

BIOGRAPHY

Rocky Bleier's story - a gripping tale of courage on both the football fields of America and the battle fields of Vietnam - has held audiences in rapt attention for years. Yet, the motivational message behind it, detailing how ordinary people can become extraordinary achievers, defines success in the new American century.

With the same optimism, sense of humor and steadfast determination that were his trademarks as a Pittsburgh Steelers running back, Rocky Bleier takes audiences from his early years through his professional career and talks about the lessons he learned along the way....lessons that we all can benefit from.

Not falling within the ideal of what a running back should look like, Bleier had to run harder and play smarter to be able to stand out. Despite his drive and ability to make the big play, the Pittsburgh Steelers only considered him a late round pick. But before the season ended that first year, he was drafted again...this time by the United States Army. At the height of the Vietnam War, Bleier was thrust into combat early and was seriously wounded when his platoon ran into an ambush. Receiving wounds from both rifle fire and grenade fragments in his legs, he was barely able to walk and his professional football career seemed to have ended before it began...

For more than two years, he drove himself. Little by little he overcame obstacles and fought his way back. He not only made the Pittsburgh Steelers, but also eventually became a starting running back on a team that won four Super Bowls and became the greatest football team of the 20th century.

The hard lessons Rocky Bleier learned early in his life that helped him overcome adversity and reach his goals, have paid off after football. These lessons are seen between the lines in the popular book on his life, "Fighting Back."

A white, cursive handwritten signature of Rocky Bleier, written on a dark blue background. The signature is fluid and stylized, with the first letters of 'Rocky' and 'Bleier' being prominent.

Wiedmer: Pittsburgh Steelers' Rocky Bleier a hero we all can believe in

August 15th, 2017 | by **Mark Wiedmer** | in Sports - Columns | Read Time: 4 mins. |



Veteran and former Pittsburgh Steelers Rocky Bleier takes part in pre game Salute to Service festivities before an NFL football game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Dallas Cowboys in Pittsburgh, Sunday, Nov. 13, 2016. (AP Photo/Don Wright)
Photo by Associated Press /Times Free Press.

Let's start this column in early December of 1968, 11 games into Robert Patrick Bleier's rookie season with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

A letter had just reached the locker room with Bleier's name on it. And as the University of Notre Dame grad noted during a speaking engagement this past weekend for the Sunrise Rotary Club fundraiser in Cleveland, Tenn., "I never got any mail. My mother never even wrote me a letter."

But the U.S. Army wrote. It was Bleier's draft notification. He was about to join Company C, 4th Battalion, 196th Infantry Brigade. He was about to fight in Vietnam.

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Recalling the Aug. 20 day in 1969 that altered his life — 48 years and 360 days ago today — Bleier painstakingly described the predicament his company found themselves in as they attempted to rescue B Company following an ambush by the Viet Cong.

"We saw leaves rustling about 100 yards ahead of us," he said. "We were in a rice paddy. A bullet went through my left thigh. Then I looked up to see a grenade tumbling through the air. It bounced off my captain's back and landed right next to me. I jumped, but not in time. It tore into my right foot, right knee and right thigh."

Fourteen hours after that attack, he finally got his first shot of morphine to dull the excruciating pain. More than 100 pieces of shrapnel later were removed from his right foot, which was damaged to the point that it became shorter than the left one. He now wears a size-10 shoe on his right foot and a 10 1/2 on his left.

Doctors told him he would never play football again. He might never walk again without a limp.

But while he was in the hospital for nine months, two things happened to Bleier beyond receiving a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart for serving his country with such courage and valor. One, he received a letter from Steelers owner Art Rooney that read, "Rock, the team's not doing well. We need you."

Second, another soldier recovering from war wounds in that hospital, one who had lost both his legs and one arm, would come by every day, his lone remaining limb holding a bar that made him upright, telling every other injured soldier, "Hey, you look better today. You feeling better? You look so much better than yesterday."

Said Bleier: "When I saw him and how positive he was despite all he was going through, I thought, 'The worst that can happen to me is not playing football again. I'm going to be all right.'"

If you're old enough to remember those four Super Bowls the Steelers won from 1974 to 1979, you know that "Rocky" Bleier wound up being more than all right. He not only eventually made the roster thanks to much kindness and patience from Rooney, but he became a starting running back in the same backfield with Franco Harris, eventually running for more than 1,000 yards during the 1976 season.

Said Bleier as he addressed the Rotary gathering: "We really only have two choices in life. We can be less than we should be. Or we can be more."

colossal, perhaps, or gargantuan — I'm those, too.

Here's a guy who was the 417th pick in the 1968 NFL draft who was later declared 40 percent disabled by the military yet somehow became a key member of four Super Bowl champs.

This is a guy who said of his current relationship with the Steelers, "I'm not an avid fan. But I come (to events) when they want me. There are still times when the old guys have some value — we're the only ones who'll say 'yes!'"

This is a guy who said with a smile, "It's taken me some time, but I have come to realize that I share this world with some people who could care less about the game of football."

Bleier is 71 now, and temporarily walking with a cane after having both his knees replaced four weeks ago. They said it might take him four months to move this well, but they obviously didn't know their patient.

What Bleier knows is that the game is rough, even if not quite so rough as Vietnam.

Asked about his longtime friendship with the Hall of Famer Harris, he said, "I've had my left shoulder repaired, my right shoulder scoped and both knees replaced. That's my contribution to his success."

Regarding the current concern with concussions he said, "I'm glad it's creating dialogue. The sport needs to be safer. But at the professional level, there's an assumed risk to playing this game."

As for quarterback Terry Bradshaw, he smiled and said, "Terry loves to talk about he always called his own plays. What he doesn't tell you is that we only had four plays — two running and two passing."

A single glimpse into how the trappings of the game have changed: When Pittsburgh won its third Super Bowl in 1978, the team was invited to the White House. Jimmy Carter was the President.

"The Steelers were pretty tight with money," Bleier recalled. "Mr. Rooney chartered an old DC-3 and about 25 of us who lived in the area during the offseason went. When we got there, a bus took us to the White House. They served us cupcakes and punch at a reception. After we shook hands with President Carter, we got back on the bus and headed back to the airport. We were all so hungry that Dwight White and L.C. Greenwood forced the bus driver to stop at a McDonald's."

As he was wrapping up his talk Saturday night, his appearance expected to net the Sunrise Rotary Club more than \$80,000 for needy folks in Cleveland, Bleier said, "We're all really in the hope business."

There just aren't many people who exemplify the positive power of hope more than Robert Patrick Bleier.

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Honoring their own on Veterans Day

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Veterans Day is a day to honor all who served, including those who wore the black and gold.

Veterans Day is an opportunity to say thank you to those who have served in the United States Armed Forces. An opportunity to thank those who protected their fellow citizens at home and abroad from harm. Those who fought for our freedom, made sacrifices beyond comprehension, and did it because of a love of their country, not to be thanked.

They are heroes, who in most cases don't think of themselves in that light. But that is exactly what they are.

They wore camouflage, they wore red, white and blue. But through the years, several of them have also worn the black and gold.

Starting with Bill Dudley, who enlisted in the Air Force after he was drafted by the Steelers in 1942, there have been multiple Steelers' players who have served in the Armed Forces.

Today, and every day, the Steelers say thank you to them, and to all who have served, and we are honored on Veterans Day to share the story of some of the Steelers who served our country.

* * *

Robert Patrick Bleier, known as Rocky to the Steelers faithful, is one of those individuals that if you see him on Veterans Day, or any day, you should stop and say thank you.

Because Bleier, like all of those who have served in the military and continue to serve, is a true American Hero.

Following his rookie season with the Steelers, Bleier was drafted into the United States Army during the Vietnam War. He was deployed to Vietnam in May, 1969, and assigned to Company C, 4th Battalion (Light), 31st Infantry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade, as a squad grenadier operating a 40mm M79 grenade launcher.

While on patrol that August, Bleier was wounded in the left thigh by enemy fire when his platoon was ambushed. An enemy grenade also landed, and he was hit in the right leg by shrapnel, and lost part of his right foot.

Bleier, who was awarded a Bronze Star and Purple Heart, was later told by doctors he would never play football again. But when you talk about heart, that is something Bleier has so much of there was no way he would not return to football.

While he was recovering Art Rooney Sr. sent him a postcard, delivering a message that spoke volumes.

It read: "Rock - the team's not doing well. We need you. Art Rooney."



Bleier worked day and night in rehab, and miraculously made his way back to the Steelers in 1970, spending that season on injured reserve.

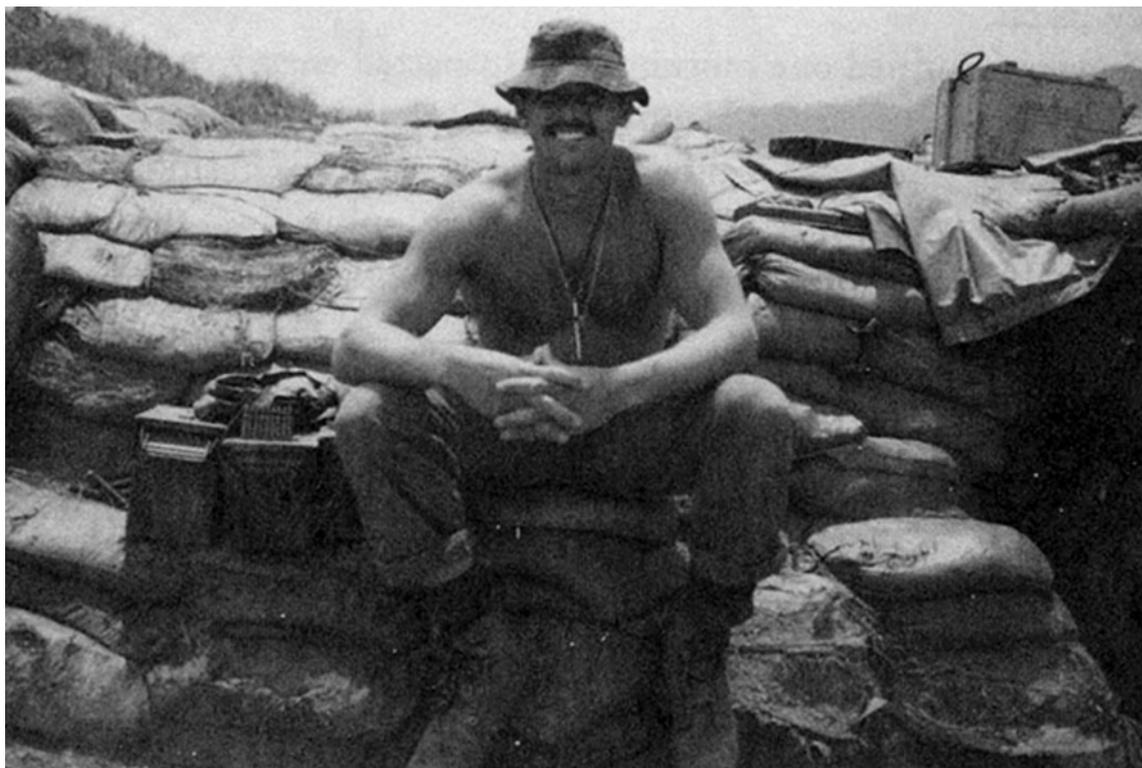
“It was Dan Rooney who gave me an opportunity to play this game,” said Bleier. “He put me on the injured reserve list and bought me a couple of years when I came back from Vietnam. It was Dan who was in my corner. He was that way in every player’s corner.”

Bleier returned to the field for the 1971 season, playing on special teams, and despite some ups and downs, always kept fighting.

“Rocky is a hero,” said Lynn Swann. “He saved lives in Vietnam. He overcame great obstacles just to be able to walk, let alone play football. He found himself in a key role as a starter on a Super Bowl championship football team and a great contributor, and a great contributor to the community.”

Bleier played for the Steelers until 1980, and was an integral part of four Super Bowl Championship teams.

“One day Rocky was on the training table and I came through there one day and saw him lying on the table,” recalled Joe Greene. “His body was purple and blue up and down. I said he needs to be in the hospital. What I recall that same day he practiced. I said if Rocky can practice, nobody should miss practice. I don’t think I ever missed a practice, not only because of Chuck (Noll) but because of Rocky Bleier and that influence he had on me.”



His inspiration on his teammates was widespread, and grows with the passing of each day.

“The older I get the more I appreciate Rocky and his story and his triumphs,” said Mel Blount. “He showed us all about perseverance, commitment and hard work. That determination to accomplish the goals he set. He is a guy who showed us how to live and taught us about life’s challenges and how to overcome them.”

* * *

Alejandro Villanueva doesn’t look at himself as a hero. He doesn’t look at himself as someone special. He doesn’t look at himself as being different than anyone else in the Steelers’ locker room.

But his teammates look at it a bit differently.

“It’s great to have him around. He is an awesome guy. A guy you want to have on your team,” said **Chris Hubbard**. “I have gained so much more respect for what they do. The stories he tells us are way beyond what you could imagine. I don’t think I could be able to go out there and do that. I respect him so much and thank him for what he has done for us and our country.”



Villanueva is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and a former U.S. Army Ranger who served three tours of duty in Afghanistan, and now does his job to protect the team’s quarterbacks and blast holes through opposing defenses for running backs.

While his role has changed from his days as an Army Ranger, the respect his teammates have for him hasn't.

“Even before he played for us I had the ultimate respect for the military,” said **David DeCastro**. “To have him, talk to him, and learn about his experience adds even more to that respect. It's great to have him on the team.”

Villanueva grew up a military child, playing football at the American High School for the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). Villanueva played football as a cadet at West Point and was commissioned in the United States Army in 2010. He was promoted to Captain in 2014, and was deployed three times as a Ranger. He received the Bronze Star Medal and the Bronze Star Medal for Valor for heroism in combat.

Villanueva, though, looks at others who served as heroes more than he does himself. He has been involved in numerous events to honor fellow veterans, including “Heroes at Heinz Field” and visiting the VA Hospitals in Pittsburgh, spending time with patients and sharing experiences in the military.

“I think in the United States there's huge appreciation for the military and that makes you feel very good about what you're doing,” said Villanueva. “Especially when you go overseas, you come back and you see all the appreciation from the civilian community. It's just a real honor to serve this country.”

* * *

For former Steelers defensive lineman John Banaszak, football will always be an important part of his life. He played on three Super Bowl championship teams, taking great pride in that.

But there is something else he takes great pride in. His time in the United States Marine Corps.

Banaszak, who is currently the head football coach at Robert Morris University, was inducted into the Marine Corps Sports Hall of Fame earlier this year.

“It really is special for me,” said Banaszak. “I was humbled and honored to receive that honor. I have talked about what the Marine Corps meant to me and did for me my rookie year going into training camp, making training camp like Parris Island and boot camp. For this to occur is special. It’s special and an honor for me to represent the Steelers in this great Hall of Fame.”

Banaszak went through Marine Corps boot camp at Parris Island in 1969, and was stationed at Camp Lejeune for three months, and then with the 2nd Marine Air Wing at the Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point for the remainder of his two years of active duty. Banaszak was a non-combat Marine, serving as a supply clerk, but was part of missions with the Air Supply unit going to the Mediterranean. He received the National Defense Service Medal and Rifle Expert Badge. He also served as a reservist from January 15, 1971 to January 14, 1975.

“When I was active duty, it was a period in time at 18, 19 years old that I needed to focus on what I had to do in order to live the rest of



my life,” said Banaszak. “The Marine Corps gave me an awful lot of guidance as to what I needed to do to become successful. It matured me a lot. There are a lot of kids that

at that age think they are tough guys. I thought I was a tough guy. I had no idea what I was getting into when I joined. They taught me not only to be a tough guy, but they taught me to be a smart, tough guy. That was the biggest effect it gave me. I became a kid who all of a sudden set goals for himself and started to achieve those goals.”

One of those goals was making it into the NFL and playing for the Steelers from 1975-81, and being a part of three Super Bowl championship teams. He said what he learned in the Marine Corps, including the values, transferred over to his football career.

“The Marine Corps and what it represents, it’s honor, courage and commitment,” said Banaszak. “I know the model franchise in the NFL, the Pittsburgh Steelers, have those three words attached...honor, courage and commitment. When those three ingredients become part of your life, you are going to become successful and achieve your goals and ambitions.

“It’s still very much a part of me. You have to be able to believe in yourself first. You have to have the courage to challenge the impossible. You have to have the commitment that nothing is going to stop you from attaining your goals. Those are the virtues I got instilled in me in the Marine Corps.”

* * *

When Andy Russell learned that he was drafted by the Steelers, in the 16th Round of the 1963 NFL Draft, he first thought he was drafted into the service. But that wasn’t the case, instead he would go on to have a great rookie season.

A year later, though, he would be headed to the military, serving as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army, stationed for two years in

Germany.

“It was a commitment I made, and I wanted to fulfill it,” said Russell. “I was proud to do it. I didn’t see any combat, but I had an obligation, had a commitment that was important to me.”

Russell still had hopes to return to the Steelers after his two years in the Army, so when he learned they had division level football there, he was all about it.

“The General of my Corps, the 7th Corps, said he was going to move me to a different place. He told me I was going to be the coach of the defense. It helped me because I had to know what every position was doing. It made me a much smarter player.”

Russell went on to play for the Steelers through the 1976 season, was a member of two Super Bowl Championship teams, was an eight-time Pro Bowl selection, a first team All-Pro selection and a member of the Steelers 75th Season team.

While he was playing, he never forgot his time in the Army, and wanted to give back. He went on a USO Tour to Vietnam in 1968, and the combat he didn’t experience while stationed in Germany, he experienced there.

“When we were there it was the biggest Tet Offensive ever,” recalled Russell. “The Viet Cong attacked Saigon. There were thousands of them there shooting and killing people. They could have easily taken over our hotel, we had no security there. They gave me a rifle and told me I was qualified with it.

“While we were there we even were under attack. A sniper missed me by about three inches. I laid on the roof of a building thinking my God I can’t believe I am on a USO tour and I almost get killed.

“It wasn’t a Bob Hope type of USO tour. It was much more dangerous kind of thing. They probably assumed they could take NFL players on those kind of highly dangerous trips. What we started doing was flying in a helicopter up to these forts on the top of mountains. We would fly in to one of them and there were no landing pads. We would land outside the area. They told our leaders of the tour, tell your players to run zigzag to get to the fort because there were snipers in the trees. You would see puffs of smoke on the ground from the shots as you ran. It was insane.”

Russell, who to this day is involved with programs supporting veterans, will often downplay his time in the service since he didn’t see combat.

“People ask me if I am a veteran,” said Russell. “I think of veterans as people who were in combat.”

With all due respect to a man who served our country, he is wrong. Anyone who puts on a military uniform and serves our country, they are a hero, and a true veteran.

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Rocky is one of the owners and managing members of RBVetCo. RBVetCo is a service-disabled, veteran-owned company. It specializes in the construction of commercial buildings, additions and renovations including planning, design, scheduling, value engineering and sub-contracting.

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