

Of God and Country

Based on True Events

Synopsis

This story is about Arthur Henderson, my uncle. I have enhanced and interpreted some of his words based on his stories and those told by my father (his brother), numerous newspaper articles, the U.S. National Archives, and the Catholic Church Archives in Santa Barbara.

Growing up in rural Canada in the 1910s, with gloomy weather and isolation, Arthur was unhappy with life's contradictions. He questioned God while he witnessed the unnatural notions of his churchgoing parents, who seemed to accept those teachings unquestioningly. This dilemma affected his spiritual growth and restricted his artistic expression. Determined to explore and be young, he would test life's limits at every turn. His father had a life-altering accident, and his younger brother died, which propelled him into a quest for some meaning. He believed his best hope for achievement lay back in his native USA.

A train ride away is New York City, a dreamland of stars and celebrities. He desired to experience theater, arts, and music and wanted adventure and to explore. However, in God's complexity, spiritual doubt and inquisitiveness boiled under his skin. He was charismatic. People stared and noticed him. He stood out—a kind of unknown celebrity. He had no reason to dig deep into his psychic but needed to. He successfully fell into an acting job with a road company, an "Off-Broadway Production," which took him on tour across the country and abandoned him in San Francisco. The tour company went bankrupt. It was the 1930s; a depression was on the horizon. Street-level rumors were ramped up, warning of chaos, war, and fascism. Newspapers, however, reported a different twist. Arthur often walked between the social order but favored the "street" world. Within a week, he had lost this theater job, his friend who had mentored him drowned, and his mother died, which sent him into despair. He felt out of control.

So now, what to do? He and two actor friends decided to go to LA through Santa Barbara. There, he found solace from a compassionate priest when he was introduced to the famous mission. He discovers he has gotten off track, then recommits to his earlier spiritual examination and becomes a priest. Throughout the 1930s, he studied at the seminary as the world intensified. After graduation and ordination, an old colleague and friend urged him to join the military and assured him of officer status and the satisfaction of serving God and country. Through his "street" acquaintances, he heard rumors of atrocities happening in Europe. This helped make his mind up, and he became a US Army Chaplain.

After intense military training, he was sent to France in 1944, when the war was in full rage. At one battle, he rescued two army soldiers from a tank, crawling on his back. At another battle, he saved the wounded from an aerial attack, pulling them to safety. In a dramatic scene, at gunpoint in a bunker, he talked two German foot soldiers into surrender. Another incident was when a group of rowdy German soldiers hauling their wounded surrendered to him in an ox cart. As a Chaplain, he carried no weapon and was shot and injured several times. He became the "Most Decorated Chaplain" in that war.

Postwar, he recuperated at a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. During those months, he was offered a Pentagon position in the office of the Chief of Chaplains. He worked to form policy on post-war agendas like freedom of religion and human rights. He became good at his job but missed the arts. This was the "cold war" of the 50s, and a lot of suspicious activity was happening; he ignored it until he heard a confession that disturbed him. Revealing its content

was prohibited by church and judicial law. It put him into a universe of espionage. Questioned by multiple authorities from church and state, he held stout not to reveal anything. He was firm in his commitment. His enchanting personality helped outwardly, but he was internally in conflict.

A year or so elapsed, and he carried this "confession" weight into his retirement from the military and into the next stage of his life, constantly feeling suspicious characters were shadowing him. Now, in the 60s, he was a regular priest. The Franciscans wanted him to retire to parish work. He had the heart of an artist and a passion for exploration. The best thing about parish work was singing the High Mass every Sunday in front of a live audience. A clergy friend from the war years had risen to a high position at the Vatican. He used this friendship to gain an audience with Pope Paul VI. This resulted in a job restoring artwork in Latin America for the church. However, it would be under the jurisdiction of the California Franciscan Order. He was pleased.

In two years of studying art restoration in Europe, he was frequently visited by various government offices, clarifying his activities. He thought they were part of the CIA or something. When Kennedy was killed, he was bombarded with interrogation. He passed the examinations and continued to deny any so-called "Confession." He returned to the States and visited Latin America, uncovering some interesting artifacts. However, selected governments thought they owned the works, not the church. He was conflicted by this and voiced his outrage. The Mexican government did not like the attitude he displayed. He was followed by what he called "unknown rifferaff." It was unclear who was on his tail. He was involved in a massive auto accident with several cars and a truck that happened in the northern part of Mexico. A veil of suspicion surrounded his death in 1970 at age 63.

Was he a victim of circumstance or the result of God's work?