Richard Nott Antrim

The Brotherhood of Soldiers at War

Executive Officer – U.S.S. Pope (DD-225)

Brotherhood is more than biological, it is fraternal. It develops quickly among men in uniform, both in peacetime and during times of war, simply by virtue of the call to duty they share in common. There is a sense of family among men in uniform, a common bond to look out for each other. But how far will one brother go on behalf of another? The horrors of war often test the limits of that brotherhood.

Richard Nott Antrim became a part of a very special brotherhood when he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1931. Naval officers have always shared a kindred spirit. To the men who served under him in the years that followed, Antrim was a capable leader. As executive officer of the *U.S.S. Pope* when World War II began, he was a man of rank who inspired confidence. On March 1, 1942, disaster struck the men of the *U.S.S. Pope*. For the next three years, the survivors would need more than a leader, they would need a "big brother". No one could have imagined how big would be the shoulders of Richard Nott Antrim, the stronger, older brother they would all need to see them through a crucible of unimaginable horrors.

Among the myriad of tales of courage and heroism that fill the annals of Medal of Honor history, the story of Richard Nott Antrim has always been one of the most inspiring to me. It was a story, however, that could not rightly be told for many years. When Rear Admiral Antrim retired from the Navy in April 1954, he settled with his family in the quiet community of Mountain Home, Arkansas to run a small tour boat. In the community everyone knew him as "Dick", and that is how he wanted it. Tom Dearmore was editor of the local newspaper and one of Dick's friends. One day when Tom asked Dick about his Medal of Honor action the kindly man whose only concerns were for the welfare of his community pointed his finger at Tom and said, "I don't want it published—I don't want to ever read anything about it in your newspaper." Thirty years after Dick Antrim's death, Tom finally wrote the story saying, "He (Antrim) has been dead 30 years now and will not reproach me."

In preparing this story for our Brotherhood series, I first sought the approval of Rear Admiral Antrim's family. I am especially indebted to Judy Antrim Laylon, for her assistance in putting together this glimpse into history that needs to be told and retold, not to glorify the heroism of the humble hero who graced our world, but so that his example can inspire others to put the needs of others before themselves. Ms.

Laylon wrote:

> *“My father was a very modest man and probably wouldn’t have contributed their information about his heroism, but I feel this generation who has not really experienced war needs to know about the people who came before them and what they did to preserve our freedom.”*

Richard Nott Antrim was born in Peru, Indiana where he lived his early life with his mother Mary who was a local school teacher. Young Dick Antrim attended Peru public schools and found a good balance between education and athletics. Two years before his high school graduation in 1926 he was part of the squad that won the Wabash Valley Football Conference championship. From there he received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis where he played varsity football for three years, graduating on June 4, 1931.

Two years later, Dick and his young wife Mary Jean welcomed daughter Judy to the family. A second daughter, Nancy, was born two years later. In May 1937, the family was living at the Lakehurst Naval Station in New Jersey when the Hindenberg began its approach. Dick Antrim was on the mast to anchor the dirigible when tragedy struck. Standing on the porch of the Antrim home, Jean and 4-year-old Judy watched in horror as fire rained down around the Naval officers stationed below. It was a moment of horror that tried the soul of the Antrim family. “Two things went through my mind.” Jean later wrote. “If Dick is alright, he won’t want me running around, He’ll want me at home. The other, if anything has happened, I must be here to receive the word, so I stuck my ground.” Dick survived, but the strength of character that Jean Antrim exhibited that day would receive its greatest trial in years that lay ahead.

In December 1939, Naval Lieutenant Richard Nott Antrim was assigned to the *U.S.S. Pope (DD-225)*, an aging but important part of the Asiatic Fleet. Mary Jean and daughters Judy and Nancy had returned home to Peru, Indiana while Dick was serving at Sea. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the 7 and 9-year-old girls knew it would be a long time before they saw their father again. However, they didn’t realize just how *long* it would be.

In the first 80 days after Pearl Harbor, the Pope served well in two major engagements, the Battle of Makassar Strait and the Battle of Badoeng Strait. The cool, effective leadership of the Pope’s executive officer led Commander Welford C. Blinn, the ship’s commanding officer, to recommend Richard Antrim for “a decoration deemed appropriate… for the meritorious performance of his several duties before and throughout the action.”

During three and a half years of captivity as a prisoner of war, Lieutenant Antrim

would prove to be not only courageous but ingenious. The citation for his subsequent Bronze Star award speaks for itself:

> *"For heroic service while a Japanese Prisoner-of-War. He was forced to take charge of a labor party and assigned the task of constructing slit trenches for bomb protection. Through self-effacing courage and sheer audacity of purpose, he caused to be constructed under the very eyes and alert surveillance of Japanese guards, a huge sign "U.S." This was done by rearranging the construction work of the slit trenches from the Japanese approved plan to one of his own devising, after causing the Japanese to concur in the changes suggested. The sign, if recognized by the Japanese, would have resulted in Antrim's immediate beheading, but Antrim's well-thought plan would result in Allied photographs indicating the occupants of the trenches and thus save hundreds of prisoners' lives."*

The actions of Lieutenant Antrim that resulted in these two awards are admirable, but they are not unlike such similarly heroic actions of many other American soldiers, sailors, and Marines. But one fateful day in April 1942, Richard Nott Antrim did something unbelievable. It was a deed that went beyond *valor.* It captured the imagination and spoke volumes about selfless service and sacrifice. The award of the Medal of Honor by President Harry S. Truman on January 30, 1947, recognized the deed for its valor. As was his custom at these presentations, he told the Naval hero, "I would rather have this medal than be President." Then the President did something unusual, recognizing Antrim's incredible actions for their nobility with an addendum.

> *"You did a mighty fine thing!"*

One hundred and fifty anxious faces looked back at the *USS Pope*, slowly sinking into a watery grave. The ship "that was old enough to vote", an old four-stack destroyer, had served well during its short combat career. The Battle of the Java Sea was its third major engagement. It was only three months after Pearl Harbor and the Japanese ruled the seas. A massive force of enemy cruisers and destroyers sought to encircle Java, a small island of the Malay Archipelago. As darkness fell on the eve of February 28, 1942, three ships slipped out of Surabaya in a desperate attempt to escape the snare the enemy was creating. Two of the ships were British, the heavy cruiser *HMS Exeter* and the destroyer *HMS Encounter*. The third was the *U.S.S. Pope.* Through the night they had quietly tried to elude the enemy, but with daylight, they were spotted by enemy aircraft and quickly engaged by nearby enemy cruisers and destroyers. All three ships fought valiantly but in vain. The *Exeter* and *Encounter* quickly sank and the badly damaged *Pope* was spared the same fate only by being hidden in a passing rain squall. The reprieve was only temporary. Damaged by enemy shells

and bombs from Japanese carrier-launched aircraft, the *Pope* had slowly begun to sink.

As the sunset across the ocean, it would have been a night for panic and terror, were it not for the courage of the Pope's Executive Officer, Lieutenant Richard Nott Antrim. As the ship had begun its slow descent to the ocean floor, he had organized life rafts and a single whaleboat to bear the 151-man crew to safety. Despite wounds from the earlier engagement, he struggled through the pain to lead and encourage his men. With great foresight, he had attempted to ensure provisions for an ordeal at sea, then distributed the meager rations among the men. All but one of the Pope's crew survived the sinking, a tribute to Antrim's cool, effective leadership. But for them all, the greatest ordeal lay ahead.

For three days, the sailors remained together in a tight group, enduring the heat of the tropical sun, a merciless ocean, and a shortage of food and water. Richard Antrim's calm voice, effective leadership, and valiant example held them together. Then, on March 5th, they were plucked from the sea… by a Japanese warship. They became prisoners of war, taken to Makassar in the Celebes, one of the larger islands that were firmly under the control of the Japanese Army. It was there that not only allegiances but customs, collided.

"Bushido" is a Japanese word meaning "the way of the warrior." It was an ancient code with roots in feudal Japan, a code that demanded endurance, courage, and other warrior-like traits. It also demanded that any warrior who forfeited his honor in any way, should take his own life rather than live in dishonor. To the Japanese soldiers of World War II, a prisoner was a warrior who had forfeited his honor and should have taken his own life. For this reason, their hatred of Americans as enemies at war turned to absolute disdain towards prisoners of war. *Bushido* justified, for the Japanese captor, sub-human treatment of prisoners, men the Japanese considered to be cowards and unworthy of respect. Torture was common, arbitrary, and deadly. This was the fate that awaited the crew of the Pope when they joined more than 2,500 other prisoners at the POW camp at Makassar.

For weeks, the prisoners had lived in fear, watched fellow prisoners broken and abused by sadistic guards who viewed their lives as something lower than the most basic animal life forms. Cries of pain and anguish filled the long nights, and the sights of death were quickly seen with the dawn of each heartrending day. Hope quickly vanished as prisoners did their best to avoid eye contact with the enemy and struggled to obey each order to the ultimate degree. They had seen time and again how quickly, how cruelly, and how deadly, the slightest infraction could be.

Time lost meaning, all that the prisoners could do was hope to survive each night, then pray for the end of each day. Tension mounted on both sides, and the situation

was extremely volatile. It could erupt into mass murder at any moment, for the slightest or even for no, reason at all. It was in this climate that the 2,700 prisoners watched in pained agony as one lieutenant failed to bow too low to a Japanese guard one horrible day in April. As was expected, and all too common, the reaction was swift and violent.

The Japanese guard flew into a rage, venting all of his anger in a swift series of abusing blows from his swagger stick. It was an insane, violent flurry of blows that broke the skin and crushed the body of the lieutenant. Those Japanese guards who witnessed it felt no compassion, content to believe the battered lieutenant was receiving all he deserved and perhaps not enough. The frightened prisoners could not help but look on helplessly, knowing that the slightest movement might draw attention to them and result in a similar or worse fate. But Lieutenant Antrim had had enough. His heartbreaking for the Lieutenant he stepped forward, calling attention to himself to plead for mercy. It was an act that could have been perceived as insane as the wrath the guard vented on his victim, a hopeless gesture that could only result in two deaths instead of one. But it was an act the Naval Lieutenant believed had to be done, regardless of the cost.

With the broken body of the lieutenant laying at their feet, Antrim faced the enraged guard to plead the case of his brother. Struggling with broken English and gestures, he tried to convince the guard that enough had been done, that the lieutenant had meant no insult. His sincere effort drew the attention of the entire force of enemy guards. Fellow prisoners looked on in amazement and fear, certain bad was about to turn worse. It also attracted the attention of the Japanese commander. Antrim continued to appeal the lieutenant’s case, begging for mercy. In the center of the prison compound with trigger-happy guards on one side and the abused and demoralized prison population on the other, a “kangaroo court” was held. There would be no mercy. Antrim was ordered to step back while the nearly unconscious lieutenant received his “just sentence”… fifty lashes with a thick, raw hawser.

The helpless lieutenant was already near death from his earlier beating as the first lash of the hawser landed across his body, only to be followed by another, and another, and another. Large welts broke open to spill his blood on the ground and like a swarm of hungry sharks, the frenzy of the guard administering the punishment created a bloodlust. Fifteen lashes had left the man unconscious, unable to move or flinch from the repeated beating. Three more guards rushed into the scene, brutally kicking at the prostrate form. Further lashes would fall upon a body that could feel no more pain unless something happened.

It did!

“Enough!” Spoke the voice of Lieutenant Richard Nott Antrim as a stunned silence fell over the camp at his unprecedented action.

> *“I’ll take the rest!” Lieutenant Antrim said.*

Prisoners could only stare in incredulity. The Japanese were stunned. They had never expected to see such an act of unselfish, personal sacrifice by any of the prisoners they despised as sub-human. So stunning was the proclamation, no one on either side of the camp could believe what their ears had heard. Lieutenant Antrim had to repeat his offer.

> *“If there is to be 50 lashes, I will take the rest of them for him.”*

This time his stunning pronouncement sunk in. From the ranks of the battered, broken prisoners there erupted a roar of acclaim. Among the Japanese guards, there was nothing but silence, amazement, and a slow dawning of what had just occurred before their eyes. It was a defining moment, one of those rare experiences that is so magnificent and powerful, none can deny it. The punishment ended, and a young Naval Officer’s broken body was gently restored because Antrim cared enough to show the highest degree of brotherhood… unconditional love.

In the years that followed, torture and abuse continued. But the actions of Lieutenant Antrim that day in April gave the Japanese guards a new appreciation for their prisoners and the torture and beatings lessened for a time. For the hopeless men who struggled to find a reason to continue, to survive in the living hell to which they had been cast, there was a new inspiration.

On January 17, 1943, station J.L.G.4, Tokyo broadcast a message, read by a Japanese announcer and written by Richard Nott Antrim. It read:

> *“Dear Mother: The Japanese have given me permission to send a message and I am sending you my love. I am treated fine and in good health. I want you to write in care of the War Prisoners’ Information Bureau in Tokyo, through the International Red cross at Geneva, Switzerland. Love Dick.”*

Two and a half more years remained before he would see his family again. When he was liberated in September 1945, he returned home to continue his service in the United States Navy. He never sought recognition, only to serve others. His valor on a momentous day in April 1942, became known only because it was an act other returning

POWs couldn't help relating to others. On January 30, 1947, President Truman invited Commander Antrim to the White House to award him the Medal of Honor with that simple under-statement,

> *"You did a mighty fine thing."*

On a chilly April day in 1969, the sound of "Taps" echoed across the hillsides where warriors rest in Arlington National Cemetery. Beneath a flag-draped casket rested the body of a hero far too few people ever met. Most of his neighbors back home in Arkansas saw Dick Antrim in uniform for the first time as the newspapers announced the death of a humble, quiet man whose first concern had always been for other people.

On September 26, 1981, Mary Jean Antrim flew to Seattle for the Commissioning of the Guided Missile Frigate Antrim, named for her late husband. It was a ship destined to remind us all of a noble hero who had passed through our midst. The crest of the ship tells a story that, due to the wishes of a humble hero, hadn't been heard enough.

The wreath is for outstanding gallantry and achievement in which the palm denotes victory, and the laurel, honor. The torch symbolizing leadership and bravery is contained behind the portcullis representing the period of imprisonment as a prisoner of war.

On the shield, dark blue and gold are traditionally associated with the Navy and represent the sea and excellence. The light blue and downward-pointing star refers to the Medal of Honor awarded to Rear Admiral Antrim for heroic actions while in a Japanese POW Camp at Makassar, Celebes, and Java.

The anchor symbolizes his naval career and represents his dedication to service. The crosslets are a personal device from the Antrim family crest. The cross throughout the shield is an allusion to the Navy Cross awarded to Admiral Antrim for action in the battle of the Java Sea in the Dutch East Indies. Beneath the shield is the ship's motto "In Defense of Freedom", which provides a reference to both Admiral Antrim's life of dedication and the mission of the ship which bears his name.

Among those attending the commissioning ceremony was Tom Dearmore, now an editorial director of the San Francisco Examiner. Tom reported that the day started with the dark clouds so common to Puget Sound. And then, "just at the right moment a shaft of sunshine breaks through." Perhaps it was symbolic in its own way, a humble man's way of saying, "Okay, my story can now be shared."

A very special "Thank You" to Dick Antrim's daughter, Judy Antrim Laylon, for sharing

her father's story with us and assisting in the preparation of this story. She has done so, not only out of deep love and a sense of respect for her father but also a patriotic love for America.

Sources:

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