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Adams, Robertson: A hero remembered

By DAVID A. ADAMS and TRAV ROBERTSON JR.
Guest Columnists

Grady Patterson was the hero we tell our children and grandchildren about. He is the role model people ask for and don't realize they've had all along until he's gone. He always was true to his principles and he never let us down. He was a good man - a great man - who rose to the top of the military and state government without ever compromising his character.

Any conversation you had with Grady Patterson about public service would begin with the word "integrity." That would be on every politician's list, but very few practiced it as he did. Integrity was something deep inside him, and it was something that was shared and grew stronger throughout his life with his family and those close to him. You could see his character in all that he did every day.

Testing our mettle against Grady Patterson's standards could be frustrating sometimes for those of us who worked with him. We didn't just have to do things correctly; we had to do them in the right way. That often meant that our jobs were a little harder because completing tasks in the Grady-way meant having to go the extra mile.

The reputation he had of service, humility, honesty and heroism was not a political commercial. It was Grady Patterson. He really was all of those things, and those of us around him wanted to be great for him to uphold his good name.

For the past 12 years, we spent our time working for Mr. Patterson in a variety of capacities. Neither of us called him anything other than "Mr. Patterson" or "General Patterson." He had earned and deserved that respect, and even though it seems old-fashioned now, in his presence he was never just Grady. He was more: a leader.

We both first met Grady Patterson in 1997 while he was in political exile. He had been narrowly upset at the polls in 1994, after winning seven straight general elections and 28 years in office. The prospects for Democrats were bleak in 1998, but he wanted to run for state treasurer again.

He needed a new way to campaign because he'd been unprepared and surprised by his very narrow loss. Mr. Patterson had rarely been challenged before his loss, and had assumed that just doing a good job was enough to get re-elected. It was a new political world for him. After a lifetime of success, Mr. Patterson, who had done so much for the state during his first years as treasurer and had retired as a lieutenant general in the Air Force, was willing to go through a long process of self-evaluation.

Back then, we thought we could teach him something. Instead, he dug within himself (and maybe his military training) and adapted just enough to win back the post he loved so much. He was at the campaign headquarters every morning at 8 waiting for us to arrive. Looking back, the thought that we could teach him anything seems comical.

Over the past 12 years, Mr. Patterson changed only by improving every day. He only changed as much as he needed to - never as much as we asked. It might be better said that he modernized, but he did not change. His core beliefs couldn't change. Win, lose or draw, his belief in character, persistence and honesty never wavered.

The more time we have spent in politics, the more we realize how difficult it was for him to maintain the type of integrity that he had for the entirety of his career. You watch all of these politicians fall and fade and fail, and you realize just how special he was.

Grady Patterson taught us. He was the calm in the middle of every storm; that must be what battle can do to a man. He would laugh and tell us things would be OK and that rash decisions were the worst decisions.

He had been shocked by his loss in 1994. Still, in all the years that we were by his side, we never saw him make a political decision. He never did anything in an effort to get reelected, or to protect himself.

Grady Patterson was all that you saw - nothing more or less. He loved people. He loved South Carolina. He loved flying. But most of all, he loved his wife and his family.

To us, he was a patriarch, a mentor, a leader and a friend. He was the kind of person we should all aspire to be, and we only wish now that we'd been with him for longer.

To South Carolina, he will be remembered as one of her most accomplished sons. In the world today, South Carolina needs more leaders like Grady Patterson. He will be missed.

Mr. Adams, Richland County treasurer, worked on Mr. Patterson's last two political campaigns and served as communications director from 1999 through 2003.

Mr. Robertson ran Mr. Patterson's last three campaigns and was a deputy treasurer in 2002-2006.