



Indomitable Spirits of 43C

W. Tom Gleeson

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During the Vietnam War, “43C” referred to the amputee ward at Brooke General Army Hospital in San Antonio, Texas. W. Tom Gleeson, a US Army infantry sergeant assigned to search-and-destroy missions in Vietnam’s highlands, was himself a patient on that ward and has now published a fictionalized story about the soldiers and caregivers who inhabited 43C during his time there. His book, *Indomitable Spirits of 43C*, is an inspiring and heart-wrenching tribute to the scores of war wounded who have physically lost so much yet remain spiritually undaunted in their quest to overcome adversity. While Gleeson’s novel includes a few typos, some occasionally stilted dialogue, and an ending that is a bit too unrealistic, the story of the injured soldiers themselves shines through brilliantly.

The Brooke Army Medical Center, like Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in the Washington, DC, metro area, still operates an amputee care center to treat the wounded of more recent military conflicts. Gleeson’s book is as timely today as it would have been back when he was first at Brooke. While technological developments have changed some treatments since the Vietnam era, the traumatic experience of losing a limb to war remains the same, and Gleeson’s true-life account outlines both the tragedies faced and the potential triumphs to be achieved following such a loss.

Francis Riley, the protagonist, is a proud, likeable young man. He is twenty-one when a fellow soldier steps on a booby trap, causing an explosion that kills three and leaves Riley barely alive. With one foot gone, the other leg broken, a broken arm, a debilitating injury to the other arm, shrapnel and “cuts and holes all over the place,” Riley is transported to an evacuation hospital in Vietnam. There, infection and gangrene necessitate removal of more of his leg, to above the knee. “Hanging on the edge between life and death,” heavily medicated with morphine, he comes to terms with a spirit within himself that convinces him to fight to stay alive. Riley “had a strength inside that he hadn’t noticed before—and he would need it.” The next many months prove just how much.

Transported from Vietnam to a military base in California and then to ward 43C of the Army Hospital in Texas, Riley encounters some of the best and the worst of military care, suffering hospital snafus and ongoing personal indignities. Denial, pain, and depression threaten constantly, but he ultimately manages to fight back against them. Making friends with the other patients on his ward enables Riley and his fellow soldiers to better deal with their similar experiences and to share their despair and anger over their injuries and treatment. The friends take a great interest in one another’s well-being, which helps them avoid feeling isolated. Some of the nurses, too, are instrumental in providing physical and emotional support. “Doctors may save people’s lives,” Riley realizes, “but nurses keep them alive.”

Through Riley, Gleeson illustrates the strength of character required to overcome an adversity as severe and challenging as his own war injuries, as well as the team approach needed to achieve success in that pursuit. The many “spirits” described in Gleeson’s book are indeed indomitable. Soldiers, nurses, doctors, and other caregivers are courageous and admirable, and they deserve every bit of the credit he gives them.

CHERYL HIBBARD (September 24, 2012)

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