

FAITH MATTERS

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LOVE, FAITH AND THE LOST BATTALION

BY DR. E. WESLEY ELY



**IT TAKES THREE PEOPLE
TO STAY MARRIED, MY PATIENT SAID.
'DAISY, ME AND GOD.'**

When his wife's scream from the next room awakened him, Ford Callis leapt bolt upright out of bed. Then he fell, his left eye smashing the edge of the bed stand. As he hit the ground, the air gushed out of his lungs. Mr. Callis, who is 94, listened intently to the noise-monitor in the dark for any clues from his demented wife, Daisy, in the next room. He could hear his own heart throbbing, he would

later tell me, but nothing more. He tried unsuccessfully to crawl to her.

The bleeding laceration on his eye, and his new shoulder and chest injuries, reminded him of the time 60 years ago that he'd been injured and trapped in a foxhole in the French Alps, a member of the famed World War II Lost Battalion. Rescue came then, and it would come now, since the





morning phone call from his daughter had gone unanswered as he lay stranded on the floor hours later peering at the sunrise through the window.

Later that day Mr. Callis ended up on our ICU service. Lying helplessly on the floor after his fall, he had developed enough muscle breakdown on what he called the “death crawl” toward his wife that his kidneys shut down from toxic injury. He also developed a bleeding stress ulcer and a new blood clot in his left leg, all of which made for complicated medical circumstances that nearly ended his life.

Yet Mr. Callis kept asking only: “When can I return home to care for Daisy? She’s waiting for me in Ridgetop”—in the rustic house in Tennessee she bought 71 years ago with savings from her job as a riveter making planes during the war.

In the hospital our team of white

coats swooped in to “save” Mr. Callis. Yet we later learned from what he told us that his real rescue, the one that mattered most, had occurred on a much higher plane, through a sacramental promise made many decades earlier.

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The story began before he became a soldier, when he was 20, and he and Daisy had married. Shortly thereafter, he went through military training and shipped off to Naples, Italy, with the 36th Infantry. The company made its way to the Vosges Mountains of the French Alps, where the Germans surrounded them and began starving them out. Following failed rescue attempts by the two other battalions of the 36th Infantry, they became known as the Lost Battalion. After eight days without

food and water and stuck in foxholes drinking from a pond and eating worms, they were liberated by the 442nd Regiment of Nisei Japanese-Americans.

And now, decades later, Mr. Callis was determined to rescue Daisy. Sporting a black eye but smiling from his ICU bed,



he said: “Doctor, I need you to get me home to my wife as soon as possible.” His dutiful daughter stopped staring at the blood dripping into his IV and said, “Yep, that’s his main mission in life, and he refuses to fail.”

Through marriage, it became clear, Mr. Callis had undergone the type of indelible change in a soul that no personal injury or earthly event can undo. “Having someone believe in me and waiting for me back home, that is what gives me purpose. I am more than myself because of our marriage,” he said, expressing his hope that people not give up on marriage even when the sparks of romance seem distant.

All this brought to mind the words of the German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he wrote from a Nazi prison to his niece before her wedding: “Marriage is more than your love for each other... In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed in a post of responsibility toward the world and mankind. Your love is

your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, an office.”

The story of Ford and Daisy generated lots of discussion on hospital rounds that day. Theirs was not a tale of military or medical rescue, as exciting and perhaps technically interesting as those were. It was one of marital rescue. This covenant has liberated their souls and given them a higher purpose. Each of us that day, married or not, caught a glimpse of where our true north lies and a reminder of when we are at our best—in serving another.

Mr. Callis eventually regained color and strength, and on the morning of his hospital discharge he once more explained, “You know, it takes three people to stay married: Daisy, me and God. This is not just a civil agreement; we are one.” It was a beautiful echo of another line in Bonhoeffer’s letter to his niece: “It is not your love that sustains your marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.”

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Dr. E. Wesley Ely, MD, MPH is a subspecialist in Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine with a focus in Geriatrics, who conducts patient-oriented, health services research as a Professor of Medicine at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa and Summa Cum Laude from Tulane University and earned his medical degree from Tulane University School of Medicine and master's in public health degree from the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine in New Orleans, Louisiana. There he was elected to Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA) medical honors society. Dr. Ely's research has focused on improving the care and outcomes of critically ill patients with severe sepsis and respiratory failure, with special emphasis on the problems facing older patients in the ICU (e.g., weaning from mechanical ventilation, delirium in the ICU, neuropsychological and functional deficits post ICU care). He was elected to membership in the American Society of Clinical Investigation (ASCI) and serves as the Associate Director of Aging Research for the VA Tennessee Valley Geriatric Research and Education Clinical Center (GRECC). He is a life-long Catholic, who considers his priorities firmly entrenched first as a Christian, then as a husband and father to his wife and family, and then as a physician. He actively serves as the faculty sponsor of the student-run Catholic Medical Student Organization of Vanderbilt Medical School called the Society of Saints Cosmas and Damian (SSCD). Dr. Ely is also the President for the Nashville Guild of the Catholic Medical Association.



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