



Øystein

by
William Warner

AT first I was stunned. His slow, deliberate words – soft, almost hushed – sounded carefully thought-out, as if the messenger in black had rehearsed them silently while walking up our drive, gravel crushing beneath his feet. But it was his eyes that spoke first; then came the words, “Our friend Øystein died last night.”

Why is it that when we hear someone has died unexpectedly our first response is, “I just saw him two weeks ago...” or some other duration of time? In this case, it was yesterday.

We, along with our boss, had just returned from a two-day meeting of academicians in Holland. Øystein wasn’t looking forward to the trip; I was. He had to sort out the gritty details for the allied advance of four universities (from France, Denmark, Norway and The Netherlands) planning a grant application. I was there simply to put the plan on paper, to draft ideas into words. But that’s not why I looked forward to the trip: the meeting’s location was only 25 km from Arnhem.



Arnhem remains one of the greatest feats of arms in military history. But it was also a military defeat: Britain’s second Dunkirk. On September 17, 1944, the largest armada of troop-carrying aircraft ever assembled for a single operation took to the air. *Operation Market-Garden*¹, one of the most daring and imaginative operations of the war, was planned by one of the most cautious of all Allied Commanders, Field Marshal Montgomery. His plan was to outflank the German defense line by speeding 20,000 vehicles across Holland, and possibly end the war by Christmas. But first, five bridges had to be seized intact by airborne assault. Until Cornelius Ryan wrote *A Bridge Too Far* almost thirty years after the event, the tragic story was virtually unknown in the United States. Thirty years after seeing the film, based on the book, my dream of visiting Arnhem became a plan. And Øystein knew it.

On the second day I got up at dawn, hoping to take a bus to Arnhem and be back for the nine o’clock meeting. But it was a bridge too far. The hotel desk told me I had to change buses, but she didn’t know the connections, or how often the busses ran, or what Arnhem’s rush-hour traffic was like... So I went back to my room and stared out the window, where 64 years ago 10,000 paratroopers descended to disaster. After balancing my thoughts, with the weight of that bridge on my conscience, I decided it wasn’t worth the risk. I was afraid I’d show up late for the

¹ As the codename implied, the operation was divided into two: MARKET, the employment of airborne troops to seize bridges; and GARDEN, the advance of armor across them.

meeting, walking in like a tardy student hugging the wall; or worse yet, not show up at all, like Monty's tanks halted on the road. I've never experienced the fog of war, but I know that often in the sunshine of peace, if something can go wrong, it does.

I scrubbed the plan and shuffled into the hotel dining room for breakfast. There sat Øystein like a surrendered soldier with a detached, vacant expression. As I eased into the chair it was as if I'd interrupted a prayer: "In my father's mansion there are many bosses..." Then his dim eyes lit up: "What are you doing here?" I explained. He just waved it off with a point of toast, "You should've gone;" then dabbing his yolky egg, "I would've covered for you." He might have said something about life being too short to miss golden opportunities, but I don't think he did. It would have made the story too good, and more tragic.

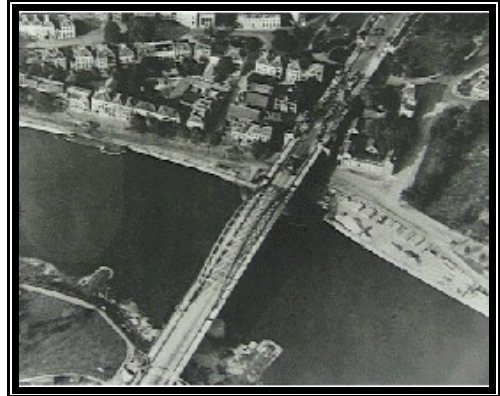
For the past few months he'd been talking about his dream: to motorcycle across the US, solo, on Route 66. He'd planned it for next summer, planned it long, long ago. Then last year he finally got his motorcycle license, and in November bought a bike. Who buys a motorcycle in November, especially in Norway? He rode it to work once – a shiny BMW, showroom red, trimmed in chrome. Øystein wasn't the Harley type. He didn't want a hog that huffed "*potato, potato, potato...*" He went for a tiger that purred. It was the beginning of his dream.

It was also the end. His heart attack came suddenly, unexpectedly. Five hours after I said my final "See you tomorrow," he bent down to light his woodstove and keeled over. Tomorrow never came: an hour later he was dead.

All the things we worry about never seem to happen. Then one day you open the door and the unexpected knocks you for a loop. Hope for the best; plan for the worst. That's the old adage. But then, who really plans for their death? (Well, at least plan for it like that next vacation.) I can think of two: those with some terminal illness², and those who make an explicit choice between years of life and some noble cause, like soldiers.

People who volunteer for military service risk giving up most of their Biblical allotted three score and ten. Unfortunately, every war has at least two sides, and at most one of them is good. Logic, like the math, suggests that historically at least half of these sacrifices, though generous beyond belief, probably were a mistake.

In the Second World War, sometimes called the *Good War*, the math wasn't logical. Allied forces suffered more casualties in Market Garden than in the mammoth invasion of Normandy (D-Day, June 6, 1944). British airborne losses were the worse. The 1st Airborne Division was almost completely destroyed: of the 10,005 paratroopers dropped into Arnhem, 7,578 were casualties – twice the German losses. No wonder Montgomery's plan was considered a failure. Although he asserted it had been 90 percent successful, his statement was merely a consoling figure of speech. Admittedly all objectives save Arnhem had been won, but without Arnhem the rest were as nothing. In return for so much courage and sacrifice, the Allies had won a 50-mile salient – leading nowhere. *What a waste!*



2 Randy Pausch (47) is dying of pancreatic cancer. But in the process, he plans on teaching millions of people about living via his "last lecture". And thanks to YouTube, his lecture doesn't require any tuition checks. He says the lessons were meant as a "message in a bottle" for his three kids. But millions now feel part of Randy's extended family – and that it isn't too late to listen, learn and really live. Not a bad plan.

Those were my exact words when I thought about Øystein's death. He didn't die because of a calculated plan or a random accident; he died because of a heart attack. His life wasn't a waste – far from it. He was one of those active fellows whom everyone liked, which explains why his funeral drew more than 300 people, a crowd trumping state dignitaries and world celebrities. The waste was that he died like a soldier volunteering without a cause. Yet, there was a cause for his death: despite his family history of heart disease, he smoked. Equally important, he sacrificed his life by never saying *no* to others. His big heart simply couldn't combat the stress of work, the strain of play, the stamina of always saying *yes* when a volunteer was needed.

If Øystein had not died so young, his death wouldn't have been so tragic. Though, in fact, he wasn't *that* young, 49. Deaths of young adults are mourned with special pain, and the very old are celebrated. But any age between about 60 and 90 doesn't rate a second glance as you flip through the obituaries. Øystein was about 25 years short of the average life span.

When it comes to dying, we might find comfort in numbers, but not in numerals. Math merely helps us figure the odds. With some heroic assumptions, we can come up with an age when death starts to be in-your-face. Since my 40th high school reunion is this year, I'll chalk an analogy on the blackboard. Assume your high school class had 100 students: on average one classmate died freshman year. By the 45th reunion, the class starts losing an average of one alumnus per year. Then it accelerates. By the 60th reunion everyone is on borrowed time; and coincidentally, only 60 of the original hundred are left. Most likely the last reunion is the 80th, for only three classmates remain.

The odds weren't nearly so good for those who went to Arnhem after jump school. Most were in their early twenties, many could hardly shave; yet, for every 100 paratroopers, 22 died. Of those who survived, 66 were either wounded or captured (often both). Only 22 escaped. Montgomery didn't plan on such horrendous odds.

We don't either. We are born thinking that we'll live forever. Then death becomes an intermittent reality, as grandparents die, and tragedy of some kind removes one or two from our own age cohort. By middle-age most folk plan on living with the law of averages. Hanging in is a good dream; holding out is a bad plan – especially if you plan to hold off your dream for the future, like cruising Route 66 on a motorcycle.

Montgomery planned his tanks to cruise a narrow road across Holland, but not until that crucial bridge, 64 miles behind the German lines, was held. And that worried the commander of the 1st Airborne. Pointing at Arnhem's bridge on the map he asked: "How long will it take the armor to reach us?" Montgomery replied briskly, "Two days." Still looking at the map, the officer answered, "We can hold it for four." Then he added, "But, sir, I think we might be going a bridge too far."

Indeed, it was. After nine heroic days of hanging in, the airborne forces simply couldn't hold out. Montgomery ordered a retreat. Then German reprisals savaged what was not already shattered. British sympathizers were hauled to the street and executed. The rest – all of them – were evicted from their homes; their personal belongings were looted. What remained was senselessly destroyed. Most of the residents nearly starved that cruel winter. Many did. Dutch civilian casualties were around 10,000. Something else not planned for.

Another thing not planned for: our meeting ended early and we had several free hours before our flight home. I was surprised when our boss forfeited the idea of strolling the canals of Amsterdam; thrilled when he suggested that we climb in a cab and drive over the bridge in Arnhem!

On the way we stopped at the Airborne Museum on the edge of a quiet suburban park. During the battle it served as the 1st Airborne headquarters; before that it was a hotel, and before that a private home, which is what it looks like today. A small mansion, white, dwarfed by

towering elms, with a sweeping lawn in front, a wooded park in back. I couldn't imagine the groomed grounds, laced with pebbled paths and trimmed hedges, being cratered, scarred, and littered with the detritus of war. Where empty park-benches reclined under warm dappling light, clots of broken men had shivered in slit trenches. It was as ironic as incongruent to see a tank parked on the apron of the circular drive: Montgomery's armor never did show up.

On the edge of the drive there's a touching monument with heartfelt prose. The low granite block is nestled in the shade, humbly, where shadows are the dials of time. It was recently erected by the British to the locals. I can't recall the exact words, but it was something like, "We came to liberate and give you hope, but we failed and gave you sorrow..." I don't know why, but when I think of Øystein I often see him silently reading those words. I suspect the image will hold on as long as I hang in. But then, old soldiers aren't the only ones who just fade away.

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BILL WARNER is my favorite ex-patriot American essayist who lives in As, Norway. We have enjoyed a joyous friendship for 35 years since he was a student associate at Transylvania College in Lexington, Ky. He is a delightful, quiet, deep thinking man who shares his trenchant thoughts with me through his numerous luminous essays. A few years ago he sent me a remarkable book, *Sophie's World*, by

a Norwegian author, Jostein Gaardner, which I would like to recommend highly to AAPA members. It is a work of fiction, and is the best summary of the history of philosophy I have ever encountered. I am currently reading it for the third time and find it is a treasure.

Whippoorwill E-Comment is the sometime journal of J. Hill Hamon, a long time member of AAPA who lives in delightful isolation in the back woods of rural Kentucky. Becoming inexorably long in tooth and creaking joints, he has given his letterpress print shop away to friends and former students who have established their own presses and who have pledged to continue to print with it. This is positive proof of a special kind of reincarnation.