On Top of the World

Remembering Dad

by Amy Bocks-Duryea
Daughter of Army SFC John Duryea, 10th Special Forces Group, who lost his life in 1990.

On August 5, 1987, my dad and I struck out on the last 2,000 feet of our trek up Mt. Whitney.

I was 12; he was 35. The previous day we had hiked for eight hours before making camp on a ledge high above Consultation Lake, across from a large curved glacier in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Five more hours of switchbacks, shear drops, some glacier ice and the peak was before us. He was awed at the sight, a dream he had for several years after climbing and camping in his beloved Appalachians and around the world. At the summit he found a marker proclaiming it to be 14,496.118 feet in elevation. I was the highest point in the Continental US at that moment, until he stood up beside me. He called me a “hard charger” and said that the guys in his unit would be impressed. (Oh, about the climb and that we bypassed two young Marines on leave from Camp Pendleton on day one.)

I’ll never forget the view; the mountains and depressions with glaciers to the north, Mt. Muir to our south and rain clouds moving in from the west. Dad talked, envious, with several climbers who’d come up the east face of the peak. I fed a bird trail mix from my fingers. I knew then what a special trip it was, just the two of us spending time together while he was on leave. I enjoyed the hike, the forest, the mountain meadows bursting with color and the views that few people ever experience. But at night, it was just me and dad in the tent, talking in the lantern light.

Three years to the day we started out on our trip from my home in Tempe, Arizona, August 3, 1990, we buried him at home in Pennsylvania. I was 15; he was too young. In less than a week I’d gone from my only worry being starting my sophomore year to staring at a flag-draped coffin. To me, he was dad. He’d gone back to community college to earn an Associate’s degree and sent us his report cards. He was actually quite good at writing and his teacher wanted him to write for the campus.
literary magazine but he joked he had other commitments. He smoked less when he was with us but that was just on his leaves. At every opportunity he’d load up his car and head for the hills, so to speak. Usually alone, he’d find places to climb in New England and the Appalachian range, especially in Tuckerman’s Ravine at Mt. Washington. He took hundreds of pictures which he developed on his own. And he was a computer nut that would keep my mom up until the wee hours of the morning showing her things he’d found and learned on the computer when he came out on leave. “John, it’s after midnight, I have to work in the morning.” “Just wait, one more thing…”

That week I learned about SFC. John Duryea, 10th Special Forces Group. On July 27, 1990, his Blackhawk crashed on a night training mission in the rough terrain outside Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Thirteen men were onboard and five died, my dad and his teammate, Joseph Grzadzielewicz among them. ODA-094; they called themselves the Wild Geeks and sent me a plaque later with his SF dates engraved on it. He was the old man on the team and they called him Spot. I think that was when I realized the strength of the brotherhood of which he was proud to be a part. I remember his buddy Danny, who escorted him home from Fort Chaffee, cried when he handed my sister, Jamie, 12, and me each a set of dad’s dog tags and beret he’d brought with him from Ft. Devens. I put those dog tags on and wore them day and night for months, even with my Homecoming dress that fall.

Dad taught me to love the quiet solitude of the mountains. When I hike with my husband and daughter I am still amazed that the sounds and smells of the high desert mountains of Arizona bring home the same smells and sounds of the mountains we explored together in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. He gave me a love of music and introduced me to Vivaldi and classical music, to classic rock (not so classic then) and even country. My first introduction to the Beatles was a late night drive back to his mom’s from visiting the national cemetery in Gettysburg. I got to sit in the front of the car that night and Jamie was asleep. I asked him to play Yellow Submarine over and over. He probably regretted ever putting that tape in the stereo. I never really got the opportunity to know him as a man and I often sit and wonder what he’d be like now. He’d be 58 now and retired, probably. Would he own the computer store he talked about with my mom? Would he have moved here to Arizona? Would he go shooting on the weekends with my husband and daughter? Would he vote red, or blue? What stories would he remember from growing up a Navy brat? Would he ever tell me about burning down the cornfield by throwing a lit cigarette out the car window when he was supposed to be driving his brother and sister to Catechism class, or would he keep that one to himself? How about being picked up by the SPs after shoplifting at the PX when he was 10? There are so many things that I’ll never know, that I can only guess.

I do know that he loved us and would be so very proud of who we’ve become. I know that his grandsons would be the light of his life and my daughter the granddaughter who’d have him wrapped around her finger like she does her dad. I also know that he’d be proud of the effort his special operations brothers have made to provide for the children of their fallen comrades. My dad made me the person I am; I may not know everything about him, his hopes or dreams for the future, but I know the important things and those are what I hold on to and what I’ll pass to my daughter. She’s ten and looks at her dad with the same awe that I used to and rather than making me sad it makes me immensely happy, because every little girl should have a daddy to idolize.

One afternoon in 2002 my mom took a phone call from a staffer in the State Representative’s office in our old district in Pennsylvania. He had information about the Special Operation Warrior Foundation and was trying to locate us. We were shocked that he would take the time to track down the family of a soldier who’d been dead for over ten years. That was when we learned that time makes no difference to the SOWF and those that are dedicated to meeting its mission. The organization had recently changed their policies to include the children of special ops warriors killed in training accidents and my sister and I were eligible. I was married, with a two-year old, a full-time job and a part-time school schedule at the University of Arizona. My husband, a Gulf War veteran and police officer, and I jumped at the chance. My dad often remarked that he wished he’d be able to pay for college for us, but we all knew it was unlikely. In a way, he did in the end.

The tuition the SOWF paid for my last two years of school was worth so much more than the money. Sometimes it’s hard as time passes, memories fade and often the next news story is already in the works before the final note of Taps sounds. SOWF keeps those men alive. Every golf tournament, every endurance run, every time the Yankees have a SOWF day or the hood of a NASCAR car bears the SOWF emblem, they are remembered. And so are we.