

William B. Bache

THE HERO SYNDROME

The other day I read that George Halas, Old Papa Bear (as the newspapers call him), decided after seeing the movie *Patton* that George Patton would have been a great football coach. Old George Halas was even tempted by the movie, so he said, to come out of retirement (*hibernation* was the word used) and coach the Chicago Bears again. Imagine that. Several years ago, when the movie was first released and before George C. Scott was brave enough to turn down an Oscar for the starring role, my long-haired daughter and I went to see *Patton*. As the action developed, my general, though unexpressed, feeling was that, although the facts were largely true or were based on truth, the movie was only calculated pop-art, a display of merely specious good. History had been translated into vulgar myth for fun and profit. If anything, I was bored.

When the lights went up, we rose and my daughter turned to me and said that if she were a boy, she wouldn't go to war, to any war: Patton was a psychopath; Bradley and Eisenhower were children. Oh, well, yes. I told her that I could see what she meant: the movie did seem to be a bit anti-war. In the lobby I turned at something a woman following me said. And the man with her, whom I recognized as a campus cop in civilian clothes, declared with bitterness that there were real men in those days: "They weren't lily-livered, like these hairy kids today."

Although I never met or even saw Patton in person, I served, as they say, in the Second World War and I did have a little experience with someone comparable to that general. In fact, I once was a driver for General Anthony McAuliffe, the commander who said "Nuts" to the besieging Germans at Bastogne, during the Bulge. In the early spring of 1945 we went for a ride in my jeep into Ludwigshafen and we reached

the Rhine. Commonplace and slight as that may seem, I didn't and don't find it so. I keep remembering.

I sometimes think of how I could have behaved in the beginning. I think of what I could have done or should have done. It occurs to me now that, before we ever started, I could have told the General that I was a lousy jeep driver, the kind you wouldn't be caught dead with. Or I could have made some casual comment about how unlucky I've always been with vehicles. Or, I'm a goddamned jinx, I could have bluntly said. I might have told him that, when I was eighteen, I was just driving along in my father's car and the front wheel fell off. Or maybe I should have simply confessed to the General how I got to be a jeep driver in the first place.

I had gone overseas with the MO (or whatever those letters are) of a scout. But I didn't discover until just before Christmas 1944 – while we were retreating from our first, abortive invasion into Germany – what a scout may have to do. He can be turned into a sniper; he can be told to impede the movements of the enemy; he can be counted on to be extraordinarily brave in effect. Well, I soon understood that. And as soon as one of our jeep drivers got frostbite or discovered a case of latent hemophilia (I forget which), I volunteered to take his place. Let me drive, I said. I can drive. It had nothing to do with my being qualified to drive or being good at it. As I say, I was lousy, and, again, I probably should have told the General that: my grandmother would have said that that's the Christian thing to do.

Anyway, I should say that I can't think about my army experience without many second thoughts and several regrets. And, strange as it may sound, these include wanting to be successful. I even used to dream of being a lieutenant or a captain. But nothing worked out. I took basic training four times; it took me twenty-eight months to make PFC; then, finally, I was shot four times, first by a sniper and, a few seconds later, by a machine gunner, on May 3, 1945, when the war in Europe was really over. Anyone can tell you how unlucky or stupid getting shot then was. But I don't want to sound neurotic. And anyone who has ever been in the infantry in any war can tell you of great inefficiency, of unbelievable, stupidity, of shocking brutality. I don't want to do that either, though I should say that I am still incapable of liking officers of any kind. I hate boy scout leaders.

It was a dismal, dull day toward the end of March with dark, hanging

clouds around us: we had occupied the village of Neustadt, and the German civilians were huddling in damp cellars. The main road through the village was clogged with soldiers and there was an occasional vehicle churning through the mud, and the world for a change was almost silent, with just the ticking of small arms fire somewhere in the distance. We had finally wiggled through the Siegfried Line, and you would have thought we were rear echelon troops. As I recall, I was standing slackly alongside the road, my defenses down, probably smoking and perhaps calculating my chances of getting pneumonia or of picking up yellow jaundice. Since I felt secure, I may even have had a cigarette dangling from the side of my mouth as I let myself fancy that I was Errol Flynn or some hot-shot pilot. If I was bothered by anything, it was the nagging awareness of the dead GI, whose body I had had to run over with my jeep in order to get through the Siegfried Line. So the day was like some Sunday in late fall at home, a perfect day for a fire in the fireplace, and then this sergeant came up and told me that he had a job for me and that I should get my jeep.

Before I knew it, I was behind the wheel, and the General was alongside me, really there, a living presence, that famous man, a hero. I'm not quite sure how I felt at the time. Though I could see those two stars on his collar, I don't think I was impressed. I imagine I just thought I was being taken advantage of or being put upon. One moment I had it made; the next moment I was about to have to do something dangerous. Why couldn't they pick on someone else? Why did I have to drive? I should have stayed inside. I was unlucky. The way I felt then is now mixed up in my mind with the way I know I felt several months later when Betty Grable and other celebrities came through the hospital ward in which I was recuperating, a major leading them through. I remember watching the little elite troupe stopping at each enlisted man's bed, clustering around it with side-show concern before passing on. The major had me take off my pajama top so that the celebrities could see my battle scars. I felt like cursing; I suppose I blushed.

Anyway, the General had on a greenish snug jacket with an imitation-fur collar; his pants were new and sharply creased and they bloomed professionally over his polished jump boots; he had a forty-five in a holster at his side like a gunslinger; I think he carried a hand grenade or two about his person. I imagine he was dressed

according to the movie notion of what a paratrooper ought to look like. The General was about forty-two at the time, I surmise, and he had this clean-shaven Irish face and he seemed tough and confident. I can believe that the General may have been living up to some ideal, swaggering image of himself as a youthful MacArthur or a younger Patton.

If you've ever seen a picture of the General, you can see how well built and solid he was then. At the time he reminded me of what, in football, journalists used to call a watch-charm guard. The guy who had jumped into the back seat of my jeep was also from the paratroopers and was dressed in the same fashion, though his jacket didn't have a fur collar. He was tall, young, athletic, a captain, and also very self-assured and eager — the tailback type. I mean, he was like somebody from West Point. He was going places.

Whenever I remember these two officers, I always think about a third officer, the best line officer I've ever known, Captain Joseph Bell from Kansas, tough and confident Joe Bell. For me he is a kind of reference figure, in much the way that old football specialists judge every running back they see in terms of Johnny Blood. Captain Bell was my company commander in the states for a time. Before we shipped out from Texas, he got drunk one night and had all of his enlisted men turned out of their barracks into the company street at three o'clock one Sunday morning and had the company barber clip everybody's head, his too. You stood in line and when your turn came, you went into the mess hall, sat on a table, and had your head clipped. Overseas Captain Bell once moved into a town after it was cleaned up and threw our platoon out of the house we had liberated because he said his men deserved it more. Another time he and his company came upon a deserted house one night and occupied it. But when he couldn't fit the last few men into the place, he deserted the house. He and his men went outside and slept on the cold ground, leaving the house sitting there, sheltering no one, empty. They all suffered alike.

If you were a private coming through a replacement depot at the time, you would get the word that if you got into Captain Bell's company, you would find yourself under a great officer, for no one could ask for a better leader. And that's true. Captain Bell led every assault, as any decent line officer should: he led his troops rather than staying behind and letting someone else lead them. And Captain Bell

was such a superb line office that the staff officers wisely gave K Company many opportunities to lead assaults. So if you came to our division as a replacement, the chances were excellent that you would find room in K Company, where you would get your great leader, and that you, in turn, would end up on the ground and in it.

"Let's go to Ludwigshafen," the General matter-of-factly said, as today your old man could ask you to take in a movie, so long as it wasn't X-rated.

I remember wanting to say: "Why don't you go? I don't want to go. Drive yourself. Hire an airplane. Walk." I didn't say anything.

So, big deal, off we started to Ludwigshafen, just the three of us, our new commanding officer and his aide at the mercy of a lousy driver. I mean, there was this war on, and we could half-believe that we were important.

In a little while I managed to say to the General, "I don't think they've cleared that town yet. At least they hadn't yesterday."

"What's your name, private?"

"Bache," I said. And then, being helpful, "It rhymes with *H*."

"How do you spell it?"

I told him.

"O.K., Bach, let's go."

I felt like telling him that it's a famous name.

Our original general had been sent back to the states with a liver ailment or something, and General McAuliffe had been rewarded for his marvelous performance at Bastogne by being given our division. He was like some new executive out to see what he had gained. Perhaps the reason he wanted to go for that ride was to do a kind of spot check on his troops. Maybe he just wanted us to know he was around. But I can believe that he was just preoccupied with the Rhine, for that was what he knew he had to get across.

Our first general would travel around overseas in his own personal jeep with about three jeeps in front of him and three behind, a regular convoy, with machine guns fore and aft, like a battleship, the panoply of rank. But not our new general. All in all we had two forty-fives, maybe four hand grenades, and one rusty M-1, and there we were, out to check the traps. You'd think we were out for a Sunday drive or something.

At first there was some traffic and I was kept busy negotiating that. After a while the traffic thinned out, almost stopped, and then did stop. The countryside opened up, the road improved, and I now concentrated on keeping a steady pace of thirty miles per hour and on trying not to think about the trip. There were some 155-howitzer emplacements, complete with camouflage nets, on the side of the road now, and the sound of rifle fire ahead, above the drone of the jeep, seemed brisk and almost near, and the smell of cordite hovered in the heavy air, and you could see we were nearing this battered city. The day had become the kind of day on which you could easily believe that something bad would happen. The General and his aide kept making little observations back and forth. Every once in a while the General would have the Captain take a note.

"Maybe you better slow down," the General said to me.

I took my foot off the gas. A German machine gun rattled far in front of us.

"Well, this is Ludwigshafen," I said as we went past the first outlying buildings. I didn't know what they expected. We had arrived. We went on.

For what seemed like a long time we crept through that rigid mass of brick and stone, that ominous, bleak city, that eerie, empty-seeming place. I found myself hunched over the steering wheel, holding my breath. A stray squad of American soldiers, strung out in combat formation, their backs to us, were cautiously going up a deserted street. I drove around a pile of disordered bricks in the road. Each street was littered with strange debris. An M-1 and a helmet had been discarded on the sidewalk. A wall was spattered with what looked like dried blood. Life seemed absent, but I knew that something was going on behind thick walls or in cellars.

"Try to go a little faster, Bach."

The jeep jerked ahead.

"Turn here."

At such a time it is much easier to walk through a desolate dangerous place than it is to ride through it. The buildings loom around you, and you feel the fear of what you cannot see. You may have the sense of being just part of a vehicle, yet you think how nice it would be to be hidden. And just the fact of walking can bring a kind of small comfort: physical movement mutes the hot flashes of panic. The mechanics of

movement dulls thought, settle you down. And soon you get to feel trapped in a single, open vehicle, vulnerable and superfluous. I thought then that going into Ludwigshafen was just the General's whim. I felt then that if the General was trying to prove something, he didn't have to convince me.

As we'd come to an intersection, I'd glance to the left and to the right, up the canyoned, yawning streets, not knowing what to expect, or when. Every moment was filled with its fear.

He told me to turn again, and I did, and then we approached and then went by a couple of dirty GI's, their bodies flattened against the building. "You'll be sor-ry," one of them sang after us as we cavaliered by.

You might have expected the General to order me to stop and then for him to give those GI's hell. I think I expected him to show us who our leader was.

A brisk firefight erupted, perhaps a block away. The air was filled with the dust of stone now, and I felt the way you do if you've been speeding in your car and you hear the wailing siren of a cop behind you and you suddenly remember that your license has expired. I kept telling myself that at the first shot that came anywhere close, I was going to bail out, to vacate. I couldn't decide whether it would be better to get behind or beneath the jeep or to make a mad dash for some doorway. That decision seemed very important at the time. My mind was absolutely clear, and racing.

A bullet buzzed and twanged off something stone. It probably wasn't as close as it seemed, but I almost deserted the jeep anyway. My hands were gripping the wheel as if I were afraid the wheel would fall off. Strangely, I didn't either slow down or speed up the jeep at all. It occurred to me that there was probably some lousy sniper up ahead and that he was at that heart-stopping moment lining up his rifle on the General. But he was probably such a lousy shot that he'd end up hitting me. I hoped that the Germans were better at picking snipers than we were. Then it occurred to me that any decent sniper would be aiming at me, the driver. I knew that they always aimed at your head. We had recently lost thirty-one men killed by snipers, most of them shot through the head.

"Let's go home," I managed to say, dodging with my wheels some rubble in the road. "I mean, there's nothing to see." I felt like just

refusing to go on. But of course you always go on. It has nothing to do with being brave. It's just simpler to go on.

The General casually turned to the Captain. "It's not too torn up, is it?"

"No, sir."

"The Rhine can't be far ahead."

"No."

It's just a river, I thought. The General acted as if it was something special, the kind of thing you went out of your way to see. I felt the kind of doped resignation you get as you're being wheeled into the operating room.

I'm aware of how your feelings can be affected by some slight thing. Really, I believe that if I had known for certain that there was some real purpose behind taking that trip. I wouldn't have felt as I did for a long time afterwards. I wouldn't have liked it any better than I did, but I would have understood. We got to the Rhine and stopped and gazed at the little flashes of light from the guns at Mannheim; the trivial sounds of war carried across the neutral, grey water. We had come through the city for this. There at the Rhine I felt the way you do when your football team loses the game in the last few seconds. There at the dull Rhine I felt drained and no longer afraid. There at the Rhine I felt that I couldn't bear to look at the General, as if he were some friend who had said or done some embarrassing thing. With almost unconcern I listened to the dismal, far boom of field pieces, the thin cracking of rifles, and then we retired from the naked shore. What was the use? We never even got out of the jeep. Nothing happened. There was nothing to see.

As I reached the outer edge of Ludwigshafen with my passengers, night beginning to fall, I felt a shudder of relief, the way you feel when as a kid you come coldly out of a house of horrors at a carnival; you feel like giggling, as if you have been aware that the experience has been fake but that, still, you're glad it's over. Then in the fresh, open country, as I raced the night to Neustadt, I could tell that, like kids the officers were pleased with themselves. And I felt the same kind of sudden disenchantment I felt in 1943 when, a private hitchhiking through Ohio, I was led through Clark Gable's old home. I had been picked up by an old man in an outmoded Ford on his way to Cadiz. When we reached that town, the old man insisted on taking me through

the now-vacant side of the clapboard duplex where Clark Gable was born. The old man was very proud of that narrow, yellow place, the rooms high-ceilinged and cold, boxlike, ugly: it was hard to believe that anyone could ever have lived there.

That old man was proud of that empty, shabby place, showing it off to a stranger like some special prize, cuddling the pleasure of a famous dim association. As I left that old man in Cadiz, he told me with voluble pride that Clark hadn't been back for twenty years but that they were sure he thought of them often. He'd be back when the war was over. And in 1945 on the way home from the Rhine trip with the General chatting with his aide about how well the war was going, I was struck with the same truth about human beings, their small, sad vanities. It was as if the football game is over and your team has lost and you know how bad you feel and you also clearly know that what you are feeling bad about is only a game.

But more than that. If you are a new commander, you act the way you think a new commander ought to act. Only when at ease do you reveal the old person. But still more than that. You are new only briefly. It is a commonplace that something happens to men after they get great authority: they lose themselves in their roles and turn into something they weren't. In a war they become captains or generals, for they cannot remain simply themselves. They become the roles they play. Moreover, an old public figure, like the General McAuliffe of today, is a stage beyond a man who has great authority. For he has had great authority, much clout. And, strangely, his fame rests finally on a single memorable act in a less significant past. A public man like the old General is what we are told he once for a fleeting moment was. Vaguely idealized and thus dehumanized, he is for most of us frozen in our minds in a famous gesture about which we have only read.

My slight experience with him on our trip has kept the General from becoming for me what he has become for others. I don't think of him the way the world does. In part this is so because, like it or not, he depended upon me. And in part this is so because his fame was new both to him and to me at the time: his fame was then like his uniform, unexpectedly neat and somewhat derivative. Strangely, the public fame of the General cannot obscure what I sense is the true person. I have not intended to defame him.

When we got back to Neustadt, the General and his aide got out of

the jeep, and then the General turned to me and said that if he was ever in our sector again and needed a driver, Bach, he'd ask for me. I mumbled my thanks. I have never seen the General in person since. And if General McAuliffe remembers me at all, I suppose I am in his mind only some vague GI, just a lousy driver, who one took him for some insignificant ride to see some unimportant river.