**The Truth About Being a Hero; Karl Marlantes on what makes men heroes--in their own hearts and in the eyes of others**

[*Marlantes, Karl*](http://search.proquest.com/news/indexinglinkhandler/sng/au/Marlantes,+Karl/$N?accountid=2878)*.* [***Wall Street Journal (Online)***](http://search.proquest.com/news/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/Wall+Street+Journal+$28Online$29/$N/105983/PrintViewFile/885062727/$B/D877FB4CD05E4884PQ/1?accountid=2878) *[New York, N.Y] 20 Aug 2011*

In 1968, at age 23, Karl Marlantes shipped off to Vietnam as a second lieutenant in charge of 40 Marines--an experience he later drew on for his novel "Matterhorn." In this excerpt from his forthcoming memoir, "What It Is Like to Go to War," he reflects on the motives and transcendent moments of heroism.

We all want to be special, to stand out; there's nothing wrong with this. The irony is that every human being is special to start with, because we're unique to start with. But we then go through some sort of boot camp from the age of zero to about 18 where we learn everything we can about how not to be unique.

This spawns an unconscious desire to prove yourself special, but now it's special in the eyes of your peers and it comes out in the form of being better than or having power over someone else. In the military I could exercise the power of being automatically respected because of the medals on my chest, not because I had done anything right at the moment to earn that respect. This is pretty nice. It's also a psychological trap that can stop one's growth and allow one to get away with just plain bad behavior.

Looking even deeper, I realize now that I also had very mixed feelings about some of the medals on my chest. I knew many Marines had done brave deeds that no one saw and for which they got no medals at all. I was having a very hard time carrying those medals and didn't have the insight or maturity to know what to do with my combination of guilt and pride.

The best words I've ever heard on the subject of medals come from a fellow lieutenant who'd been my company executive officer when I first arrived in Vietnam. The company came under mortar attack. Tom--all names given here are pseudonyms--then a platoon commander, had found a relatively safe defensive position for himself, but he stood up, exposed to the exploding shells, in order to get a compass bearing on where the shells were being fired from. He then called in and adjusted counterbattery fire, which got the company out of trouble. He was awarded the Bronze Star. When I heard the news and congratulated him, he said, "A lot of people have done a lot more and gotten a lot less, and a lot of people have done a lot less and gotten a lot more."

Medals are all mixed up with hierarchy, politics and even job descriptions. What is considered normal activity for an infantry grunt, and therefore not worthy of a medal, is likely to be viewed as extraordinary for someone who does the same thing but isn't a grunt, so he gets a medal and maybe an article in Stars and Stripes.

I got my medals, in part, because I did brave acts, but also, in part, because the kids liked me and they spent time writing better eyewitness accounts than they would have written if they hadn't liked me. Had I been an unpopular officer and done exactly the same things, few would have bothered, if any. The accounts would have been laconic, at best, and the medals probably of a lower order. The only people who will ever know the value of the ribbons on their chests are the people wearing them--and even they can fool themselves, in both directions.

I was eager for medals early on, but after a while I was no longer so anxious to get one of any kind. But the same phenomenon of being taken over by something, or someone, still seemed to operate.

We had moved up in the dark and waited in the jungle, strung out on line as the jets roared in to bomb the enemy defenses at first light. But because of a screw-up the jets dropped their bombs on the wrong hill. I screamed bloody murder over the battalion Forward Air Control net but was told I was out of line and to get off because I couldn't possibly see what was going on.

Going up against bunkers is hard enough, but doing it without any air prep was decidedly unnerving. A huge value of the air prep is the boost to the morale of the attacking infantry. We came out of the jungle onto the exposed earth below the bunkers and were instantly under fire from the untouched machine-gun positions.

Everyone dived for logs and holes. The whole assault ground to a halt, except for one kid named Niemi, who had sprinted forward when we came under the intense fire and disappeared up in front of us somewhere. We figured he was down and dead. I actually don't know how long we all lay there getting pulverized out in the open like that. I knew it would be only a few minutes before the enemy rockets and mortars found us.

Again, I seemed to step aside. I remember surveying the whole scene from someplace in the air above it. I saw the napalm smoke burning uselessly on the wrong hill. The machine guns had us pinned down with well-planned interlocking fire. The North Vietnamese Army were pros. Everyone was strung out in a ragged line hiding behind downed trees and in shell holes--even me, tiny and small, huddled down there below with the rest.

I distinctly remember recalling the words of an instructor at the Basic School, a particularly colorful and popular redheaded major who taught tactics, talking to a group of us about when it was a platoon leader earned his pay. I knew, floating above that mess, that now that time had come. If I didn't get up and lead, we'd get wiped.

I re-entered my body as the hero platoon leader, leaving the rest of everyday me up there in the clouds. It was at this point I started screaming at the wounded machine gunner to crawl up to my log and start that machine-gun duel, which would keep the crew of one of the interlocking machine guns busy. I then got an M-79 man to move up next to me and had him start lobbing shells at the observation slit of an adjacent bunker that was also giving us fits, directly up the hill from us. Then I stood up.

I did a lot of things that day, many of which got written into the commendation, but the one I'm most proud of is that I simply stood up, in the middle of all that flying metal, and started up the hill all by myself.

I'm proud of that act because I did it for the right reasons. I once watched a televised exchange about what dramatists call "the hero's journey," between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell. The camera had cut to a boot camp scene with Mr. Campbell saying, "There are some heroic journeys into which you are thrown and pitched." The camera then cut to scenes from Vietnam, helicopters, a young black man limping forward in agony. Then, it cut to war protesters, and Mr. Moyers then asked Mr. Campbell, "Doesn't heroism have a moral objective?"

Campbell replied, "The moral objective is that of saving a people, or person, or idea. He is sacrificing himself for something. That is the morality of it. Now, you, from another position, might say that 'something' wasn't worth it, or was downright wrong. That's a judgment from another side. But it doesn't destroy the heroism of what was done. Absolutely not."

I was no more heroic this time than the time I won my first medal--when I went after an injured Marine named Utter, jokingly asking another fellow Marine, "Is it worth a medal if I go get him?" Both times I faced a lot of fire. In fact, both times my actions were an effort to save a person, Utter, or a people, my little tribe exposed and dying on that scourged hillside. But my motives had changed. And because my motives had changed, I feel a lot better about what I did.

I made no heroic gestures or wisecracks this time. I simply ran forward up the steep hill, zigzagging for the bunker, all by myself, hoping the M-79 man wouldn't hit me in the back. It's hard to zigzag while running uphill loaded down with ammunition and grenades. Every bit of my consciousness was focused on just two things, the bunker above me and whether I could keep running and zigzagging with everything I had. Another 400-meter sprint against Death. A long desperate weekend. A time out of time.

I was running in a long arc to get between the machine-gun bunker and the one I was heading for--and to avoid the M-79 shells now exploding against the observation slit, which I hoped were blinding the occupants. As I made that arc I was turned sideways to the hill and I caught movement in my peripheral vision. I hit the deck, turning and rolling, coming up in a position to fire. It was a Marine! He was about 15 meters below me, zigzagging, falling, up and running again. Immediately behind him a long ragged line of Marines came moving and weaving up the hill behind me. Behind the line were spots of crumpled bodies, lying where they'd been hit.

They'd all come with me. I was actually alone only for a matter of seconds. We took the bunker, and the next, and--together with Second Platoon joining up with us on our right flank--broke through the first line of bunkers, only to come under fire from a second, interior line of fighting holes higher on the hill. At this point I saw the missing kid, Niemi, pop his head up. He sprinted across the open top of the hill, all alone. The NVA turned in their positions to fire on him. I watched him climb on top of a bunker and chuck two grenades inside. When they went off I saw him fall to the ground. I assumed that this time he'd been killed for sure.

Being hit from behind by Niemi both unnerved the NVA and encouraged us to hurry to reach him. All semblance of platoon and squad order were gone by now. Everyone was intermingled, weaving, rushing and covering, taking on each hole and bunker one at a time in groups.

It was just about that time I got knocked out and blinded by a hand grenade. I came to, groggy. I could hear my radioman, who seemed very far away, telling the skipper I was down and that he didn't know if I was dead or not. I grunted something to let him know I wasn't dead and tried to sit up, but then went back down. I felt as though I couldn't get my breath.

Then I panicked, because I knew I'd been hit in the eyes. I started rubbing them, desperate to get them open, but they seemed glued shut. My radioman poured Kool-Aid from his canteen onto my face and into my eyes, and I managed to get one eye to clear. The other eye was a bloody dirt-clogged mess and I thought I'd lost it. (The blindness was temporary, but I later learned that several metal slivers were just microns from my optic nerve.)

We kept scrambling for the top, trying to reach Niemi, trying to win, trying to get it all over with. I got held up by two enemy soldiers in a hole and was attempting to get a shot or two off at them and quickly ducking back down when a kid I knew from Second Platoon, mainly because of his bad reputation, threw himself down beside me, half his clothes blown away. He was begging people for a rifle. His had been blown out of his hands.

He was a black kid, all tangled up in black-power politics, almost always angry and sullen. A troublemaker. Yet here he was, most of his body naked with only flapping rags left of his jungle utilities, begging for a rifle when he had a perfect excuse to just bury his head in the clay and quit. I gave him mine. I still had a pistol. He grabbed the rifle, stood up to his full height, fully exposing himself to all the fire, and simply blasted an entire magazine at the two soldiers in front of us, killing both of them. He then went charging into the fight, leaving me stunned for a moment. Why? Who was he doing this for? What is this thing in young men? We were beyond ourselves, beyond politics, beyond good and evil. This was transcendence.

Many of us had by now worked our way almost to the top of the hill. Fighting was no longer them above and us below. Marines and NVA intermingled. Crashing out of the clouds into this confusion came a flaming, smoking twin-rotor CH-46 helicopter. It was making a much-needed ammunition run to the company waiting in reserve and firing support for us from the hill we'd taken several days before. We think that the bird got hit by a mortar round as it was coming in and, in the confusion and scudding cloud cover, the pilot picked the wrong hill or he did it because he had no choice.

The result was the same. Down it came, right where we were assaulting, and the NVA just tore that bird to pieces. Spinning out of control, it smashed right on the very top of the hill, breaking its rotor blades.

I saw Niemi pop into sight again. He sprinted to the downed chopper. Later we found out he'd spent his time crawling behind holes and bunkers, shooting people from behind. He'd watched aghast as the chopper came screaming out of the sky, nearly hitting him. Later, he told me that it looked as if the thing simply started sprouting holes as the NVA turned their weapons on it.

When he saw the crew bail out and crawl for cover underneath the chopper (aircrews are armed only with pistols, virtually useless in a fight like this), the only thing he could think to do was sprint across the open hilltop to see if he could find a place from which he could lay down fire to protect them. He didn't debate this. He just did it. It was an unconscious, generous and potentially sacrificial act.

Many of us coming up the hill saw Niemi sprint into the open. Knowing now that he was still alive and that he and the chopper crew were dead for sure if we didn't break through to them, we all simply rushed forward to reach them before the NVA killed them. No one gave an order. We, the group, just rushed forward all at once. We couldn't be stopped. Just individuals among us were stopped. Many forever. But we couldn't be. This, too, is a form of transcendence. I was we, no longer me.

Lance Corporal Steel, 19, who'd been acting platoon commander until I reorganized things and was now acting platoon sergeant, got there first. The crewmen were so grateful and happy they gave their pistols away. I got the pilot's .38 Smith & Wesson.

Niemi got a Navy Cross.

I got a Navy Cross.

The helicopter pilot got a front-page story in Stars and Stripes with the large headline, "Copter 'Crashes' Enemy Party, Takes Hill."

The kid who borrowed my rifle didn't get anything.