

BEYOND COURAGE

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The Chicago Literary Club

1. I. In the 1960s, Vatican II commissioned hagiographers to comb through a list of more than ten thousand Catholic saints: acclaimed persons of heroic virtue. Just who of these were authentic? Who had actually been put through the sieve of the “devil’s advocate”—a researcher specifically designated by the pope to dig out the kind of dirt that exposes a supposed saint as in truth a scoundrel?

The outcome was a purge of apocalyptic proportions. Venerated figures, by the thousands, were deodorized of their sanctity, as their halos proved to be products of purely pious phantasies. Still, more than 400 passed the test. More than enough for each to be commemorated at daily Mass, when priests don vestments whose colors symbolize the main virtue exemplified by the saint of the day: bright red for martyrs, white for virgins, green for teachers. Vivid liturgy, designed to edify the flock down in the pews to what Martin Buber calls, “the hallowing of everyday life.”

Did you chuckle at the original number of saints slated for delisting? Well, look at our list of heroes. In just over two hundred years—a mere tenth of Roman Catholic history—how many heroes do we already have, if we include all those acclaimed in all our towns big and little? How many of these would we purge, were all put through a devil’s advocate purificator? What about our most dramatic monument, the raising of the flag on Suribachi, Iwo Jima? Have we delisted those four marines since, among other reasons, the picture was photostaged as Kara Marling and John Weltenhall reveal in their book, Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories and the American Hero? What about that all-time WWII picture of McArthur with his aides wading ashore in Leyte, also photo-stage?

We will not be robbed of our heroes and heroines. We love having them. To a cynic who insists that no man is a hero to his own valet, we retort with Hegel, “not because the hero is not a hero, because the valet is a valet.” In short, if we did not have heroic figures, we would invent them. Facts alone starve us. Our imagination revels in fires from heaven and hell. Thus myths become mightier than memory, dreams more durable than destiny. In Africa, the Madonna is black, in the Orient almond-eyed, and it is not beneath Italian masters to paint even the Virgin’s face as if la donna e mobile. I even seemed to have sensed vibrations around here, which hinted ever so wispily about garlands of laurel for the heads of one or two of our members. A fascinating hypothesis that only shows how normal we are, collectively! Thus I feel assured as I dwell tonight on my own special set of American heroes.

Over fifty years ago, on April 9, 1942, the American-Filipino Defenders of Bataan surrendered to the Imperial Japanese army. A month later, Corregidor fell. Some day, I may talk in praise of the Filipino defenders, many of whom I knew personally, including my own uncle. But tonight, I would like to eulogize only the Americans of that group. For the Japanese eventually released the Filipinos in the vain hope that they would reverse sides. The Americans they held and brutalized to the bitter end. Only the abrupt end of WWII enabled the approximately 10,000 (out of 23,000) American POWs from the Philippines to come home again.

As a gangly teenager, during those dark years of 1942-45, I watched from the sidelines as these bedraggled American men, many of them walking skeletons, were paraded by their haughty captors, under fixed bayonets and machine guns mounted on armored trucks, in many a Philippine street. It was impossible ever to come near them, and somehow in the intervening fifty years since, I never managed to meet any of them.

Hence, in May 11-18, 1992, when the roughly 1,000 survivors of this group—all that's alive today—convened for a full week in San Francisco for the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of Corregidor, I hastened to join them.

“Twas brillig, 1941” when many of them were shipped out from San Francisco to Manila. Who could have believed that in less than a year half of them would start dying brutal deaths? These last thousand of them will soon be gone, too. Hence my sense of both elation and urgency last May as I flew to the city by the bay.

After that week of cordialities with those ADBC, my main impression was this: their survival had been a matter, not just of courage, but of something beyond courage. Clearly, every survivor was courageous. Does this imply that those who did not survive lack such will? Of course not. Our family friend, the Jesuit priest, Father Carl Hausmann, was a chaplain in this army. His life in captivity is stuff for legends. Yet, he did not make it. Hence, the question that nagged at me during the week in California was: how ought I to understand these men's survival? Courage, yes. But that word is much too charged with content. It needs to be unpacked inductively, out of these men's actual experiences. So, to those I now proceed.

II. Take Louie Lachman of nearby Skokie. When I dropped by at Louie's hotel room, I noticed how he and his two other buddies who shared the room, had canned and bottled food tucked in various parts of the room. This after fifty years! After liberation, and a few weeks of recuperation in the Philippines, Louie and his group were put on a priority plane for back home. What happened? Over the Pacific Ocean, the bay doors of their C-47 accidentally opened sucking seven men out into the night, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. The pilot never even

knew until after landing. Seven, who were actually en route home, vanished into space without a trace.

Next Sgt. Harold Spooner. When Bataan surrendered, Harold dove into the shark-infested sea and started swimming toward Corregidor. He clung to flotsam. Two days later, he crawled to a beach on Corregidor. When Corregidor surrendered, a month later, the American prisoners were hauled off to the hellholes of mainland prisons, but at least they had escaped the Bataan Death March. Of the 13,000 total of POWs there, some four hundred were detained by their captors for many months in Corregidor, for clean up labor. The comparatively idyllic saga of these four hundred can be read in Corregidor: Oasis of Hope, by Asbury Nix, an ADBC from Wisconsin. Guess who was among these four hundred. Sgt. Harold Spooner. This group was later moved to the Port Area of Manila. There they were enslaved as stevedores, but they in turn could retaliate through God-sent opportunities to steal food from cargo. Later Harold survived a horrendous hellship and slavery in Fukuoka, Japan.

Now hear this. After liberation, and cargo planes had dropped generous supplies in that Fukuoka POW camp, Harold and three other buddies thought it was time, one fine morning, to enjoy a poker game with brand new cards dropped from the skies. A plane flew in and dropped more supplies. This time a heavily loaded barrel broke free of its chute. It crashed through the roof impacting with tremendous force into the earth. The three card players stared in horror as they saw their fourth partner smashed into the crater beneath the barrel. This, again, in those heady days after liberation. On my tape recorder, I hear Harold saying, "I believe, but I have learned not to ask God for any favors."

Meet Captain Paul Ashton, a medical doctor, still hale and spry at 83. He ran the infirmary in Bilibid Prison in Manila. One day Paul heard a Japanese guard screaming

while beating an American medic. Paul ran out to mediate, and the guard grabbed a rifle barrel and swung the butt at Paul's head. Instinctively Paul's hand went up. His fingers tagged the trigger, the gun fired, and the guard dropped, shot through the heart. After a severe beating, strangely, Paul was put on court martial. Even more strangely, this dragged on till suddenly commandos liberated Bilibid. Ashton autographed for me his two voluminous books of Bataan diaries.

I met survivors who were in one hellship after another, each one sunk by torpedoes, except the last.

Then there is Donald Wills. As his prison ship coasted by Mindanao, he was allowed to go to the benjo (the enclosed latrine at the side of the ship). It was night and raining hard, so he knew it was his last chance. Wills dashed up some freight stacked by the rails, and from all that height leaped into the sea. He barely escaped suction from the ship's enormous screws. Bullets and searchlights sprayed all around him but he was not even nicked. He had read in science books that sharks do not feed at night. So, as his floating inferno boiled away to Japan, Wills laughed, "for several minutes at the top of my voice," alone in the moonless sea. Next day, the Filipinos on shore were aghast. Sharks, they told him, scavenged that part of the sea especially at night. They then led him to the guerilla chief of Mindanao, Colonel Wendell Fertig.

Today we know that Enola Gray's secondary target was Niigata, which teemed with thousands of Allied POWs. Earlier, Hiroshima was overcast, so the crew prepared to drop the bomb "little man" on Niigata instead. But just in time the cloud lifted over Hiroshima.

When the Japanese first decided to ship the American POWs to Japan, they ordered the American officers to draw up the lists. These officers figured, correctly, that

the Philippines would be liberated first. So they sent mostly enlisted men thinking delay would work to their (the officers') advantage. Yet, when finally they too had to go, the hellships were at their murderous worst. Not many of them emerged from the infernal cargo holds alive.

There was Greg Rodriguez, from New Mexico, who was among those experimented on by the Japanese scientists in the Mukden camp in Manchuria. Scores of prisoners died from the injected virus, but today at 76, I could not but marvel at how well Greg looked.

I also met Leon Beck who broke out of the Death March as it were passing by a thicket. Leon never went to the mountains like other American guerillas. Instead he stayed in the lowlands for three years, moving from one Filipino house to another without ever being betrayed. Leon is still married to Veneranda, his lovely Filipina wife whom I also met, and who was his sweetheart during all that period of hiding. He is small of stature, but of such feisty temperament that he just never fit in with any group. He was always too ready to settle differences by single combat. His fellow American guerillas shunned him but Filipinos lionized Leon.

I also visited Ret. Col. Edwin Price Ramsey. After almost 50 years of silence, his book, Lieutenant Ramsey's War, came out two years ago and it was excerpted in The Reader's Digest, and Modern Maturity. I chided him for misnaming my father who was one of his unwavering supporters, and I treasure the apology he wrote for me. His book tells of his chronic illnesses which forced him to flee periodically just in nick of time to elude certain decapitation.

I also met Ben Corrigan who, too, autographed his book for me. Ben still suffers from occasional nightmares about a scene describes in that book, Corregidor, Island

Paradise, about a Marine who escaped, was recaptured, and brought in front of his fellow American prisoners for beheading. Here is his description.

We arrived in Nichols Field just at sunrise. We were told to form a large circle, then they brought the Marine into the center of the circle. They still had his hands tied behind his back, still leading around like a dog. The ‘White Angel’ (the brutal Japanese commander) stepped into the circle and asked the Marine “Would you like a blindfold?” The Marine answered, “I don’t need no damn blindfold. I’m a U.S. Marine who is not afraid of you or any other slant-eyed son-of-a-bitch. Get on with it.” He then knelt and on his own stuck his neck out. The White Angel withdrew his saber and struck down a terrific slash which completely decapitated the Marine’s head, except for one inch of the skin on his throat. A Jap sergeant ran up and finished slicing the skin with a sharp knife. Then he picked up the head, put it in a basket, and held it over his head. He went around the circle of men, yelling, ‘Banzai’. While this was going on my eyes were glued to the body of the Marine as it was jerking and kicking on the ground with blood gushing all around. The Jap officer wiped his saber with a towel and returned to his scabbard. Then he walked away.

Well, that was certainly not the kind of “beyond courage” example I sought. Still, it helped steer me in the right direction.

III. By the fourth day it dawned on me that there were individuals in the convention who did not socialize much. They turned out to be mostly officers and among them was Richard Gordon, 72, Major, U.S. Army, retired.

Thursday noon I found myself alone with Dick.

“Hey, you’ve really been busy with your tape recorder!” He had apparently been watching me.

“Six tapes,” I exulted, “and I brought more today.”

Dick turned pensive. “I hate to tell you this, “ he said, “but don’t forget you’re recording reminisces half a century old. It’s all like the proverbial fish story. We old vets are prone to embellish things.” Then the zinger. “All those tapes—how will you sort out the truth?” Back when I was talking to Leon Beck, I

had all to quickly dismissed a thought as I listened to him cuss officers. Now that same thought rumbled in my head like a struck gong. I was staring at the ADBC's own devil's advocate.

Gordon's deposition in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal helped send a particularly brutal guard to the gallows, and others to prison. He has written for respected military journals, and was selected by Japanese television to be their commentator on POW life in Japan. In short, my devil's advocate, I am forced to admit had all the credentials. I still write and phone him occasionally, and his negative views are summarized in one of his letters to me.

During the prison camp experiences, beginning with the death march out of Bataan, I found that I disliked my fellow Americans with a great intensity. The reason: most were predators. If they possessed food or medicine, usually gained illegally, they would only part with it if you could afford to pay for it. Others, who did not make profits, still took advantage of their fellow prisoners if it meant they would survive. That veneer we call civilization is very thin, and it does not take much to scrape it away. The stories I could tell!

Many of the officers deserved the resentments they got as they too took advantage of others. I was in the regular Army, unlike most of ourselves men who were national guardsmen, or draftees. They had very poor discipline and it showed then. That they would have done the same as officers if in a similar position goes without saying. This is why I admired the British soldiers in prison camp so very much. They had a professional army, with time to make their draftees into soldiers, and it showed in their continued military discipline in prison camp. I've heard people make skeptical remarks about the film, Bridge on the River Kwai, but from what I observed of British prisoners, and their officers, I have no doubt that's the way it happened. I find the Corregidor group to be the worst liars. One night in the lobby of the Marriott (the night, I think, you were out to Fisherman's Wharf with another group) I heard a Marine tell about "ten thousand Japs invaded Corregidor, and we piled their dead three high." Poppycock! One thousand Japanese invaded Corregidor and many of the defenders were in Malinta Tunnel, hence the expression 'tunnel rats.'

I have objected personally to Gordon that he was capture in Bataan, and thus was not in Corregidor himself. But under prodding from him I checked documents and now had to face other depressing testimonies about the less than honorable behavior among the POWs. I had read these earlier but had suppressed them. Now evasion was impossible. Hear Pvt. Lewis Elliott, for instance in Death March.

I seen two brothers in Cabanatuan prison camp. One was lying in the barracks dying of malaria, and his brother's out selling quinine for cigarettes. Can you believe that? I saw it. (p. 205)

And from Capt. Marian Lawton in the same book on those hell ships.

In the total darkness and heat of the Oryoku Maru men became desperate. Some drank urine. Some turned vampire. They tried to drink the blood of sick men who couldn't resist. Men were murdered in that ship. (350)

The stories indeed that men like my devil's advocate could tell.

This observation from Sgt. Forrest Knox just about shattered me.

The ones that got out were the ones that hated. Love never kept anyone alive. You could do your best for someone and they'd lay there and die. But if you hated, whether a Jap, or those medics, or an officer, it seems strange but those who did—I mean hated real hard—they lived. Once you felt sorry for yourself, you were an absolute gone bastard. (345)

The thin veneer of civilization; one's comrades, or even brothers, turned ruthless predators; anything for food in one's guts. Was my devil's advocate really doing my heroes in? Or could I cling to that razor-thin defile that barely divides love from hate?

IV. My paper's title, "Beyond Courage," was a red herring. I construe heroism not in terms of deeds beyond the call of duty, or "supererogation," in the jargon of hagiographers, but as mere ordinariness viewed in a threefold way.

First or course is luck. Beyond courage is Dame Fortune's proverbial bullet with or without your name on it. Already I have cited enough instances of this. So, I now want to move beyond this run-of-the-mill meaning of luck. I venture to note that the heroic names on our rosters are products, for the most part, of that most fickle donor of glory, public acclaim. Abe Lincoln's life, for instance was riddled with setbacks from womb to tomb, including his Gettysburg address. Yet, how repeatedly surprised he must have been to see those defeats fortuitously turning into successes. Accidents keep propelling plain Abe on and on to unintended greatness, till his final downfall also sealed him in the robes of an immortal. Said Secretary of State Seward, after he heard the assassinated President breathe his last, "Now he belongs to the ages." So too, my ADBC heroes did not strive to be heroes. They saw what befell those who did. From this comes realization that heroic persons, saints, are not only more than 10,000, but in fact numberless. And that they turn out, surprisingly, to be mostly those nearest and dearest to us, who lived unsung and unacclaimed, yet hallowed their everydays with deeds of virtue lavished on us. By encompassing our years with mere ordinary availability, they filled our spirits with rays of amazing grace. These are they whose remembrance we now cannot bear without strewing the scent of sainthood across their bodies like blossoms. Thus, not in corridors of light and pedestals, nor in frescoes of famous basilicas, but in the beings you and I have become are their memorials carved. Were all the monuments in the world annihilated, their halos would continue to exist and to glow in our flesh.

If so, then I venture to add what may sound most presumptuous and arrogant of all, that in our own lived world, most of us do not measure up all that unfavorably against our publicly hailed heroes and heroines. Surely, we must deem bring singled up for popular acclaim secondary. For such a prize, if indeed it is such, is so contingent on the judgment of others, including popes, who are, just like any of us, ever vulnerable to less than worthy motives. Fickleness, the bard erred in naming you woman, instead of public acclaim! Moving through the thunderous shouts of Ave Caesar, the philosopher-Emperor Marcus Aurelius would mutter, “sic transit gloria mundi.” You read about Nancy Reagan and others, and you wonder if we populate our pantheon of patriots is so different from how Hollywood marks for stardom whoever it wills, out of crowds with equal or better talents. Thus, unless we are clear to ourselves that those in the limelight up there on the front stage of acclaim are merely magnified portraits of just little us way out here in the audience and shadows, our construal of our true selves amid life’s vagaries can be dangerously out of kilter. We are likely to forget that the heroic figures Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Publik make, they also often unmake and worse, on the winds of whim. What else do the apocalyptic purges and counter-purges of cynosures, all supposedly heroes, now portend, before the rest of the world sees the last of the worst in Russia, if not this truth?

I raise my voice in a paeon tonight to patriots beyond courage who, as our largest army ever to surrender to a foreign enemy, tend to be shuffled aside in our acclaimed roster of heroes. So what!

Second, beyond courage, there was wile, ADBC wile to survive, yes, “predatory” wile, in my devil’s advocate’s blunt word. Here I recall William Manchester’s autobiographical Good-Bye Darkness, where he shows how so many

deaths in war resulted, not from fate, but sheer carelessness. Training and common sense do matter in the way one hangs on to life or not. That said, you will surely excuse me if I beg off from dwelling any further about my heroes on this point, except to say, “There but for the grace of God, go I.”

The third and final ADBC characteristic beyond courage is what I find most intriguing namely, the almost mindless acceptance of anything from one moment to the next that the ADBC assumed in bondage. Just endure, never think. Those who dared to think down there in the bottomless pit despaired and perished. Better simply to brace for ever deeper horror. Only thus may one’s feet touch solid ground, if such there be. Says Harold Spooner, “I’ve learned not to ask of God any favors. To understand, we almost have to pervert St. Paul’s letter on love in I Corinthians 13, thus.

Before my capture I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child. But when I became a POW of the Japanese I let go of my whole humanity without daring to think or ask how long. I just kept alive, enduring all, suffering all, hating all.

Will I persist in my admiration of the ADBC? You better believe it. How do I describe the strength that surges through me as I recall what they endured, whenever I think of a personal hurt, affront, or defeat, as unendurable? I have never felt as totally one with any group of Americans as I did that week with those beloved veterans in San Francisco. Their unique affection for Filipinos was part of it. Deep call unto deep. Many ADBC told me they feel more warmly admired and appreciated in the Philippines than here in their own country. Frankly, these men feel bitter about the way our government has always seemed to be more concerned about Japan than about them vis-à-vis their demands for reparations against the former enemy. Yet,

each of them bears this unkindest cut of all with dignity. “Bloody but unbowed,” General Wainwright cabled President Roosevelt the day he surrendered Corregidor.

One last incident will crystallize the way these heroes inspire me. After liberation, during de-briefing, Pvt. J.J. Carter started to answer a military doctor’s question. He was cut short. “I don’t want to hear war stories. I want scientific information. I know you can’t work the hours you say you did on the food you say you were given, and still live.” Here is where my imagination rages off into a conflagration as the ex-POW answers. In my mind’s eye I visualize my buck private here donning priestly vestments: white alb, cincture, bright red chausable, surplice and maniple. He ascends the altar, turns around and raises both hands as if to bless, then opens his mouth and splits the air with fiendish laughs, a vile and vulgar vomit venting out of hell’s depths. Sacrilege! The flock on the pews are livid and on their feet screaming, just as the doctor was livid and up on his feet shouting courtmartial at Carter for disrespect to a U.S. Army officer. Carter, you see, lapsed into plain soldier talk about the broken bodies of my heroes in San Francisco. “Sir, I don’t want war stories either. I have plenty of my own. But the fact is that we’ve been beat, starved, enslaved, made to drink our own piss and live and die in one another’s bloody shit. Would you please tell me what you, or any other officer of this whole army, would do that hasn’t been done to me already in the last three years?” The officer was beside himself. “Get out of here! Just get out!”