

AT FIRST LIGHT: A True World War II Story of a Hero, His Bravery, and an Amazing Horse by Walt Larimore and Mike Yorkey

Growing up in the 1930s in Memphis, Tennessee, Phil Larimore is the ultimate Boy Scout—able to read maps, put a compass to good use, and traverse wild swamps and desolate canyons. He even swims across the mighty Mississippi River. His other great skill is riding horses.

Phil does poorly in school, however, leading his parents to send him to a military academy. After Pearl Harbor, Phil realizes he is destined for war. Three weeks before his 18th birthday, he becomes the youngest candidate to ever graduate from Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Landing on the Anzio beachhead in February 1944, Phil is put in charge of an Ammunition Pioneer Platoon in the 3rd Infantry Division. Their job: deliver ammunition to the troops on the front lines—a dangerous assignment involving regular forays into enemy fire.

As Phil fights his way up the Italian boot, into southern France and across the Rhine River into Germany, he is caught up in some of the most intense combat ever. He is awarded many of the Army's medals for valor.

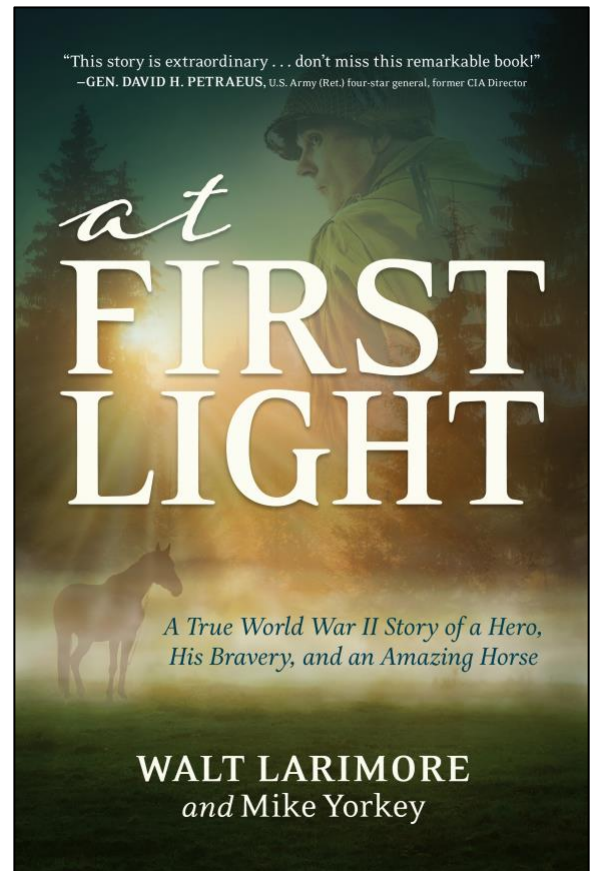
Toward the end of the war, after fifteen months of front-line warfare, Phil is sent on a top-secret mission to find the world-famous Lipizzaner horses Hitler has hidden away.

But it's what happens in the final stages of the war and his homecoming that makes Phil's story incredibly special and heartwarming.

An emotional tale of courage, daring, and heroism, *At First Light* will remind you of the indomitable human spirit that lives in all of us.

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Story of a Hero, His Bravery, and an
Amazing Horse**
by Walt Larimore and Mike Yorkey

Jacketed Hardcover
On-Sale: April 19th, 2022
ISBN: 9781642939590
\$35.00 US / \$47.00 CAD





Walt Larimore is a prolific author and has written or co-written forty books, thirty medical textbook chapters, and over 1,100 articles in various medical journals and lay magazines. His books have garnered a number of national awards, including three Gold Medallion Award nominations and a Book of the Year Award from ECPA. Most recently, *At First Light* received the “Highly Commended” and “Finalist” awards at the international 2020 Page Turner Awards. Dr. Larimore has also authored four novels and five memoir-style bestsellers. Walt’s website is www.DrWalt.com and his Twitter handle is @WaltLarimore.



Mike Yorkey is a veteran author who has worked with many high-profile speakers, authors, and sports figures over the last twenty-five years. He has authored and co-authored (as a collaborator) more than 110 books in many genres. Mike’s website is www.mikeyorkey.com, and his Twitter handle is @MikeYorkey.



A Conversation with Walt Larimore and Mike Yorkey:

Q: What inspired you to write *At First Light* about your father's heroics in World War II?

A: My dad never talked to me about the war until his 50th wedding anniversary in 1999. We were sitting together when I casually mentioned to him that I had been asked to preach a Fourth of July sermon at our church on the topic of "Freedom Isn't Free." I wondered if he might tell me a little more about his adventures and escapades during the war years. Perhaps he was feeling nostalgic after a half-century of marriage and keeping his past concealed, but for whatever reason, he decided that this was the right moment to share parts of a remarkable adventure when he fought in Europe along with two million other young men.

Despite the shadow box with dozens of World War II medals, the picture of him with General Eisenhower and British Field Marshal Montgomery, and the half-dozen pictures from World War II commanders commending his courage and heroism in battle, he strongly denied being a hero. He just said, "I was only one of over 550,000 U.S. casualties in the European theater of operations." His eyes misted when he whispered, "Of those, over a hundred thousand were killed in action. Son, those were the heroes. Not me!"

After Dad passed away in 2003, I began transcribing over 400 of his letters home as well as the many stories he told my brothers, his friends, and me—some that bordered on unbelievable, such as a secret mission to find and save the world-famous Lipizzaner horses. I researched historical accounts of his battles and World War II in hundreds of books, memoirs (some unpublished), periodicals, newspaper articles, and websites.

I interviewed a few of the remaining men he fought with and the children of others. I traveled to and spent months in several states and in Europe studying exhibits and documents at archives, museums, posts, forts, redoubts, and stables. The information I discovered allowed me to fill in holes and add color and detail to an already incredible story.

I began formulating more than a decade's worth of work into what I thought might be an interesting novel, but trusted writing colleagues strongly urged me not to fictionalize the story. Jerry B. Jenkins, a *New York Times* best-selling author and a dear friend, told me, "A novel needs to be believable, and a nonfiction book needs to be unbelievable. Your dad's story is the latter. Make it nonfiction." So, it is. I'm proud to honor my father's memory as well as the men he fought with and the women who aided in his recovery. Plus, it's an unbelievable story—and all the better for that.

Q: What do you hope is the biggest takeaway from the book?

A: My deepest hope is that the memory of the Americans who fought in what I call the forgotten southern front across northern Africa and into Europe will be resurrected and revived—that they would no longer be overlooked.

Ask almost anyone if they know about “D-Day,” and they’ll nod and mention Normandy. But I’ve met no one that knows there were seven D-Days on the forgotten southern front of Europe in World War II.

The GIs on the northern front in Europe had the horrific Battle of the Bulge, the Ardennes mountains, and the Hürtgen Forest. But the men on the southern front had the arguably worse battles on the Anzio Beachhead, in the Colmar Pocket and the forests found in France’s Vosges Mountains.

The northern army liberated Paris, but two months before that, the southern GIs liberated Rome, the first capital of Europe liberated. Unfortunately, they did it on June 4-5, 1944, just before the Normandy invasion. Again, they were forgotten.

During World War II, my father’s division had 531 consecutive days of combat and was awarded one fourth of all the Medals of Honor presented during the entire war for its feats in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany. Nearly 35,000 men, more than twice the original strength of the division, were killed, wounded, or missing in action. The 3rd Infantry Division suffered more casualties on its bloody road to glory than any other division in the entire U.S. Army.

After the war, Lieutenant General Lucian K. Truscott, Jr., who commanded the southern front, said, “Officers and men under my command established records that were not equaled by others in this war and have not been excelled in any other to my knowledge. In large measure, these magnificent accomplishments ... passed without full recognition.” The southern front has been, indeed, the forgotten front for over seventy-five years.

Recently, a World War II veteran who fought with Dad was interviewed. When tears began streaking down the old man’s cheeks, he said, “I’m crying because I thought myself and all the guys I knew along with the regiment had been forgotten about. It makes me happy to know I haven’t been forgotten.”

My prayer, hope, and goal are that their stories will be forgotten no longer.

Q: What skills were most beneficial to Phil during his time in the military?

A: Although before joining the Army, Dad had mastered many outdoor, wilderness, physical training, equestrian, and weapons skills, he added almost eighteen months of intensive and broad-based infantry, weapons, paratrooper, and glider pilot skills before deploying to the Anzio Beachhead—all of which uniquely qualified him to serve on the front-line as well as on many missions into no man’s land.

However, I believe it was his leadership skills, both innate and learned, that were most beneficial to him and his men during his over 400 days of consecutive fighting. He and most of his men under his command survived most of the war—when, at times, the average life expectancy of a man on the frontlines fell to about twenty days.

But perhaps his most important traits were his courage, loyalty, and faith—his faith in God, his faith in his country, his faith in the righteousness of the mission, his faith and respect for his leaders, and his faith in his men.

Before he passed, Dad told me, “Patriotism was the main motivation of most soldiers before deployment—especially after Pearl Harbor.” He added, “For those of us in Europe, it was not just to keep fascism out of our country, but to kick it off the globe. However, what motivated me and my men as the fighting and the war dragged on, and as we endured the horrors of combat, was to live, to get home to

our family and our loved ones, and to protect our buddies.” He did all three honorably.

Q: What is the best piece of advice anyone has ever given you?

A: It’s a combination of two encouragements from Scripture: The first is that we are blessed when we are content with just who we are—no more, no less. That’s the moment one finds themselves the proud owner of everything that can’t be bought. The second is that we all have three things to do . . . trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly, And the best of the three is love.

Q: How does the bond between Phil and his horse impact his story?

A: Besides being a gripping war story, the book is also a tribute to horse lovers everywhere. Dad was a master equestrian, and his experiences with horses as a child, were not wasted when he worked with draft horses during Army training, participated in war games on an Arabian stallion in Morocco, learned dressage on a Neapolitan horse in Naples, trained mules for front-line work in Italy, and saved German war horses in France. He was also involved in a secret mission to locate and eventually save Hitler’s secret stash of Lipizzaner horses in Europe. After the war, back in the U.S., my father trained one of these horses he had saved in Europe. Later, Dad would say of that special horse, “He saved me.” the bond between my dad and that amazing horse is one of the most beautiful parts of the whole book.

Q: What would you have done in Phil’s shoes?

A: I’m not sure anyone could accurately predict how he would respond in the face of the horror and atrocities of front-line combat against a vicious and fanatical enemy.

Dad and his men experienced combat phenomena that were too horrifying for most of us to comprehend. They stared death in the face daily and endured tremendous pain and suffering. One of the men wrote home of their “days of struggling, toiling, and praying, with very little food and sleep. It was . . . unremitting hell. In fact, the comparison is hardly fair to hell.”

After the war, Dad would quote a poem he heard while training at Fort Benning: “When an Infantryman gets to heaven, to Saint Peter he will tell, ‘Just another soldier reporting, Sir. I’ve served my time in hell.’”

I’ve learned that the pride of the front-line infantrymen comes not from knowing that they were doing a job that others couldn’t, but that they were doing a job that others simply wouldn’t. I would hope that I would have done the same, but I simply don’t know.

After the war, Dad and most of the men he fought with longed for a world free of destruction, evil, and fear. They were courageous on the battlefield, not because they wanted to be heroes, but because it was their duty. They knew the difference between freedom and oppression and didn’t want to live in a world in which evil triumphed over good. Hence, they fought and sacrificed so that we could be free.

I like what historian Stephen E. Ambrose wrote about men like my father: “They had a character like a rock, these members of the generation born between 1910-1928. They were the children of the Depression, fighters in the greatest war in history, and builders of and participants in the postwar boom. They accepted a hand-up in the G.I. Bill, but they never took a handout. They made their own way. A few of them became rich, a few of them became powerful, almost all of them built their houses and did their jobs and raised their families and lived good lives, taking full advantage of the freedom they had

helped preserve.”

Q: What is one thing readers would be surprised to learn about you?

A: This is my 41st book, but truth be told, I’m by nature a storyteller. I’m not a trained writer. No wonder almost fifty publishers turned down early manuscripts of the book.

But God has blessed my writing career with co-authors and editors who not only know how to write but who do so exceptionally well. Mike Yorkey, my co-author for this book, and I did a book for the parents of teens almost two decades ago. I loved working with him then, so when my literary agent, Greg Johnson, suggested I consider working with Mike on this book, I jumped at the opportunity.

Mike took my research and my dad’s stories about the forgotten southern front in World War II and, as my wife, Barb, says, “Brought an amazing story to the surface and the proverbial icing on the cake.”

After Mike and I had completed the manuscript, Barb read it and then came to me one afternoon. “Walt,” she began, “In this book, you and Mike together have nailed it. You tell an amazing story, a riveting page-turner about an extremely courageous man and his brothers on the battlefield, most in their teens and early twenties, who fought bravely with only months of training, with fierce odds against them in vicious battles, all for the cause of freedom. You have honored them, their sacrifices, and their memories. They will be forgotten no more.”

I couldn’t stop the tears when she told me this. From the bottom of my heart, I believe that our wonderful country and the freedoms we all enjoy exist because we sit on the shoulders of these amazing men and women. We can only try to fill their very big boots—to make them proud—and do our best to preserve the freedom and liberty for which they surrendered so much.



Praise for *At First Light*:

"This story is extraordinary. A forgotten hero: tough combat, tragic sacrifice, a marvelous horse, and an astonishing ending. Don't miss this remarkable book."

— **Gen. David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army (Ret.) four-star general**

"What a fantastic story. I highly recommend *At First Light* ... a standing ovation."

—**Mike Krzyzewski, Head Men's Basketball Coach at Duke University**

"Phil Larimore was a Dick Winters from the *Band of Brothers*-type of frontline, small-unit combat leader. *At First Light* has the makings of a great movie."

—**Col. Alex P. Shine, U.S. Army (Ret.), Army War College Professor**

"*At First Light* is riveting. This is a fascinating story of an American hero whose leadership and sacrifice are truly inspirational."

—**Joe Gibbs, five-time NASCAR Cup Series champion and three-time Super Bowl champion**

"*At First Light* is an absorbing read. The meticulous research brings (Phil Larimore) back to life and speaks of combat fortitude, unimaginable courage, and front-line action ... a story you cannot afford to miss."

—**Gen. Ann E. Dunwoody, U.S. Army (Ret.), the first woman to achieve the rank of four-star General**

"I love World War II books, and none is better than *At First Light* ... a combination of *Band of Brothers* and *War Horse*—or a mixture of *Unbroken* and *Seabiscuit*. A mesmerizing page-turner."

—**Pat Williams, co-founder of the NBA's Orlando Magic and former GM of four NBA teams**

"This true tale scores in spades. It may just keep you up till first light."

—**Jerry B. Jenkins, *New York Times* best-selling novelist**

"One of the most fascinating stories of World War II. Heartwarming true story of a great hero."

—**Lt. Gen. William G. Boykin, U.S. Army (Ret.) three-star general**

"Intelligently written, descriptively rich, and tailor-made for anyone who cherishes powerful World War II stories."

—**Marcus Brotherton, *New York Times* best-selling author**

"*At First Light* is a must read so that we never forget the sacrifices of this greatest generation."

—**Gen. Gary Luck, U.S. Army (Ret.) four-star general**

"A masterful and moving account of sacrifice in World War II will make you proud to be an American."

—Tara McClary Reeves, daughter of a Vietnam War hero Clebe McClary

“We need real heroes more than ever; this story should inspire, bless, and encourage every American.”

—Cal Thomas, nationally syndicated columnist

“Call my agent! *At First Light* needs to be greenlighted for a multi-episodic film series today.”

—Gerry Gacek, singer/songwriter and screenwriter