

PATRIOT ACTS

Howard L. Tomb, III

The Literary Club

4 October 2004

PATRIOT ACTS

This is the story of a soldier. This is the story of a man who loved his country. This is the story of an American. This is the story of a patriot. Yes, a patriot-with all the meaning of that word. He would object to that term, since the definition conjures up so many overtones and nuances.

Our hero was a warrior. As Lincoln said of Grant, "He fights." Also, he was man of the people, a man who disdained rank and privilege. He was modest about his accomplishments in war. He was truthful about himself to the point of revealing more than the reader wants to know. He was sensitive to his comrades in arms, and even to the enemy. He understood why we were in the war and why we had an obligation to forever exterminate fascism. Of course, you know of whom I speak. One of our own: Morse Johnson.

Morse was nominated for membership in the Literary Club by Elsie Asbury and elected in 1958. After his initial paper (entitled, "I Refuse To Answer" which justifies the use of the Fifth Amendment), As wrote him a congratulatory letter:

"Won going away in a fine effort on Maiden try," as a racing chart-maker would say of your paper.

The large crowd brought out and their decibels of applause attested to the undivided interest of the members in your well-organized and well-written paper, making your sponsors swell with pride.

Best wishes,

As

P.S. Life would be so much more attractive if one's republican friends with some of their virtues also had the intellectual and personal charm of my democratic friends...

Morse read 21 papers for the Literary Club. As his devoted wife, Betty, writes,

"[They] represent his concerns and passions from combat to civil liberties to theater to the authorship of the canon called Shakespeare." Betty and her daughter, Judith, have generously provided me all of Morse's letters from his enlistment in January 1942 until his return from Europe in October 1945, as well as a history of his beloved 712th Tank Battalion.

He looked remarkably like Peter O'Toole. Oscar Wilde opined that comparisons are odious, but Morse reveled in the comparison. Perhaps it was not Peter O'Toole but Lawrence of Arabia whom he hoped to evoke.

My task tonight is to demonstrate Morse's overall devotion to the principles of democracy in the face of constant battle. His letters are filled with awe, introspection, doubt, hope and, inevitably, fear. For those who knew Morse, you know his heart was always on his sleeve, and it was never more so than in his letters to his adored mother. I have the dubious distinction of not being Morse Johnson, so I can relate to you those stories that his modesty would have prevented him from repeating.

The 712th Tank Battalion landed on Omaha Beach June 28, 1944. They were seeing action by July 3. Of their 310 days of conflict, 298 involved active combat with the enemy. Morse's letters, which he had been writing since his enlistment, became, in the face of battle, even more lengthy and revelatory. Without frightening his mother he wanted her to understand what war was about, expressing the range of emotions he felt. As I quote from the letters, I have elected to stress the variety of his experiences rather than proceeding chronologically.

Morse provided great insight into his approach to combat. He wrote

on October 17, 1944:

When I am actually fighting the enemy, I have a wholly impersonal attitude toward those we see, wound or kill. I am unable to—or rather I do not—identify that Nazi helmet & uniform with a human personality Nor do I stimulate my fighting spirit by regarding them as beasts. There is also very little of the 'kill or be killed' in me. It is really far more methodical than that. In front of the tank is a roadblock manned by Nazis. To advance we must smash that roadblock And so we do and there is nothing much more to it than that But somehow the threat of a Nazi patrol at night presents a far more personal problem. Franz & Josef & Hans are actually out there with human qualities, virtues & faults. It is under such conditions that war becomes horrible & inconceivable.

Fear is a constant companion in battle. It is all-consuming and yet difficult to express. But listen to his letter written August 3rd, 1944.

Around 1 p.m., as we moved into a town the sky suddenly grew brilliant with light—& truly beautiful! But the cause of the light were flares dropped from Nazi bombers & there we were, big as anything, on the road with the flares lighting us up as clearly as a noon sun. "Close all hatches & pull to the side of the road," I commanded, & as I spoke the eerie sound of the power dive reached my ears. I slammed down the turret hatch & there we 5 were closeted as they blasted up & down, in and around us. I have been in some tight spots before in this war but nothing as nerve wracking as this. Our whole left side of the tank lifted completely off the ground at one explosion & glass & mortar from an adjacent building splattered over the tank. There was none of our night fighters about & our anti-aircraft activity seemed slight, so up & down the road they loosed their destruction with relative freedom. We tried to joke but humor came slowly & was forced when spouted between the blasts, the roars & the screeching whistles of both falling bomb & plane. It lasted for about 10 minutes & never again will I laugh at the movie comedian who simulates fright by knocking his knees together, for mine, & I say this literally, were closing & opening rapidly. Part of this, I explained to myself when unable to get them under control, was the muscular tension— my position in the tank as tank commander permits me only to stoop down with bended knee, holding onto the inside handle of the turret hatch—but later, in unashamed confession, everyone agreed that he too had had similar difficulty in trying to control the knee knocking.

Tanks fight on behalf of our infantry. They clear the way of pillboxes and enemy

on foot. They do not engage other tanks unless they must. On February 13, 1945, Morse wrote an account that for this reason is even more harrowing.

A forward observer spotted some Heines trying to set up some mortars in the woods out front. Artillery laid down on them & so did Oley & I, & we were just congratulating ourselves when Oley yelled, "Tanks, Johnny—Heine tanks!—Get the artillery!" One of the houses blocked my view but I shouted to the telephone man in the house & as I did I saw Oley's tank belching out armor piercing shells. I was just about to try to maneuver my tank into a position so that I could get in Last night it warmed up a bit & today a thaw set in—which makes for much sloppiness—but you know how much I prefer the latter to the lacerating cold which we have had. You seem to understand how miserably I react to cold weather. And really as unimaginative & immature as it may sound I am always urging that we move into a Heine-occupied town where a good chance of a warm stove exists—that is, fight our way into it—in preference to sitting the night out in deep snow & freezing cold. Perhaps the most fearful part of this life is that being overwhelmingly cold—feet & hands numb—there is quite frequently no hope for warmth for some time to come. There you are outside & nightfall curtains—eliminates usually—any firemaking & while you can generally find warmth in your bedroll if you climb in right after unrolling it. But then—Guard!—and all of you is ice cold when you're through & the bedroll is crinkling with frost & ice. And the tremendous decision!—whether to abandon once & for all the foot end of your bedroll & curl your legs up into the semi-warmth of your hips & thighs or battle it out down there with your feet!—oh, I seek no pity for 75% of the time we manage to get a room—or at worst a barn, where, at least, you can sleep warmly.

But as uncomfortable as his circumstances clearly were. Morse realized that many of his fellow soldiers had it worse. On November 21, 1944 he penned the following:

Yesterday we had stood on the left flank of the town on a road & being road-bound (the ground on both sides entirely too soft to hold our 32 tons) we were like ducks as Heine artillery threw shell after shell at us. Far better to be an infantryman, I concluded, as he can duck & dodge in almost any direction. And, what is more, he keeps warm because he stays on the move. I tried to tingle my frozen feet by kicking them up against the track. And then a company of infantry went by. The column halted for a few minutes & I chatted

with a couple of them. One boy was carrying the base plate of a 3-inch mortar & he told me it weighed 42 lbs.—the ammunition carrier told me the shells

weighed 45 lbs. And I tried to hoist the same on my shoulder! I looked at the hill they had just mounted, at the slush & wet of the mud, at their mud-caked shoes. I looked at one thin, bespectacled little fellow; he had his rifle at high port, for some 300 yards ahead there were Heines. In civilian life, no doubt, he had punched an adding machine in a nice warm office. His ankles were wet & covered with slush. As he went by I grinned and said, "Rugged go, huh, Mac?"—and he responded cheerfully & determinedly. I climbed back into the tank full of thanks that I was a tanker.

Staying alert, waiting for the next salvo from the enemy is enervating, as the letter of December 17, 1944 tells us:

The lulls in battle are trying... For periods we will become daring, restless & foolish & stick our heads out pretty far & then a concentration will land nearby & down we dive with all hatches closed—a period of quiet & we open a hatch, then another one, etc. & then a repeat performance! But frequently there will be long periods of quiet & the only thing I can resort to is a book—the other day we had it fast & furious for about *Vi* hour & then, although bitter fighting waged some two blocks ahead, we stayed put for 10 hours, during which time I read half of "Pride and Prejudice"!

Imagine being in mortal combat and having the concentration of mind to read a book, and not just any book, but "Pride and Prejudice." Only Morse—and perhaps Jim Bridgeland—could be concerned with late 18th century manners when their lives could be eliminated in a puff of smoke.

From the outset Morse recognized the gravity and significance of being part of the maelstrom of World War II. Listen to his letter of June 6, 1944:

Well, write the above date down in banner letters & recognize that it will, in time, rank with July 4, 1776 and other glorious days. While we here had no inside information as to when the long-expected, feverishly prepared-for day would come, we guessed that something big was afoot when from midnight last night until dawn the air was heavy with planes. They were so abundant that the noise disturbed our sleep!

Morse remained in England, awaiting orders to join the invading Allied forces in

Normandy. His love of America was overwhelming, as expressed in his letter of June 12, 1944:

They have just finished a tea dance in the next room & played the Star-Spangled Banner. I stood more than usually erect & proud.

Fast-forwarding two months, to August 6, 1944, we learn from Morse the way in which true liberators are welcomed:

Yesterday was 'Big Parade' day, for the roads were lined with the cheering 'liberated' natives. We were the center of adulation & attention. Flowers by the thousands were hurled at us, millions of kisses blown to us, & at every pause the glass of "citre" &/or cognac. (I have enclosed one of the petals from a flower which landed in my face.)... One lady shepherding 3 youngsters was obsessed with the handshaking tribute & maneuvered her party from one end of the column to the other & stopping at each tank to pump the arm of each crew member. There was in her face a sort of ecstatic hysteria & for that fact on every face was an undeniable elation...

What would Mr. Cheney have given to be able to quote such a letter from our troops in Iraq?

Ever the political activist. Morse's thoughts were never far from the campaigns back in the States. His letters are replete with suggestions for the way to keep FDR in office, voting for Lausche, and making sure that Bob Taft's iniquities were revealed. He was concerned that every citizen ought to take advantage of the right to vote. On April 15, 1944 he wrote the following to his mother:

The apathy & frustrated indifference among the soldiers re the coming election disturbs me deeply... [T]he mere trouble of writing for an

application, then applying & then voting is a sufficient obstacle in most cases, I nevertheless am forced, most unwillingly, to believe that there is still no recognition of the strong connection between exercising democratic privileges—voting being as important as any— & the present war.

He wanted his views to prevail with his family as well as with his fellow soldiers. For instance, on September 28, 1944, he wrote his mother in apparent response to his aunt's letter:

Aunt **Byrd** wrote that Aunt **Nesta** was an "all-out **FDR** booster"— scratch a **Johnson** deeply enough & you will always find intelligence!!

During the course of my conversations with Betty, I asked her, "Why was Morse so liberal?" She looked at me incredulously and shrugged. "Because he was so intelligent."

The following are excerpts from a myriad of accounts about the horror that is war.

(I) heard the news broadcast recounting the facts about the execution of the American aviators by the Japanese. Somehow the act is so loathsome and brutal that it shocked and enraged me to the very marrow of my bones. It is no paradox to be emotionally wrought up by this event when it comes at a time when killing is paramount the world over. On the battlefield, strength is pitted against strength, wile against wile. Even the bombing of civilians is justifiable and not so bluntly unfair and base. I think of the men who were executed and for the first time I have a heart and mind filled with vengeance. The act is so vicious, so foreign to even the most primitive rules of justice and sportsmanship. It angers and appalls me far more than Pearl Harbor did.
[late 1943?]

Only Morse **Johnson** would use the word "sportsmanship" in this context. As the extent of the atrocities became apparent, his letters home reflected his inability to comprehend the savagery.

I was shocked by (an) eyewitness account of the Nazi extermination of Polish Jews. How can men become so bestial—so indifferent to suffering &

death? Over here we become callous to death; we see it in so many shapes & forms & we see it so often. And yet it is a self-imposed, skin-deep callousness. For instance, the other day several of us were walking by a dead Heine & I happened to remark: "You know, he loved life like we do—liked

women & jokes & home & a fireside." And for all the dead Americans I have seen, I can never help but feel a strong wrenching inside when I pass another body & yet I doubt whether anyone near me would realize my feelings. To that extent and for that purpose we dope ourselves. But in the concentration & extermination camps there seems to have been nothing of this sort. If there isn't a positive enjoyment, a sadism, there is, at least, no repulsion. Nor has it been bom of desperation or **enflamed** vindication. No, I cannot understand it! [February 15, 1945]

At the same time, he was able to see the opportunities that lay ahead.

Well, the most spine-tingling scenes are those in which the slave laborers—the Poles, French, Slavs, Russians—come ecstatically leaping out of their miserable holes in the ground and, crying and embracing us. Already the roads are clogged with these poor, miserable souls starting their long trek back to the homeland. Today all of this really took hold of me and I could not keep myself from sort of shuddering all over, watering at the eyes and saying to myself over & over: "This is too big a thing for me—I can't grasp it all. This is tremendous & all-important. This is liberation & freedom, here it is, everything vital in this whole world, wholly represented by these delirious men. Yes, this makes it all worthwhile. But it's too big— too emotional." I quiver even as I now write about it. [March 30, 1945]

Finally, the **fighting** ceased on May 8, 1945, and we find Morse at the end of his journey. The 712th Battalion had traveled from the beaches of Normandy through France to the Battle of the Bulge in **Bastogne**, breaking through the Siegfried Line, crossing the **Mosel** and Rhine rivers, and finally ending up in eastern Europe.

I am permitted to say that we are now in Czechoslovakia; we were, in fact, the first American units to cross that border. It is a real joy to be liberating rather than conquering. It's France all over again with the mad cheering crowds and the flowers. And then we have in the past month liberated so many thousands of American Prisoners of War. Their harrowing tales, their emaciated bodies, their intense desire for vengeance, do not make pretty pictures. Some have been enslaved since June 1944 and have worked in coal mines 12 to 14 hours a day... I could write at length about all these matters and probably will some one of these days. But at the moment my heart and mind are so filled with the blessings of the day that I do not wish to plunge into those tragic aspects. [May 8, 1945]

Morse was given a battlefield commission a few weeks before the end of the war. His battalion had been decimated, and his leadership qualities were apparent. One might have expected Morse to enter the service through Officer Candidate School, but, as his letters explain, he wanted to be just one of the men with no special privileges. In any event, he ultimately became an officer. He reacts to this in his letter of May 9, 1945:

Well it is rather difficult to orient oneself to being an officer. With the boys in the Company there is, of course, absolutely no change. But naturally I must have contact with men from other units and it is both strange and unpleasant to be sirred and saluted. Like royalty, it is so very false. Two weeks ago if a joke of mine was not funny, there would be no laughter; if a suggestion of mine did not pass muster, it was not adopted. Now even the slightest quip results in laughter. Oh not a conscious attempt to please but rather a nervous habit of adaptation to the mood of an officer. And in the past if I suggested that a vehicle be parked over there, more often than not the driver would know of a better spot. Now it's 'very good, sir'. Except for my beloved Moody, one of the Service co. gas truck drivers, who is wholly genuine and not controlled, as are so many others, by custom and habit. When I returned he cuffed me on the shoulders and said:

"Those G..D..gold bars don't frighten me. You're still Johnny."

In 1944 the army and the navy started awarding bronze stars for valor in combat. Morse received his Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster in September 1944. This was not a significant event as far as he was concerned, since he mentions it only in the third paragraph of his October 27th letter:

For what it's worth. Mother, I am quoting from a piece of paper handed me the other day: "Award of Bronze Star!....Morse Johnson....for heroic service in connection with military operations against the enemy in France on 12 September 1944."

Now before you take pride in your son too much let me tell you two things. First, our commanding general once said that to receive an award a soldier needed three things: 1) the opportunity; 2) guts; 3) a good publicity agent.

Second, I did nothing more than any other person in this company on that day & less than many have done on other days. But the lieutenant's tank went out & he rode with me a good deal of the time. He was awarded a decoration because the particular mission achieved real tactical success & in a burst of generosity recommended me for the same.

The extent of his modesty is stunning. He was also awarded a Purple Heart, which he fails to mention in any of the letters home.

Introspection and curiosity run all through Morse's letters. He moves from descriptions of battle, to politics, to the conditions under which the soldiers lived, to ruminating on the fortunes of the Cincinnati Reds, even to his advancing age:

Well, dearest Mother, I am 30! William Pitt, the Younger, was Prime Minister of England at the age of 21 & Bryant wrote "Thanatopsis" at 17—all the more incredible when you think that neither of them had you for a mother. We'll talk over such matters as we sit in the yard sipping martinis & watching the lights blink over in Kentucky—this summer! [February 15, 1945]

Of course. Morse didn't make it home by the summer of 1945. But by late October of that year he was back in Cincinnati, hopefully sipping martinis.

Morse ran for Congress in 1948. He ran as an unmitigated liberal in what we all know is a highly conservative district. Truman beat Dewey that year—despite all predictions: The Roper poll taken three days before the election showed Dewey winning by over 15%. Truman, who had said that if he won Hamilton County he could win Ohio, and with a win in Ohio, win the nation, did just that. Morse did not fare as well. He lost to a 5-term incumbent.

Morse remained a committed liberal for the rest of his life. More than twenty-three years after the end of World War II, he presented a paper entitled "Of Patriotism

and Conscience" on October 21, 1968. This was at the height of the Vietnam War and less than a month before the election of Richard Nixon as president. Morse was affronted by the phrase "America, Love It Or Leave It". He wrote:

Contrary to the affirmations of all the familiar patriotic rituals, songs and pledges, this fiat to love or leave reflects rancor and malevolence. It is intended to and does carry the menacing implication that there are among us many whom the hawkers of the command have decided to label **un-American**. This is destructive not constructive, for when patriotism is used by partisans it becomes divisive rather than underlying, and when patriotism is used to besmirch rather than bestir it loses its aura of clean nobility.

There is no one and only American way...(A)ll of us should at once reject, if not condemn, any attempt to identify one side of an issue and its advocates with loyalty and the other side and its advocates with disloyalty.

Throughout his life Morse **Johnson** remained a patriot. He never stopped fighting for truth and justice. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Dissent is the essence of patriotism." I believe Morse would agree with that definition.