

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *AT FIRST LIGHT*

"This story is extraordinary: an almost forgotten hero, tough combat, tragic sacrifice, gripping aftermath, a marvelous horse, and an astonishing ending. Don't miss reading this remarkable book. *At First Light* is a way for you to join me in remembering and honoring the story of our World War II heroes, those selfless Americans who put it all on the line downrange, day after difficult day, in crushing heat and numbing cold, in the toughest conditions, against the most challenging, resilient, often barbaric enemy to liberate Europe and to help safeguard our freedom and liberty here at home."

—**Gen. David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army (Ret.) four-star general, former Director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and former Commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan**

"As a graduate of West Point, an Army officer for five years, and the head men's basketball coach at my alma mater and at Duke for the past forty-six seasons, I've been blessed to be a part of great teams. I recognize the commitment and discipline required to win at the highest level. These experiences leave me in awe of Phil Larimore and his servant leadership, sensational suffering, and stoic sacrifice. What a fantastic story about a leader whose courage on the battlefield deserves a standing ovation. I highly recommend *At First Light*."

—**Mike Krzyzewski, Head Men's Basketball Coach at Duke University and Naismith Hall of Fame member**

"I've known Walt Larimore for many years and have tremendous respect for him. He has always been a great storyteller, and the real-life account of his father's experiences in World War II shared in his new book, *At First Light*, are 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 (as team owner), three-time Super Bowl champion (as a coach), two-time NFL Coach of the Year, inductee into the NFL and NASCAR Halls of Fame, and bestselling author of *Game Plan for Life* and *Game Plan for Loss***

"I spent thirty-eight years in the logistics world in peace and war, ultimately supporting the warfighter in every contingency since 1983. That's what made *At First Light* such an absorbing read for me. Walt Larimore's meticulous research brings his father back to life and speaks to me of combat fortitude, unimaginable courage, and front-line action. This outstanding work also brought into focus my own father's service and sacrifice as a tank commander in the Ardennes. This story is one you cannot afford to miss."

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

"It's said that 2nd lieutenants in World War II had one of the shortest lifespans of anyone entering combat. And no wonder: They could not cower in a foxhole waiting for someone else to lead the way, to get up and walk into enemy fire. No matter how exhausted or frightened they were, they could not shirk their duty of being an example for their men (boys, really). Usually only in their early- to mid-twenties, they shouldered responsibilities that would have overwhelmed older men. The combat experiences of Phil Larimore, as captured by his son in this terrific and inspirational book, are a testament to the grit and fortitude of a generation who really knew the meaning of duty and personal sacrifice for the greater good."

—**Flint Whitlock, former U.S. Army captain, and editor of *WWII Quarterly* magazine**

"I spent the majority of my life fighting battles on the football field—thirty years in the National Football League, nine Super Bowls, and legendary classics like the famous 'Ice Bowl.' I've told my 'war stories' from the NFL for years, but none of my tales come close to the captivating story shared by Walt Larimore in *At First Light*, a war story about his father who fought to protect the very freedoms you and I enjoy in this country we love."

—**Dan Reeves, Super Bowl Champion and record-setting NFL player and coach**

"*At First Light* is one of the most fascinating stories of World War II I have ever read. If you love history like I do, this book is a must-read. Near the end of the war, a courageous young US Army officer, Phil Larimore, is given an almost impossible clandestine mission—to find Hitler's hidden Lipizzaners so they can be saved. Don't miss this heartwarming true story of a great American hero."

—**Lt. Gen. William G. Boykin, U.S. Army (Ret.) three-star general, Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence under President George W. Bush and former commander Delta Force and U.S. Army Special Operations Command**

"As the son and nephew of several World War II veterans, I never grow tired of reading about their heroics. The story of Phil Larimore is the most compelling and riveting of them all. At a time when we need real heroes more than ever, this story should inspire, bless, and encourage every American."

—**Cal Thomas, nationally syndicated columnist**

"*At First Light* is an amazing story of a remarkable young infantry officer. Phil Larimore embodies all the attributes we associate with 'Duty, Honor, Country.' I was extremely impressed that such a young officer commanded with bravery and courage beyond his years. Phil Larimore's courageousness is only surpassed by his extraordinary selflessness and concern for his troops. This book 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 and former Commander of CFC/UNC/USFK in South Korea (1993–1996)**

"The children of America's wounded warriors share a special bond. We know firsthand what that red stripe in Old Glory means and respect every bloodstained story of valor behind it. Whether or not you come from a patriotic home, Walt Larimore's masterful and moving account of his father's sacrifice in World War II will make you proud to be an American."

—**Tara McClary Reeves, daughter of Vietnam War hero Clebe McClary and author of *Is Your Dad a Pirate?***

"I teach writers that readers love to be entertained and educated, but that they never forget when they've been emotionally moved. Walt Larimore's true tale of his own father's exploits in World War II scores in spades on all three counts. Exhaustive without being exhausting, *At First Light* may just keep you up till first light."

—**Jerry B. Jenkins, twenty-one-time *New York Times* bestselling novelist and biographer and founder of the Jerry Jenkins Writers Guild**

"I love World War II books, and none is better than *At First Light*. It's like a combination of *Band of Brothers* and *War Horse*—or perhaps a mixture of *Unbroken* and *Seabiscuit*. A mesmerizing page-turner not to be missed."

—**Pat Williams, co-founder of the NBA's Orlando Magic and former general manager of NBA teams in Chicago, Atlanta, Orlando, and the 1983 World Champion Philadelphia 76ers**

at
**FIRST
LIGHT**





at FIRST LIGHT



*A True World War II Story of a Hero,
His Bravery, and an Amazing Horse*

WALT LARIMORE
and Mike Yorkey



A KNOX PRESS BOOK
An Imprint of Permuted Press
ISBN: 978-1-64293-959-0
ISBN (eBook): 978-1-64293-960-6

At First Light:
A True World War II Story of a Hero, His Bravery, and an Amazing Horse
© 2022 by Walter L. Larimore
All Rights Reserved

Cover Design by Emily Muse Morelli, bluemusestudio.com
Interior Design by Yoni Limor, yonilimor.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
by any means without the written permission of the author and publisher.



Permuted Press, LLC
New York • Nashville
permutedpress.com

Published in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The veterans from World War II were so appreciative of us being there, especially the 30th Infantry veterans.

A few actually cried when they found out we were portraying them.

I asked an elderly veteran, "Are you alright?"

His response was, *"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."*

He just kind of smiled after that. So did I.

**—Sgt. James Dunigan, III, Able Co.
U.S. 30th Infantry Regiment
3rd Infantry Division (Reenacted)¹**



**To the memory of Philip Bonham Larimore, Jr.
and the American soldiers who fought in World
War II's "forgotten" southern European front**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A NOTE TO THE READER.....	xvii
PROLOGUE.....	I

PART I: PREPARING FOR WAR

1. THE LITTLE STINK	9
2. THE BIG MUDDY	15
3. A DAY OF INFAMY	21
4. ON TO BENNING.....	26
5. CAPTURE THE FLAG.....	30
6. THE SCHOOL SOLUTION	35
7. FLYING COFFINS	40
8. PLATFORM GIRLS	45
9. DRAFTS AND SCOTCH.....	50
10. FÜHRERVILLE	54
11. FINAL PREPARATIONS.....	59

PART II: THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN

12. SHIPPING OUT	67
13. MEETING MAGELLAN	72
14. GETTING PREPPED FOR HELL	77
15. INTO NO MAN'S LAND.....	81
16. OPENING SALVO.....	86
17. BAPTISM BY FIRE	93
18. MULES TO THE RESCUE.....	99
19. BREAKING OUT	105
20. ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME	111
21. A ROMAN HOLIDAY.....	114

PART III: THE FRENCH CAMPAIGN

22. CÔTE D'AZUR'S D-DAY	121
23. HEROES AND LIBERATORS	125
24. THE HORROR OF MONTÉLIMAR.....	130
25. A THRILLING ROUNDUP.....	134
26. THE CHAMPAGNE CAMPAIGN	139
27. CRUEL COMBAT	146
28. AN EXPLOSIVE WAR	151
29. THE VICIOUS VOSGES	157
30. POINT-BLANK RANGE	163
31. RECOVERY WITH MURPH	167
32. BACK TO THE FRONT	173
33. COLD MISERY	178
34. THE MAISON ROUGE BRIDGE	185
35. A DISASTROUS RECEPTION	192
36. TAKING A LICKING	197
37. THE BIG DANCE	205

**PART IV:
THE GERMAN CAMPAIGN**

38. DRAGON'S TEETH.....	213
39. CROSSING THE RHINE.....	218
40. A SECRET MISSION.....	223
41. OPERATION LIPIZZANER.....	229
42. RIDE OF A LIFETIME.....	234
43. HELMET TRICK.....	239
44. PERFECT TIMING.....	245
45. NO SPA DAY.....	250
46. NOWHERE TO GO.....	254
47. THE SOUND OF A GUNSHOT.....	262
48. HOMEWARD BOUND.....	266

**PART V:
AFTERMATH**

49. BITTER OR BETTER?.....	275
50. BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN.....	282
51. IN THE HUNT.....	288
52. A CHRISTMAS REUNION.....	293
53. A HOPEFUL FUTURE.....	299
54. BURYING HEROES.....	305
55. A FOUNTAIN OF HOPE.....	313
56. ONE-LEG LEAD.....	318
57. GAME OF THE CENTURY.....	324
58. THE APPEAL.....	330
59. THE GREAT DEBATE.....	335
60. DECISION TIME.....	339
61. THE AUCTION.....	348
EPILOGUE BY WALT LARIMORE.....	355
FINAL THOUGHT.....	367
PHOTO GALLERY.....	369

APPENDIX A: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	387
APPENDIX B: ABOUT THE AUTHORS.....	393
APPENDIX C: THE PIONEER LARIMORES AND THEIR HORSES.....	395
APPENDIX D: THOSE WHO FOUGHT WITH PHILIP B. LARIMORE, JR.....	399
APPENDIX E: TIMELINE FOR PHIL LARIMORE.....	403
APPENDIX F: GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS.....	407
APPENDIX G: BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	411
APPENDIX H: CITATIONS.....	431
APPENDIX I: INDEX.....	444



PROLOGUE

"I do feel strongly that the Infantry arm does not receive either the respect or the treatment to which its importance and its exploits entitle it. This may possibly be understandable, though misguided, in peace; it is intolerable in war. So, let us always write Infantry with a capital 'I' and think of them with the deep admiration they deserve."

—British Field Marshal Archibald Wavell, who lived
from 1883–1950²

As he crept forward inside a cold, dark forest, Lieutenant Philip B. Larimore, Jr. and his men darted from tree to tree, stooping low, fingers poised on their M1 Garand riflesⁱ while using their other hands to signal to one another.³

Larimore found the unexpected lull unnerving as he peeked around a massive tree trunk for enemy movement. After surviving almost fourteen months of intense combat, the company commander worried continuously that "one lead pill"⁴ could explode inside his body at any second and take his life, so close to the end of the war.

With the Russians bearing down on Berlin and the Allies steadily advancing across Germany, the Yank soldiers had heard the scuttlebutt that the German Army could surrender any day. Larimore, filled with cautious optimism, was no longer saying, "If I live," but rather, frequently thinking of home and plans for the future.

i The M1 Garand was a .30-06 caliber semiautomatic rifle that was the standard U.S. service rifle for frontline enlisted men during World War II. The rifle was named after its Canadian-American designer, John Garand, and was the first standard-issue semiautomatic military rifle. General George S. Patton called it "the greatest battle implement ever devised."

But Larimore also heard the rumors that Germany's dictator, Adolf Hitler, had ordered fanatical "last man" stands to give the German forces time to mount final defenses in larger cities so that the High Command could retreat into Austria. The result was stiff resistance from desperate German soldiers, which was turning into a significant military problem.

The latest snag was a firefight in a heavily wooded forest bordering the German village of Rottershausen on this chilly spring evening of April 8, 1945. German snipers nestled in towering firs were picking off his men one at a time. Machine gun nests hidden behind a camouflage of evergreen boughs were keeping the GIs pinned down. Simultaneously, well-disguised artillery was firing projectiles into the canopy of hundred-foot-tall evergreens, timed to burst and rain splintered wood and white-hot shrapnel onto the soldiers below.

Larimore was keenly aware that death lurked in every direction.

Even though he was only twenty years old, Larimore was considered an "old man" on the battlefield because he'd been part of the 30th Infantry Regiment since arriving on the Anzio beachhead in Italy in February 1944, part of the 3rd Infantry Division.

After liberating Rome, taking part in an amphibious landing on southern France's famed Côte d'Azur beaches, fighting his way through France's Provence region into the Vosges Mountains, and now making a final push across Germany, Larimore was well aware that he had been waging war in an active combat zone for over 400 days.

At Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, he'd learned that the typical frontline infantryman typically couldn't take much more than 200 to 240 days of combat before mentally falling apart. He wondered if he was fighting on borrowed time.

Suddenly, the forest ahead erupted in gunfire, and his radioman's SCR-300 backpack walkie-talkieⁱⁱ sizzled with distress. The voice of one of his sergeants came through.

"Love 1ⁱⁱⁱ, this is point squad alpha."

A squad leader was calling him.

"We've been ambushed in a glade!" the sergeant yelled. "There are nine of us and probably a 150 Krauts^{iv} around us. The rest of the platoon behind us is pinned down. We have four wounded. We're low on ammo. We're in a clearing. Help needed now, sir!"

ii The SCR-300, a battery-powered, backpack-mounted radio transceiver, was primarily used by combat troops as they moved forward, which is how the term "walkie-talkie" came into use.

iii "Six" was reserved as the call sign of the unit (platoon, company, battalion) commander. The other subunits used one through five and when they called the company commander if the radio operator answered, he would answer "Love Six;" however, if the unit commander was reached directly, he would say "Love Six Actual."

iv "Krauts" was a derogatory term for Germans and German soldiers during World War II.

German potato masher grenades^v joined the cacophony, answered by American grenades and machine gun fire. Projecting a calmness he didn't feel, Larimore called orders to each of his platoons and radioed back to armor. "I need a medium can now!" he yelled into the radio handset, requesting a Sherman tank.

Then he spread a field map on the ground and studied it with his Executive Officer (XO), Lieutenant Abraham Fitterman, and a field artillery Forward Observer (FO)^{vi} who'd just come up to the front.

"Our trapped squad must be here." Larimore pointed to the northwest edge of the only nearby clearing. Turning to the FO, he said, "I need fire massed on the other side of the clearing."

He ran his finger along what appeared to be a forest lane on the map. "Abe, you take over the CP^{vii} staff. When the first tank gets here, I'll take it to the clearing to get to our guys."

Within a matter of seconds, all three men heard rumbling. Larimore looked up and was delighted to see three Sherman tanks advancing in their direction instead of one.

"Abe, I'm hopping a ride on the lead can." Larimore's experience had taught him that when officers or NCOs^{viii} didn't accompany the tanks, they frequently got lost, which often resulted in more guys dying.

Before his XO could object, Larimore and his radioman leaped onto the back of the vehicle and squatted behind the massive tank's turret. The radioman found the intercom handset that would allow him communication with the tank commander inside. As they approached the clearing, green tracer rounds^{ix} from enemy machine guns laced the air from directly ahead.

"Our guys are fifty yards ahead! Friendly platoons are coming up from behind on our left and right!" Larimore called to the tank commander. Speaking into the radio, he said, "Second Platoon, send up all three of your squads, pronto! One behind each can as we move up!"

v The *Stielhandgranate* (German for "stick hand grenade") was widely used by the German armed forces, or Wehrmacht, during World War II. The baton-like hand grenades were called "potato mashers" by Allied soldiers because they resembled a kitchen tool used to mash potatoes.

vi An XO or executive officer was the second-in-command, reporting to the commanding officer, and typically responsible for the management of day-to-day activities, freeing the commander to concentrate on strategy and planning the unit's next move. An FO or forward observer was an artilleryman embedded on the frontline as a liaison observer who directed the artillery fire via phone line or radio communication.

vii CP stands for Command Post.

viii An NCO or non-commissioned officer is a military officer who usually obtains his position by promotion through the enlisted ranks. Non-officers, which includes most or all enlisted personnel, are of lower rank than any officer.

ix Tracer ammunition (tracers) are projectiles built with a small pyrotechnic charge in their base, which burns brightly, allowing its trajectory to be visible to the naked eye, day or night. Tracers allow the shooter to visually trace the flight path and make ballistic corrections without having to see an impact or even use the weapon's sight. American and German tracers were generally different colors: red for the U.S. and green for Germany.

His men sprinted from the forest to the shelter of the tanks. "Shermans, move into the clearing!" Larimore commanded as the two trailing tanks fanned out along the clearing's western edge, one on his left flank and the other to his right.

Enemy fire poured in, churning up dirt all around them. Larimore quickly identified at least three machine gun nests on the other side of the clearing. He ducked as the slugs of multiple snipers came from at least two directions, missing him by inches. Larimore ordered the gunners inside the tanks to use their 76-mm cannons and .30-caliber machine guns to lay down suppressing fire as he manned the turret-mounted .50-caliber Browning heavy machine gun, firing and taking fire across the clearing. Spotting his besieged squad, he shouted into the radio, "I see our guys! Twenty yards ahead. Let's get 'em outta here!"

The men behind the tank's protection now emerged, running up and evacuating the wounded. Enemy fire erupted again, and Larimore fired his remaining ammunition, killing several Germans and drawing more hostile fire as his patrols used the diversion to withdraw. His machine gun now empty, Larimore jumped off the back of the tank to direct his men as another hail of German bullets came in his direction. Suddenly the back of his head took a jolt as a sniper's bullet blew the helmet off his head and knocked him off the tank.

He landed on his butt, stunned and seeing stars.

His radioman jumped off and carefully ran his fingers through Larimore's hair. "Just nicked your scalp, Lieutenant, but it's bleeding like hell." He reached into his overcoat and pulled out a gauze bandage, tearing the wrapper off to press against it against the wound and carefully tying off the cloth as bullets ricocheted off the tank.

"You okay, sir?" the radioman asked.

Larimore refocused his eyes as he became more alert. "Yeah," he said. "Just a scratch."

"It's more than that, sir, but we gotta get out of this hellhole!" the radioman exclaimed.

As Larimore and the radioman moved back between the tanks and retreating men, laying down suppressing fire, enemy fire from the far side of the clearing intensified, coming from three directions. The other men started running as fast as they could for the protection of the trees. Larimore was beside the last tank backing out of the clearing, rapidly firing his M1 Garand as bullets shredded the earth around him.

Suddenly, an excruciating jolt of searing agony shot up his right leg. He hit the ground, groaning. Despite unbearable pain, Larimore managed to roll himself away from the tank's treads and into a shallow ditch.

From the safety of cover, he peeked over the edge. The three Sherman tanks were rapidly pulling away from him, and scores of Germans, firing as fast as they could while screaming at the top of their lungs, were giving chase. When the Krauts were only twenty to thirty yards from him and closing fast, Larimore lowered his head and played dead. Within seconds, the enemy soldiers leaped over the ditch and kept running.

Not daring to move, Larimore thought, *They didn't see me. Maybe I'll make it.*

The violent blasts of the raging battle around him strangely began to wane. His vision dimmed. Even the overwhelming discomfort began to melt away.

Larimore understood what was happening: he was bleeding out, and he didn't have the strength to pull off his belt and apply a tourniquet. Soon the world around him was silent, and his body completely numb.

So, this is what it feels like to die. Not as bad as I imagined.

Tired beyond measure, he closed his eyes.

He felt his breathing slow. Maybe, just maybe, his long, grueling war was finally over.



PART I: PREPARING FOR WAR

“Build me a son whose heart will be clear, whose goal will be high; a son who will master himself before he seeks to master other men; one who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past. And after all these things are his, add, I pray, enough of a sense of humor so that he may always be serious yet never take himself too seriously.”

**—General Douglas MacArthur, five-star general, and
Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers at the end
of World War II ⁵**





1

THE LITTLE STINK

"In your pursuit of your passions, always be young."

—Tom Brokaw, author of *The Greatest Generation*⁶

Philip Bonham Larimore, Jr., born January 4, 1925, was about two weeks old when the first letter about his birth arrived at his parents' home at 565 South Holmes Street in Memphis, Tennessee. The note from his mother's childhood friend, who lived deep in the backwoods hill country of north Arkansas, said:⁷

Dearest Ethyl and Philip,

There is nothing that brings the happiness and joy of a little babe. You can never realize just what they mean to you until you keep them awhile and feel your very life bound up in them. I wish I could see the little rascal. Of course, he had to be a Jr. It is almost always that way with the first one. Kiss that little stink for me.

*Ever fondly,
Alta⁸*



After little Philip began walking and talking precociously early, he never slowed down and quickly became the prophesied little stink. His tendency toward delinquency happened because he was a latchkey child: his father was a Pullman conductor gone for days at a time, and his mother was a legal secretary.ⁱ A succession of Negro nannies tried to keep him in rein but to no avail. Even two years at Miss Lee's School of Childhood did not tame him.

During the annual Chi Omega May Festival for Children pageant, four-year-old Philip joined the other pupils of Miss Lee's for the *Alice in Wonderland* segment. He was given the part of a bumblebee, along with one of his best friends, Luke McLaurine. Unfortunately, Philip was too hyperactive to remain in the flower he and Luke were assigned to. Master McLaurine screamed at Philip to return to their blossom, which did nothing to affect Philip's improvised role as a young bee freely buzzing around the stage. The audience chuckled as his mother sat mortified.

One year later, Philip was no more successful as an elf in *Hallowe'en* when he couldn't resist the temptation to trip a witch running across the stage on her broomstick. The young girl picked herself up and then began beating Philip with her broom as they ran off the stage to the amusement and laughter of parents in the audience.

Seeking to instill some values into her child, Ethyl tried religious education, but Philip couldn't sit still during the services or children's Sunday school at St. Luke's United Methodist Church. He did somewhat better at Vacation Bible School, but he was still considered a "rascal" by his teachers. His mother tried evening prayers and reading Christian storybooks, as well as a book of her grandfather's sermons, *The Story of a Happy Life*, but the lessons failed to stick.

On trips to the family farms of relatives, the youngster found great joy in hunting, fishing, and most of all, caring for and riding horses. His father taught him how to shoot guns, and by his sixth birthday, Philip could knock kernels of corn off a fence post with a .22-caliber rifle at twenty-five yards while standing, kneeling, or lying prone. His other great skill was getting a running start and mounting a horse and riding bareback.

Because his father was a conductor, the boy could ride the Cotton Belt train to Pine Bluff for free, and did so every weekend so that he could pal around with cousins and friends while hunting, camping, and taking long rides in the woods. Too bad he didn't cotton as well to schoolwork.

i Philip Larimore Sr. was a sergeant in a machine gun company during World War I. After returning from the war, he took a job with the Illinois Central Railroad. He met Sara Ethyl McClanahan in Little Rock, Arkansas, and after a whirlwind romance, they married in 1922. He was twenty-five, and she was twenty-eight. Philip was soon promoted to Pullman conductor on the *Panama Limited*, a first-class-only train, and the *City of New Orleans*. The trains traveled from Memphis to New Orleans or Chicago and back. As a result, the couple moved to Memphis, where Ethyl, who could type upwards of ninety words a minute flawlessly, took a job as the executive assistant for Walter P. Armstrong, the senior partner of an influential Memphis law firm. Having only one sibling each, the couple desired to have as many children as possible, but Philip Larimore Jr. was their first and only child.

Following his first six-week grading period at his local public school, the first-grader received “unsatisfactory” marks in all his subjects. After significant and painful discipline, as well as parental threats that he would never return to his relatives’ farms in northeast Arkansas or ever ride a horse again, Philip buckled down. He improved his marks to “acceptable” in all disciplines—both academic and behavioral. Throughout his elementary school years, his mother wondered if academic accomplishment prompted his promotion to the next grade, or whether his teachers were just anxious to see him move on.

On Saturdays, when his father was out of town on train trips or his mother was involved in trial preparation, he was forced to attend Miss Lee’s or the Free Art School. He loathed both and did not succeed at either. He often played hooky to spend time at a nearby stable where he could hang around the massive workhorses that pulled carriages or trolleys throughout the city. It was there Philip learned the rudiments of caring for these gigantic yet gentle creatures. He found out that he could innately communicate with them, so much so that one of the grooms told his mother that her son was a natural when it came to horses.

On his ninth birthday, his mother hosted a “duck” birthday party at the Peabody Hotel,ⁱⁱ known for the Mallard ducks that spent their nights in a “rooftop palace” and then marched down a red carpet from the main elevator to a marble fountain in the hotel lobby each morning. After enjoying the day frolicking in the fountain, the ducks would march out in the evening. Both marches were accompanied by a recorded version of John Philip Sousa’s “King Cotton March,” and their “rooftop palace” was an elaborately decorated doghouse.

Philip and his friends were overjoyed to see and play with the Peabody ducks on his birthday. The boys all laughed when, on a dare, Philip sat down on the floor and began calling the ducks. Before long, the drake and his four ladies were camped on Philip’s lap and between his legs.

By fifth grade, he earned the highest marks in physical education and geography, so his mother relented to her son’s pleas to take him out of Miss Lee’s and the Art School and let him spend his Saturdays and Sunday afternoons under the capable supervision of the stable hands.

Philip also became involved with Scouting and joined the local Boy Scout troop, where he found immediate success in Troop 40 of the Chickasaw Council in Memphis and received his Tenderfoot badge in the sixth grade. A Scout Master gave him a copy of Horace Kephart’s 1906 masterpiece, *The*

ii The Peabody is probably the grandest, most historic hotel in downtown Memphis, dating back to 1869 when the original Peabody Hotel opened. The resplendent hotel became the social and business hub of Memphis, building its legacy as the “South’s Grand Hotel.” During the Depression in 1933, ducks were placed in the hotel’s lobby fountain, setting in motion a tradition that continues today with the March of the Peabody Ducks.

Book of Camping and Woodcraft: A Guidebook for Those Who Travel in the Wilderness, which he devoured. The lessons he learned about how to read a map and use a compass were put to good use at Scout camps, where Philip traversed the wildest swamps and the most desolate canyons.

Throughout his adolescent years, wearing camouflage, pathfinding, stalking and trapping game, and identifying every sort of edible plant all became second nature to him. He could dress wild game, catch fish, cook over campfires in the worst weather, and create comfortable camp bedding while setting up a safe camp in any wilderness environment (known as bivouacking). He learned first aid skills and imagined becoming a physician for wilderness expeditions.

His greatest love, though, was being around and riding horses. As a young equestrian, his skills grew. During his summers and holiday breaks, he rode the horses of friends and family, winning various competitions across western Tennessee and northern Arkansas. Rows of blue, red, yellow, and white ribbons covered the movie posters in his bedroom. His equestrian trophies filled several shelves.

Philip often took a trolley to attend horse shows at the Mid-South Fairgrounds a few miles from his home. Other times, he snuck out after bedtime to visit nearby stables. He could not seem to keep away from horses—nor they from him.



A wise trainer taught Philip the three most important virtues he needed when around a horse: patience, observation, and humility.

Even the hot-blooded and high-strung Thoroughbreds acted calm around him, and Philip developed an uncanny way to speak to them with finger and hand commands or with an almost inaudible whisper and very low-pitched squeaking sounds. He came to believe the adage that a good rider can hear his horse speak, but a great rider can hear his horse whisper.

“He’s incredible with horses,” one of the grooms told his mom. “He can speak to them *and* hear them.”

“How does he do it?” his mother asked. “What’s his trick?”

“There’s no magic. No mysticism. He’s curious about them. He seems to recognize that they are his kin. He gives them gentle love and genuine respect. They pick up on it pretty quick.”

The young boy spent his hard-earned yet meager allowance on every Western movie that played downtown. One of the posters in his bedroom pictured the movie cowboy, Tom Mix, and his trusty steed, Tony, the first horse to bear the name “The Wonder Horse.”

Phil was mesmerized by reading books about the Wild West. He would sit on the front porch for hours reading Zane Grey novels and imagining himself as the hero. He'd look up when the freight trains passed by, their beckoning whistles sounding like summoning sirens. The boy would break out in goose bumps, knowing for sure he was being called to some mysterious land, to some great battle—on his favorite horse, of course.

During the first light of each new day, he would imagine the adventures he would experience and the stallion that might take him there.

Philip Larimore Jr. had no idea that many of these dreams would come true.





2

THE BIG MUDDY

“The spirit is there in every boy; it has to be discovered and brought to light.”

—Robert Baden-Powell, 19th century
British Army officer and founder of the
worldwide Scouting movement⁹

Since his earliest days, Philip had been an excellent swimmer. During the summer of 1936 when he was eleven years old, he took a junior lifeguard course with his pals, Luke McLaurine and Billy O'Bannon, at Camp Carrier, a 300-acre Boy Scout camp located just south of Memphis near Eudora, Mississippi.¹⁰

Late that summer, they convinced their moms to allow them to swim the Mississippi River as part of an annual race sponsored by the Memphis Chicks semi-professional baseball team. Their competitors, all of them teenage boys, boarded a rented paddle steamer and were taken about fifteen miles upriver.

Once at the starting point, the boat turned sideways. On the steam whistle signal, all the boys leaped off the top deck of the paddle steamer and into the river. The current moved steadily at ten miles an hour, and the smooth water was the color of milk chocolate; thus, the river's nickname, “The Big Muddy.”

While the older boys swam for a trophy, the younger boys just paddled down the river accompanied by a small armada of sixty motorboats, each



equipped with a pile of swim vests in case anyone encountered trouble. When Philip, Luke, and Billy successfully swam to the pull-out on the southern point of Mud Island, a peninsula on the east side of the river that connected to downtown Memphis, they ran out of the water screaming in joy, hugging and swatting each other's backs, and feeling exceptionally manly and heroic.

This only emboldened them the following year when, on an unusually warm, seventy-six-degree day in March, Philip and Billy decided to swim *across* the mighty Mississippi, unaware that the fast-moving river was carrying the largest volume of water since the historic flood of 1927. The ordinarily tranquil waterway, now the color of intensely dark chocolate, was a frothing, pulsating monster that roiled and rampaged downstream, throbbing with the unrestrained power of one million gallons of water per second rushing south. The newspapers further downstream were calling it the "Great Flood of '37."ⁱ

After placing towels and their clothes into small waterproof backpacks, the boys dove into the raging current just south of where the Loosahatchie River drained into the Mississippi River, about four miles north of the Mississippi River bridge crossing from Memphis to Arkansas. They stroked across a three-quarter-mile section of the bone-chilling, raging torrent, dodging trees and barrel-sized litter to the large and mostly wooded Loosahatchie sandbar near the west bank.

Philip thought they were far enough upriver that their swim would put them safely on the sandbar, but the current swept them downstream three miles so fast that they were barely able to make it to shore in a small bay on the southern section of the sandbar. Although exhausted and shivering from their ordeal, they each pulled out a towel from their backpacks, dried off, and briefly warmed themselves in the midday sun. They considered the option of hiking a half-mile across the island, swimming a half-mile channel, and then walking almost two miles to the bridge and hitchhiking back to Memphis. After thinking things through, they decided that they had no choice but to swim back to Memphis from the uninhabited island.

Philip, who had meticulously studied maps of the area in planning their escapade, reasoned they should aim for Mud Island. Given the incredible speed of the water, he calculated that they'd need to walk at least a mile up the Loosahatchie sandbar before taking off, which would give them a greater margin of safety, as well as more time to warm up from the cold water.

Philip spied a small herd of Shetland ponies grazing on the south end of the island. He and Billy walked up to them, and finding them tame, chose two to mount bareback. Grabbing the ponies' manes, the two boys whooped and hollered as they rode their steeds back up the island. After dismounting,

ⁱ "The Great Flood of '37" occurred in January and February, when the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers experienced floods that exceeded all previously recorded stages. When measured by the loss of life and property, these floods constituted a major catastrophe.

saying a brief prayer, and encouraging each other with an Indian chant they learned as Scouts, they slowly waded back into the frigid water and began their swim to the distant shore. Fortunately, Philip's calculations were correct, and it became clear they were going to make it to the safety of Mud Island.

Near the end of their swim, however, Billy ran out of steam and began to go under. He screamed out, yelling for help. When Philip saw his buddy panicking and fighting to keep his head above water, he used powerful strokes to bridge the distance quickly. Calling upon his lifeguard skills, Philip dove just below the surface and grabbed Billy by the waist. Then he promptly turned his buddy, surfaced, put him in a cross-chest lock, and hauled him to shore at Joe Curtis Point on Mud Island's southernmost section. Upon reaching dry land, Billy dissolved into tears, embracing Philip, and thanking him repeatedly for saving his life. After a time to rest and warm up, they dressed and hitched a ride back home.

Although Billy wanted to nominate him for a Red Cross or Boy Scout medal for bravery, Philip begged him not to. He didn't want to get into more trouble because he was sure his father, upon learning of another one of his harebrained escapades, would reward him with yet another trip to the backyard toolshed for a whipping. This time Philip was lucky to escape punishment since he'd saved his friend's life, but he realized how close he had come to losing his buddy to the heartless river.



Philip's twelfth birthday was his most memorable. At the stables, he learned that the world-famous Lipizzaners from the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria,ⁱⁱ would be performing at the fairgrounds the same weekend as his birthday. On a Saturday morning, Philip rode the trolley to the fairgrounds and watched the horses and their trainers practice the choreographed steps they would execute at their evening performance. He spent most of the day with the riders and grooms, asking endless questions. Best of all, they allowed him to brush and groom some of the magnificent stallions.

While brushing and talking to one of the Lipizzaners during the early afternoon, an observant stableman from Austria leaned toward him.

"A stallion like Gustav here may be perfectly schooled after about six years, but an apprentice rider—what we call an *Élève*—needs a full ten to twelve years of training to earn the right to show these magnificent horses," the stableman said. "They first have to spend years feeding, grooming, and leading the horses around before they are allowed actually to ride a Lipizzaner. After

ii The Spanish Riding School is an Austrian institution dedicated to the preservation of classical dressage and the training of Lipizzaner horses. The school was first commissioned in 1565 and named for the Spanish horses that formed one of the bases of the Lipizzan breed, which is used exclusively at the school.

that, they graduate to the rank of *Assistant Reiter*, or assistant equestrian. Few outsiders—maybe a royal here or there—have ever been granted permission to ride one of our Lipizzaners. But I can tell that Gustav here has taken a shine to you and that you have the makings of a master equestrian. Would you like to mount him?”

Philip’s eyes widened in wonder as a smile spread ear to ear. “Are you kidding me? I’d *love* to!”

The man smiled and looked around to be sure they were alone. He nodded and indicated to Philip that he would lift him onto the back of the massive stallion. Philip could feel the steed’s muscles quiver between his legs. He instinctively leaned forward to stroke the horse’s neck and whispered into his ears. Gustav immediately calmed down, shook his head, and continued to feed.

“He likes you,” the man whispered. “But let’s get you off before I get into big trouble.”

In the late afternoon, Philip’s mother hosted his birthday party, with cake and ice cream, and then took him and several of his friends to the arena for the evening show. They were mesmerized by the gala performance as they watched the expert riders and their Lipizzaners demonstrate the most demanding movements, all accompanied by classical Austrian music.

At one point, a stallion was led into the ring on a long rein without a rider. Philip recognized Gustav and leaned forward as the stallion was led to the center of the ring. The announcer described each increasingly tricky jump. “We call these ‘the airs above the ground’ or ‘school jumps.’ Only certain breeds have the strength and intelligence to perform these difficult airs today.” The crowd applauded after each incredible movement.

“To complete this amazing performance, Gustav will demonstrate the *capriole*, a word which means the ‘leap of a goat.’ On command, he will jump straight up into the air, kicking out with his powerful hind legs, and then land on all four legs at the same time. It is considered the most difficult of all the airs above the ground.”

The crowd burst into raucous applause after Gustav completed the arduous maneuver flawlessly, while Philip sat captivated. Then the boy’s heart skipped a beat when the horseman led the stallion toward him. He recognized the “stableman” who had put him on the same Lipizzaner that morning. The man spoke to the horse, which then bowed by kneeling on one leg, extending the other leg in front, and lowering his head to the ground. The horseman smiled, tipped his black riding hat toward Philip, and mouthed, “Happy Birthday.”

The crowd erupted in applause again as all attention fell on Philip. He felt exceptionally proud and would never forget that day or Gustav’s *capriole* and

bow. The boy vowed to himself that he'd one day travel to Europe to see these magnificent horses in person again.

Little did he know that would happen in an unimaginable way.



The school years became more challenging for young Philip as he continued to do poorly in academics. His mother found it increasingly difficult to discipline him, mostly since his father was away from home on railroad trips so often. Finally, at her husband's insistence and the encouragement of Philip's scoutmaster, Ethyl applied for her son to attend the Gulf Coast Military Academy (GCMA) in Gulfport, Mississippi,ⁱⁱⁱ a distance of 360 miles. GCMA's motto was, "Send us the boy, and we will return you the man." She could only pray that this would be the case for a fun-loving son not inclined to academics.

His four years at GCMA were a success by every measure and among the best in his life. The structured and regimented environment proved to be a stimulating learning atmosphere for the easily distracted teenager. Although Philip struggled with some of the mundane academic subjects, military topics became his forte—military history, strategy, operations, tactics, and weapons. He turned out to be a quick learner when motivated, and he became adept at competitive shooting, compass work, navigation, wilderness skills, sailing, and close combat. Philip also learned to fly a Piper Cub at a nearby airbase and became certified as a glider pilot. He enjoyed his time in the air, but the two areas in which he experienced even more joy were equitation—the art of horsemanship—and romance.

His happiness as an equestrian was primarily due to a feisty, chestnut Thoroughbred stallion nicknamed Moose. A trainer tried to steer Philip to a gentler horse, explaining, "Thoroughbreds are known for their agility, speed, and spirit, but they are also hot-blooded horses."^{iv} But when Moose lowered his nose and relaxed as Philip spoke to him and stroked him, their partnership was sealed.

Moose was large by Thoroughbred standards, standing seventeen hands and weighing just under 1,200 pounds. Moose's rich mahogany coat made him look—except for the absence of antlers—like one of his namesakes. On Moose's back, Philip not only excelled in showing, jumping, and steeplechase competitions, but he also won more show ribbons than he could count.

As for the romance side, that excitement started in his senior year of high school with a blind date. Marilyn Fountain was a beautiful brunette with a

iii GCMA was a military preparatory school for boys founded in 1912.

iv The Thoroughbred breed is said to have been developed in 17th- and 18th-century England, where native mares were crossbred with imported Oriental stallions of Arabian, Berber, and the now-extinct Turkoman breeds. All modern Thoroughbreds trace their pedigrees to these three stallions. The breed was imported into America starting in 1730.

thin face, high cheekbones, and a radiant smile. She was from Des Moines, Iowa, and had just begun her freshman year at Gulf Park College in Gulfport, a junior college for girls close to the Gulf Coast Military Academy, even though she and Philip were born weeks apart.

They met because Philip's roommate at GCMA, Billy "Tex" Metts, began dating one of Marilyn's suitemates. After Billy found out that Marilyn's father was an Army officer and that she had a fondness for horses, being the newest member of her college's Bit and Spur Club, he deduced she and Philip might be a match made in heaven.

Billy arranged for them to meet under the Friendship Oak located on the campus of Gulf Park College. This massive Southern oak stood over five stories tall and spread its immense fingers of foliage over 150 feet in each direction, providing over 16,000 square feet of cool, moist shade. The Friendship Oak was also the center of a legend: those who entered the shadow of her branches would remain friends for all their lives.

Under this magnificent tree, Philip and Marilyn first met, and then not too many days later, they first held hands and kissed. In the fall of 1941, the young couple could not have been happier, but they had no idea how their lives were suddenly going to be altered forever.



3

A DAY OF INFAMY

“Great crises in human affairs call out the great in men.
They call for great men.”

—Brevet Major General Joshua L. Chamberlain, Union
Civil War general and Medal of Honor recipient after
the Battle of Gettysburg¹¹

On Saturday evening, December 6, 1941, “Phil,” as Marilyn called him and as he now liked to be called, took her out for dinner at the Bungalow, a popular seafood restaurant in Biloxi, Mississippi that overlooked the calm, brown waters of the Mississippi Sound.ⁱ The menu had something for every taste: fresh seafood, choice steaks, Southern fried chicken, Cajun specials, and even Chinese dishes. After enjoying the surf-and-turf special, the young couple decided to go to the cinema.¹²

Marilyn had wanted to see the romance, *Johnny Eager*, starring Lana Turner and Robert Taylor. In contrast, Phil had a yearning to watch *Tarzan’s Secret Treasure*, starring Maureen O’Sullivan alongside his favorite movie star, Johnny Weissmuller, one of the world’s fastest swimmers. They compromised with *Ball of Fire*, starring Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck.

i The Mississippi Sound is a massive estuary—a body of water where fresh river water meets a salty sea—that runs east-west along the southern coasts of Mississippi and Alabama. The water is brown, brackish, and shallow due to several rivers that drain into it.

The next morning dawned clear with unlimited visibility and an unseasonably warm fifty-nine degrees predicted as the high. Rather than attending church together, which was their habit, Phil and Marilyn decided to play hooky. He picked her up early, and they trailered their horses to the nearby De Soto National Forest, where they rode through the gently rolling terrain. When they located Black Creek, Mississippi's only National Scenic River, they followed the meandering ribbon of water until they found a wide white sandbar. There they set out a picnic lunch and talked for hours in the warm sunshine about their hopes and dreams—and, for the first time, about the prospects of a life together.

Late in the afternoon, they returned to the stable and found a group of people gathered around a radio. "Whatcha listening to?" Phil asked. The men shushed him as he and Marilyn leaned closer to listen.

The announcer blurted, "This is KTU in Honolulu, Hawaii. I am speaking from the roof of the Advertiser Publishing Company Building. We have witnessed this morning the severe bombing of Pearl Harbor by enemy planes, undoubtedly Japanese.... This is no joke. It is a real war... There has been serious fighting going on in the air and on the sea."¹³

Phil and Marilyn's eyes met, and he pulled her close. There was another second or two of static. Then the announcer continued, "We cannot estimate just how much damage has been done, but it has been a very severe attack."¹⁴

The sound of rustling papers came through the small radio as the announcer took a deep breath. "Oh, this is much worse than we've heard up to now. The BBC is now reporting, and I quote, 'At oh seven fifty-five local time, the first wave of between fifty and one-hundred-fifty planes struck the naval base for thirty-five minutes, causing several fires and untold damage to the Pacific Fleet. The Japanese squadrons dropped high explosive and incendiary bombs. A second strike followed at about oh nine hundred when a force of at least one hundred planes pounded the base for an hour,' end quote."¹⁵

Phil looked at his watch. This meant the attack had started just before 1 p.m. in Gulfport, located in the Central Time Zone.

The broadcaster continued, "The BBC also says, and I quote, 'The *Times* newspaper's Washington correspondent says the U.S. government expects Germany and Italy to declare war on the U.S. within hours. Although the attack has shocked the American people, there is little doubt that it has been brewing for some years,' end quote."¹⁶

Marilyn began to cry; Phil pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to her. "Oh, Phil," she muttered, "This can't be happening, can it?" He could only hold her close as a zillion thoughts raced through his mind. Their shared disbelief mirrored their astonishment.

The announcer paused a moment, and the clacking of a teletype machine could be heard. "This just in. This just in. Japan declares war! Japan declares war!"

Someone whispered to the man. The pitch of his voice increased as he announced, "This wire is just in from Hirohito, the Emperor of Japan. Here are his words, and I quote, 'We,ⁱⁱ the Emperor, hereby proclaim unto our loyal and valorous subjects that we have now declared war upon the United States of America and Great Britain,' end quote."¹⁷

Phil's mind swirled. He thought, *So, this is it. This is really it. Soon, I'll be off to war. I'll be going into battle.* He couldn't have imagined such a confluence of excitement and horror occurring in one moment. Marilyn continued to weep in his arms.

"I have to get back to GCMA. Now!" he said.

She nodded. They ran to the car and sped away.



The next morning, Monday, December 8, the nation awoke to even more bad news: the extent of the damage from the surprise attack on Hawaii. At that point, no one knew that the Japanese attack had killed 2,403 U.S. personnel, including sixty-eight civilians, and destroyed or damaged nineteen U.S. Navy ships, including eight battleships, and destroyed or damaged 328 aircraft.¹⁸

Not even the U.S. government was aware that the ship with the most lives lost, the battleship *USS Arizona*, would report 1,177 dead—meaning that about one half of those who perished at Pearl Harbor were on the *Arizona*. What everyone *did* know was that Japan also attacked the Philippines, Wake Island, and Midway on the morning of December 7. The only good news was that the three aircraft carriers of the U.S. Pacific Fleet had been out to sea on maneuvers.

After a hastily arranged Protestant church service at GCMA, Phil received a call from his father. He had been working on the train running between New Orleans and Memphis. At a stop in Water Valley, Mississippi, Phil Sr. had been given a handwritten note:

*Do not permit any Japanese to ride your train. Orders
of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹⁹*

Then Phil and his fellow cadets attended a solemn assembly at 11:30 a.m., during which they listened intently to the nationwide radio broadcast

ii The "we" used by the Emperor is called "the royal we," or "the majestic plural," and refers to a single person who is a monarch.

of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's address to a joint session of Congress inside the U.S. Capitol. The President started his speech with these memorable words:

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.²⁰

After recounting details of the aerial assault, the President concluded his speech with this:

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory. I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.

With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God. I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.²¹

The roars of approval and tsunami of applause from the members of Congress could be heard over the speakers, and was joined by the young GCMA cadets as they bounded to their feet, throwing their caps toward the ceiling, and hugging and swatting one another on the back. As the cheers faded, though, they became aware that America was about to face an extraordinary test—one that would potentially threaten her very being. The young men at GCMA knew that their training put them in a position to quickly make a difference and play a significant role in the days ahead.ⁱⁱⁱ

The next five months flew by, and on a beautiful, cloudless, and calm seventy-degree Saturday, May 16, 1942, Phil graduated with honors from GCMA and the Reserve Officers Training Corps, or ROTC.

iii On December 8, the Declaration of War against Japan passed with just one dissenting vote. Three days later, Germany and Italy, allied with Japan, declared war on the United States. America was now drawn into a global war and became part of the Allies—most importantly, Great Britain and the Soviet Union.

Before Pearl Harbor, he had planned to begin pre-med studies that fall, but with America in the midst of a global conflict against the Axis powers,^{iv} he realized that he would not be studying medicine anytime soon.

Philip Larimore Jr. understood that he was destined for war.

^{iv} The major Axis powers were Germany, Italy, and Japan. The military alliance began to form in 1936 and was called the “Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis.”

4

ON TO BENNING

"Now to the Infantry...the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys. They have no comforts, and they even learn to live without the necessities. And in the end, they are the guys that wars can't be won without."

—Ernie Pyle, American journalist and war correspondent²²

On September 10, 1942, instead of heading to college, Phil told his parents goodbye in Memphis and traveled back to Gulfport to spend a few days with Marilyn. His girlfriend was continuing her education at Gulf Park College. Before they knew it, their time together raced to an end. They embraced for one long hug and a kiss under the Friendship Oak before he boarded a Greyhound bus heading to Infantry Officer Candidate School (OCS)ⁱ at Fort Benning, Georgia.²³

Upon arrival, he and 199 other candidates formed four platoons of fifty men each, and each platoon was assigned to one of four two-story barracks.

i During World War II, OCS became the leading source of new Army officers with candidates commissioning as 2nd lieutenants upon graduation. From 1941 to 1947, over 100,000 were enrolled in 448 Infantry OCS classes with 67 percent graduating. Most of the candidates came from the enlisted ranks and college ROTC programs. In Phil's case, it was almost unheard of to go directly from high school to OCS, but because of the urgency of World War II, the Army broke normal protocol as Phil's military school record and ROTC experience made him a top candidate.

All four platoons had a Tactical Officer (TO), also known as the platoon's TAC (Teach, Access, and Counsel) Officer. In Phil's case, the TAC was a 1st lieutenant who was not only in charge of the platoon's training, but he would be able to choose which of the men would be commissioned as officers. As Russell Cloer, another OCS candidate from Jersey City, New Jersey, said, "In other words, he was God for the duration of our stay!"²⁴

The TOs' pith-style helmets had an Infantry School insignia front and center that read *Follow Me*, the motto of the Infantry School, which was also nicknamed "Benning's School for Boys." At their first formation, Phil's platoon was told that fewer than half would graduate while the rest would "wash out." He had no way of knowing that this was an exaggeration intended to motivate the men, but it worked: Phil determined that failure was not an option. He was also aware that he was the youngest in his class.

A typical day involved the men being awakened before sunrise, usually at either 4 a.m. or, more commonly, 5 a.m., by a bugler playing "Reveille."ⁱⁱ The recruits were given enough time to "shit, shower, and shave" and wolf down a quick breakfast before falling into formation and being trucked to the day's training area. The officer candidates had to perform no mundane duties—just training, training, training.

For most men, their OCS physical and mental exercises were grueling, but Phil found the drilling and physical workouts to be surprisingly gratifying. He was in much better shape than most of his classmates, and although a fair share had more intellectual prowess, few could match how quickly he learned, how expertly he handled small arms, rifles, and marksmanship, or how skillfully he could lead men when called upon to do so.

The officer candidates had free time every Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday. Many of the guys would put on their uniforms, with the required OCS patch sewed to their shirt pocket, and take a bus six miles into the nearest town, Columbus. Phil, however, occupied his free time either studying or writing home to his parents and Marilyn. On Saturday and Sunday evenings, he would treat himself to a movie at the theater on the post.

But once Phil learned about the Fort Benning Hunt Club,ⁱⁱⁱ an on-base stable, he could be found there on most weekends. The first time he walked through the barn, he carefully looked at each mount. A bay-colored Thoroughbred mare seemed to respond to him. As he approached her, she whinnied, shook her head in approval, and walked across the stall to let him gently rub her nose.

ii "Reveille" is a bugle call used to awaken military personnel at sunrise and comes from the French word for "wake up." This bugle call is also used when the flag is raised in the morning and honors are paid to it.

iii Before World War II, almost every major post in the Army operated its own foxhunt. Besides the Infantry Hunt at Fort Benning, other major hunts were the Cavalry Hunt at Fort Riley, Kansas, the Artillery Hunt at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and the 1st Cavalry Division Hunt at Fort Bliss, Texas.

"She's a beaut," one of the passing grooms commented. "Rita Hayworth she's called, after the movie star. Lotta the guys like riding Rita, or at least writing home and saying they did," the groom chuckled.

For the weekends that followed, Phil and Rita were inseparable. Phil believed, as did British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, that "No hour of life is wasted that is spent in the saddle."²⁵ He and Rita not only swept nearly all the on-base equestrian events, but it was at Fort Benning that Phil experienced his first foxhunt.

The hunt used a pack of American Foxhounds maintained with the assistance of the Army MWR (Morale, Welfare and Recreation) Division. A retired colonel who served as the Master of the Foxhounds invited Phil to his first hunt and introduced him to the most recognized tradition of foxhunting—the distinctive attire.

Working out of a closet owned by the club, the distinguished gentleman had Phil try on several outfits until he had the perfect fit for a scarlet jacket, beige jodhpurs (or riding pants), tall black boots, and the traditional black top hat. The brightly colored coat's primary purpose was to ensure that riders were not mistaken for prey and shot as they chased their quarry through the woods, the colonel explained.

As the colonel helped Phil into his overcoat, he said, "Traditionally, only the Hunt Club members get to wear the red coat, which is called a *pink*, but in your case, the Master of the Foxhunt gives permission."

Phil smiled. "Thanks, Colonel."

"You've earned it, son. I've seen you ride and jump. As for these tight-fitting britches, they reduce the chance of getting caught up in branches or brambles, and the tall boots protect your legs from scratches and scrapes."

"Thanks for the explanation. What game do you chase?"

"The game for our hunts is usually a coyote. The hunt area here at the post is so large and rugged that the game rarely has any trouble eluding the hounds and the hunt field. It's not considered sporting to kill the game. What we love are the pure joy and sport of the hunt—and the chase. And," he added, "the social time after the hunt is a wonderful time to meet folks from all around the post and the surrounding area."

Phil and Rita both loved the hunts—the galloping and jumping. Although many of the less-experienced riders fell during jumps over creeks, logs, or narrow ravines, Phil and Rita were both expert jumpers and nearly always at the front of the pack. The colonel often told him, "Horses lend us the wings we lack."²⁶ And, as the colonel had predicted, the social hours after the hunt were always an enjoyable time to share drinks and stories.

Having spent four years in military school, Phil did not wrestle with homesickness as some of the men did, but he desperately missed Marilyn.

Fortunately, the Southern Bell Telephone Company's phone room allowed the men to call home and their gals once a week for no charge. Of course, he wrote her as often as he could.

For Phil, the exhilaration of riding on weekends and the military instruction during the week combined to make the time fly.



5

CAPTURE THE FLAG

"I remember OCS as being one of the most intense episodes of my life, aside from Infantry combat, which, of course, was what it prepared us for. Our determination to successfully complete the program was the primary goal of our young lives."

—Russell W. Cloer, an Officer Candidate School graduate²⁷

At Fort Benning, there was never any hazing or what the OCS candidates called "chickenshit" from the TOs. But one thing the men all grew to hate was what was called the "Fuck Your Buddy Sheet."²⁸

During the last half of their training, the men were required to rank the other men in their platoon in order of officer suitability. For the first five and last five men on their list, each candidate had to write a sentence explaining his justification for the ranking. As one candidate, Russell Cloer, wrote, "There could be no hedging because someone had to be first and someone had to be last. And showing favoritism didn't pay because we were each rated by the TO on our ability to evaluate others effectively."²⁹

Toward the end of OCS, the officer candidates had to rotate as first-time instructors in subjects they had completed. Their TO and the other students graded them on the quality of their performance. It was during this phase that Phil learned he was a natural teacher. He was primarily encouraged by one of



his instructors, 2nd Lieutenant Ross H. Calvert, Jr., from Nashville, Tennessee, who had graduated from OCS a few months earlier and had done so well that he had been invited to stay on the teaching staff.

Although relationships between candidates and staff were discouraged, the two men quickly became fast friends, given their Tennessee roots and mutual love of bourbon, horses, and outdoor sports. Phil and Ross shared meals and drinks at the Officer's Club during their free time and learned to play contract bridge—a trick-taking card game played by four players, with partners sitting opposite each other. They quickly became one of the best competitive teams on the base, pocketing a fair amount of spending money in winnings. On weekends, they also loved riding together.

At the end of supper one day, Phil's platoon was unexpectedly ordered to double-time to the barracks. Once there, platoon members were handed field coveralls, a small backpack, a loaded carbine,ⁱ and a sidearm. Then they were marched in the dark and placed in a large windowless box truck. After being driven around in disorienting circles for about thirty minutes, the truck stopped, and the back gate was slung open.

The TO jumped in. "Gentlemen, I'm going to have you leave the truck in groups of four. As you get off the truck, I'll assign a squad leader and give you a compass bearing. Follow that bearing to the first road you find, which will be between two and three miles away. You'll be traversing forests, fields, ravines, and, if you're unlucky, an alligator-infested swamp with mosquitos and snakes. We have men posing as the enemy scattered between the roads. Some of them are hunting for you, while others are hunkered down in machine gun nests, waiting to kill as many of you as they can. Your weapons and their weapons have been preloaded with blanks. Feel free to fire at will at the enemy. If you don't kill him, rest assured he will kill you. There are to be *no* prisoners in this exercise."

The TO paused and looked over the men. "Each of the enemy will have a small flag attached to their belt by a rubber band. When you exit the truck, one flag will be attached to your belt. When a man is killed, the killer pulls the band to prove his kill. If you're killed, your night—and perhaps your training—will be over. But if you either kill or avoid the enemy and achieve your objective, then when you get to the road, I want you to find the nearest stake, pull it up, and write your arrival time on it.

"Each stake is numbered, and your performance will be judged on how close you come to the proper stake and how long it takes you to get there. Bonus points will be awarded for any kills you make. Then stay by the road.

ⁱ A carbine is a shortened version of a full-length rifle. The M1 carbine was significantly shorter and lighter than the M1 Garand rifle and was intended for rear-area troops who couldn't be hindered with full-sized rifles but needed something more powerful and accurate than a pistol. The M1 carbine was not a shorter version of the M1 Garand, but a wholly different design, firing a smaller, less-powerful cartridge.

You may sleep if you have any time left, but expect to be picked up at zero six hundred hours sharp. And if you're not at your pickup point at zero six hundred, you will have a long, long walk back to the barracks. Good luck."

The exercise reminded Phil of a traditional game played at Boy Scout camp after dark, where two teams each had a flag in their home camp. The objective was to capture the other team's flag and bring it back to your base without getting "killed." Players were eliminated from the game when a piece of cloth attached to their belts by rubber bands was pulled loose by an enemy combatant.

As Phil and his three teammates exited the truck, the TO assigned him to be the squad leader. Phil felt his stomach tighten and his pulse quicken. One of his squad mates was a Lumbee Indian from Lumberton, North Carolina, whom Phil swore could hear a mouse walking on a carpet of grass at fifty yards. For the two of them, it was a marriage made in heaven.

Other than a minor stumble into an unrecognized but shallow ravine, the group was able to thread its way through the forest quickly and quietly. Fortunately, a Southern forest at night is alive with the booming sounds of tree frogs, pond frogs, bullfrogs, crickets, cicadas, katydids, and even whip-poor-will birds chanting their name, along with any number of other critters.

Phil was glad it was fall so that the echoing chatter could conceal any inadvertent sound he or one of his men might make by stepping on a small twig. A snapping stick could sound like a gun going off in a quiet forest, and point the enemy directly toward them.

While making their way through the woods, the Indian suddenly hand-signaled that they should crouch and be quiet. He listened for a minute and pointed ahead, indicating one hundred yards with hand signals.

Looking across the darkened field, Phil nodded as he saw the red glow of two cigarettes. Using hand signals, he broke the group in two, and they circled the enemy ambush. Approaching from opposite sides, Phil and his men snuck up to within yards of the four men who were in hushed conversation while smoking in a small depression that they had made into a machine gun nest.

Apparently, "the enemy" had not expected the trainees to arrive so quickly. On Phil's signal, they swarmed over the edge of the nest, gripping sheathed knives. Before the unsuspecting enemy could react, they pretended to cut their throats. To make an even bigger statement, the Lumbee Indian shoved his shocked victim to the ground, placed his knee on the man's chest, pulled off the man's cap, and pretended to scalp him. The soldier looked terrified as Phil's buddy stood over him, softly chanting in his native language as he held the imaginary scalp to the stars.

Phil's other two men got into the act, whooping and hollering as they "scalped" their victims, but Phil quickly shushed them. They each collected a

flag from the men they had “killed” and stuck them in their pockets. As Phil bent over his man, he was startled to see that he had subdued his good friend Ross Calvert.

“Good job!” Calvert whispered through a smile that spread from ear to ear.

Phil grinned and turned to his men. “We need to move quickly!” he said with urgency in his voice. They resumed their speed hike silently through the forest in single file. The Indian led the way, and as he darted from tree to tree, each man would quietly follow in succession. They would stop every five minutes for Phil to pull out his compass and take a reading by moonlight.

The sharp snap of a breaking twig about seventy yards in front of them brought them to a crouch. The three crept up to the Indian. They heard another snap and muffled voices in the distance.

“There’s a patrol just ahead of us,” Phil whispered. “Gents, it’s time to set up an ambush.” He looked at the Indian. “Can you tell the direction they’re walking?”

The man nodded and swept his arm from side to side to show the direction they were traveling.

“Okay, boys,” Phil quietly directed, “on my hand signal, let’s separate. We’ll form a ten-by-twenty-yard perimeter, and when they walk into it, I’ll whistle, and we can all open up with our weapons.”

Then he smiled. “We’ll mow ’em down before they know what hit ’em.”

The ambush went off without a hitch, other than being roundly cursed out by the eight enemy combatants, all of whom were enlisted men out to earn rewards and bragging rights for “killing” the candidates. One of them exclaimed, “You boys literally scared the shit outta us!”

Following their capture, Phil and his men pulled off their flags, pocketed them, and melted into the woods. In short order, they found the right road and the nearest stake. It had taken them only three hours to traverse the course. As much as they could determine, they were the first group out of the woods.

“Time to take a nap,” the Indian said.

But Phil was suspicious that there could still be a trap. “Let’s pull up our stake and move back into the woods a bit. We’ll still be near enough to the road to hear the trucks when they come. We’ll rotate watch every hour. Two men up; two asleep. Just to be safe.”

Phil sensed the men’s dissatisfaction with his decision, but they quickly pulled off their field packs and used them for pillows, and the first two men immediately fell asleep. Phil and the Indian took the first watch.

Slowly, other men came out of the woods, pulled up their stakes, and lay down to sleep. After his first watch, it was Phil’s turn to nap.

Just before dawn, one of the men shook Phil from his sleep. He pointed across the road. They could see “the enemy” exiting the woods, one man every ten yards. They all moved into the ditch across the pavement from the sleeping trainees. Then one blew a whistle, and the enemy charged across the road, their guns blasting away. All of the asleep men were “killed.” Cries of cursing erupted up and down the road as the candidates realized the tables had been turned, and they had been caught in an ambush of their own.

The enlisted men laughed and hooted—that is, until Phil and his men, who had spread out twenty to thirty yards apart, came running out of the woods on his whistle with their rifles and pistols erupting in a cacophony of fire. The “dead” OCS candidates began cheering as they realized one of their teams had the final hurrah.

The victorious outcome energized Phil and gave him confidence that he could successfully lead men and hopefully survive the many battles that lay ahead.