

TEN QUESTIONS

Rocky Bleier

ACG interviews the Vietnam veteran turned gridiron great.

BY JOHN INGOLDSBY

Fighting Back, the inspirational story of Rocky Bleier that traces his journey from wounded warrior to gridiron great, captivated America in the 1970s. Since that famous book-turned-movie, the Notre Dame running back drafted by both the Pittsburgh Steelers and the U.S. Army in 1968 has lived a sequel that could best be titled *Giving Back*. Since Bleier's 1980 retirement, the four-time Super Bowl winner has immersed himself in military veterans causes with the same determination he



used to conquer the severe foot injuries he suffered in Vietnam. ACG Correspondent John Ingoldsby, who covered Bleier and the Steelers during their legendary run, interviewed Number 20 at Super Bowl XLIV in South Florida.

ACG What are your memories of the ambush in Vietnam in which you were wounded twice, earning you the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star?

BLEIER: Everybody was on pins and needles



TOP: In 1968, following his rookie season with the Steelers, Rocky Bleier was drafted into the Army. He served in Vietnam with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade and was awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart. **LEFT:** 1969. Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor visits Bleier in the hospital in Tokyo, where Bleier was recovering after being shot in the leg and wounded by a grenade blast during an ambush near Hiep Duc, Vietnam. **RIGHT:** January 18, 1976. Bleier runs the ball upfield during Super Bowl X. After overcoming severe leg injuries received in Vietnam, Bleier went on to win four Super Bowls with the Pittsburgh Steelers and rush for 3,865 yards.

TOP AND LEFT: COURTESY, ROCKY BLEIER; RIGHT: VERNON BLEIER

“All of a sudden out of the darkness, someone reached down, held me up and said, ‘I got you Soldier.’”

dles until that morning, when we ran into an ambush, and I thought, “Oh, man, this is finally hitting.” Now we’re in a firefight – guys screaming, yelling back and forth, chaos happening. Eventually, they got us out of there, and I was with a medic, and then the rest of the guys came in and we got hit the second time. We were just on remote.

ACG In your book *Fighting Back*, you refer to a fellow Soldier who carried you 500 yards to safety. Did you discover who he was?

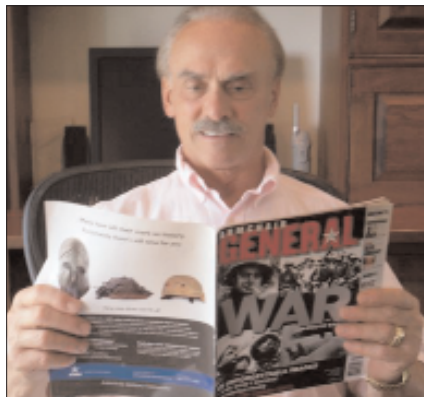
BLEIER: No, I never found out. No one ever came forward, and it was just a time of reaction. As I explained in my book, the reinforcement platoon came in, and someone said, “Rock, you all right? Don’t worry, we’re going to get you out of here.” We were still fighting, so they carried me a third of the way. Then two guys picked me up and carried me fireman-style between their shoulders. But they got tired since they were dragging me and I was just dead weight, so they set me down. Then all of a sudden out of the darkness, someone reached down, held me up and said, “I got you Soldier,” and he threw me over his shoulders and carried me the rest of the way to the bottom of the hill.

ACG Who was the most inspirational person during your grueling rehabilitation?

BLEIER: I don’t know if there was any one person who was an inspiration. There are people who created an opportunity or some hope, and I tell the story that when I was in the hospital, the doctor said I’d never be able to play this game again given my wounds and the damage to my foot. Then right after that, I got a postcard from Mr. Art Rooney [Steelers owner], who said, “Rock, the team’s not doing well, we need you.” So that gave me the hope or inspiration to be able to do it. The driving aspect of my life, my career, was that football was something I wanted to do. I said to myself, “Okay, fine, you got to do everything you can so that later on you don’t go saying, ‘I wish I would have done more, ran more.’”

ACG NFL stars, including you, are supporting injured military personnel. What is your role in that endeavor?

BLEIER: There are studies taking place on head trauma and within the NFL on the early



2010. Bleier reads the January 2010 issue of *Armchair General* at his Pennsylvania home.

onset of dementia, and of course that is primarily the type of injuries our troops are receiving in Iraq and Afghanistan. What we are trying to bring to the public is an awareness factor that when you deal with and see depression, there is help.

ACG Are you involved with other Vietnam veterans organizations or Department of Defense projects?

BLEIER: You name it, I’m involved in it. For instance, Franco Harris and I are chairing the National Wheelchair Games in Pittsburgh in 2011, after I chaired them 11 years ago. There is also an awareness bicycle ride for wounded warriors that is crossing the country, and we are involved when it comes through Pittsburgh this July. Also, here in Pittsburgh, I’m involved in an organization called NAVOBA, the National Veteran Owned Business Association, that is promoting returning veterans and [stressing] why corporate America should hire these returning veterans for the experience that they bring, such as management skills and decision-making.

ACG As a 1966 All-American at Notre Dame, you played in the epic 10-10 tie against Michigan State. What is your strongest memory of that game?

BLEIER: My strongest memory is that it was deemed “The Game of the Century.” I can remember walking on that field, and there were 80,000 fans – the biggest stadium I’ve ever seen. When they say you see or hear sound or you see sound move, I did when we walked out on that field, and they were screaming, and it was just waves of sound, and I’m going,

“Wow, oh man.” We ended up in a 10-10 tie, and it was like kissing your sister.

ACG Another famous game was the AFC Championship against the Oakland Raiders, December 23, 1972. Where were you when Franco made the “Immaculate Reception”?

BLEIER: I was on the sidelines. Earlier, I was in the game along with Franco, and so we were watching what was taking place. With 30 seconds or so on the clock, it was 4th and 10 on the 30, we had 70 yards to go, and it was like, “This is it.” My thought was, “I can’t watch it; it is like disaster.” And then, “Oh, we scored, we scored, we scored!”

ACG What are your memories of Steelers owner Art Rooney?

BLEIER: They’re all positive, and everybody’s got their Art Rooney stories. He was a man who made a difference within the city and with this club, and he was a very gracious man. He always had time for his players, knew them by name and knew something about every one of them. He was an engaging fellow, a Damon Runyon kind of person.

ACG And Steelers coach Chuck Noll?

BLEIER: My memories of Chuck are that he was a student of the game who knew everything about the game. He wasn’t a player’s coach, meaning a buddy-buddy kind of guy. He had certain expectations and wanted you to live up to those expectations. He didn’t want to fine you. If there was a curfew, just be in on time and accept that responsibility as a professional player. That was Chuck.

ACG How involved were you with the movie *Fighting Back*, which is based on your book?

BLEIER: My involvement was as a technical adviser, and we talked about the movie and my life before they wrote the screenplay. It’s a movie about overcoming obstacles and setting goals. I spent a week in California, and then I was on the set here in Pittsburgh, and I got a director’s chair with my name on the back. ★

John Ingoldsby, a leading writer on the intersection of sports and the military, is president of IIR Sports & Entertainment Inc. (IIRsports.com), a public relations and writing firm in Boston.

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