



Who Should Our Heroes Be?

By Lynn Terry

Singer Joey Ramone died the other day and the San Francisco Chronicle noted his passing with a lengthy obituary, followed by a Joel Selvin article that referred to him as a punk rock pioneer and "Three Chord Hero." I don't know Ramone's music so I certainly can't say whether he was a pioneer or not. He may have made a contribution to American Popular culture, but if he did I'm not aware of it. I grew up on rock 'n' roll myself, but that was back when you could understand most of the words and the music made you snap your fingers and get up and dance.

The singer and his group, the Sex Pistols, were no doubt meaningful to a segment of our population, but Ramone was certainly no hero. I know that because my friend Jerry Ledin, who died the same day the singer did was an authentic one; at least according to the definitions that I found in our family dictionary. One such description stated that a hero was; "A person who in the opinion of others has heroic qualities or has performed a

heroic act and is regarded as a model or ideal." To my way of thinking, my friend Jerry, who nearly fifty years ago was a star athlete at Los Gatos High School, Hartnell College and San Jose State, fit that definition to a tee and then some.

As a Marine infantry company commander, Captain Jerry Ledin was physically imposing and firmly in control, regardless of the situation, when I first knew him thirty plus years ago. He was also soft spoken, calm and so confident under duress that his young lieutenants, myself included, admired him even more than our battalion commander, a grizzled combat veteran of Iwo Jima and the Chosin Reservoir in Korea.

Jerry first distinguished himself in Vietnam during "Operation Starlite," America's first major battle of the war, but it was for his action in a later engagement that he was awarded the Silver Star, Bronze Star and the Purple Heart for heroism under fire. "Although painfully wounded by mortar fragments," his Silver Star citation states, "Captain Ledin continued to direct his men, constantly pointing out targets, ensuring evacuation of the wounded and shouting encouragement to those Marines who remained engaged with the enemy."

I left Vietnam the summer of 1965 and did not see Jerry again until 32 years later. By

then he had already begun his battle with Shy-Drager Syndrome, the devastating neurological disease that took his life at age 67. This time around, with both of us having long since left the Corps behind, we became friends. While that friendship lasted but four years, it was during that time that I came to see that the man I would have followed anywhere three decades earlier was much more than simply one of the many war heroes that still live amongst us.

Jerry had been exposed to Agent Orange during his second tour in Vietnam and that may have been the reason he contracted Shy-Drager. Whatever the source of his illness, I never detected the bitterness in him that I think I would have felt had I been the one so afflicted. Instead I saw a man, who throughout his ordeal; while encouraged and aided by his loving and devoted wife, Sharyl, continued to demonstrate the same qualities that had made him one of the Marine Corps' finest. Unlike Joey Ramone and the others like him in this day and age of false heroes, whose heroism is tied to celebrity rather than deed, Jerry Ledin's passing will go largely unnoticed. However, to me, to the others who served with him, to his life long friends from the San Jose area and to his wife and family, Jerry is the one whose life is worth remembering and whose actions were authentically heroic to the very end.