

'A Big Brother and Mentor'

A VFW Life member was instrumental in the renaming of a West Virginia bridge in honor of his friend who was killed in action almost 53 years ago

Mar 23, 2023

On May 3, 1970, an Army staff sergeant and West Virginia native was KIA during a battle in Vietnam's Quang Nam Province. Almost five decades later, a man from his unit helped memorialize the late soldier in his hometown.

Thomas Hess, who went by "Tommy," was an Elkins, West Virginia, native. He was serving on his second tour in the Vietnam War with B Co., 1st Bn., 501st Inf. Regt., 101st Abn. Div., when he was killed. Peter Agriostathes, who was a forward observer attached to Hess' unit, said Hess was his best friend. He described Hess, 26, as a "stern older brother," while having a "big West Virginia grin" that put everyone at ease.

"Tommy became my best friend during my time in Vietnam," Agriostathes said. "He became a big brother and mentor to me when I was just brand new in my tour."

Agriostathes, a Life member of VFW Post 2875 in Pahrump, Nevada, recalled his first interaction with Hess. He said Hess "politely scolded" him for grieving "too hard and too long" for losing a friend, a medic, in the war.

"What Tommy told me was blunt and correct: 'If you're not paying attention, we are going to lose you, too,'" Agriostathes said. "I needed to pay attention to what I was doing – he was right. He said I needed to think of my friend [as if] he went home and changed his address to heaven."

Agriostathes said that also was his mentality when Hess died.

"We were in a battle for our lives for a whole week," said Agriostathes, who was 18 at the time of Hess' death. "I needed to focus on the mission not only for myself but others in the unit."

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PROMISING ‘A LEGACY’

Hess was killed in a firefight when his unit encountered North Vietnamese troops in May 1970 in Vietnam’s Quang Nam Province. Agriostathes said Hess sacrificed his life to recover the remains of a soldier killed in the fight.

“We were outnumbered by [an estimated] 500 troops,” Agriostathes said. “We were on top of a hill that overlooked a valley.”

Agriostathes said the top brass of the unit wanted him to call in a napalm air strike in the valley where the NV troops were. However, they were informed that a strike could not be authorized when American remains were in a location that was being targeted.

“I tried to run down to recover a body but was stopped by our captain,” he said. “He said he needed a forward observer in the fight.”

Before their captain could send someone else, Agriostathes said Hess gave him a grin and took off down the hill. Agriostathes claims Hess was able to get the remains out of harm’s way for the strike. However, Hess was killed before making it back to the unit.

“Tommy saved my life and the lives of 28 others by allowing us to call in napalm,” Agriostathes said. “I remember the very next day after I lost Tommy that I promised I would give him a legacy before I leave this earth. I wanted people to remember his name.”

Agriostathes would do just that.

POLITE PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

Agriostathes said that he used a four-part approach in accomplishing his goal, which at first was getting a street in Elkins named for the staff sergeant. He said these four things made his idea of honoring Hess a reality:

1. GET IT INTO THE RIGHT HANDS

Agriostathes said the “most vital” part of his plan was to tell “people of authority” about Hess and the idea of honoring the late soldier.

“People who want something like this done need to get their idea into the hands of somebody who is capable of putting your plan into action,” Agriostathes said. “For me, I contacted political representatives of Tommy’s hometown.”

Without carrying out this first step, Agriostathes said, ideas are “dead in the water” and will go nowhere.

2. POLITE PERSISTENCE

After putting a project idea into the right hands, politely nudge people by reminding them about the plan, Agriostathes said.

3. DELICATE TIMING

While being polite works, the timing of your gentle reminders is just as crucial, Agriostathes added.

“People shouldn’t annoy those who are helping them with a project,” he said. “They are busy with other things, so they can’t drop everything they are doing to help you.”

4. APPRECIATE THEIR WORK

And finally, make sure to show appreciation to those who are helping you. Thanking them for their time goes a long way, Agriostathes said.

“When things are getting done, make sure to appreciate and acknowledge their work,” Agriostathes said. “Use their name when talking to them — they will appreciate it.”

MEMORIALIZING HESS

After more than a year of emails and phone calls with representatives of Elkins, Agriostathes said the West Virginia state legislature approved the renaming of a spillway bridge in Hess’ name. A dedication ceremony for the bridge took place in July 2019. Agriostathes attended, making it his first time in his best friend’s hometown.

The spillway, Agriostathes said, keeps the town from flooding during heavy rain. The bridge is located on Georgetown Road in the town.

“I couldn’t think of anything more fitting of Tommy’s name than being on a bridge that’s designed to keep the town safe,” Agriostathes said. “It’s always protecting his hometown.”

This article is featured in the March 2023 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.