



Life and death in the summer of '65

THIS IS THE DAY FRANK REASONER died. There is absolutely no reason for you to know who he was, when he passed away or why because it happened exactly 29 years ago and he was neither famous nor a celebrity.

In terms of how we live, 29 years is an eternity. We are an incredibly impatient country with a drive-through window for a national symbol and "What about me?" for a motto.

But in July 1965, we had not yet lost our innocence. Sure, something had begun to unravel after the Kennedy assassination and the lingering doubt those shots left with us. But an awful lot of people still held a naïve belief in things.

Race had emerged in our national consciousness. The violence of Southern summers and northern riots led to a Voting Rights Act and a president from Texas told us we would overcome.

The Beatles were almost new and the Rolling Stones were on their way. The Temptations, Four Tops and the Supremes were huge.

Nobody had heard of microwave ovens or laptop computers. There were three TV networks but people still got the bulk of their information from newspapers.

On hot July nights, you could leave the windows open without worrying some nutball would come through the screen while you slept. Only the rich or the truly rich had air conditioners.

Parents would allow young children to walk to the store after dark, by themselves, to buy ice cream on those evenings when the heat would not quit. Everybody knew everybody else on the block.

There weren't many strangers in the world of 1965. Your entire frame of reference could be encompassed within the small village where families were raised and often stayed.

Not a lot of people got divorced. Hardly anyone ever moved or changed job.

There was still a respect for authority, family and religion. The police department, teaching, and even the priesthood were thought of as honorable professions.

Oh, the long slow slide had started but everyone was too busy, too preoccupied to pay much

attention. There were a few warning signs but we didn't see them for what they were: lies and official deception.

The summer of 1965 was actually the start of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." We were going to have everything: justice, prosperity and a bright, healthy future.

We were going to have it all at practically no cost, too. Plus, we were going to knock back the communists in a little country called Vietnam. Guns and butter, we could have them both.

Don't worry. The President of the United States wouldn't kid us and both he and all the brainy men around him insisted things were terrific and only getting better.

And on this afternoon, 29 years ago, Frank Reasoner was a 28 year-old lieutenant in the Marine Corps. He was from Kellogg, Idaho, and had been in Vietnam with the 3rd Marines for 3 months.

On this very afternoon in July of 1965, he was killed just west of Danang trying to save the lives of four wounded men who served in his platoon. He won the Medal of Honor, one of the first of 238 that would be awarded through that long, miserable war.

Reasoner used to write a lot of letters. He wrote to his friends back in the States and endured the heartbreaking task of writing to the parents, wives or girlfriends of young Marines who lost their lives in a war nobody back home paid any attention to throughout 1965. He also wrote everyday to his wife and 5 year old son.

"I really don't know what happened to them," Reasoner's cousin, Craig, was saying yesterday on the phone. "I guess we sort of lost contact over the years.

"His mother is still alive, I believe," the cousin added. "I don't know where she lives. My aunt used to have a scrapbook with all the news stories about Frank in it. They named a camp after him in Vietnam, and we were all real proud, but I don't know what happened to his wife and boy. I sure hope things turned out OK for them."

We celebrate a lot of silly things in this country. We remember the arcane, the foolish and the useless. We dwell on celebrity without realizing the difference between being famous and being well known.

So, it's like I told you: There is no reason you would know or recall Frank Reasoner. He was simply a terrific young guy who got killed 29 years ago today, back when we were all much more innocent and believing.