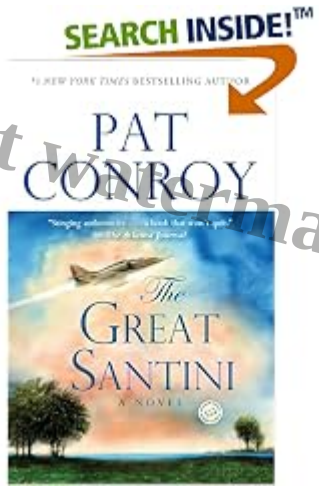
A Eulogy for Col Don Conroy, USMC

Description

Found via chasing links on the Sitemeter hits, I got to SkyGod. Not sure how I got there, but the words spoken about his father by Pat Conroy are priceless and inspiring.

A few days ago, I posted links to an editorial by Pat, where he realized he had made a mistake in avoiding service to his country. While he may have done that, he certainly understands what happens in the service, as you will note in the remembrances of his father.



default watermark

In case the name isnâ€™t ringing any bells, Col Don Conroy was the real life father of Pat, who the character of â€œBullâ€• Meecham in the book (and movie) â€œThe Great Santiniâ€• was modeled after. The real â€œGreat Santiniâ€• sounds like a real man who was larger than life, and more like a dramatized character we wish would have lived. Maybe, just maybe, one man was in real life, what we have only come to expect in the movies.

Required reading for anyone who has a parent who flies combat aircraft. â€˜Nuff said. Get to reading!

> Colonel Don Conroyâ€™s Eulogy by his son, Pat Conroy
>
> The children of fighter pilots tell different stories than other kids do. None of our fathers can write a will or sell a life insurance policy or fill out a prescription or administer a flu shot or explain what a poet meant. We tell of fathers who land on aircraft carriers at pitch-black night with the wind howling out of the China Sea.
>
> Our fathers wiped out aircraft batteries in the Philippines and set Japanese soldiers on fire when they made the mistake of trying to overwhelm our troops on the ground.

Your Dads ran the barber shops and worked at the post office and delivered the packages on time and sold the cars, while our Dads were blowing up fuel depots near Seoul, were providing extraordinarily courageous close air support to the beleaguered Marines at the Chosin Reservoir, and who once turned the Naktong River red with blood of a retreating North Korean battalion.

We tell of men who made widows of the wives of our nationsâ€™ enemies and who made orphans out of all their children.

You donâ€™t like war or violence? Or napalm? Or rockets? Or cannons or death rained down from the sky?

Then letâ€™s talk about your fathers, not ours. When we talk about the aviators who raised us and the Marines who loved us, we can look you in the eye and say â€œyou would not like to have been Americaâ€™s enemies when our fathers passed overheadâ€•.

We were raised by the men who made the United States of America the safest country on earth in the bloodiest century in all recorded history.

default watermark

Our fathers made sacred those strange, singing names of battlefields across the Pacific: Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, the Chosin Reservoir, Khe Sanh and a thousand more. We grew up attending the funerals of Marines slain in these battles.

Your fathers made communities like Beaufort decent and prosperous and functional; our fathers made the world safe for democracy.

We have gathered here today to celebrate the amazing and storied life of Col. Donald Conroy who modestly called himself by his nomdeguerre, The Great Santini.

There should be no sorrow at this funeral because The Great Santini lived life at full throttle, moved always in the fast lanes, gunned every engine, teetered on every edge, seized every moment and shook it like a terrier shaking a rat.

He did not know what moderation was or where youâ€™d go to look for it. Donald Conroy is the only person I have ever known whose self-esteem was absolutely unassailable. There was not one thing about himself that my father did not like, nor was there one thing about himself that he would change. He simply adored the man he was and walked with perfect confidence through every encounter in his life. Dad wished everyone could be just like him.

His stubbornness was an art form. The Great Santini did what he did, when he wanted to do it, and woe to the man who got in his way. Once I introduced my father before he gave a speech to an Atlanta audience. I said at the end of the introduction, â€œMy father decided to go into the Marine Corps on the day he discovered his IQ was the temperature of this roomâ€•.

My father rose to the podium, stared down at the audience, and said without skipping a beat, â€œMy God, itâ€™s hot in here! It must be at least 180 degreesâ€•.

Here is how my father appeared to me as a boy. He came from a race of giants and demi-gods from a mythical land known as Chicago. He married the most beautiful girl ever to come crawling out of the poor and lowborn south, and there were times when I thought we were being raised by Zeus and Athena.

After Happy Hour my father would drive his car home at a hundred miles an hour to see his wife and seven children. He would get out of his car, a strapping flight jacketed matinee idol, and walk toward his house, his knuckles dragging along the ground, his shoes stepping on and killing small animals in his slouching amble toward the home place.

My sister, Carol, stationed at the door, would call out, â€œGodzillaâ€™s home!â€• and we seven children would scamper toward the door to watch his entry.

The door would be flung open and the strongest Marine aviator on earth would shout, â€œStand by for a fighter pilot!â€•

default watermark

He would then line his seven kids up against the wall and say,

â€œWhoâ€™s the greatest of them all?â€•
â€œYou are, O Great Santini, you are.â€•
â€œWho knows all, sees all, and hears all?â€•
â€œYou do, O Great Santini, you do.â€•

We were not in the middle of a normal childhood, yet none of us were sure since it was the only childhood we would ever have.

For all we knew other men were coming home and shouting to their families, â€œStand by for a pharmacist,â€• or â€œStand by for a chiropractorâ€•.

In the old, bewildered world of children we knew we were in the presence of a fabulous, overwhelming personality; but had no idea we were being raised by a genius of his own myth-making.

My mother always told me that my father had reminded her of Rhett Butler on the day they met and everyone who ever knew our mother conjured up the lovely, coquettish image of Scarlet Oâ€™Hara.

Let me give you my father the warrior in full battle array. The Great Santini is catapulted off the deck of the aircraft carrier, Sicily. His Black Sheep squadron is the first to reach the Korean Theater and American ground troops had been getting torn up by North Korean regulars.

Let me do it in his voice: â€œWe didnâ€™t even have a map of Korea. Not zip. We just headed toward the sound of artillery firing along the Naktong River. They told us to keep the North Koreans on their side of the Naktong. Air power hadnâ€™t been a factor until we got

there that day. I radioed to Bill Lundin I was his wingman. â€˜There they are. Letâ€™s go getâ€™em.â€™ So we did.â€•

I was interviewing Dad so I asked, â€œhow do you know you got them?â€•

â€œEasy,â€• The Great Santini said. â€œThey were running â€“ itâ€™s a good sign when you see the enemy running.â€•

There was another good sign.

â€œWhat was that, Dad?â€•

â€œThey were on fire.â€•

This is the world in which my father lived deeply. I had no knowledge of it as a child.

When I was writing the book The Great Santini, they told me at Headquarters Marines that Don Conroy was at one time one of the most decorated aviators in the Marine Corps. I did not know he had won a single medal. When his children gathered together to write his obituary, not one of us knew of any medal he had won, but he had won a slew of them.

default watermark

When he flew back toward the carrier that day, he received a call from an Army Colonel on the ground who had witnessed the route of the North Koreans across the river. â€œCould you go pass over the troops fifty miles south of here? Theyâ€™ve been catching hell for a week or more. Itâ€™d do them good to know you flyboys are around.â€•

He flew those fifty miles and came over a mountain and saw a thousand troops lumbered down in foxholes. He and Bill Lundin went in low so these troops could read the insignias and know the American aviators had entered the fray.

My father said, â€œThousands of guys came screaming out of their foxholes, son. It sounded like a world series game. I got goose pimples in the cockpit. Get goose pimples telling it forty-eight years later. I dipped my wings, waved to the guys. The roar they let out. I hear it now. I hear it now.â€•

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, my mother took me out to the air station where we watched Dadâ€™s squadron scramble on the runway on their bases at Roosevelt Road and Guantanamo.

In the car as we watched the A-4â€™s take off, my mother began to say the rosary.

â€œYou praying for Dad and his men, Mom?â€• I asked her.

â€œNo, son. Iâ€™m praying for the repose of the souls of the Cuban pilots theyâ€™re going to kill.â€•

Later I would ask my father what his squadronâ€™s mission was during the Missile Crisis.

â€œTo clear the air of MIGS over Cuba,â€• he said.

â€œYou think you couldâ€™ve done it?â€•

The Great Santini answered, â€œThere wouldnâ€™t have been a bluebird flying over that island, son.â€•

Now let us turn to the literary of The Great Santini.

Some of you may have heard that I had some serious reservations about my fatherâ€™s child-rearing practices. When The Great Santini came out, the book roared through my family like a nuclear device. My father hated it; my grandparents hated it; my aunts and uncles hated it; my cousins who adore my father thought I was a psychopath for writing it; and rumor has it that my mother gave it to the judge in her divorce case and said, â€œItâ€™s all there. Everything you need to know.â€•

What changed my fatherâ€™s mind was when Hollywood entered the picture and wanted to make a movie of it. This is when my father said, â€œWhat a shame John Wayne is dead. Now there was a man. Only he couldâ€™ve gotten my incredible virility across to the American people.â€•

default watermark

Orion Pictures did me a favor and sent my father a telegram; â€œDear Col. Conroy: We have selected the actor to play you in the coming film. He wants to come to Atlanta to interview you. His name is Truman Capote.â€•

But my father took well to Hollywood and its Byzantine, unspeakable ways. When his movie came out, he began reading Variety on a daily basis. He called the movie a classic the first month of its existence. He claimed that he had a place in the history of film. In February of the following year, he burst into my apartment in Atlanta, as excited as I have ever seen him, and screamed, â€œSon, you and I were nominated for Academy Awards last night. Your mother didnâ€™t get squatâ€•.

Ladies and gentlemen-You are attending the funeral of the most famous Marine that ever lived. Dadâ€™s life had grandeur, majesty and sweep. We were all caught in the middle of living lives much paler and less daring than The Great Santiniâ€™s. His was a high stepping, damn-the torpedoes kind of life, and the stick was always set at high throttle. There is not another Marine alive who has not heard of The Great Santini. Thereâ€™s not a fighter pilot alive who does not lift his glass whenever Don Conroyâ€™s name is mentioned and give the fighter pilot toast: â€œHurrah for the next man to dieâ€•.

One day last summer, my father asked me to drive him over to Beaufort National Cemetery. He wanted to make sure there were no administrative foul-ups about his plot. I could think of more pleasurable ways to spend the afternoon, but Dad brought new eloquence to the word stubborn. We went into the office and a pretty black woman said that everything was squared away.

My father said, â€œItâ€™ll be the second time Iâ€™ve been buried in this cemetery.â€• The woman and I both looked strangely at Dad. Then he explained, â€œYou ever catch the flick â€œThe Great Santini? That was me they planted at the end of the movie.â€•

All of you will be part of a very special event today. You will be witnessing the actual burial that has already been filmed in fictional setting. This has never happened in world history. You will be present in a scene that was acted out in film in 1979. You will be in the same town and the same cemetery. Only The Great Santini himself will be different.

In his last weeks my father told me, â€œI was always your best subject, son. Your career took a nose dive after The Great Santini came outâ€•. He had become so media savvy that during his last illness he told me not to schedule his funeral on the same day as the Seinfeld Farewell. The Colonel thought it would hold down the crowd. The Colonelâ€™s death was front-page news across the country. CNN announced his passing on the evening news all around the world.

Don Conroy was a simple man and an American hero. His wit was remarkable; his intelligence frightening; and his sophistication next to none. He was a manâ€™s man and I would bet he hadnâ€™t spend a thousand dollars in his whole life on his wardrobe. He lived out his whole retirement in a two-room efficiency in the Darlington Apartment in Atlanta. He claimed he never spent over a dollar on any piece of furniture he owned. You would believe him if you saw the furniture. Dad bought a season ticket for himself to Six Flags Over Georgia and would often go there alone to enjoy the rides and hear the children squeal with pleasure. He was a beer drinker who thought wine was for Frenchmen or effete social climbers like his children.

default watermark

Ah! His children. Here is how God gets a Marine Corps fighter pilot. He sends him seven squirrelly, mealy-mouth children who march in peace demonstrations, wear Birkenstocks, flirt with vegetarianism, invite cross-dressers to dinner and vote for candidates that Dad would line up and shoot. If my father knew how many tears his children had shed since his death, he would be mortally ashamed of us all and begin yelling that he shouldâ€™ve been tougher on us all, knocked us into better shape â€“ that he certainly didnâ€™t mean to raise a passel of kids so weak and tacky they would cry at his death. Don Conroy was the best uncle I ever saw, the best brother, the best grandfather, the best friend-and my God, what a father. After my mother divorced him and The Great Santini was published, Don Conroy had the best second act I ever saw. He never was simply a father. This was The Great Santini.

It is time to leave you, Dad. From Carol and Mike and Kathy and Jim and Tim and especially from Tom. Your kids wanted to especially thank Katy and Bobby and Willie Harvey who cared for you heroically. Let us leave you and say goodbye, Dad, with the passwords that bind all Marines and their wives and their children forever. The Corps was always the most important thing.

Semper Fi, Dad

Semper Fi, O Great Santini.

My dear friends and fellow lovers of Santini,

You have written so many letters of condolence since my father died that Iâ€™ve been overwhelmed at the task of answering them. But know this, all of them meant something, all

of them moved me deeply, all were appreciated, and all were read. Don Conroy was larger than life and there was never a room he entered that he left without making his mark. At some point in his life, he passed from being merely memorably to being legendary.

In the thirty-three years he was in the Marine Corps, Col. Conroy concentrated on the task of defending his country and he did so, exceedingly well. In the next twenty-four years left to him, he put all his efforts into the art of being a terrific father, a loving uncle, a brother of great substance, a beloved grandfather, and a friend to thousands. Out of uniform, the Colonel let his genius for humor flourish. Always in motion he made his rounds in Atlanta each day and no one besides himself knew how many stops he put in during a given day. He was like a bee going from flower to flower, pollinating his world with his generous gift for friendships.

Don Conroy was a manâ€™s man, a soldierâ€™s soldier, a Marineâ€™s Marine. There was nothing soft or teddy-bearish about him. His simplicity was extraordinary. He died without ever owning a credit card, never took out a loan in his life, and almost all the furniture in his apartment was rented. I think he loved his family with his body and soul, yet no one ever lived who was less articulate in expressing that love. On the day the doctor told him that there was nothing more to be done for him, my father told me, â€œDonâ€™t worry about it. Iâ€™ve had a great life. No oneâ€™s had a life like me. Everyone should be so lucky.â€•

default watermark

Don Conroy died with exemplary courage, as one would expect.

He never complained about pain or whimpered or cried out. His death was stoical and quiet. He never quit fighting, never surrendered, and never gave up. He died like a king. He died like The Great Santini.

I thank you with all my heart.

Ã¢â‚¬â€• Pat Conroy

Trackbacked at:

Third World County

Category

1. History
2. Marines
3. Military
4. Quotes
5. Speeches

Date Created
December 28, 2006
Author
admin