

The Choices of a Hero

What this farmer can do with his limited body is amazing. Even more inspiring is his positive outlook on life.

The air was relentlessly muggy at 7:00 on the morning of Nov. 25, 1968. James "Butch" Robbins and his buddies in the 101st Recon Unit were still out on patrol after an all-night search for an enemy cache.

The 19-year-old soldier had had only an inkling of what he was in for when he completed basic training at Fort Polk, La., known as "Little Vietnam." G.I.'s who grunted their way through the training found themselves in the jungles of Southeast Asia a short time later.

"Military experience" was about all Butch had heard from prospective employers since he had quit school at 16. It seemed strange that trudging through the mud and the muck in this gritty place called Hue was going to help him get a job back home in Sharpsburg, N.C. Yet, here he was.

When the small church came into view, 19 of the 20-man recon unit advanced cautiously into its sanctuary. Butch was the lone soldier who took steps toward the graveyard. There, his attention was caught by a suspiciously fresh mound of dirt

near a tombstone. About five yards away from the grave, the young soldier took the last step he'd ever take on his own two feet when he stepped directly onto a boobytrapped 105 mm shell.

The results were about as devastating as can be inflicted on a thinly mortal frame. "My [right] arm was blown off at the elbow," says formerly right-handed Butch. Both legs were violently amputated from just above the kneecaps. "It took half of my nose, and my side and chest were wounded," he continues.

The bloody sight of Butch's torn body must have jarred even those among them hardened to wartime brutality. But the soldiers didn't slow as they quickly used their belts as tourniquets.

Except for a few minutes after the explosion, Butch never lost consciousness. He fought the threatening blackness by repeating, "Why did I do that?" over and over again. "They always told us if we kept talking, you wouldn't go into shock as quickly," he explains. Shock was the

No. 1 killer in Vietnam.

He doesn't remember any pain from the grisly explosion. "It was just like chopping a chicken's head off," he bluntly states. He does recall the suffering he endured, however, when his pals scooped him up to transport him to the helicopter.

But speed, not finesse, counted. Butch's life was literally spilling onto the Vietnamese soil at their feet. During that first 24 hours, his ravaged body required 25 pints of blood and plasma, double and then some the 11 pints of blood a healthy body normally holds.

Still, he survived the initial explosion, the torturous lift, the jostling chopper ride, the frenzied landing at the Army field hospital, and the first of what was to be 25 operations to repair the damage one single misbegotten step had wrought.

He even survived a totally unforeseen life-threatening complication. "A nurse came by and told me I could have whatever I wanted to eat," Butch explains.

The teenager ordered a chocolate



Butch Robbins is capable of almost any physical feat, like hoisting himself onto his tractor with his strong arm. Once, he almost missed a plane because the ticket agent assumed that Butch needed help in boarding. Butch grinned, jumped from his wheelchair, and then walked on his stumps up the steps to the aircraft.



For long distances, Butch tried a motorized wheelchair, but found that its heaviness hampered his independence. He prefers this lighter nonelectric model because he can lift it in and out of his van by himself. He has to replace its seat at least once a year because of wear and tear.

milkshake, then promptly became sick after drinking it.

That's when the doctors learned that Butch also had malaria. Once again, the plucky North Carolina boy survived against the odds.

The telegram sent to Butch's parents must have been like a piece of sharp-edged shrapnel, ricocheting all the way from the faraway land of Vietnam. It quietly exploded in the living room of T.E. and Eunice Robbins and left them fighting their own traumatic shock.

"We thought he would die," Eunice says simply.

Many times during his year and a half of hospitalization, Butch came close to dying. Truth be known, some people thought he might have been better off if he had. But not Butch. Despite his terrible wounds, he never once longed for death.

"But I've seen the time when I could have *let* myself die," he says. "I had to keep pushing myself."

Many folks in the North Carolina community rallied behind Butch. From these loved ones, Butch soaked up strength.

Others thoughtlessly concluded that Butch's life was over. The veteran learned from them as well. His lifelong habit of stubborn pride became a lifegiving tool of survival.

"People would say I didn't need a car," Butch explains. "Or they'd say I didn't need a house. All I needed was four walls, just like being in a hospital room. If I had stayed like that, I wouldn't be here now."

Not long after he got home, while still in bandages, Butch decided his days of dependency were over.

"I thought, 'If you want to drive a car, you've got to get out here and do it,'" he says. "So I just jumped on down the steps and drove on over where [my family members] were in the tobacco field." He used an umbrella to control the gas and brake pedals. Not long afterward, he got a

rols.



"I've never had rehabilitation," Butch says.

He tried artificial limbs once, but found he was able to get around more effectively on what was left of his legs "[It's] kind of like walking like a duck," he grins.

For long distances, he uses a non-motorized wheelchair.

It was hard. It had to be. But you cannot get Butch, now 42, to talk about that part of it. "I never heard him complain," his mother says.

"You just have to learn what you can and what you can't do," Butch says. On the "can't" side, Butch will admit failure only at climbing trees.

His first job after Vietnam was as a fire department dispatcher at the Nash County Fire and Rescue. He moved on to serve as a dispatcher at Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, N.C.

The Tactical Air Command named him its Outstanding Handicapped

Employee of the Year in 1978. During that same year, President Jimmy Carter named him Outstanding Handicapped Federal Employee.

In 1979, he decided to farm and began raising beans and corn. By the early eighties, he had switched over to a custom hay-baling business.

"This year, I put up about 21,000 square bales and about 1,200 round bales," he says.

He added licensed auctioneering to his accomplishments in 1985. It sounds cruel when his auctioneer buddies introduce Butch to the crowd as "Shorty" or "Half a Man." (Formerly 5 feet, 7 inches and 150 pounds, Butch now stands 3 feet, 2 inches and weighs 110 pounds.)

But Butch is the primary culprit when it comes to poking fun at his appearance. He figures if people are comfortable enough to laugh, they are comfortable enough to forget.

"I can't change this; no way can I

change this," he says about his body. "So why not use it to my advantage? The more you can joke about things like this, the better off you are."

If you talk to him for any length of time, you stop seeing what's missing because of what's there. The smile that perpetually rides his face announces what he thinks of himself: "Gosh, I'm a lucky son of a gun."

And it's this gratitude that shines through when he gives his presentations. As part of his livelihood, Butch tells his life story to organizations, for which he charges \$1,000 plus expenses. Of course, there is a purpose beyond money for his sharing.

"I always say the good Lord had a reason for me to be here," Butch says. "Maybe somewhere down the line what I say or do in my talk will help someone else."

Regret and self-pity are wasted emotions, he tells people. No matter what the circumstances, you have a choice about what you will do. This father of four gets through especially well to school children.


"There is always someone, somewhere, who is worse off than you are," Butch says. In his mind, those who live to seek pity are much worse off than he is. Even in the days when his injuries were fresh, that was Butch's message.

His mother remembers men calling her into their hospital rooms to tell her how much her son had inspired them. Eunice says, "They would be in their rooms, hurting, and he'd come along with a big smile on his face and cheer them up. They'd think, 'Well, I'm not really that hurt.'"

It's true, courage is often stumbled upon during the extraordinary circumstances of war. But perhaps a more truthful test of bravery is in the choices made daily. Every day, Butch Robbins wakes up, looks at his devastated body, smiles, and thanks God that he's alive. Surely, that choice is what makes him a hero.

By **NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON** with photos by **JOE LINK**

Editor's note—If your group is interested in hearing Butch's life story, you can catch him between hay mowing and auctioneering by phoning 919-446-3802; office, 919-235-5924. His address is Rt. 7, Box 180, Rocky Mount, NC 27807.



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