

“The Hotel Tacloban”: The Depravity of War from The Pacific War Theater to the CIA’s Phoenix Program

Review of Douglas Valentine's Book

By [Dr. T. P. Wilkinson](#)

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“I’ll never forget that day—it was the day of his mother’s funeral. I’d heard the news of Kennedy’s death on the TV and I’d gone into the living room, where the adults were consoling one another, to let everyone know. I was fourteen at the time and the first person I told was my grandfather, who didn’t hear a word I said, and who, when I repeated myself, pulled away from me and said, ‘I don’t care.’ Next I told my father the awful news, ‘Dad’ I said excitedly, ‘The President’s been shot and they got the guy who did it.’ More kindly than bitterly, he replied, ‘the guy they got didn’t do it, Doug. You can count on that.’”

Unlike untold many of that generation, Douglas Valentine did not become obsessed with the question “who shot Kennedy?” At the age of 14, he could not imagine why his father had reacted in that way to news of the Dallas assassination. Yet he went on to publish his first book 24 years later in which he discovered the roots of his father’s reaction that day.

The Hotel Tacloban recounts the story of a 16-year-old high school dropout who, like many of his generation, lied about his age to get into the Army and go fight the “Good War”, for flag and country as an Eagle Scout should. He could have no idea that he would spend about one month in combat and the following three years in a Japanese POW camp.

Joining the Army was not only patriotic it was an escape from home. He was shipped to the Pacific where his unit was assigned and to a campaign with Australians that officially never took place. Generalissimo and Viceroy of the Philippines Douglas MacArthur had agreed to deploy secretly to New Guinea a contingent of US Forces to assist the Australians in obstructing the Empire of Japan from staging an invasion of Australia from New Guinea’s southern coast. There the unit to which Douglas Valentine Sr. was assigned was sent and there is where MacArthur forgot about them.



Douglas Valentine with his father, Douglas Valentine, Sr. (Source: douglasvalentine.com)

Douglas Valentine became a writer by first recovering everything his father had been commanded officially to forget some 40 years previously. The literary transcription covers events that “did not happen”. The mission on which his father was sent ended in a patrol where everyone in his squad but him was killed. There were no American troops in New Guinea at the time and hence there could also be no US POWs. He was the only US soldier in a camp otherwise holding only Australian and British prisoners—and at age 16 he was more than somewhat out of place. The events in three years of Douglas Sr.’s youth didn’t happen and even as they were happening, were entering historical oblivion—pushing the participants into an oblivion—albeit in a place and time less renowned than Dallas in 1963.

Lying about his age to do his patriotic duty: does the lie or the duty or the patriotism come first in the Boy Scout law?[1] especially when one has reached the pinnacle of the paramilitary organisation Baden-Powell launched in support of British imperialism during the Boer War. After three years of imprisonment, this Eagle Scout came back to the US physically broken and denied every recognition, benefits or assistance due to veterans of US wars. What is worse he had to give his consent to this denial, obstructing later recourse. Naturally the actions of MacArthur, Patton and Eisenhower toward the WWI veterans of the “Bonus Army” could have shown what the ordinary private soldier has to expect when in need after having served his country. However, the machine for selling the military and war has always been rather successful at masking the real divisions between those who command and those who die. Even today it is the supposed military virtue attributed to these generals, their supposed loyalty and concern for their troops, their supposed (imagined) bravery at the head of enormous bureaucratic organisations which is allowed to overshadow their actual conduct as officers in the military class and caste system.

The history of the prisoner-of-war camp known as “Hotel Tacloban”, because of its proximity to the eponymous provincial capital of the Philippine island of Leyte, might never have been told. Douglas Jr. and Douglas Sr. were not on the best of terms—quite aside from the generational conflict and the political turmoil caused by the war against Vietnam. The author’s father was not among those proud veterans with stories or anecdotes (real or fabricated) from their days in “the War”. He belonged to none of the typical veterans organisations, viewing them more with contempt than respect. Had Douglas Sr.’s GP not prescribed telling his story as a way to relieve his illnesses—after multiple heart attacks, open heart surgery and decades suffering from malaria (which officially he never had), he

may never have lived to tell. Father and son had to create a basis of communication virtually from scratch. This is probably why the book is so successful in its aim to present the story accurately and why it is free from the sentimentality that makes treacle out of most memoirs. Although unsentimental *The Hotel Tacloban* is saturated with unstated but real empathy for the person whose story is recorded. In fact this empathy was so powerful that former CIA director William Colby granted Douglas Valentine the key interview that would lead to his landmark study *The Phoenix Program*.^[2]

One reason this story is so remarkable is that the narrator was already on the verge of taking the secrets with him to the grave. He had been spared a kangaroo court by the Army high command on the condition that he never tell the story to anyone and also consent to having his entire service record “sheep-dipped”. This seems strange given that he was a POW in an enemy camp for whom mere survival had been the only accomplishment of his three-years in the Pacific Theatre on behalf of the USA. This had been an official war against a declared enemy—just like the US Constitution prescribed, unlike every US war since then. In the “Good War” where so much nostalgia and patriotic humbug prevails to this day and where every US veteran is supposed to have been a hero in the face of the yellow savagery of the Japanese imperial forces, the brutally inhumane treatment of a 16-year-old for three years should have been one more glorious sacrifice for freedom and democracy about which every patriotic American should know. Why was Douglas Valentine Sr. not to be immortalised like the POWs of Bataan?

Another remarkable quality of *The Hotel Tacloban* is that it goes beyond mere transcription. After years of abysmal health, Douglas’ father had to recount events, which by his own standards filled him with shame. The story he told his son could not be uplifting or evidence that indeed the father’s conservative ideals had triumphed or were in any way worthy of emulation. Of course some of the feelings burdening the principal in the story cannot be attributed to ideology or personal opinion but must be seen in the overall trauma of war. Where soldiers are taught to obey, kill or die, the failure to die while comrades are killed or the inability to kill when ordered to do so or even to kill when there have been no orders but necessity is worse than original sin. One can cease to believe in God, but the military remains and with it all the capacity to punish those who violate its codes of conduct. The book that resulted is a small effort to transcend that closed immoral world and the control it exercises over the souls of those who have spent any serious amount of time in it. It is not a story of familial or generational reconciliation but a partial purging of the military parasite that like the malaria parasite had destroyed the youth and most of the adult life of Douglas Valentine Sr.

The Hotel Tacloban is a short book, 173 pages comprising nineteen chapters. In the beginning the background to the deployment that brought the 16-year-old to New Guinea is told. Intermittently the exploits of the big Douglas, the great self-promoting warrior chieftain and third generation mass murderer in the commission of the United States, MacArthur are summarised for context.^[3] This serves to remind the reader of the difference between the war story for public consumption and the war stories that are suppressed because they neither flatter the mass murdering class nor make good advertising for cannon fodder. At the same time it is important to see that Douglas Valentine Sr.’s suffering is a direct result of the uncontrollable egotism, class and caste arrogance, and blood lust of the Big Mac, who was fond of posing as a soldier’s soldier but in fact considered any and all servicemen who did not immediately benefit his career to be worthless. Douglas MacArthur was probably the most theatrical of the mass murdering class in his day and so it might be unfair to make him

a bigger, easier target than he already was. Eisenhower liked to keep a low profile; letting generals like Patton “play Macbeth”. From a stylistic point of view it is highly appropriate to focus on MacArthur also because of the coincidence of their first names.

The story is an investigation in the depravity of war, not only for those upon whom it is waged but also for those who are just there to obey, kill and die. It is also something like what the Germans call a *Bildungsroman*, a novel in which the protagonist is educated and developed into the character central to the narrative. At the same time this book has the brilliance of Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*.^[4] Douglas Valentine Sr. is not executed like Melville’s hero but the story is full of the contradictions of class and caste in the military (the only place in American society where both class and caste are even acknowledged). Beginning with Valentine’s landing in New Guinea and the patrol in which all but him are brutally killed, the story includes details that suggest explanations for events but remain riddles unsolved. For instance, before going out on patrol the lieutenant leading the squad orders Valentine to remove a military patch displaying crossed swords (perhaps a cavalry badge) from his uniform. Grudgingly he assents but apparently forgets to actually do it. When the squad is ambushed, every soldier is brutally bayoneted until the Japanese come to him. The Japanese officer commanding appears to recognise the crossed sword patch and Douglas’ life is spared. Yet the story offers no explanation for this anywhere, leaving the attentive reader to wonder what the significance of this trivial detail has if any.

To arrive at the prison camp, the young Douglas Sr. has to be transferred by ship from New Guinea to Leyte and is blindfolded the entire route. Here again we notice that a fact becomes a narrative device because the capture and transfer were alienating but the reader has to understand how alienation occurs in the person who experiences it. This use of detail to construct preponderance in a situation has become a characteristic of Douglas Valentine’s work. Although there is nothing sinister in the transfer itself, the stages of entering the hell that Valentine Sr. would inhabit for three years are just as important because the violence of war is not accidental activity. It is planned and depends on a myriad of ordinary operations, which if viewed in isolation conceal the concept of mass murder to which these acts also belong.

In *The Phoenix Program*, Valentine applies this attention to detail masterfully by presenting the organisation of operations and their components—to reveal structure in which facts first acquire any useful meaning.^[5]



MacArthur Landing Memorial Park, Palo, Philippines (Source: Trover)

Douglas Sr. arrives in a camp, originally constructed by the US colonial regime to detain Filipinos and hence woefully “undersized” for white folks, the Australian and British inmates. Because he is a private and still a youth and because he is the only American he is taken under the wing of the Australian majority in the camp. Thus we learn about the way Australians behave, at least in contrast to the expectations of this youth from upstate New York, and the lack of filial love between HM Australian Forces and the British Army. Douglas begins to learn about social organisation in this sweltering and infested, disease ridden patch of earth. The British are the best organised and therefore dominate the camp despite their inferior numbers. However this organisation is based on rigid class distinctions and the capacity to demand not only military discipline but also fealty and subservience according to

rank and station. If there is a hell and it is organised then it will be commanded by a regular British Army officer of at least field grade (major or above). This plot of hell is commanded by the graduate of HM Royal Military College Sandhurst, Major R L Cumyns.[6]

As Valentine Sr. related it:

“I suppose it’s a cultural foible with the English (certainly any nation that nurtures and glorifies a royal family, at huge public expense, necessarily develops an unnatural devotion to figures of authority), but it was embarrassing to watch the Brits grovel at the Major’s feet. For their part the Aussies looked down upon the Brits with disgust and wondered how any self-respecting man, especially a soldier, could allow himself to accept such a demeaning, subservient role. No Aussie in his right mind would ever play the toy soldier, or yield to someone regardless of his merits. Aussies rendered their loyalty to individuals of proven worth, not to abstracts like office or rank.”

Of course what also separated the British from the Australians (and Valentine) was the fact that most of the British were professional soldiers—the Army was their business. The Australians were serving because Japan—at least New Guinea—was on their doorstep. When the war was over the Australians would return to Civvy Street.[7] The sergeant major, those company grade officers and NCOs had to play by the rules—the rules of the mass murdering elite who control the professional armed forces. They could not afford Australian libertarianism—even had it occurred to them.

Valentine also learned a subtle lesson—one which is not openly taught, but essential for survival. All militaries are organised hierarchically and the most salient distinction is between officers and men. Major Cumyns was first and foremost an officer and then he was British—at least as far as ordinary soldiers were concerned. This may be extreme in the British Army but it is common to virtually all war machines. Valentine was to learn at high cost to himself what it meant to violate the rules of this hierarchy—of class in an absolute system like the Army.

At this point it is important to note that although war is essentially a lawless condition—organised murder and destruction, in which the criminals who run the State authorise those they rule to commit virtually unlimited violence against chosen targets with whatever state of the art weaponry prevails—there has been a tradition in most societies that regulate even the limits of this authorised murder—if only to keep the organised hordes from turning on their leaders or interfering with the State’s objectives by mere wanton violence. This lawlessness is governed by what are generally called the “laws of war”. In ancient times, i.e. before industrial mass slaughter (middle of 19th century), these mainly unwritten rules were based on the sentimentality of chivalry. Knights were supposed to be subject to codes of conduct including respect for the unarmed or those who surrender in battle. However with the abeyance of “knightly combat” new instruments were developed. In fact the chivalric codes for war only applied to combatants of equal rank and station and never extended protection to foot soldiers of the rank and file.

The unpleasantness of the British war in the Crimea led to the establishment of the Red Cross, which among other things was supposed to ameliorate the conditions of soldiers sick or wounded and later those captured in combat.[8] This was initially only a national solution intended to dampen public disgust at the British Army’s mismanagement of the war. Eventually this model was extended to cover most countries for whom professional trans-

border murder and mayhem were standard. (Needless to say little aid was afforded those in the colonies or wherever non-whites were resisting conquest by force of arms.) The exceptional slaughter among white folks in the years 1914 - 1917 served to reinforce arguments for rules to govern the conduct of mass murder by uniformed servants of the State. Today we still have The Hague and Geneva Conventions [9] governing the conduct of war and the treatment of prisoners of war.

Part of this law was pragmatic. Neither belligerent had an interest in the wholesale slaughter of captives. If recalcitrant union members were to be massacred by machine guns and mortars at the Somme, the terrified survivors should be kept alive to return to work in the mines in a more disciplined manner when hostilities ceased. Just as important however was the need of the State to maintain morale and recruitment quotas for mass armies. If it were clear that death was the only result of mobilisation even the most patriotic peasant would sooner or later say "no". At the same time, strict obedience is necessary to get thousands to run, crawl or walk to their deaths. Were war to mean utter lawlessness, soldiers could abandon their duty upon capture or surrender so it was necessary to assure that capture and non-combatant status did not eliminate class control.

As a result the laws of war codified the practices of class (and race) distinctions too. In a POW camp it is generally prohibited to assign officers to manual labour. Officers are to be accorded the courtesies and privileges due to their rank even in captivity—within the scope of the camp's resources. US soldiers remain subject to military law (UCMJ - *Uniform Code of Military Justice*) while in captivity.[10] De facto they also remain subject to every kind of brutality and chicanery that the military hierarchy has ever invented for the subordination of the ordinary soldier. One could argue even more so than in combat. The officer in prison is no longer able to simply order his subordinates into battle from which he can expect they will not return—a common practice during the so-called Great War. He is leader in a defeated unit. The imputed bravery which is the officer's ritual claim to authority not only cannot be exercised, it can be seriously questioned as having been inadequate to prevent captivity in the first place. For these reasons it is all the more urgent that officers maintain those class and caste distinctions of rank since they have been deprived of any other sort of legitimation and by their own subordination to the enemy also their freedom to arbitrarily dispose of unpleasant members of the lower ranks.

Neither the victorious nor the vanquished among the officer class (and the larger class of mass murderers to whom they belong) can afford to risk breach of discipline—especially since unlike in peacetime, the rank and file have already been issued a license to kill.

Hence Major Cumyns was afforded all the privileges of his class, rank and station, even in the hell of Hotel Tacloban. Conversely the ordinary soldiers were subject to whatever routine abuse they would have to accept in peacetime—aggravated by the war and the virtually unrestricted violence of those waging it.

At Hotel Tacloban this was no exception. The Japanese captain commanding knew as well as Major Cumyns that officers belong to the ruling class and are to be treated accordingly. Major Cumyns also knew that the proper conduct of an officer is always to kiss ass upward and to kick ass downward. Hence in the management of the camp both Major Cumyns and Captain Yoshishito behaved essentially as if they were in the same army while only the ordinary soldiers were prisoners—to be treated accordingly.

Although *The Hotel Tacloban* is not written as an allegory or even a history of British intra-

imperial relations, it is easy to surmise that the antagonism between the British, with Cumyns at the apex, and the Australians, led by Lieutenant Duffy, has its own history pre-dating the camp. Ordinary Australian military history records the anger of many soldiers who fought in the First World War and died gratuitously under British command. [11] The ethnic composition of Australia—leaving aside other immigration—included not just those stigmatised by penal servitude and transportation for “crimes” but also the components of the British population which the English upper classes (and before them their Norman forebears) had been taught to despise—esp. Scots and Irish. Douglas Sr. was dumped into this pot of dysentery-inducing gruel for three years.

And when it all seemed over, when the US Army collected him from the camp after Leyte had been returned to MacArthur’s control, the next round began. His very existence became an indictment, but of a crime he could not imagine. Here *The Hotel Tacloban* may remind the reader of *Caleb Williams*. [12] The eponymous hero of William Godwin’s novel is accused of a crime by the principal landowner on whose estate he works. Not only is the charge unfounded but also the machinery by which he is to be tried and judged is so blatantly corrupt that he cannot be acquitted. Having been decreed a criminal his subsequent life becomes one endless flight from treachery to treachery, to the point where the reader is forced to ask is there not one person, one instance capable of acknowledging the blatant injustice and that the perpetrator both of the supposed crime but of all the consequences is none other than the master of the estate from which Williams was forced to flee. Nowhere in the great hierarchy is there a hope of appeal. Godwin argued that there can be no appeal since the hierarchy cannot condemn itself.

The Hotel Tacloban is remarkable in one last sense, too. The author was able to grasp in his conversations with his father the scepticism toward any official description or explanation or report of the “facts” while retaining the respect needed to let those speaking tell their story. That has been the overwhelming strength of all his later work. It studiously avoids all tendentiousness whether in form or argument. “Facts” do not speak for themselves, but people do. What is needed is careful attention to detail, organisation and presentation. This makes it possible to discern fact and fiction, insight and deceit. Ultimately the listeners and therefore the reader have the ultimate responsibility for making sense out of history. An honest and comprehensive presentation with an intelligent structure is what makes *The Hotel Tacloban* and all Douglas Valentine’s subsequent work good history.

This article first appeared on Dissident Voice.

Notes

1 The Boy Scout Law: “A Scout is: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.” There have been different formulations since the first one promulgated in Scouting for Boys (1908). This is the version I learned.

2 William Colby (1920-1996) Director of Central Intelligence, i.e. head of the CIA (1973-1976) Prior to that he had served as chief of the Far East Division and Chief of Station in Vietnam, with particular responsibility for the creation of what became known as the Phoenix Program.

3 Douglas MacArthur (1880 – 1964), just to avoid any confusion. MacArthur had served under his father Arthur MacArthur while the latter was Military Governor of the Philippines, a colony in the US Empire until 1948, when it became a puppet state under US suzerainty. Prior to the outbreak of World War II Douglas held a commission from the nominally independent Commonwealth of the Philippines by which

he had de facto command of Philippine colonial forces. The West Point graduate from Arkansas came from a long line of professional mass murderers. He would become the virtual military governor of the US dominated Pacific from 1945 until he was relieved of duty by Harry Truman in April 1951. MacArthur's career was one of ruthless self-promotion both in battle and in the political sphere. He is probably the epitome of the military officer caste as it developed in the US.

4 Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*, an apparently unfinished last prose work by Melville (1819-1891). Published posthumously in 1924.

5 Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, reviewed elsewhere by this author.

6 Sandhurst is the name given to the British Army's officer training college: RMA Sandhurst. In status it is the United Kingdom's equivalent of USMA West Point. The main differences are that Sandhurst is not a degree-granting university like West Point and of course the graduates of Sandhurst take the Queen's commission, defending the monarchy and not just the nation. In day-to-day operations this does not affect the lethality or banality of the officers each institution produces. However, in the United States the ultimate subordination is to the bureaucratic chain of command. In Britain this is personified in the quasi-feudal subordination to the British sovereign and its extensive system of rank and honours.

7 Civvy Street is military jargon for demobilisation and return to civilian life and civilian life as opposed to life in the military.

8 Crimean War (October 1853 – February 1856) fought by Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire against the Russian Empire in the Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea. Russia was defeated but at enormous cost of life to the belligerents. Much of this was due to conditions on the battlefield and less to actually combat deaths. Florence Nightingale became famous in Britain for her contributions to organised nursing of wounded and sick soldiers. In 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross was founded in Switzerland.

9 The Hague Conventions (1899) and (1907) Laws and Customs of War on Land; the four Geneva Conventions: First "for the amelioration of the condition of the wounded and sick in the armed forces in the field" (1864, 1906, 1929, 1949); Second (1949) "for the Armed Forces at Sea"; Third (1929, 1949) "relative to the treatment of prisoners of war"; Fourth (1949) relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war (based on 1800 and 1907 Hague Conventions updated).

10 During WWII, the Articles of War would have applied. On 5 May 1950, Harry S. Truman signed 64 Stat. 109 which codified US military and naval law for the entirety of the US Armed Forces as the UCMJ.

11 The Australian and New Zealand Establishment commemorate annually the slaughter of their soldiers in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli (February 1915 – January 1916) as ANZAC Day. Some 30,000 Australians were killed or wounded in this campaign, one of the more notorious catastrophes of the long class war. The unrepentant patriots and royalists treat this as a kind of bloodbath for national identity. Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister while Douglas Sr. was wasting away on Leyte, was largely responsible for the political decision to attack Turkey on these insurmountable slopes. Churchill's last active military rank before leaving the British Army was also that of major.

12 William Godwin, *Things as They Are or the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, 1794.

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