivors Found From Downed Helicopter," the headline announced. Datedined Zamboanga, the article reported on the recent crash of a MH-47 Chinook helicopter in the Philippines. In its sixth paragraph, in the list of 10 Army and Air Force casualties, three words stood out: "Major Curtis Feistner." It was a name I hadn't heard in years.

Curt Feistner and I graduated from West Point in 1990. He was a cross-country skier from Minnesota. With blond hair, light skin and a lean physique, he very much looked the part. At school, our paths seldom crossed. I didn't really become acquainted with Curt until our officer basic course and flight school at Fort Rucker.

From Fort Rucker, I remember Curt being a quiet, serious officer, well-liked by both the West Point and ROTC lieutenants. He was professional and diligent — exactly the kind of man you would want your son or daughter to serve with, or under. I still recall Curt riding his mountain bike to

our early morning PT sessions. An hour of punishing PT at the hands of the remorseless first sergeant was enough for the rest of the lieutenants — but not for Curt. At the end of the hour, we'd retreat to our air-conditioned cars. Curt would hop on his bike and pedal home.

A dozen years elapsed since we graduated from West Point, and Curt and I took very different paths. While I left the Army at the end of my military service commitment, Curt stayed the course. On the way, he earned his Ranger tab and served with aviation units overseas in Panama and Hawaii.

As a captain, Curt competed for a position with the Army's elite 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment — the same outfit featured in Black Hawk Down. Many officers tried out for the few spaces available in the regiment. Few of them, however, successfully negotiated the numerous low-level, cross-country check-flights under the stressful limitations of night vision goggles or the other tasks demanded of the unit's would-be pilots. Curt was one of the few, though, and he proudly joined the ranks of the Nightstalkers. Later, when the Army needed an officer to activate one of the 160th's companies in Korea, it

looked to Curt to handle the task.

Over the years, however, Curt faded from the forefront of my memory. He wasn't forgotten, but merely faded as I went through the motions of pursuing a comfortable civilian life "in the real world." As I was studying in law school or dropping down a mortgage on a house in Mountain Brook, Curt and his men were flying missions only rumored to exist. Most recently, they were flying a Special Forces A-Team in support of the Philippine government's efforts to stamp out the Islamic rebel group Abu Sayyaf — an organization currently holding two largely forgotten American civilians hostage.

So as I practiced law in the comfort of a law office in downtown Birmingham, Curt remained out there in the Army, manning the invisible ramparts of our republic. Thousands of others quietly stand watch with him. Like Curt, however, they only occasionally stray back into our peripheral vision.

They are the infantrymen of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), guarding the perimeter of Kandahar air base in the bitter cold of an Afghan winter. They are the soldiers of the 2nd Infantry Division, keeping a watchful eye on the icy barbed wire and minefields of Korra's DMZ. They

are the men and women of the 1st Infantry Division, patrolling the grim roads and towns of Kosovo, or the soldiers of countless stateside units who watch CNN with a careful eye and wonder where in the Third World they'll be spending their next Christmas. Ironically, it is only tragedies such as the one that befell Curt that bring them back — briefly — to the forefront of our consciousness. Then, as the headlines fade, so do their images and our awareness of them.

The British author George Orwell is often quoted as saying that "people sleep peacefully in their beds at night because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf." If Orwell indeed said that, then he got it only half right. People sleep peacefully at night in America because rough — and good — men garrison our frontiers. With the fatal crash of Curt's MH-47 in the waters of the Mindanao Sea, the ranks of the rough, good men are 10 men fewer.

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