Eulogy For a Fighter Pilot and Commenting emails

Eulogy For a Fighter Pilot  
*by Pat Conroy*

COLONEL DON CONROY'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 nations' enemies and who made orphans out of all their children.

     You don't like war or  violence?  Or napalm?  Or rockets?  Or cannons or death  rained down from the sky?  Then let'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 "you would not  like to have been American's enemies when our fathers passed  overhead".  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.  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  you'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, "My father decided to go into the Marine Corps on the day  he discovered his IQ was the temperature of this room".   My father rose to the podium, stared down at the audience, and said without skipping a beat, "My God, it's hot in here! It must be at  least 180 degrees".

     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, "Godzilla's home!" 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, "Stand by for a fighter  pilot!"  He would then line his seven kids up against the wall and  say,

          "Who's the  greatest of them all?"  
           "You are, O Great Santini, you  are."  
          "Who knows all,  sees all, and hears  all?"  
          "You do, O Great  Santini, you do."

      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, "Stand by for a pharmacist," or "Stand by  for a chiropractor".

      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  O'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:  "We didn'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 hadn't been a factor until we got there that day.   I radioed to Bill Lundin.  I was his wingman.   'There they are.  Let's go  get'em.'  So we did."

      I was interviewing Dad so I asked, "how do you know you  got  them?"  "Easy," The Great Santini said.  "They were  running - it's a  good sign when you see the enemy running.   There was another good  sign."

          "What was  that, Dad?"  
          "They were  on fire."

      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.

      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.  "Could you go  pass over the troops fifty miles south of here?  They've  been catching hell for  a week or  more.  It'd do them good to  know you flyboys are around."  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, "Thousands 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."

      During the Cuban Missile Crisis, my mother took me out to the air station where we watched Dad's squadron scramble on the runway for their  bases at Roosevelt Road and Guantanamo.  In the  car as we watched the F-4's take off, my mother began to say the rosary. "You praying for Dad  and his men, Mom?"  I asked  her.  "No, son.  I'm praying for the repose  of the souls of  the Cuban pilots they're going to kill."

      Later I would ask my  father what his squadron's mission was during the Missile Crisis.   "To clear the air of MIGS over Cuba," he said. "You think you could've  done it?"  The Great Santini answered, "There wouldn't have been a bluebird flying over that island, son."

      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 father'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,  "It's all there.  Everything you need to  know."

     What changed my father's mind was when Hollywood entered  the picture and wanted to make a movie of it.  This is when my  father said, "What a shame John Wayne is dead.  Now there was a  man.  Only he could've gotten my incredible virility across to the American people."  Orion Pictures did me a favor and sent my father a telegram; "Dear 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."

     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, "Son, you and I were nominated  for Academy Awards last night.  Your mother didn't get  squat".

      Ladies and gentlemen, you are attending the funeral of the  most  famous Marine that ever lived.  Dad'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  Santini'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.   There's not a fighter pilot alive who does not lift his glass whenever  Don Conroy's name is mentioned and give the fighter pilot toast:   "Hurrah for the next man to die".

      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,  "It'll be the second time I've been buried in this cemetery."  The  woman and I both looked strangely at Dad.  Then he explained, "You  ever catch the flick "The Great Santini? That was me they planted at the end of the movie."

     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 week’s my father told me, "I was always your  best subject, son.  Your career took a nose dive after The Great  Santini came out".

    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 Colonel'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 man's man and I would bet  he hadn't spent 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.

     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 should've been tougher on us all, knocked us into better shape - that  he certainly didn'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 good-bye, 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.

LETTER FROM  PAT CONROY

My dear friends and fellow lovers of Santini,

          You have written so many letters of condolence since my father died  that I'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  man's man, a soldier's soldier, a Marine'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, "Don't worry about  it.  I've had a great life.  No one's had a life like  me.  Everyone should be so lucky."

     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.

        Pat  Conroy

Don Conroy is Citadel, Class of 67.

---------- Original Message ----------  
From: f8flyer

To: robert Beavis Date: June 20, 2021 at 11:12 AM  
Subject: Re: Fwd: Re: The Path of the Warrior

Thanks for sharing.  George Coker and Jim Ray are good friends.  I met Al Kroboth once or twice but only briefly.  He was a Citadel graduate, and played on the basketball team with Pat Conroy, the author and son of our own Great Santini (Colonel Don Conroy, a close friend of mine).  Pat wrote a book about his varsity basketball at the Citadel, "My Losing Season".  Pat was a wonderful novelist.  He passed away a few years ago.  If you have not read his writings, give him a try.  You will recognize some of the players.  By all means, read Pat's eulogy for his father.  Truly memorable.

Orson

***Orson Swindle***

‐‐‐‐‐‐‐ Original Message ‐‐‐‐‐‐‐  
On Sunday, June 20th, 2021 at 3:49 AM, robert Beavis wrote:

---------- Original Message ----------  
From: Richard Jakucs  The Path of the Warrior

I had the privilege of knowing 3POW.

1. George Lee Cocker, U.S. Navy. George Coker grew up in Linden New Jersey and I got a chance to meet him at a parade given in his honor. Then I heard him speak at a  small venue speech at the local Rotary club.

He was part of the incorrigible’s and had successfully skate twice. The first time he made it out into the gulf of Tonkin on a raft but was picked up by North Vietnamese patrol boats.

Spent close to three years in solitary confinement because of us and he has a hollow thousand-yard stare and the eyes of a concentration camp victim.

He was still healing and trying to get used to Western life and food. While he didn’t look like John Wayne; his spirit and his actions were like John Wayne.

 2.  Colonel Jim Ray USAF. Jim was a F105 pilot yes thunder fudge that was shot down early in the war. He spent 7 1/2 years in the North Vietnamese prison  Jim was a tall drink of water from Texas. He was quiet but in his own way he was a true leader in the camps.

    Tim smuggled out lavish with vital intelligence I hate turtle guard and structure of the North Vietnamese prison a great rest of them self.

    His mother originally had the letters taken by the CIA  She begged them to make copies of the letters. so she could read her cherished songs words. The CIA relented.

      Jim was later told by the CIA and the Son Tay raiders that his intelligence from those letters was used as a basis for the brilliant, but unsuccessful, raid on the Son Tay prison.

3. Captain Al Kroboth, USMC. Al  went to Linden high school and played basketball there. He was a dear friend of my brothers and they played varsity basketball together. As a 10-year-old I was unofficial manager of the team at 10 years old.

Al was an NFO in an A-6 that was shot down late in the war during operation linebacker.  He was captured by the Viet Cong, who’s treatment was even worse than the North Vietnamese, (Hard to imagine, but watch the movie Rescue Fawn with Christian Bale).

Al had a broken back that walked through a large part of north Vietnam and Laos with a broken back.

       He was repatriated and discharged from the Marine Corps and ran his families cemetery in Linden. He recently passed away but his successful struggle and honor is not forgotten.

All three of the people I mentioned, the people in this documentary, and all who were prisoners of war in Vietnam were giants of their time.

Unsung the noblest deed will die.

Semper Fidelis,