



On Nov. 19, 1969, some 200 U.S. soldiers of the 101st Airborne were systematically being picked off by enemy fire in Vietnam. Pinned down and taking heavy casualties, the group had radioed for help, but the Vietnamese held the mountainous high ground while the U.S. forces were on the plains below seeking any kind of cover they could find — and finding very little.

Although there had been attempts to take out a heavy-artillery emplacement some 1,000 feet up the mountainside, the gun had been mounted on a rail system inside the mountain. It would fire and then be pulled back into the safety of a cave. Making matters worse, the gun wasn't visible from above for an accurate air strike as clouds hovered just above its location.

On that day, Maj. Bob Whelan

and his F-4 Phantom II fighter-bomber wingman were scrambled to do whatever they could to take out the artillery position and save the 101st from being totally wiped out. But according to Whelan, there was a problem.

"We were carrying dumb bombs [no guidance systems]," Whelan recalls. "The way we deliver them is to go into a steep dive from 20,000 feet — there was no way to do that!"

With the cloud cover, they could hardly make out the mountains, much less the artillery pinning down the soldiers, so Whelan decided to try something he had done as a test pilot back at Edwards Air Force Base — he would come in at low altitude, pull up the mountainside and fly up into the target to drop his bomb.

"It was unorthodox, unauthorized and outside of any normal

procedure," Whelan says, but it was the only way he felt he could have a shot at hitting the target. "My first pass missed, but the second time the 500-pound bomb went into the cave — and it took everything out."

For his heroic effort and skill in flying, Whelan would receive the Distinguished Flying Cross. However, his bravery took a toll. Although he knew his job as a pilot sometimes caused death and destruction, this time there was a high body count — his bomb had taken many lives. He would take the medal, return home, put the medal in a box and try to forget it all.

In 1985, Bob and Beverley Whelan and Todd, their then 15-year-old son, accepted Christ as Savior at Springs of Life, an Open Bible church in Lancaster, Calif.

In 1989, Bob and Beverley

became very involved in Lancaster First Assembly. In 1993, a couple they respected mentioned they had attended an AG Marriage Encounter and really enjoyed it.

"Anything that helps your marriage is a good thing," Bob recalls thinking. So, the next weekend, not knowing they needed to register, they just showed up at a nearby Marriage Encounter. But

noticed a man in the front row staring intently at Bob.

Beverley recalls, "He kept inching forward on his seat as Bob spoke. I wasn't sure if Bob was making him angry or what the problem was."

When Bob concluded his talk, the man got up and went directly to Bob, dwarfing the slender Whelan. But then he began to quiz Bob on his Vietnam story,

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things worked out, and Bob and Beverley agreed: "It was awesome."

That very next week, Mark Rhoades, director of AG Marriage Encounter, contacted the Whelans. The weekend coordinators had felt the Whelans would make excellent coordinators themselves, and after talking to the Whelans' pastor, Rhoades agreed.

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It was May 1997. The Whelans were slated to do a Marriage Encounter in Austin, Texas. At the last moment, things were switched, and the Whelans ended up going to a Houston event instead. As Bob spoke, he decided to share his story about his experience in being "unorthodox" in Vietnam in order to achieve his objective. As he shared, Beverley

asking for specific times, dates and locations. As Bob responded, the man began to nod, tears welling up in his eyes. He explained to Bob that he had been one of the men on the ground that day, trapped by the enemy fire. They had never seen anything like what Bob had done to take out the artillery, but he believed the only reason he was alive today was because of Bob's heroic act.

Prior to the Marriage Encounter, meal tables had been preset. Benny Holmes (the Vietnam veteran) and his wife were "coincidentally" chosen to sit with Bob and Beverley.

"It was an emotional meal," Beverley says. "I'm crying, Bob's crying, Benny's crying, his wife is crying — we're all crying, and I'm sure the rest of the couples were wondering what was going on."

However, for Bob, after decades of hidden pain and struggle, he opened himself up to Benny. Bob told him about the struggles he

had of being responsible for killing so many people ... ultimately questioning himself as so many had questioned and condemned him upon his return from Vietnam.

"He told me," Bob says, "that if I hadn't come and taken the enemy out, every one of those U.S. soldiers would have been wiped out. By killing the enemy, I had saved their lives."

Beverley says she had been telling Bob basically the same thing for years, but hearing it from Benny — a man who was there — hit home. Bob says at that point the healing process finally began.

"Benny is a fine man, a deacon in his church, a father, a caring husband," Beverley says. "He just hugged Bob, and Bob about disappeared."

At the end of the weekend, with his marriage refreshed, Benny decided to let the rest of the Marriage Encounter couples in on the emotional lunch of the day before. He stood before the couples and shared about Bob's act of heroism — and how this weekend, in God's provision and timing, he had finally met the man who had saved his life. By the time Benny concluded, few dry eyes remained.

Today, good natured and with a smile always on his lips, Bob no longer hides the pain he cemented inside for so long due to the experiences of Vietnam. He expresses his compassion and prayers for the men who, like Benny, were on the ground fighting in that horrific war. Bob still takes no pride in the lives he took in the war, but his medals of heroism and recognition from the military are now out of the cardboard box and in a display box — symbolizing the lives saved. **tpe**

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