

A Spartan Game: The Life and Loss of Don Holleder

Terry Tibbetts

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“It’s amazing the number of people who still contact me and tell me about the positive influence my father had on them. They know what his life was all about. I wish that there was some way to let today’s generation know that his life was about courage and perseverance to overcome great obstacles.” Responding to this quote from Stacy Jones, one of Don Holleder’s daughters, Terry Tibbetts has written *A Spartan Game: The Life and Loss of Don Holleder*.

Holleder’s story is a tale of heroism from a bygone era. He was a gifted athlete, a devoted family man, and a dedicated patriot and soldier. He grew up in Buffalo and Rochester, New York, and attended a prestigious Catholic high school, where he excelled in its noted football program. In the 1950s, Holleder attended West Point, where he also starred on the football field. Upon graduation, he rejected an offer to play professional football. Instead, he made the U.S. Army his career. He rose to the rank of major and was killed in combat during the Vietnam War.

Tibbetts relates the Holleder saga in a straightforward, journalistic style that is well suited to the story. The author has extensively researched Holleder’s life, interviewing friends, teammates, and family members. He has collected newspaper stories recounting Holleder’s feats on the football field. In fact, much of the book is devoted to a year-by-year chronicle of Army football teams in the 1950s, a period during which the annual Army-Navy football game was one of the premier contests of the college season.

Tibbetts does not shy away from difficult topics in recounting Holleder’s life. He devotes a short chapter at the end of the book to three controversies connected with Holleder: whether he grieved appropriately over his father’s death; the circumstances surrounding his decision to drop out of flight school; and the events surrounding his own death. By addressing these matters, Tibbetts makes Holleder a more authentic character.

Several chapters conclude with short “Epilogues”—one written by the author and the others by friends of Holleder. *A Spartan Game* would have been a better book had these pieces not been included, as they read more like comments delivered at a wake than concluding thoughts. Holleder was an exemplary man who died too young in what many believe was a senseless war. However, he was also a real person with foibles and talents. To compare his death to that of Jesus, as one epilogue writer does, is unwarranted.

Tibbetts has included a bibliography and extensive notes that provide the reader with a ready guide to pursue further research into Don Holleder’s life and times.

JOHN SENGER (January 29, 2013)

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