

ABOVE AND BEYOND

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Born in 1947, William T. "Bill" Perkins was the son of a WWII bomber pilot and a stay-at-home mom. He grew up in the San Fernando Valley of Southern California when the Valley was quaint and suburban. It was 1950's America, a period of relative calm soon to be shattered by the '60s and a war that would reverberate into the next century.

As a teenager, Bill Perkins had a passion for theater and photography. He also had plans to attend UCLA film school. In his junior year of high school, the slim and scrappy Perkins met and befriended Craig Ingraham, a hulking varsity football player and musician from another school. Ingraham, a Catholic, had spent the ninth grade in the seminary studying for the priesthood. The common ground Bill and Craig found however was rock 'n roll music, theatrical performance and offbeat humor. Bill and Craig idolized Jonathan Winters and Bill Cosby; they memorized their routines. They became certified scuba divers together. They discovered the beauty and physical challenge of diving off the Southern California and the Channel Islands. And they laughed.

After high school, Bill and Craig enrolled at the local junior college. Ingraham remembers, "One morning Bill and Jim Priddy [a mutual friend] showed up in my driveway and announced they had joined the Marines. Like half a million other young Americans, that's where my friends were headed. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This was 1966; the Vietnam War was raging. We were all going to college, making music, diving, discovering girls and rock 'n roll. We had it made in the shade." Ingraham was sure they were pulling his leg. "No, man, we really did!" Ingraham says at that moment he had a premonition: one of them would never come back. "It shook me to my core."

At a party just before Perkins' departure for Marine boot camp, Craig looked up to see Bill charging at him from down the street. Craig's smile turned serious as Perkins, enraged, jumped on him and wrestled him to the ground, cursing him with every epithet he could muster. Craig easily subdued him with a bear hug. When Bill's rage had passed, Craig released him and they scrambled to their feet. Perkins stormed away, muttering a last invective, and was gone. Confused by the altercation, Craig soon learned that a girl he'd been intimate with the previous week was a girl Bill Perkins had fallen for. But it was too late to make amends. Within days Perkins was gone. The two friends would never speak again.

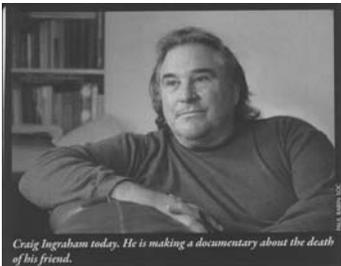
In April 1966 Perkins was assigned to Marine Corps Supply Center, Barstow CA, where he received on-the-job training as a photographer. An opportunity became available to take the Motion Picture Photography course at the US Army Signal Center and School, Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. It wasn't UCLA film school, but it was close. There was a price however: Servicemen who went to the Army Motion Picture School committed to a tour in Vietnam. In the fall of 1967, that's where Perkins found himself.

On October 11, 1967, Perkins was a 20-year old Corporal in Vietnam. He was attached to Company C, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Division and on a helicopter headed for Operation MEDINA, a battalion-sized reconnaissance in the Hai Lang forest near the DMZ. On the evening of October 12, 1967 fighting raged in and around the clearing held

by Company C. They were 165 men outnumbered at least 3 to 1. Hand grenades figured prominently in the battle which would rage through the night. An enemy grenade landed in the immediate area occupied by Cpl. Perkins and three other Marines. Shouting a warning of “incoming grenade!” according to eyewitness reports, Bill Perkins crawled forward on hands and knees and covered the grenade, absorbing the blast with his body and shielding his fellow Marines from the explosion. In so doing, he saved the lives of three men. Perkins was holding his Eymo motion picture camera when he died. Craig Ingraham got the news, grabbed a bottle of scotch and drank himself sick. Religious faith was no longer a place of refuge, and he felt hatred for the politicians who were killing the young men of his generation. He composed a jazz ballad, “Song for Bill,” and tried his best to let go. It would not be the last time Craig would deal with his grief by creating something.

In honor of his heroism, Cpl. Perkins was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, our nation’s highest award for valor. He is the only combat photographer so decorated. He also received the Purple Heart, the Presidential Unit Citation, the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal with one bronze star, the Vietnamese Military Merit Medal, the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Palm, and the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal.

For Craig Ingraham, feelings about Bill Perkins were like a bad dream that wouldn’t go away. A nagging sense of never being able to make it right became a call to action one night in 1992. Craig was on the phone with Jim Priddy whom he hadn’t spoken to in many years. They both expressed their confusion and doubt regarding the circumstances of Bill’s death. What had really happened? And what about all the film that Bill Perkins had shot in Vietnam? Where could it be?



Craig Ingraham today. He is making a documentary about the death of his friend.

Thus began Ingraham’s journey. He found 2 hours, 30 minutes of color motion picture footage Bill had shot in Vietnam, including Operation Medina which Perkins filmed hours before his death. He found 35mm Kodachromes, the command chronology for Operation Medina, and the eyewitness accounts of his heroism. Eventually, Craig was invited to the 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Division reunion in Washington D.C. A documentary was taking shape, so

Ingraham took a film crew with him to interview the survivors of Operation Medina.

As he amassed this body of information, Ingraham was joined by producer & partner Debora Masterson. Ingraham himself was becoming part of the documentary that was taking shape and Masterson’s guidance was helping Craig create a beautiful film tribute as a way of dealing with this profound loss from 30 years ago.

ABOVE AND BEYOND: The Story of Cpl William T Perkins Jr. USMC is now available on DVD through this website. It is constructed from Perkins’ own combat footage, still photographs and letters home to family and friends, along with interviews with his family and the Marines whose lives Perkins saved. Actor Dennis Franz narrates the Medal of Honor citation.

When asked what he hopes his film will accomplish, Ingraham responds, “I hope that people seeing this film will come away with the message that war and killing in the 21st century is obsolete; there is no reason for it. Human beings can communicate with each other instantly around the world. We can learn to get along. I am grateful that Bill’s mom and dad were able to see this film. I know that it brought them joy and a bit of solace in the face of unspeakable, unending pain—the death of one’s child. Finally, it’s

my way of letting him know how profoundly he has affected so many lives and that we all love him and miss him.

As we parted, Debora, Craig and I concluded that if Bill Perkins was alive, he'd be working with Craig, making films together. And then we stopped and let the irony sink in: it's only because of Bill's untimely death that Craig Ingraham finds himself a filmmaker today. "You're not a first-time filmmaker until you've made your first film and now we have." says Ingraham, and the spirit of those two teenagers from 40 years ago fills the room.