

# Two True Heroes

By Kenny Bowyer

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By now, everyone has heard of Pat Tillman - the former Arizona Cardinals football player who passed up all those millions of dollars, to go fight for this great country of ours after we were blindsided on 9-11, only to pay the ultimate price and give his life for his country.

But I am going to introduce you to another man. A man who I had never heard of before, until this past Memorial Day weekend.

A man who WAS Pat Tillman, before Pat Tillman was even born.

His name is Bob Kalsu, and he's from the great state of Oklahoma.

Del City is the proud home of two-time Olympic gold medalist wrestler John Smith. But it's the Eagles' home football stadium that bares the name Bob Kalsu Stadium. Kalsu was a Del City football standout back in the early 1960's.



He went on to play football for the Oklahoma Sooners, where he had a stellar career on the offensive line. In 1968, Kalsu earned All-American honors at OU, and a few months later, was taken by the Buffalo Bills in the eighth round of the NFL Draft.

Just as football was so important to Kalsu at Oklahoma, so was his commitment to the ROTC. It was that commitment that kept NFL teams on edge about drafting him, which is why he went high into the eighth round.

Nonetheless, the Bills took a chance. Kalsu started eight games for the Bills that season. The Bills picked him in the eighth round, and Kalsu was voted the Bills' top rookie in

1968.

For the former Del City Eagle, his career looked as if it were taking off. However, that's when the United States Army came knocking on the Kalsu door. The Army contacted Kalsu after his rookie season, and told him he was being sent to Vietnam.

He and his wife, Jan, already had a daughter, Jill, and Jan was pregnant with the couple's second child.

For many people (then and now) there were ways that might get him out of the war. There was talk that Kalsu should try to use his family status as a way to avoid service, but

that wasn't the Kalsu way. He said it was his duty to go. Kalsu arrived in Vietnam in November of 1969, as a First Lieutenant.

He was killed in action on July 21, 1970 at FSB Ripcord near the A Shau Valley.

Bob Kalsu Jr. was born two days after his father was killed.

Kalsu quickly slipped out of the public's mind. However, in 1976, a campaign by a Buffalo sports columnist helped get some interest in honoring the Bills' fallen hero. In 1977, Kalsu was recognized by the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The plaque in his honor reads: "No one will ever know how great a football player Bob might have been, but we do know how great a man he was to give up his life for his country."

In 2000, the Bills added his name to the Wall of Fame at Ralph Wilson Stadium in Buffalo. The University of Oklahoma presents the Bob Kalsu Award annually. The award is given to a Sooner that displays character and dedication, on and off the field. Also at OU, he was memorialized by his teammates and the "O" Club with the Benien-Kalsu-Henderson Scholarship. It is presented annually to student-athletes who have completed their eligibility.

Kalsu is the answer to a trivia question that is hardly trivial. He is the only NFL player to lose his life in Vietnam.

Too often today, I think we tend to confuse "celebrity" with "hero." Celebrities are known for being known. Heroes change lives. When Bob played for Oklahoma and Buffalo, few, if any, football fans would have considered this man their hero.

Pat Tillman was a pretty good football player. In some social circles, he would have been considered a celebrity. But how many of us (myself included), before his tragic death in Afghanistan, would have called Pat Tillman a hero? I'm sure that answer could be counted in one hand...and that's unfortunate.

The day Bob Kalsu and Pat Tillman put their careers aside to fight for my freedom--not the day they died--is the day they became MY hero.

Del City High didn't name its stadium for Bob Kalsu because he was a celebrity, but because he was a hero.

War doesn't create character. It reveals it. These two men walked away from a life of riches and a social status that many of us only dream about. Some people in war never get to reach their dreams.

"Bob was 25 but the others they were 18, 19 years old. They had dreams too and they were cut short," Jan Kalsu McLaughlin, Bob's wife said at the Bills' Wall of Fame ceremony. "Bob was able to start beginning his dream. Some of them never got to and for that I would have Bob's name up there to honor them."

These two brave men never played in the Super Bowl. They never stared in some shoe commercial, or tried to make you feel sorry for them. Instead, they chose to fight their battles not on the gridiron, but in the jungles of Vietnam and the sands of Afghanistan. And they both did it without any fanfare. In times today, it would've been easy to hold a press conference, get endorsements and make a reality series out of going to war. But these guys simply vanished...

Surely, they did not intend to just walk away from their family and football forever. But, for Kalsu and Tillman, that was a risk they were willing to take. They were willing to risk their lives and walk away from "celebrity" status, to fight for the freedom of people that they didn't even know...including their own sons or daughters.

We live in an "I" and "me" society and it does shock us when someone gives up power, money and status for "us" and "we." Bob Kalsu and Pat Tillman epitomized the best of what it is to be an American.

I'm saddened by the loss of heroes that I never knew. I'm also saddened about the loss of heroes I did know. But what saddens me more than anything, is the fact that we don't say THANK YOU to our veterans - guys who walked away from something, even if it wasn't a career in football, who fought for our freedom.

To all you men and women who served this great country during any war, THANK YOU!