

Coping With Survivor's Guilt

Survivor's guilt has former Sgt. Robert Toporek concerned, not just for himself, but for others like him.

Having lived with it since 1965 after his experiences in Vietnam, it's a haunting phenomenon Toporek knows something about. He's writing a book about it through the lens of his deployments more than 50 years ago, and he hopes to share some of the healing that has helped him live a full life.

"I don't think survivor's guilt ever goes away," said Toporek, whose working title for his book is *A Great Vietnam War Story: Beyond Survivor's Guilt, the Path to Everywhere and Anything*. The guilt, he said, "is something that we have to learn to live with and find out how to turn it into a contribution."

A high school dropout from Charleston, South Carolina, Toporek enlisted in the Army in December 1964 at age 17, joining the infantry and going through jump school, where he flew in a plane for the first time. "I was under the belief that everybody should serve their country," he said.

By May 1965, Toporek was on Okinawa, Japan, assigned to the weapons squad in 3rd Platoon, B Company, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, which was part of the 173rd Infantry Brigade, as it was known then. Soon after, he and other new soldiers left Japan to link up with the brigade, which had just deployed to Vietnam.

It was there that Toporek met Pfc. Milton Olive III. They were bunked in the last tent in a row of 12 tents, and, before long, the 18-year-olds got into



Above: Robert Toporek at the U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1965. **Below:** Toporek today.

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a bravado-fueled fight. "We both were a little arrogant," Toporek recalled, recognizing that in Vietnam, "there was probably not a moment when we weren't really afraid, and we covered it up by being arrogant."

On Oct. 22, 1965, on a midday patrol in Phu Cuong in a thick, steamy jungle, Olive would save the lives of other soldiers by smothering a grenade blast with his body, a sacrifice that would posthumously earn him the Medal of Honor.

Moving on the platoon's far right flank, suddenly "the jungle erupted in gunfire and explosions and screams, with shrapnel and bullets flying. After a few minutes it died down, and we crawled back to the rest of the platoon," Toporek recalled. "That's when I saw Olive laying on his stomach

with his guts hanging."

Toporek, who was paralyzed at the sight of Olive, was ordered to wrap up the body and move it to a medevac helicopter.

"I remember putting a poncho down. Me and another guy rolled his body onto the poncho, put his guts back in his body, and we carried him out of the jungle," said Toporek, who got out of the Army as a sergeant in 1968 after a second tour in Vietnam.

After so long, some details of his deployments are beginning to fade, and his buddies from back then sometimes have different recollections of events. But the memory of Olive is clear.

"The part about how Olive fits into survivor's guilt is the unanswerable question: If I was there, would I have done that? Why he's the one that did it is in God's hands," Toporek said.

After the Army, Toporek tried going to school, but he found his place in the civil rights movement, working for government-run poverty programs. He later studied the human

potential and its relation to education. This progression and new projects, he said, have "continued to put me in the realm of helping other people heal their wounds."

Toporek expects to finish his book before the end of the summer and plans to eventually revisit Vietnam. He also wants today's sol-

diers to get the help they need.

"Survivor's guilt is just as powerful as [post-traumatic stress disorder]. We just sucked it up, and that's pretty much what happens to soldiers in war," he said. "It's not acknowledged or treated." —Gina Cavallaro ★

