Richard Regnier

"Hard Heels"

The Army jeep wound its way around a hairpin turn along the unpaved road leading up out of the old Bavarian town of Velden. Sergeant Rufus Yokum was driving. Colonel Augustus J. "Gus" Regnier, commanding the 66th Combat Infantry Regiment of the Third Army's 71st Division, was in the right front seat. His soldiers had nicknamed him "Hard Heels", a double entendre overtly for the sharp-sounding metal cleats he wore on the heels of his dress shoe boots as a military accent, but also for his steely determination and disciplined demeanor. Both men wore mud splattered combat boots, soiled fatigues, steel helmets, and belts with holstered semi-automatic Colt 45s. Hard Heels cradled his trademark Thompson sub-machine gun across his lap. Behind them Velden was ablaze from the 66th's successful mortar/tank/infantry assault which had routed crack Nazi SS and Wehrmacht troops.

Minutes earlier as the jeep emerged from the far end of Velden, Hard Heels barked, "Stop!" He quickly dismounted and approached a tall tree nearby. A handsome young German soldier, perhaps 17 years old, was propped up in his grey green uniform against the shrapnel spattered tree trunk. He had a massive chest wound. Gushes of blood poured out – his life force leaving him. The brave young man was conscious but in an ashen faced state of shock. Hard Heels stood close to him as each man fixed his gaze on the other. They silently exchanged a mutual message of the sheer horror, the hellish destruction of war. It was a scene reminiscent of Kipling's enduring poem, "The Ballad of East and West,"

> Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
>
> Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
>
> But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
>
> When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from
>
> the ends of the earth!

As he continued to look into the dying soldier's soul through the windows of his fading eyes, Hard Heels thought, "Somewhere this fine specimen of young manhood has a mother who must be so proud of him. Now his life is finished. What a waste. God, war is awful! We must end it as fast as possible." The soldier's eyes closed as he stopped breathing. Hard Heels returned to the jeep and Yokum drove slowly away from Velden.

Scarcely two minutes later Hard Heels and Yokum were making their way warily beyond the hairpin turn. Unknown to them five enemy soldiers were embedded with a machine gun behind protective sandbags. Their camouflaged position was at the edge of a woodland about sixty yards up a gradual slope from the road. Gunning down the two Amerikaners approaching in a jeep would be like the proverbial shooting fish in a barrel. As the open jeep moved forward, Yokum and Hard Heels scanned the countryside for any sign of retreating German troops. Suddenly a long, loud burst of staccato machine gun fire tore into the front end of the jeep, shooting out both front tires and the radiator. Some rounds zipped so close to their heads they could feel the heat from the burst of bullets. Reflexively Yokum punched his right arm with

lightning speed at Hard Heels' left shoulder to knock him out of the line of fire. The knockout punch hurled Hard Heels head first out of the jeep onto the hilly terrain. As he tumbled down the slope his helmet protected his buffeted head. Separated from his submachine gun, when he stopped tumbling he drew his pistol. As he looked up towards the disabled jeep, he saw Yokum zigzag sprinting uphill towards the machine gun nest with his pistol drawn. Inexplicably the machine gun stopped firing as Yokum raced towards it. Seconds later he reached the enemy emplacement. Standing on top of the frontal sandbags, he rapidly shot dead all five of the astounded Krauts.

Hard Heels dusted himself off, retrieved his Thompson, and walked uphill to the jeep. He waited while Yokum strode down from the den of death. Yokum stopped just short of his regimental commanding officer. Hard Heels looked him straight in the eye and said, "That was a foolhardy thing to do, Yokum!"

His chest still heaving from his deadly exertions, Yokum's eyes flared with incandescence, his nostrils dilated like an enraged bull, as he pronounced, "They tried to **kill** you, Colonel."

Yokum was one of the generation of young Americans in the armed forces that Tom Brokaw has extolled in his best selling book *The Greatest Generation*. The citizen heroes and heroines who came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War were united by the greatest cause of humankind – "to save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled, instruments of conquest in the hands of fascist maniacs "(Brokaw xix). Adjudged the "greatest generation any society has produced," they were also united by common values – duty, honor, country, and, above all, personal responsibility.

But what of the generation that trained and led the greatest generation? Hard Heels, West Point Class of 1924 and a career infantry officer, was of that generation. He and other idealistically bound military professionals remained committed to serving their country in war and peace. Despite the numbing routine and boredom of peacetime service between World Wars I and II in the drastically reduced armed forces, these men studied military history and tactics, kept fit, and maintained themselves in a state of readiness for the combat leadership roles they sensed would come despite America's foreign policy of isolationism. They took to heart their oath upon being commissioned. Hard Heels swore to

> support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic . . . [to] well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office . . . SO HELP ME GOD

Commissioned in June 1924, Second Lieutenant A. J. Regnier was a paragon of fulfillment of the mission of the Unites States Military Academy:

> to educate, train and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate shall have the character, leadership, intellectual foundation, and other attributes essential to progressive and continuing development throughout a career of exemplary service to the nation as an officer of the Regular Army (Bugle Notes 4).

West Point's motto of "Duty, Honor, Country" became the bedrock of his soul. Duty to fellowmen and country, Honor as a man and a citizen, and Loyalty to the land he serves were his core identity. With America's entry into World War II in 1941, Hard Heels and his generation of military leaders instilled in Yokum's generation their sense of transcendent mission – to defeat Nazism, fight for what is right, for freedom and liberty, and against oppression and inhumanity. These men were the backbone of an unparalleled national commitment. In the eloquent words of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, they had "a rendezvous with destiny." Only victory was acceptable.

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Hard Heels' life was far from ordinary. From a humble beginning he had become an exemplary leader in the generation indispensable to training and leading the greatest generation to the greatest achievement in the history of warfare. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, the son of Ralph Regnier, a shoe salesman of French ancestry, and a mother of German Alsatian Ancestry (nee Chablein), musically gifted Gus Regnier became the first cornet soloist for the Providence Symphony Orchestra at age sixteen. Two years later when America entered World War I, he enlisted in the Navy and served as a seaman first class aboard a minesweeper in the Atlantic. Honorably discharged following the armistice ending the war to end all wars, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, young Gus attended Brown University for 1-2 years hoping to attend the Boston Conservatory of Music. But the family of six siblings could not afford that expense and West Point, where his brother Rome preceded him in the Class of 1917, was free. Four years at West Point followed as Cadet Regnier ventured towards his destiny of orchestrating combat victories instead of symphonic music.

Sergeant Rufus Yokum was one of the thousands of infantrymen Hard Heels trained and led in combat. Before World War II Yokum was an all conference high school football athlete who played guard or tackle the entire game, a burly one man special team. Raised on a Pennsylvania farm planting, hoeing and harvesting crops, hand milking cows which developed his powerful arms and pectorals, digging post holes, installing and mending fences, and tending to the myriad other farm chores and hard work essential to eking out a family living, Yokum developed a strong sense of duty and commitment. Six feet of smooth, chiseled, granite hard muscle and bone, he had sturdy fire hydrant legs, a bull neck, lustrous blue eyes, and the respect of his commanding officer and fellow soldiers as a battle hardened, fearless man of few words. He typified the consummate infantry NCO or non-com (non-commissioned officer) who was the keystone of the Army. Young lieutenants and captains learned much about soldiering from men like Yokum.

After admonishing him for foolhardiness, Hard Heels realized he could only commend Yokum's heroic devotion to duty, his death defying loyalty. He subsequently recommended him for the Distinguished Service Cross for exceptional heroism in combat.

Earlier that day the capture of Velden had been held up because the tankers in the 66th's attached tank company refused to move forward without accompanying infantry including several GIs atop each tank and battalion strength (1,000) on foot. The tankers managed to slip off the tank treads repeatedly. But Hard Heels soon realized the resulting inoperability of the tanks was a pretext for avoiding combat. He confronted the tank company commander:

"Why aren't the tanks leading the assault I've ordered on Velden, captain?"

"We can't, suh. Some of the tanks have thrown their treads," replied the captain.

Hard Heels pulled back the arming lever on his Thompson and chambered a round. Sticking the muzzle in the captain's face he warned,

"You've got ten minutes to get your tanks moving through Velden or I'll shoot you!"

A no nonsense, fierce willed battle commander, Hard Heels knew he had such authority where the lives of his soldiers were in jeopardy. Topographically Velden sat in the bottom of a gorge some three quarters of a mile in width. The walls were very rocky and cavernous – an ideal place for snipers. Eight infantrymen had just been killed and five wounded by German snipers and machine gunners because they lacked the protection of an armor led assault.

"Ye-, ye-,yeah, suh," the captain stammered as he turned and sprinted from his fire breathing, Thompson wielding commander towards the stationary tanks. A flurry of tanker activity erupted which left no doubt the captain would rather face the Germans than Hard Heels' wrath. In short order the tanks, their cannons blasting away, led a furious assault through the gorge. Picturesque Velden was set ablaze and captured.

In 1946 I learned of the foregoing events during a visit to Velden with Hard Heels, my father. The inhabitants were busy rebuilding their town. Standing in front of the battle pocked tree where the young German soldier had died, my father shared the moving episode with me. A short time later beyond the hairpin turn I stopped the Army Ford sedan I was chauffeuring in a buck private's uniform. My father was determined to accelerate his fifteen year old first born son's development, performance and acceptance of responsibility. He had conscripted me as Yokum's unarmed, part time fill-in. I retraced Yokum's all out uphill race, vividly visualized his valorous sprint under fire, mounted the same sandbags, and stood in his boots as he summarily dispatched the machine gun crew. Some time thereafter in the Nurnberg (or Nuremberg) Red Cross cafeteria over coffee, Yokum modestly recounted his hair raising brush with death. He concluded with spontaneous sincerity,

"Your dad is a man we would die for . . . he's tops with his men."

On April 20, 1945, the day before Velden was captured, the 66th had pushed southeast through mountainous and wooded terrain against enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire until it swept into the town of Neuhaus. It was situated some 22 miles northeast of Nurnberg, the citadel of Nazism. On a high bluff overlooking Neuhaus stood a 500 year old castle owned by Hitler's No. 2 man, Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering. Rehabilitated by Goering, the castle's six foot thick stone walls seemed impregnable. The massive rock on which the castle was built was honeycombed with tunnels.

The castle, complete with medieval stone turrets, was being defended by a hundred SS troops, the most fanatical Nazi combatants. Hard Heels sent a messenger under cover of a white flag demanding their surrender. But they were determined to make a last ditch stand there. Reluctant to destroy the impressive historical artifact, Hard Heels ordered one of his anti-tank gunners to fire a warning shot at one of the turrets. The shell struck home and crumbled part of the top of a stately turret. When the SS responded with small arms fire, Hard Heels commanded, "Give 'em another shot!" Part of the top of another turret was then blasted off. The SS small arms fire ceased and the defenders fled to the temporary sanctity of a nearby Waldlang (woodland).

As Hard Heels and his soldiers approached the castle entrance a distraught looking, middle-aged woman with fear-filled eyes emerged. She identified herself as Frau Goering, the Reichmarshal's wife. "Mein Mann ist nicht hier," (my husband is not here) she announced. Accompanied by Frau Goering, Hard Heels and his staff inspected the historic castle which was

known as Veldenstein. Lavish furnishings and decorations evidenced Goering's hedonistic idiosyncrasies and tastes. All interior walls were covered with rare tapestries while the floors were heavily carpeted. There was a fusion of priceless original art and gilded frames throughout. The many bottles of perfume and toilet water in the master's bedroom as well as his mistress's room spoke of rotund Goering's penchant for perfume.

Hard Heels promptly issued a hard-and-fast order to subordinates: "There is to be no looting. None whatsoever!" He then reassured Frau Goering through an interpreter, "You will be treated with all the dignity and respect due to a Reichmarshal's Frau." This gesture of gallantry from the American Oberst (Colonel) in command visibly relieved her anxiety. In gratitude for the respectful treatment she subsequently received from officers and soldiers of the 66th, Frau Goering privately gave Oberst Regnier one of her husband's prize daggers and scabbard as well as his favorite hunting jacket.

Two days later, Hard Heels' 46th birthday on April 22, 1945, became a haunting memory. The weather was very disagreeable for combat operations. It became squally with snow and hail followed by a cold rain. In his war diary Hard Heels supposes the weather "was something like my temperament - - rather tempestuous." Despite the adverse weather he had his troops, about 5,000 with attached units, continue to advance. They reached the dirty little village of Schmidmuhlen and liberated a small Nazi concentration camp for political prisoners, mainly those opposed to Nazism. Hard Heels wrote in his diary:

> I visited a school being used as a hospital and saw sixty-five human skeletons — grown men weighing I suppose from sixty to ninety pounds. As they were being processed and standing in the nude to have underwear issued to them, there was no mistake as to the ill treatment and lack of food, combined with overwork that these men had suffered. That very evening one died at the feet of our Chaplain and how the others managed to live so long is a mystery to me. If one had any previous doubts concerning Nazi brutality and the stories concerning slow death by starvation and overwork this spectacle would soon dispel that thought. It was in truth about the most horrible sight we had seen. These people were literally one step from the grave.

A further illustration of how innocent civilians, by far the largest component of World War II casualties, were injured or killed occurred in Schmidmuhlen. Hard Heels was standing in a building interrogating some captured German officers when he heard a loud explosion outside. He grabbed his Thompson and went outside to investigate along with GIs in the vicinity. It was discovered that a woman had picked up a hand grenade left behind by one of the GIs. Thinking it was some sort of perfume container, she played with it and pulled the pin. The grenade exploded in her hand in the presence of two other curious women and her child. The woman's hand was completely blown off. Protruding bone of her forearm was scorched black and bleeding profusely. Parts of the grenade pierced her body and that of each of the other two women. The little blond girl had one leg badly splintered. Hard Heels immediately summoned medical assistance and had regimental doctors render all possible aid.

A few days later the 66th, moving with the unprecedented speed urged by its Third Army Commander, General George S. Patton, renowned as "Old Blood and Guts," reached the Danube River just east of Regensburg. All bridges had already been blown up by Allied bombers or retreating Germans trying to delay the American advance. Hard Heels, however, had prepared his soldiers for the no bridge challenge of crossing the river in the face of intensive enemy fire from the far shore. They had been trained in special river crossing techniques which included enfilading light and 155 mm artillery and machine gun fire, as well as barrages from 60 mm and 81 mm mortars, tank, tank-destroyer, and anti-tank guns while laying down a dense smoke screen. Through this protective cover soldiers in engineer assault boats moved across the river to attack and pursue the enemy. As the operation proceeded in text book fashion[1], Hard Heels observed developments from atop a low-lying embankment overlooking the northern or near shore. The full fury of heavy weapons, artillery, and mortar fire erupted around the battle roiled waters of the storied blue Danube.

Standing scarcely a yard to Hard Heels' right was one of his staff officers, a lieutenant colonel. Both men were peering through their binoculars. In less than the blink of an eye, an armor piercing shell from a dreaded German 88 mm cannon on the far shore ripped through the light colonel's chest like a giant rifle shot. Blasted off his feet many yards rearward, he was killed instantly. Hard Heels felt the concussive force of the 88 shell's impact, but he was unscathed. Battle veterans, of course, know that front line combat exposure is highly risky. Perhaps it was luck, or perhaps fate, but the lethal shell did not have Hard Heels' name on it. Such are the fortunes of war and brave men.

Following the successful crossing of the Danube on April 26, 1945, the 66th continued in hot pursuit. The 71st Division had orders to advance through the broad valley of the mighty Danube into Austria to meet the Russian Army sweeping northwest from Vienna. Not far from the Austrian border is the Isar River, a major tributary of the Danube. The 66th was assigned the task of forcing a bridgehead on the Isar. Retreating German soldiers had blown up all the bridges in the assigned regimental zone. Compounding the task was a river current so swift that paddling across in standard engineer assault boats would have been futile. The previous night Third Army armored elements had tried to cross in assault boats. All of them tipped over in the perilous current and the soldiers drowned. Hard Heels knew there is no more difficult tactical maneuver than a beach landing or a river crossing. With an extremely flat approach to the river and no cover available for the GIs, while the river bank on the opposite side was a high cliff with trees, bushes and vegetation affording good cover for the German troops, the difficulty was even greater. Resourceful Hard Heels decided to expand on the tactics that had been used successfully to cross the Danube. Motor driven storm boats, each carrying a handful of men per trip, were to be utilized. In the face of determined enemy fire the bridgehead was established by 9:15 p.m. on April 30, 1945. Hard Heels then had his engineer battalion construct a pontoon bridge using assault boats placed side by side as floats to support a steel tread roadway across the river. That same evening jeeps and weapons carriers drove across the makeshift bridge to the far shore. Not a single GI was lost in the crossing while 287 prisoners, 2 Panzer tanks, five 75 mm guns, and the nearby town of Zeholfing were captured.

Between the Danube and Isar River crossings the 66th began to take in many Hungarian soldiers as prisoners. To Hard Heels they were a weak and curious lot. Many of them brought their women along with them in the woods, in their billets, and beside them in their military

[1] After Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945, Hard Heels authored a river crossing manual for the Army which became a standard reference.

wagons. They looked like a comic theatrical army. They surrendered without offering any resistance. Some wore the gaudiest of uniforms with large plumes in their hats. They appeared to be better fitted for light opera than for the battlefield.

The Austrian border was defined by the Inn River, another major tributary of the Danube. An advance unit of the Third Army's 13th Armored Division reached it ahead of the infantrymen. The tankers reported all bridges across the Inn had been destroyed. But 71st Division engineers, aloft as observers in light reconnaissance aircraft ("grasshoppers"), spotted two large, intact dams. If captured before the Germans could destroy them, they could be used as crossing sites. Hard Heels assigned to a motorized infantry battalion of the 66th , led by Major Everet Thomas, the mission of seizing and securing one of the dams. The 5th Regiment's Second Battalion, 71st Division, was to target the other dam.

De-trucking in an assembly area short of the Inn, the 66th's Infantry Battalion launched an assault crossing in engineer storm boats. While the enemy resisted this flanking maneuver with small arms fire, other Yanks fought their way across the top of the massive dam. However, German soldiers had placed three huge piles of nitro glycerin at critical points in the dam with connecting wires attached to a magneto on the Austrian side of the dam. Under fire intrepid 66ers completed a mad dash across the top of the dam and captured it intact. Meanwhile, Major Thomas and a soldier crawled in a dam tunnel with some captured German engineers, disconnected the critical wires, and threw the demolitions in the water flowing over the dam. In short order, the enemy crew left behind to detonate the explosives were captured as well as 500 other German soldiers. By midnight the 66th had seized and secured a bridgehead across the Inn River into Austria. The 5th was similarly successful in its mission and established a separate bridgehead further down river. For his heroic derring-do Major Thomas subsequently received the Distinguished Service Cross recommended by Hard Heels.

With typical American ingenuity when the chips were down, the 271st Engineer Battalion then converted for motor vehicle traffic the 1000 foot stretch along the top of the dam captured by the 66th. To press on with maximum speed and energy to defeat the enemy Hard Heels had the engineers labor throughout the night removing obstacles, modifying passageways, filling in a huge crater at the south end of the dam, and building an access ramp at the northern approach. In 14 hours the site was ready for use. On May 2, 1945, the 66th was the first Allied force to enter Austria from the west.

From its Austrian bridgehead the 66th resumed its attack, now moving directly east towards the city of Steyr where Patton expected to meet the Russians. En-route, strongly defended enemy positions were encountered and smashed. Ten miles east of the border, near Lambach, 66th infantrymen overran Gunskirchen Lager. This was a stench ridden hellhole of a Nazi concentration camp. Unburied piles of starved dead victims were shocking evidence of mass death from starvation, thirst and methodical torture. The stench was so overwhelming it caused some of the liberators to vomit. The horrors of the death camp appalled the most battle hardened men of the 66th. They knew their heroic sacrifices and courageous efforts to eliminate Hitler's monstrous regime with its bestial policy of genocide were part of the great crusade General Eisenhower had described on D-Day. Right was on the American side, arrayed against evil in a supremely just cause.

Approaching Wels, Austria, Hard Heels wanted to end the fighting with as little bloodshed as possible. Ever the decisive leader, with Yokum driving his jeep and accompanied by a junior grade officer, Hard Heels sped under a white flag of truce through enemy troop positions into Wels in early morning sunshine. In the huge town square he met the commanding

officer of the German forces, an SS Major in full black uniform and spit shined boots, with his retinue of military staff. Noticeably taller than 5'8" Hard Heels, he had the erect, confident bearing of an elite Aryan officer and was conversant in English. Hard Heels stood face to face with him, separated by only a few feet. He told the Major, "I am here to have you surrender. My soldiers have you surrounded."

The Major's eyes narrowed down to steely slits as he replied in a gruff Teutonic tone, "Nein, Oberst (Colonel). Zey are at zee airport three miles avay."

Hard Heels knew this was true. But always the adept poker player and man of unflinching determination, he said in a stern voice, "Never mind that. It's over. You and your men are finished."

Hard Heels thrust his right arm and open hand towards the Major as he commanded, "Give me your pistol!"

For a long, tense interval, which seemed frozen in time to Yokum and the young American officer, the SS Major and Hard Heels were locked in a lazer-like mutual stare that a saber could not have severed. Yokum's sphincter tightened as he sensed a shootout could erupt. The spell finally broke when the Major slowly unbuckled his belt and removed from his hip the Walther pistol in its holster. In a recognized sign of surrender he placed the weapon in Hard Heels' hand. Promptly putting his junior officer in charge of the "prisoners" with an appropriate admonition to the SS Major, Hard Heels and Yokum returned to his regiment to arrange for taking custody of the enemy officers and troops.

Hard Heels then returned to Wels with four MPs (military police) in another jeep, followed by four GIs in a signal company truck with a battered but serviceable radio. As the little convoy drove around hushed, empty streets bordered by shuttered windows and sealed up entrances to air raid shelters, Hard Heels issued orders to secure all bridges and post guards at their approaches. He selected as his temporary CP (command post) an office building on the town square where he had accepted the surrender of the SS garrison. Gradually thousands of Austrian civilians emerged from their homes and crowded into the huge square, examining the vehicles and clothing of the Americans. They noisily assured the American Oberst and his GI contingent there were no Nazis among them, only good Austrians who loved Americans and hated Hitler's Herrenvolk (master race).

In the early afternoon, however, for no apparent reason the crowd began to melt away. Quietly they returned to their shuttered homes by twos and small groups. It was not long before Hard Heels discovered why. Drifting into the great square in makeshift conveyances, on foot, on hands and knees – utilizing the full breadth of the wide, cobble-stoned streets – were the former inmates of Gunskirchen Lager. With scarcely a sound a staggering swarm of pitiful humanity engulfed the town center. Hard Heels' radioman, Corporal Jerry Tax, described the 15,000 wretched survivors:

> No more than one in a hundred walked upright, dozens were dragged into town full-length on rude carts; with their last ounce of strength, still others shuffled along leaning on sticks, crude crutches and each other. Their garments came out of a wild costumer's hallucination. They ran the gamut from tattered uniforms that had been worn twenty-four hours a day for three or four years to wrappings of rags. None, obviously, had been washed in that

> time. Lice and vermin of every sort crawled among the folds of these filthy rag-bag costumes and on the misshapen, emaciated bodies of the men.

Not one sound came from the thousands of throats, nor any sign of joy or hope. After years of torture, abject slavery and starvation, liberation was too great a shock for these broken, beaten men to assimilate.

Hard Heels levelheadedly assessed the situation and radioed Division headquarters: "Urgent! Send medical supplies and food immediately . . . 15,000 people in urgent need of delousing." By late afternoon the square was empty. Every wheeled vehicle within miles was commandeered to take the sick and starving concentration camp victims to places being set up to feed and care for them. Hard Heels had also arranged for taking custody of the enemy officers and troops. That same day several thousand of them were rounded up and escorted to the rear of the relentlessly advancing Third Army. Hard Heels' daring, intrepid confrontation behind enemy lines had saved lives on both sides and further hastened the imminent end of Hitler's Third Reich.

On May 5, 1945, the 66th seized Steyr, Austria, by the Enns River, taking many enemy prisoners. Two days later and some miles further east, reconnaissance units made contact with Russian paratroopers of the Soviet Fifth Airborne. Men of the 66th were the eastern-most of any American or British Ground Forces in the European Theater. The following day the Third Reich unconditionally surrendered. Victory in Europe, or VE Day, at long last.

The 66th had engaged in 59 days of unceasing combat operations which commenced 800 miles back in the Alsace region of eastern France. Given the mission of capturing the city of Pirmasens just over the German border, Hard Heels had launched an attack directly through the formidable Siegfried Line. This vast barrier against invasion of der Vaterland included mine fields, anti-tank dragon's teeth, pillboxes, and other fortifications. All enemy pillboxes were systematically neutralized, however, and paths cleared through the mine fields as the 66th closed on its objective. In wresting control of Pirmasens from the German Wehrmacht (Army), 141 prisoners of war (POWs) were taken. This foreshadowed the eventual setting of a new American Army regimental record of 49,000 enemy soldiers captured. In the final days of combat as many as a thousand disarmed POWs were escorted to the rear by only two soldiers because more fighting GIs could not be spared.

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During the battle for Pirmasens Hard Heels was the inspirational icon of a hands-on combat leader. At great personal risk from enemy fire, he was in the forefront directing a full scale attack which he was bound and determined would succeed. His soldiers were so impressed with his courage and composure in the caldron of battle they recommended him for the first of two Silver Star medals and two Bronze Star medals which were awarded for exceptional valor in action. Even the second Silver Star was bestowed on the recommendation of his soldiers, not a fellow officer. Coming from his foot soldiers made these medals even more meaningful for Hard Heels.

Although the 71st Division was part of the Seventh Army during its baptism of fire days, General Patton told his superior, General Eisenhower, that he wanted Gus Regnier and his regiment with him because "the Third Army is going to rip through Germany like crap through a

goose." In the late twenties Major Patton and Lieutenant Regnier had served together in Hawaii, played golf, polo and poker together, and developed mutual admiration and professional respect as fellow West Point graduates and career officers. Patton knew that Gus Regnier shared his moral compulsion as a professional soldier to fight for freedom even at the expense of his own life.

Ike responded to Patton's request, "George, I can't transfer just that regiment."

Patton shot back, "Transfer the whole damn division then," which met with Ike's approval. On March 28, 1945 the entire 71st Division officially became a part of the Third Army. Raring to go, two days later Hard Heels led a surprise pontoon bridge crossing of the fabled Rhine River . . . without incident. From a pontoon bridge Patton fulfilled his disdainful vow that he would piss in the Rhine, an event captured on film by a combat photographer.

Although the 66th was the Army's newest infantry regiment, it never lost a battle in the conquest of Germany. That it was able to do this is a direct reflection of Hard Heels' outstanding leadership and training of his troops for combat. He had 5,000 men, including attached tank units, an anti-tank company, and a field artillery battalion, under his command. Remarkably, only 164 of his 66ers were killed in action.

In the summer of 1945, however, it appeared the 71st Division would be needed in the Pacific Theater for the invasion of the Japanese homeland. Projections of a million casualties were issued. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima on August 5th, and Nagasaki on August 9th, averted all this. The 71st Division, which had been moved out of Austria in June to the Augsburg area of southern Bavaria, became part of the American Army of Occupation. Gradually troops were redeployed to the States for discharge while Hard Heels became the Deputy Commander of the Nurnberg Military District. The following year he arranged for his wife Marietta and two sons Dick and Tony to join him.

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Gus Regnier's family had spent the war living on a rented 17 acre farm in the Maine woods because he and Marietta felt it would be an ideal environment for their two growing boys. For five years they grew much of their own food including corn, potatoes, lima and string beans, tomatoes, squash, radishes and peas. Their many outdoor activities made life invigorating and the boys thrived on it. They attended a three room school- house for grades 1 through 8 two miles away in the tiny village of North Windham. With Maine winter's deep snows and the farm snowbound, they trekked to school on snowshoes. During these formative years their father's V-mail letters, which featured the censor's handiwork of cutting out words or even whole sentences, were eagerly received, read, and re-read. Despite his physical absence, Gus's presence as an inspirational father and husband was deeply felt. Patriarchal to the core, nonetheless he wanted his sons to call him Gus rather than Dad or Sir, feeling it made them closer. True believers, they happily began their letters to him with "Dear Gus."

Peacetime service afforded further insights into the character of Gus Regnier. In 1946, once the U.S. Government had authorized the families of American officers to reunite in Europe, Mom and the boys voyaged across the Atlantic in an Army transport. Following a joyful reunion at dockside in Bremerhaven, Germany, Gus and family took up residence in Nurnberg until they returned to the States a year and a half later. Mom, Dick, and Tony readily transitioned from life on a remote New England farm, complete with a pot bellied coal stove for heat, a barn, and a two seater outhouse, to life in a commanding officer's stately residence in conquered Germany.

Not until July 2005 did I revisit Nurnberg. Recollections of significant events came flooding back at that time. By a stroke of good luck and an indelible memory of a unique bedroom balcony, I found the estate home where we had lived in 1946-47. I recalled how my hands gripped two vertical bars just above the base of an iron balcony railing, my body suspended above the rose garden.

"If he looks down and sees me, I'll let go," I decided, and drop from the second floor of our spacious three story home into the rose bushes below.

"How could I have missed the last bus home? Now here I am, on this precipice of danger," I thought. I had been at a teenage party, which was a rarity in 1946 post war Germany. The get-together was at an American Army major's home in a Nurnberg suburb. About a dozen American teenagers had attended a pleasant social evening, chaperoned by the major and his wife. Alcohol was not permitted and nobody snuck even one beer. Army brats were accustomed to obeying the orders of their military fathers. This particular night my father, whose word was law, decreed his 15 year old son Dick must be home by midnight. There was no question in my mind, never ever, I wouldn't be. Leaving the gathering in what I felt was ample time to catch the bus and be home easily by midnight, I half walked, half trotted a few blocks in the chilly night air on a street bulldozed clear of the massive, seemingly endless amounts of Nurnberg rubble and debris.

As I approached the bus stop, the army bus was moving away, accelerating into the inky black night. I raced after it hollering, "Wait! Wait! Stop!" to no avail. Armed only with a flashlight, I continued running the entire distance home. About 20 minutes later the flashlight batteries conked out. No visible moonlight nor even a single streetlight pierced the eerie darkness that cloaked the graveyard of Nazism through which I still wanted to run. But I had to slow to a walk and somehow found my way to our driveway gate a short distance away. This was the front entrance to the four acre estate, undamaged by war, where my family lived. Situated in Dambach, a small suburb of Nurnberg, somehow it had escaped the more than two million tons of bombs that had rained down on the German population and industrial centers in World War II, killing over half a million civilians. Entering the estate grounds, the lights in my parents' bedroom shined out through the partially open second story window, but not enough to disclose my presence. I could see my father pacing back and forth in his white underwear tank top and army trousers as he ranted. My mother's voice was trying to calm him down. But he vocally overruled her.

"No son of mine is coming in at all hours of the night." Brandishing a golf club (the five iron was his favorite), he vowed in a loud voice,

"He'll be six feet under the **lawn** by **dawn**!" punctuating his vow by dramatically pointing down at the lawn, then at the expected sunrise horizon.

"Can't show myself tonight," I realized. "I'll sleep in the barn. Need a blanket to put down," I thought. "There's one on my bed. I can climb up to my bedroom . . . just use the strong vine growing up to the far end of the balcony outside my bedroom."

As I pussyfooted across the grand lawn in front of the house, our family dog Lulu, a black on white, wire-haired fox terrier, barked out a full muzzle alarm from her at-the-ready stance nearby.

"Lulu, here Lulu," I softly called. Recognizing my voice, she sprinted happily to me in full wiggle butt mode. After giving her a few reassuring strokes, I approached the vine. It was faintly visible in the dark, perhaps from some obscure light source. Hand over hand, with the vine clamped between my feet, I ascended to the balcony. Quickly I climbed over the top of the

railing and started to cross the bedroom size balcony floor to enter the bedroom where my twelve year old brother Tony and I slept. Suddenly the bedroom door was flung open and a light flipped on as my father burst in, glanced about the bedroom, then strode to Tony's bed. He didn't see me through the balcony door's glass panes as I hastily climbed back over the railing. No time to get back to the vine over at the corner. The need for speed was too urgent. Mustn't let him see me, so I ended up hanging by my hands gripping part of the railing with the rest of me below the level of the balcony floor. Moments later I heard breathing. I looked up. There he is, looming over me, looking out over the grounds of the estate into the protective darkness.

He pumps his right fist menacingly at the dark cloak of night as he leans forward, growling ominously, "I know you're out there, you coward. Show yourself!"

My heart pounds faster. His head is directly over mine. I expect at any moment, if he looks down and sees me, to have to make the hair trigger decision to release my grip. While light is flowing onto the balcony from the bedroom, I'm suspended in a shield of darkness. Only the white knuckles of my hands, within inches of his slippered feet, are above the shield. They are the feet of a man who is physically strong, a boxer as a West Point cadet and as a coach of championship army boxing teams, hunter, skier, crack shot, avid golfer, and seasoned warrior . . . not someone you'd want to mess with. The German Army learned that lesson the hard way as he led the beefed up 66th Combat Infantry Regiment against them and kicked their heinies. It was the 66th's highly decorated combat commander, my own father, who now stood ready, itching to make war on me.

Long seconds dragged by as my father peered ahead, then left and right, and then… but no, he didn't look down. He never saw me hanging there below his feet. And loyal Lulu never woofed a betrayal bark. Maybe she believed "The Colonel" was chastising her for barking earlier. Abruptly my father turned around, making grunting, boxing type sounds like Rocky Balboa in his epic movie fight against Apollo Creed. The head of the Regnier clan then stormed through the bedroom where a short time before he had pulled sleeping, unsuspecting Tony from his bed. He shook my even tempered brother's body with both hands as he held him up off the floor and demanded, "Where are you hiding him?" Then he even looked under both beds and my bed covers. He wouldn't put it past his furtive, fugitive, older son to flatten his slender frame under the sheets like a cardboard cutout.

A believer in the Roman law of primogeniture, my father left no doubt in our family the first born son was primarily responsible, after him, in all things family. If he were to be killed in combat, he expected me to take charge of the family, although realistically his intensely loyal, devoted, model of an army wife, my beautiful, graceful mother, would have stepped into that power vacuum while I assisted as the "man of the house." Unquestionably my father was strict in my upbringing. Not so with Tony. Yet I never resented this. I simply accepted it as how things were in this world, as handed down from on high by my idol – my complex, multi-talented (symphony cornet soloist, self-taught classical violinist, winner of many golf tournaments, shrewd financial investor, skilled at poker and bridge), fun loving, life-of-the-party, generous, enthusiastic, brave, highly intelligent, colorful, take charge, determined, no nonsense, sometimes stern and impatient, patriarchal father.

So here I am still hanging from the balcony. After my father returns to his bedroom his elusive son pulls himself back up to the balcony floor, crosses over the top of the railing and hustles into the "boys' bedroom." I close and lock the bedroom door so as not to be surprised by my father returning and blitzkrieging his errant first born son. Tony whispers, "What's going on? He thinks I'm hiding you."

As I strip the blanket from my bed and exit onto the balcony I whisper back,

"Tell you later. Can't sleep here tonight."

Tossing the blanket out onto the front lawn, I climb over the balcony railing and descend hand under hand down the same thick vine used earlier. Retrieving the blanket, I proceed warily in the darkness, accompanied by a concerned Lulu, to the horseless horse barn way behind the house. The barn lacks any electric light, but my fingers feel across a shelf surface in the dark and locate a packet of matches. I strike one of the three remaining matches to get my bearings, then a second one and spot a large pile of hay in the right rear corner.

"That's it," I realize, and approach what would be this fugitive's bedding. Standing in front of the hay mound while holding the lighted final match between the thumb and forefinger of my extended arm, I try to spread out the top of the mound to a more level surface.

"Whoa!" The flame singes me as the match burns down, causing me to drop it. Down through the dry hay goes the still burning match, bouncing off stalks and coming to rest several feet down. The next few seconds seemed unending as the flame fiendishly flickered.

"Great," I thought. "That's all I need . . . for the barn to burn down."

As I looked down at impending doom, miraculously the hay did not ignite. The flame just died. In the darkness I stared in momentary disbelief, like a watchful sentinel at the grave of the dearly departed igniter. Then I made a point of spreading the blanket directly over it, figuring if the hay belatedly caught fire I would know immediately and deal with it. Shortly I fell asleep atop Mount Tinderbox and slept the sleep of the reprieved.

Remaining in my horsy hideaway until I knew my father had reported for duty in the early morning, eventually I ventured to the house, entering through the back door. Both German maids, bilingual Dora and Zenta, were in the kitchen. As Dora saw me enter she said, "Ach, Dick. Ze Oberst ist zo mad at you." Soon I encountered Mom who confirmed my peril . . . urging caution. But the life of a fugitive, cowardly hiding out, was not for me. My father would expect the firstborn son to face up to things. That occurred when he came home for lunch. I waited outside the formal dining room until he was part way through his meal. He was seated, of course, in the commanding officer's place at the head of the table, resplendent in his olive drab army uniform, the left chest emblazoned with several rows of bright, multicolored decorations for valor, heroism, and distinguished service underneath the coveted blue and silver combat infantry badge.

"Hi, Gus," I said, facing him after I entered the room expecting a rhetorical reaming. With lightning reflex his body stiffened upwards, his forearms rising up as his hands pressed down on the dining room table, a fighter on the rise, his eyes flaring wide open with fire, nostrils dilating as he audibly inhaled and glowered at me. I stood my ground several feet from him, feeling my heart thumping. An electrically tense moment later he settled back into his chair as I explained, "I barely missed the bus back home last night so I ran all the way here . . . but . . . but it was a little after midnight when I got here … so I slept in the barn.

He muttered a primordial grumble and resumed eating. I sat down and shortly was served lunch by Dienstmadchen (maid) Dora. Needless to say there was no conversation as I maintained a respectful silence and he chose not to speak to me. He finished his meal, returned to duty, and nothing about the matter ever came up again. The balcony escapade remained a guarded secret between me, Tony and Lulu.

* * *

Memories of war razed German cities, especially Nurnberg, of the contrasting bucolic, forested, and alpine countryside, and the character of the surviving German people also resurfaced in July 2005 when I revisited Germany for the first time in 58 years. My wife Georgie and I stayed in Essen in the industrial Ruhr Valley in western, reunified Germany with 18 year old Diane Brautigam and her family. Back in 2004 Diane lived with Georgie and me in our Camarillo, California home as a Rotary Exchange student. She is such a dear, bright, charming, multilingual, representative of modern Germany, a fellow purebred dog lover, that we couldn't say no to her frequent, irresistible invitations by e-mail, snail mail, even urgent phone calls, to visit her family. We did so for ten days and were treated royally. Diane's father, Gerhart ("Gerd"), is a tall, exceptionally witty, energetic, efficient, computer whiz, lawyer and former track star who is a devoted husband and father. Her mother, Ulla, is an attractive, cheerful school teacher, fitness buff, lovingly companionable wife, and upbeat mother to Diane and her 15 year old sister Alena. More English was spoken between us than German, though some of the German I learned in 1946-47 in Nurnberg surprisingly came back to me.

During our stay in Essen, with impressive visits to nearby Cologne and Dusseldorf, all three fully restored and modernized upscale German cities, arrangements were made for a two day visit to Nurnberg. It had long been my dream to return there in search of my boyhood home. Nearly 60 years had passed, yet I recalled it was in the adjoining suburb of Dambach. I did not have the address and the only landmarks had been widespread heaps of rubble. But I could never forget that balcony.

After checking in at the quaint Hotel Steichele in the heart of Nurnberg and marveling at a thriving, enchanting, clean, modern city I had never seen before, a phoenix which had risen from the ashes of World War II, Georgie, Diane and I took a local train to a station in the suburb of Furth (all German trains are quiet because they're electric and run on time, without fail, to the minute). There I located a cab driver who lived in Dambach. I described the house, situated an estimated 75 meters from the street behind a three meter high wall, and my boyhood balcony of adventure. We cruised the streets of residential Dambach for over an hour, passing the three story house once and negating it because I mistakenly recalled it was only two stories and the high wall around the estate prevented us from seeing the balcony. It appeared we would not find the house. With typical German thoroughness and persistence, however, Horst, our strictly German speaking cabbie, began rattling off street names in the hope I might recall the name of the street where the house was located.

"Wagner Strasse?"

"Nein, Horst," I replied.

"Beethoven Strasse?"

"Nein."

"Bismark Strasse?"

"Nein."

"Schweden Strasse?"

"Nein."

"Linden Strasse?"

"Warten Sie. Das ist vertraut." (Wait. That sounds familiar.)

Sure enough, we re-cruised Linden Strasse. This time the driveway gate was open so we could see the house better when we reached it. The telltale balcony . . . there it was . . . complete with the old vine. Meanwhile, a trim, fortyish, good looking brunette French woman met us in the long driveway while the cabbie agreed to wait outside the grounds. Ariane resided

there with her second husband and four teenage children by her first marriage. In fluent English she gave us well over an hour long tour, with lots of reminiscing conversation among us, of the entire house including the wine cellar and secret underground passageway to the street which I had forgotten. A reservoir of warm memories was un-dammed and therapeutically bathed my spirits far beyond the power of any spa or premium wine. Ariane's persona and manner were most gracious, accommodating, and friendly. She shared with us that her former father-in-law had purchased the house in 1945 (it had been built in 1932). But he could not move in the following year because an American army colonel and his family occupied it for a year and a half. "That must have been you."

"It was," I confirmed.

Nearly an hour into the house tour sprinkled with *déjà vu* anecdotes, Ariane stopped, possibly triggered by the admiration I expressed for the Germans rebuilding Nurnberg so grandly**,** and quite unexpectedly changed her tune.

"I can't stand the Germans," she announced. "They are never satisfied. They are such perfectionists. They are never satisfied. I hate them."

Diane tactfully showed no reaction to the brief diatribe. Then, as we resumed our tour, Ariane readily reverted to her delightful, gracious manner for the next hour, which included a serving in the old dining room of some rich, full bodied tea. I missed not seeing Emperor Gus on his throne at the head of the table. Shortly, as we were leaving the house, a small German auto entered the driveway. The driver, Ariane's husband, got out. His head was shaved and he was wearing a full length, neutral colored, trench coat. He spoke English with a German accent (Ve haf vays to make you talk. Ja, ja). He seemed made for a monocle. Yes, he looked like a police inspector which, in fact, he was . . . for the Nurnberg Police Department. Her husband is so German.

After returning to Essen I related this paradox to Diane's father as we described our adventure in finding my boyhood home.

"And guess what, Gerd? Her husband is German."

"Ja. She hates him," Gerd popped back, presenting his best comedic straight face.

Nurnberg has changed so admirably since I lived there. Today it is a flourishing, efficient, modern city which retains a distinctive Teutonic aura The Germans have resurrected it from the evil grave of war's devastation. Like the mythical Egyptian phoenix bird, it has risen renewed from its own ashes. Has the historic French – German rivalry risen too?

* * *

Since discovering Nurnberg's rising in 2005 I have come to realize another resurrection also occurred . . . my father's spirit. After he retired in the summer of 1954 from thirty years service as a professional soldier, he and Mom bought a new, modest sized house on the edge of Roger Williams Park in Providence. Armed with a pair of pruning shears, for which he claimed he had traded his battle seasoned Thompson, Gus planted squads of red rose bushes around the property. His three decades bond with his soldiers was perpetuated by planting neat rows of compact juniper trees on each side of the long driveway. They resembled tall, evergreen sentinels on duty round the clock for the Colonel and his lady. Mom was even more aglow than usual. Except during wartime, she had lived in officer's quarters on army bases all her married life. With retirement and their first purchase of a home, Marietta Regnier, nee Howland, could finally get her family settled in a cozy home, revive her New England roots emanating from her

Mayflower ancestor John Howland, and close the long chapter of gypsy like wanderings from base to base.

By 1962, however, Tony had graduated as the Brigade Midshipman Commander from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point on Long Island, New York and was serving at sea as a ship's officer. I had completed my first year of law school at U.C. Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law after serving four years in the Air Force as a jet fighter instructor pilot. Consequently, Gus and Mom relocated to California to be closer to family. In his retirement Gus had become a serious student of golf, a passion which had won him an army golf championship while serving in the Philippines in the late thirties. His focus on golf as a retiree, which included diligent practice, enabled him to win many tournaments in California, Arizona, and Las Vegas and gain the Holy Grail of golfdom five times by shooting his age at 69, 74, 74, 75, and 79.

Yet Gus's retirement focus extended beyond the links to the stock market. Since the army's low pay did not lend itself to building a nest egg beyond the standard military pension, Gus took action **Right Now**. Upon retirement he cashed in his whole life insurance policy for $14,000 and invested those funds in the stock market. A graduate of the Army's Finance School at the Air Corps's Mitchell Field on Long Island, plus two years service as the Chief Finance Officer for the Eighth Air Force in England in 1942-43, he had honed his financial acumen. He developed a bumper crop portfolio by shrewd stock trading, increasing the initial seed money eighteen times its original value in only fifteen years - despite a tepid market. Stock brokers at Ventura's Dean Witter and Oxnard's Paine Webber firms regularly exchanged views with the Colonel and sought his studious insights. In the ensuing decade his accounts continued to grow while he kept golfing and enjoying his eight grandchildren.

But in the spring of 1981 Gus's health began to ebb. On July 27th he died quietly in bed at home in Leisure Village, Camarillo, California from congestive heart failure. Mom, my 17 year old son Augustus Jerome Regnier II, and I were present. His final words to his youthful namesake, whom he had coached in golf to become the top player on the Rio Mesa High School team, symbolized his ongoing encouragement of youth.

"How are you playing?"

"Just fine, Grampee Gus."

There was no next breath. Just like that my idol was gone at age 82.

Following an inspirational Catholic funeral mass at Ventura's Sacred Heart Church, presided over by beloved Monsignor Arnold Biedermann with the Colonel eulogized by his two sons, he was buried at Conejo Mountain Memorial Park in Camarillo with full military honors. These included a 21 gun salute presented by a contingent of immaculately uniformed army paratroopers in starched khakis. Their olive drab helmet liners and spit shined, dark brown jump boots glistened in the high noon sunlight. An army bugler 25 yards from the grave site solemnly rendered taps while a civilian bugler in a tuxedo, 25 yards away on the opposite side, echoed taps. Two paratroopers stepped forward, removed the American flag draping my father's coffin, and neatly folded it with ceremonial precision. A handsome captain smartly presented the flag to my mother with the Army's deepest condolences and a crisp salute. The Colonel's lady smiled warmly at him while maintaining the calm dignity befitting a war hero's wife and soul mate for 54 years.

Several days later the California Legislature passed a "Memorial Resolution" with many WHEREAS clauses recapitulating the distinguished military career of Colonel Augustus J. Regnier who was a longtime Ventura County resident, a "warm and friendly man known for his

deep and abiding love of his home and family." The Legislature expressed deepest sympathy at his passing. The Resolution memorialized,

> his illustrious record of personal and professional achievement and dedicated service on behalf of his community and fellow citizens, as well as the love and devotion he displayed on behalf of his family and friends.

Nearly eight years later Mom passed on peacefully and was buried beside my father. In the intervening 17 years I have intermittently visited with them at the cemetery, given thanks to God for blessing Tony and me with such wonderful parents, spoken lovingly to them, and prayed on their behalf.

Last summer's return to Nurnberg, however, rekindled in particular the embers of memories of my father. There were nuggets of practical wisdom, for example, that he gave his maturing sons. The "*Maxims of Augustus*," I call them:

1. First Things First
2. Take It Step by Step
3. Be Big about Things
4. The Strong Take It Away from the Weak and the Smart Take It Away from the Strong
5. The Family Is the Basis of Society
6. Be Very Circumspect with the Ladies
7. Don't Let Anyone Drag You Down
8. Don't Die Stupidly (emphasized to his soldiers)

As I recalled in my eulogy for him, "My father was the strongest willed man I've ever known."

Do It <u>Right</u>
Do It <u>Now</u>

was the sign he had posted in his various headquarters to will his officers and soldiers into prompt, proper, decisive action. When he was ordered to assume command of Pine Camp (later renamed Camp Drum) near the St. Lawrence River in northern New York in 1950, it was the largest army reservation east of the Mississippi River. The Pentagon considered it the most corrupt, mismanaged army base in the continental U.S. If anyone could straighten it out, Col. Gus Regnier was the man.

And he did. Hard Heels promptly formed a crack military police company to enforce discipline. In relatively short order he also obtained a congressional appropriation sufficient to paint and restore all of the buildings on base and accomplish several construction projects. The latter included a golf driving range where he advised the engineering officer I could handle the extra heavy duty bull dozer the project required (a given for a first born son even on his maiden heavy equipment excursion). Once I climbed into the driver's seat the bulldozer behemoth flexed its massive blade and excavated a hole in the earthen maintenance yard deep enough to

contain an army staff sedan. Sheepishly, by trial and error, I figured out how to operate the blade and filled in my blunder. Nearby mechanics and other enlisted men pretended to ignore my efforts to develop basic dozer proficiency. But the driving range with a long elevated tee area was built according to specs, on time, with Base Commander Hard Heels the first golfer to tee off there.

Bowling alleys were another project as well as a ski jump and downhill ski and slalom slope developed from dense, steep woodlands. The Colonel was determined to refocus his officers and soldiers on constructive physical activities and away from troublesome ones. He instituted a 6:00 a.m. two mile morning run program for the cadre to get them in better shape and had Tony and me participate with the troops. For several weeks the soldiers disdained the program, openly pretending to plot old Hard Heels' assassination. Tony and I joined in. "We'll pull the pin and you toss the grenade."

But steadily the troops and the base shaped up. When the ski slope was completed and a Canadian winter storm covered the ground with a pristine blanket of snow, the Colonel ordered an inaugural ski run. It was a windy, overcast day with the temperature well below freezing. At the top of the slope the Colonel positioned himself in front of several hundred soldiers on skis. He lit the long, torpedo sized cigar clamped between his teeth and took a couple of ceremonial puffs. Then, in true combat infantry tradition he commanded, "Follow me, men."

Down the slope he went, poling vigorously with his ski poles to go faster and faster. Tony and I followed along with all the troops hooting and hollering. As the Colonel zoomed down the ski run in the lead, he suddenly hit a bare, windblown, gravelly patch. His skis slammed on the brakes, catapulting my father through the air. He landed face first. With his arms and ski poles pinned behind him, his face plowed through yards of gravel until he ground to a stop. Tony and I quickly stopped beside him. As we rolled him over we saw the face of a thousand cuts. It looked as though it had gotten in the middle of a vicious cat fight. The Colonel moaned in pain.

"Are you alright, Gus?" I asked.

"I swallowed my cigar," he raspingly responded.

"You'll be okay."

"But it was a **fresh** cigar," he implored.

Tony and I helped Gus up. I wiped his bleeding face with the red and white bandana Tony had rolled up and tied around one of his thighs to add a colorful flair to his drab ski outfit. Then we assisted our father as we laboriously hiked to the top of the slope where a soldier drove him home.

Seeking the sympathy none of the skiing soldiers provided, my father rang the door bell instead of entering our home in his usual manner. Moments later Mom opened the door. "Help me, Marietta," he mournfully entreated for maximum dramatic effect.

Thinking he had been beaten up, Mom said as she folded her arms tightly across her chest, "I warned you, Gus. You've been pushing your soldiers too hard."

Inside our home Mom treated his myriad superficial facial cuts. The following morning he donned his uniform to resume his post as commanding officer, refusing to cut himself any slack. His chauffeur, Sergeant Murray, a veteran of World War II whose battered, leathery face and fractured nose revealed he was also a veteran of untold altercations and brawling, punctually reported with a snappy salute. He observed the Colonel's swollen visage with its gray-green pallor from the ingested cigar, all peppered with slithers of scabs and purplish bruises. Murray

greeted him in his whiskey bass voice with the slightest hint of a twinkle in his eyes, "Good morning, sir."

Grumpy Gus looked Murray straight in the eye and ordered him, "Not a word, sergeant. Not **one** word, dammit."

The Commanding Officer's quarters at Camp Drum served as our two story home. It was the magnificent, columned LeRay Mansion, built for one of Napoleon Bonapart's relatives. The large, high ceilinged, living room featured a gorgeous hardwood floor. On a social occasion when the Colonel's golf swing had been suitably oiled with single malt scotch, he conducted a brief golf clinic for some of the guests in the stately setting. In the course of his instruction he demonstrated a swing with a mid-iron. On his downswing he knocked a sizeable chunk out of the floor. It flew several yards into a wall, barely missing one of Mom's favorite Imperial Chinese paintings. Realizing she was visibly shaken, he assured her, "It's alright, dearie. I always replace my divot."

Since returning from visiting Nurnberg I have recalled my father's pursuit of golfing excellence yielded yet another unexpected result he defused with quick wit. This involved knocking himself out in 1941 with a golf ball he launched with his driver. He was hitting practice balls into a large net in our two car garage at Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York. When he hit one ball too high, it rebounded off an overhead beam and bull's-eyed him in the forehead. Down he went just as Mom drove up. Fearing the worst she ran to his unconscious form. Shortly, however, she was greatly relieved when he regained consciousness and quipped,

"Marietta, that was a **killer** tee shot."

* * *

As noted earlier, following his post World War II service in Nurnberg Gus Regnier and his family returned to the States in 1947. But before long he was on his way to Greece, destined once more to lead the fight for freedom from totalitarianism. This was in response to the rapidly expanding menace of communism to the free world which had become ominous. Its alarming spread had to be stopped. The Cold War had become a reality. In the Mediterranean former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill felt the strategic location of Greece, a country the size of North Carolina with a population of eight million, rendered it vital for the preservation of British influence in the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and beyond. The British Foreign Office asserted Britain's long term political and military objects were to retain Greece as a British sphere of influence and, more importantly, to prevent Russian domination of Greece which would gravely prejudice the Free World' strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean.

President Harry Truman persuaded a reluctant U.S. Congress to approve (1) the Marshall Plan for economic aid in the rebuilding of a devastated Europe; and (2) the Truman Doctrine for military aid to Greece and Turkey. Greece was in imminent danger of a Russian inspired Communist takeover. Consequently, Congressional authorization of 400 million dollars for military aid to Greece and Turkey was granted to fund Truman's program. However, the recipient nations remained responsible for fighting the Communist insurgents themselves.

Pursuant to these parameters an American military aid mission was sent to Greece in 1947. It consisted of U.S. military personnel advising the Greek National Army (GNA) of the equipment it should buy and how to utilize and maintain it. But this initial aid effort did not strengthen the Greek armed forces because it failed to improve and invigorate their leadership. The Communist Democratic Army of Greece (DAG), as many as 50,000 with another 700,000 supporters, were gaining the upper hand in Greece through destructive raids on bridges and

railroads; cutting roads; burning public offices, hospitals, schools and vehicles. Their classic insurgency strategy included terrorizing the population through savage reprisals against government officials and supporters to demonstrate to the Greek populace that the Greek monarchy and parliamentary democracy could not protect them – that only communism could save them. Throughout northern Greece the DAG had the ability to attack at will. Its operations extended as far south as Athens and the Peloponnese.

In response to the deteriorating situation, Secretary of State George Marshall assigned Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet, considered America's top combat general, to take charge of the U.S. Military Advisory and Planning Group with the mission of providing the Greek National Army (GNA) with aggressive assistance in field operations and logistical support. Van Fleet arrived in Athens in February 1948. His initial official report to the Department of the Army described a Greek Army that was ill trained and ill led. Many Greek officers were physically and professionally unqualified and deficient in combat leadership. A defensive attitude prevailed. The Communist rebels had the initiative throughout Greece in what had become a full scale civil war. Van Fleet proceeded to implement a reorganization plan, to relieve weak officers from command, and to institute combat related training.

Among the 178 commissioned officers who served as American military Advisors in 1948-49 in the Greek Civil War was Hard Heels. His warrior instinct had led him to volunteer for this mission. He considered it his duty to help stop the spreading plague of communism. He may have felt further combat duty might also enhance his prospects for promotion to brigadier general in a downsized army. Like Van Fleet he was doing what he did best – train men for combat and lead them to victory. As an American advisor, however, he was prohibited from becoming directly involved in the fighting. He was not even permitted to carry a weapon, much less his trusty Thompson and Colt 45.

After many months of rigorous training of Greek soldiers under simulated combat conditions with live ammunition, advising them and their officers on combat operations, and observing them in action, Hard Heels' frustration reached the boiling point. The GNA regulars were still not prevailing over the Communists. While the GNA had been involved in a number of skirmishes and minor engagements, there had been no significant reduction in enemy action. Notwithstanding the GNA's lackluster performance, Hard Heels considered the Greek soldiers, men of inherent endurance and physical strength, among the best in the world when properly led. A lingering dearth of Greek officer leadership was the nub of the problem. The lack of aggressiveness of senior commanders was the GNA's major weakness.

The Communist forces had become especially strong, even dominant, in the area of Greece's second largest city, Salonika, a port city on the tip of the Aegean Sea in Northern Greece. During an attack against the insurgents north of Salonika, Greek Army troops advanced 2-3 miles, encountered enemy artillery fire, broke and retreated to their line of departure. Hard Heels was the senior American military advisor present. In full accord with Van Fleet's strategy of fighting not by focusing on capturing and holding territory, but by decimating the Communist forces and destroying their ability to fight effectively, Hard Heels stepped forward and took charge of the Greek troops. With the help of an interpreter he regrouped the GNA regimental force and resumed the attack. Appealing to the Greeks' inborn sense of national pride, he fearlessly led them in a raging assault. Transfusing to them his will to win, to destroy the enemy of their homeland, he had the impassioned Greek soldiers pursue the Communists 20 miles into Bulgaria where they sought sanctuary.

From his Athens headquarters Van Fleet radioed Hard Heels,

"Gus, this is Van. Secretary of State Marshall just radioed me and advised the Russians are outraged! An American Army colonel is violating communist Bulgaria's border and conducting Greek Army offensive operations against communist forces inside Bulgaria. Marshall has directed me to get that colonel and the Greek Army back into Greece so as not to provoke an international incident with major repercussions from Bulgaria and Russia."

Hard Heels responded, "I'll chase the sonsabitches all the way to Moscow!"

Van Fleet said, "I understand, Gus, but I'm ordering you to return to Greece now with your Greek Army forces.

"Yes, sir," Hard Heels reluctantly answered, then complied with military dispatch.

Hard Heels' combat leadership overwhelmed the communist rebels he had fought and relentlessly pursued, inflicting heavy losses and eliminating them as an effective fighting force. This hastened the collapse of the DAG and their communist cause by the end of August 1949. King Paul of Greece was so impressed with Hard Heels' effectiveness in insuring the survival of a free Greece he personally bestowed Greece's Medal of Valor on him at the Royal Palace in Athens. Greece's immensely popular, highly intelligent Queen Frederika was also deeply grateful for Hard Heels' courage and dedication in saving the ancient cradle of Western civilization from a communist takeover. Fluent in English, well versed in world affairs and politics, strikingly attractive in her early thirties, she was the granddaughter of Queen Victoria of England and the great-granddaughter of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany (distinguished ancestors she jokingly found "equally stuffy"). Queen Frederika was the dominating personality of the Royal Couple, yet always referred to "my husband" as if he were the boss. Visibly delighted with Hard Heels' charisma, captivating smile, and zealous commitment to Greek freedom, she made him an Honorary Citizen of Sparta, an ancient city he helped liberate from the communist guerillas.

* * *

Since my summer sojourn in Deutschland in 2005, many more recollections of the richness of the father-son relationship between Gus and his two sons have surfaced. One of the most colorful episodes of a father who loved and enjoyed his sons occurred at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1944. The Colonel was intensively training his regiment for combat in the European Theater. Tony and I decided we would help him get ready for war. We lived in a two story brick house on Officers' Row. Furnishings were a bare minimum since we would only be there a few months until Gus and his regiment shipped out for the re-conquest of France and invasion of Germany. There was plenty of running room for frolicking and roughhousing. So Tony and I would rig a black thread across the stairway or a doorway to simulate a trip wire for a booby trap. When Gus unsuspectingly triggered the trip wire Tony and I would shout "Boom! You're dead," and run away with Gus in hot pursuit. As he chased us through the house downstairs and upstairs he warned, "Here I come. I'm gonna get you." Sometimes Tony or I would peel off and hide in a closet while he sprinted by and eventually caught the other son. More often than not we were clad in the uniform of the day for such rollicking activity . . . just our underwear or pajamas. After he caught and held one of us in a bear hug, he would repeatedly rub his stubbled cheeks and chin against his captive's smooth and tender face while growling like a Grizzly. Release of the prisoner from such fiendish torture could only be obtained by crying out the secret word of surrender, "Africanus! Africanus!" Elated with the three "men" in her life, Mom knew the exciting horseplay between 13 year old Dick, 10 year old Tony, and their father was always in good fun. He was having the time of his life before he departed for the deadly arena of war.

One of the weapons we used in our war games on Officers' Row was the charley horse. Actually Gus initiated the baptism of fire with this alarming means of combat. One afternoon he was showing Tony and me some of the Fort Benning wilderness areas where his regiment was undergoing war maneuvers. Tony was standing on a sandbank at the edge of a gently flowing river looking for poisonous snakes such as a water moccasin (also called cottonmouth). Gus snuck up behind Tony who was warily straining to spot a snake in the water. Forcibly grabbing the back of Tony's upper leg Gus shouted, "Cottonmouth!" Believing he had just been bitten by a deadly poisonous snake, terrified Tony leaped up and out into the river with an anguished "Yiiiiii!"

Up to his armpits in water, ashen faced Tony turned to see the vicious viper standing on the sandbank, guffawing. Ah, but a seed had been planted and would sprout sooner and even more dramatically than the combatants could have envisioned.

Living next door to us at Fort Benning was Lt. Col. Sorley, my father's Executive Officer, and his wife. Sorley was sedate, efficient, and quiet with a steady demeanor. His wife wore glasses, looked mildly matronly, was not unattractive, yet not attractive enough to turn my father's head. She was undeniably a pleasant army wife. But Mrs. Sorley very much admired Colonel Regnier, his command presence, charismatic personality, and athleticism. As for the Colonel's physicality, a charley horse sequel soon fulfilled one of her possible fantasies (she had an un-camouflaged crush on her husband's commanding officer) in a most revealing manner.

One night as the Regnier household was getting ready for bed I peeked through my parents' open bedroom door. With his back to me Gus removed his undershort BVDs.

"If I charley horse him he can't chase me naked," I figured.
Quickly I snuck up barefoot behind him in my PJs. Applying a whopper of a charley horse to his leg I yelled, "Cottonmouth!"

"Ahhhh!" he exclaimed as he jumped in the air and I fled from the bedroom. At the ready in the hallway, Tony followed me as we scrambled down the stairway. Hearing Gus baying in full chase Tony and I barreled through the front door into the protective sanctuary of the nocturnal outdoors where officer nakedness would be grounds for a general courts martial. It was a mild night with a spotlight moon ready to bare the main feature on formal, dignified Officers' Row. Once outside I began to run counterclockwise around our home with Tony close behind. Gus flashed through the front door and followed us at top speed. On the second lap I darted behind a large bush next to the house to hide from galloping Gus. Tony kept going and soon found his own hiding place. Gus assumed we were still running out of sight ahead of him at full throttle. So he continued to pour on the laps.

Meanwhile I peeped from behind my bushy hideaway and noticed Mrs. Sorely leaning partway out of her upstairs bedroom window, which faced our house. Clad in a lacey nightgown she adjusted her glasses to catch every detail. I could hear my father breathing heavily as he rounded the house on still another futile lap. Mrs. Sorley saw Gus' sprinting ivory white body, stark naked in the lunar spotlight as he approached and passed by her. Dead set on catching his streaking sons, hopefully just around the next corner, he had been unaware that chasing them, while he was out of uniform in the tell-all moonlight, had become a spectator sport . . . until Mrs. Sorley symphonically effused, "Oh, Colonel. Oh, oh, oh."

Snapping his head to the right in mid-sprint, Gus saw Mrs. Sorley with an adoring look on her face. "Oh, my gawd!" he exclaimed as he went into afterburner to get back to the front door where, for the first and only time in his life, he beat a hasty retreat.

As tough and hard as old Hard Heels could be, he was also known for never shedding a tear. But when I graduated from West Point in 1955, a solitary departure from his Spartan self-discipline occurred. Graduation ceremonies had featured President Dwight D. Eisenhower, standing high up on center stage in a dark blue power suit before an audience of thousands which included my mother and father. Ike congratulated in turn each of the 469 graduates (from an entering class of 735) as he handed out the diplomas. In my dress white uniform, wearing the crimson sash and silver saber of a cadet captain, I strode up the ramp when my name was announced over the PA system, stood at attention directly in front of Ike, and saluted him. As he handed me my diploma, recognition of my surname as that of one of his WWII regimental commanders in Ike's historic Crusade in Europe radiated from his eyes and voice as he beamed at me with his famous broad smile,

"Congratulations, Lieutenant Regnier."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

An hour later the Cadet First Captain gave his final order: "Class dismissed." In unison the Class of '55 immediately tossed their white uniform hats high in the air with a great "Hooray!" Unfortunately gravity had not been dismissed. One of the 469 airborne hats came whacking down on me, the hard, shiny black visor creasing the top of my head and momentarily staggering the first born son. In my euphoric state, however, a quick recovery was inevitable.

Shortly thereafter, by prearrangement with my parents, we linked up on the legendary West Point Plain where cadet full dress parades are customarily held. As my father extended "Congratulations, son," I was deeply touched by the unprecedented appearance of a crystalline five carat tear sliding down his cheek. He quickly brushed it aside. Yet his pride and joy in having a son join the Long Gray Line, though unspoken, was unmistakably visible. In my upbringing, including V-Mail when he was overseas fighting the German Wehrmacht, he had consistently encouraged me to excel but spared any praise if I did. He expected excellence. Consequently, seeing how moved my hero was by his son's achievements at West Point was a life event which created an indelible memory stamp on my psyche. While I had not recalled it in the 51 years since graduation, Nurnberg revisited resurrected memories of this exquisite experience. How blessed Mom, Tony and I were in our respective family roles and experiences with him.

Americans today have been blessed by the World War II commitment to safeguarding freedom of the greatest generation. They have been equally blessed by the generation which trained and led the greatest generation to victory – the generation of Hard Heels . . . of my father. Memories of the man and his accomplishments must be preserved. Our country owes him its undying gratitude, as Mom, Tony and I do. He was unique, exceptional – an American fighting man who consistently achieved victory in the vertiginous violence of war, a classic of exemplary service to our nation as an army officer, and as a husband, and father. He did it RIGHT. He did it NOW – when it counted most.

Your course on earth has run, faithful father. As we have sung in our West Point "Alma Mater," it may be said "Well done: Be thou at peace."

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