

# Taps For A Fallen Ranger Battalion Commander

For Dear Friends John and Maria

Maria Keneally met me at the foot of the stairs in General George Marshall's former quarters at Fort Benning, Georgia, now the guest house for special people within the military family. Her eyes were swollen and tears threatened to spill over, yet she managed a broad, open smile and she embraced me. Like most military wives, she learned to maintain a dignity seldom witnessed in others. To be outwardly emotional is a sign of weakness and would have an adverse effect on those who surround her. Lt. Col. John T. Keneally, Sr. USAF retired, Maria's husband, knows what it is to appearance of strength in adversity, but this time it was almost beyond endurance. Both of their hearts had a large section removed – their oldest son, Lt. Col. John T Keneally, Jr., United States Army, was summoned three days prior for a higher duty by his Supreme Commander and Chief.

Before we departed for the Memorial Service, Maria asked if I would write a few words about her son, John. I only met him a couple of times in the course of 12 years as a neighbor to his parents while and after I was on active duty at Charleston AFB. S.C. but my family and I stayed on as Maria's neighbor until now, 26 years later.

When I left the Marshall House, to my surprise, there were military police spaced every fifty or so feet along a mile and a half distance to the place where the service was to be conducted. When I reached the parking lot surrounding the enormous building called the Infantry Hall, there were hundreds of cars; almost every space was taken. I was met by a battle garbed, six foot eight soldier at the building's entrance who escorted me down the aisle of the auditorium. On

both sides sat a sea of shaven heads, camouflage, yellow and black fatigues and the black laced, spit polished jump boots of those standing at the end of each row reflected the ceiling lights.

I was seated in the third row behind the bereaved family members along with several other colonels and not a few generals of the Air Force and Army. To my left, I could see four rows of officers, none less than a major, but in front there was a Lt. General and a couple of major generals –dressed in fatigues, just like all of the rest of the troops now seated behind me. I looked to my rear – the entire auditorium was about the size of basketball courts with mezzanine stretching from the back to one third of the length of the round floor. It was filled to capacity. There were well over a thousand silent, intent faces of men who probably didn't have an extra ounce of fat amongst them facing me.

Within minutes of the family members being seated, a whispered order was given and the entire assemblage rose as one. A Catholic Priest, Father Pikura, gave the invocation. With my head bowed, I had the strangest feeling that at any moment the banshee undulating music of Wagner' "Ride of the Valkyries" would be sweeping over us for truly I was in the company of the spirit of ancient Viking Warriors. These men were of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 75 Ranger Regiment, the nation's elite Special Forces outfit that leads all others: that penetrates enemy lines before the conflict; that parachutes; digs holes under the ground and reports on the enemy or sends them to their Maker using skills and endurance unequaled in the annals of military history. This is the outfit which lost their Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. John T. Keneally in a training exercise during rough and inclement weather. The Special Forces don't have exercises in good weather. Who can penetrate enemy lines on clear moonlit nights? Although there was no Viking vessel to burn they were there to launch him on his final voyage.

Instead of the "Ride of the Valkyries," the somber lyrics of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" were sung by a thousand warriors. It established a mood which constricted my throat with sorrow for what my dear friends must feel. After readings from the Bible, a young lady, Ester Haskins, sang "On Eagles Wings" and on the last note, she faltered and returned to her seat on the stage in tears. The shoulder patch of the American Eagle is part of the Ranger's uniform.

The Regimental Commander, Colonel Grange, began his eulogy – not in words prepared as from a text, but he spoke simply from the heart, describing who this courageous officer was. He related in his most sincere terms that John Keneally was a person respected, loved and emulated. He was considered one of the most outstanding officers ever to have served as battalion commander. His voice cracked and he had to pause to retain composure. Other officers followed Col. Grange, as well as the Battalion's Sergeant Major, all of whom reemphasized the qualities of his love for God and his family, his total devotion to the principle of duty honor country.

He was the soldiers' soldier. He was thought of so highly by his commander and by his men that through the chain of command the President of the United States was contacted and then promoted him, posthumously to the rank of full colonel (He had already been on the colonel selection list awaiting congressional approval). In addition, the U.S Army awarded John the Legion of Merit with two Oak Leaf Clusters and of most significance, named the enormous Fort Benning Infantry Hall, to the "Colonel John T. Keneally, Jr. Memorial Hall." Such a prestigious honor is given only to the best of the best. The bravest, most dedicated combat organization in the military could not have had bestowed a greater honor on one of their own.

John's brother, Lt. Col Robert Keneally, U.S.A.F. presented the final tribute, and addressed from the stage, his brother's wife, Barbara, a soldier in her own right. He pledged his

eternal support as a substitute father to her children, tying together their families as one. There were no dry eyes to this example of love and the great spiritual wealth shared among all of the Keneally family – father, mother, sister, brothers and their children.

As the soulful sound of the bugle playing TAPS and the final rifle shots were fired, my somber reflections centered on Maria's request. Anything I could write to what transpired here would be redundant. Over a thousand men repeated the Ranger Creed aloud and in unison before Sergeant Major Salinas read the final role call unanswered by their beloved commander. I look at all these valiant men, keeping the last of their Creed in mind:

“Readily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the Ranger objective and complete the mission, though I be the lone survivor. “RANGERS LEAD THE WAY”

How fortunate is our country to have such men and their families as these...

With love- The Kress Family

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