Understanding: the Best Father's Day Gift
By Bill Collier

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He snores in the next room and you think you know him. He is your father, your father-in-law, your grandfather. He is a carpenter, a businessman, a clerk. His life seems almost as familiar as your own. Selfishly, you measure him with the yardstick of your own experience. What so you really know about him?

In my case, he is Antonio Alderette Tafolla, age 58. He is overweight, smokes when he knows he shouldn't, is known to drink too many beers on occasion. He is a retired painter who has called San Angelo, Texas home all of his life. He enjoys playing with his grandchildren and fishing with his sons. My baby girl makes funny faces she has learned from him. He is my father-in-law.

Tony Tafolla is a good man, an unselfish one. In many ways, he seems just like millions of other men. Yet there was always something that set him apart, a quiet reserve, an inner strength others could sense but never fully comprehend. "He was wounded in the Philippines," someone might say politely when he was out of the room. "Oh, I see," would be the response. "That explains it." Or, one would casually remark: "He was a prisoner of war, you know." Arched eyebrows. "Really?" But little more would be said. It was not because of disinterest, but because it was understood that those things in Tony's past, those black, terrible things, were locked in his memory alone and would stay there unless he desired to share them. I asked him to share them with me so that I could understand him better. And I offer this story now as a Father's Day gift to him, hoping it will help others to better understand and appreciate those around them.

It was 1927. Jose Tafolla and three friends made their way back to the saloon he owned in San Angelo. A native of Mexico, Tafolla had done well: he also owned a small ranch outside town, bought and sold horses and served as bondsman for the town's Mexican-American community. In this latter role, he had crossed paths too often with Bill Barbee, a deputy sheriff with a mean streak and a hearty disliking for Tafolla's practice of putting up bonds to get Mexican Americans out of jail. Barbee was also quick to use his gun with questionable justification, and Tafolla had further angered him by testifying in an unsuccessful effort to bring him to justice. Twice the pair exchanged shots: the first time, neither was hurt; the second time, Barbee shot Tafolla in the knee and had his own heel shot off.

This night, Tafolla was going to spend the night on a bed at the saloon and his three companions left him. Barbee and two others arrived shortly after. In the melee that followed, Barbee's group dynamited the saloon and shot Tafolla in the throat, killing him. They claimed Tafolla had fired first, although he was found still lying in bed, his gun untouched. But there were no witnesses to the contrary and Barbee went free.

Tafolla's death left his wife, Michela Alderette, ten children living and one soon to be born, all alone. Among them was Antonio, then six years old. The next years of his life would be a constant struggle to put food on the table. Jose left no will and his property became tied up in court. Michela Tafolla took in laundry and did other odd jobs. The children were also expected to contribute. Each day, Tony got up around 5 or 6 a.m. to search the alleys for junk and pick up discarded scrap metal from behind garages before going to school. Such items were sold on Fridays. After school and on weekends, he shined shoes. He shined shoes for five years. When

he was old enough, he began taking jobs on the ranches, grubbing prickly pear and mesquite brush for fifty cents a day.

By the time he was seventeen and it was 1938, jobs were scarce for Tony in San Angelo. That year he left home to join the Civilian Conservation Corps in Globe, Arizona, where he fought forest fires, cut trees for telephone poles, built roads through the mountains and worked on erosion control projects. The pay wasn't much—he kept $8 a month and sent $22 home—but the meals were regular. He picked up a little extra money boxing.

He came home in the summer of 1940, but there still were no jobs. After talking to his older brother Joe, an Army master sergeant home on temporary leave, Tony decided to join the Army. He did so on Feb. 5, 1941, and was quickly shipped through San Francisco for assignment to F Company, 2nd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, stationed at Manila on the Philippine Island of Luzon. He soon found he had two main things in common with his new acquaintances: they, too, had joined the Army because of hard times; and they all thought assignment to the islands in the South Pacific would be "easy duty." For a time, it was. He continued boxing, kept $9 a month of his Army pay and sent $21 home to his mother. He was promoted to corporal, but lost the grade in one of those servicemen's barroom brawls most of us thought took place only in Hollywood.

"Easy duty" in the South Pacific ended with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor Dec. 7, 1941. Almost as soon as the word reached Manila, Japanese planes arrived to bomb and strafe Luzon. The 31st Infantry Regiment was deployed strategically around the island. The job facing the Allies in the Philippines was to delay the onrushing tide of Japanese through the South Pacific for as long as possible. From the outset, it was understood that the Philippines would have to fall. The damage to the American fleet at Pearl Harbor made adequate resupply or reinforcements impossible.

The Japanese first landed on Luzon on December 10; but their main force landed December 22 and the battle began in earnest. American and Filipino forces, including the 31st Infantry, withdrew onto the Bataan Peninsula, across the bay from Manila. It was to be a four-month campaign for which the Americans and Filipinos were poorly supplied. On Jan. 5, 1942, they were placed on half-rations; this was later further reduced. Horses, mules, iguanas, and monkeys supplemented a meager rice diet. A day's ration consisted of eight to ten ounces of rice and one to two ounces of canned meat or fish. Malaria was commonplace and weakened the American fighting strength still more, striking a thousand men a day. In many respects, it was a war of nerves, as the Japanese infiltrated nightly to quietly slit the throats of the sleeping American and Filipino soldiers.

On Feb. 14, 1942, Tony manned his .30-caliber machine gun on a path through a sugarcane field on Bataan. The Japanese attacked, spotting and firing at the machine gun first. An enemy machine-gunner drilled seven bullets into Tony's right collarbone and shoulder, but he continued firing until his right hand fell away from his gun and he couldn't lift it back up. Another bullet went through his helmet, spinning it around, but miraculously missing his head somehow. The other two men in his crew took over the gun and shouted for him to get to the rear

and find a medic. Dazed and confused, Tony ran toward the Japanese instead, then caught himself and turned around in time.

Ordinarily, such a wound would be good for a ticket home for the duration of the war. But in early 1942, there was no way out of the Philippines for the thousands of wounded. Tony was taken to a hospital on the island fortress of Corregidor in Manila Bay, where his shoulder was treated and where he helped care for other wounded and for the dead. After two weeks, his shoulder still carrying five bullets and pieces of others, an open wound that could and did become quickly infected, he was sent back to his unit on Bataan. A piece of one bullet later had to be removed in the field without anesthetic. Tony and his machine gun crew were nominated for the Silver Star for their valor in action. But the officer who nominated them and the paperwork disappeared in the chaos that followed. Tony's Silver Star was never awarded.

The battle for Bataan continued. It was not long before Tony was wounded a second time. Advancing toward enemy pillboxes hidden in trees in a mango grove, he suddenly saw a Japanese grenade coming his way. He fell forward to the ground, but not far enough. Grenade fragments tore into his calves and knees. His unit was pinned down until dark. Then they withdrew about two hundred yards and his wounds were treated. This time, he wasn't even sent to the hospital.

On April 3, freshly reinforced Japanese forces began a strong attack that could not be stopped by the hungry, sick and fatigues Americans and Filipinos. Six days later, Major Gen. Edward King Jr. surrendered the 76,000 men still alive on Bataan. Tony's company, like the others, stacked their weapons and waited for the Japanese to arrive. The Japanese quickly gathered their prisoners into tight groups, sitting them on the ground and refusing to let them up except to urinate. That night, Tony used that excuse to walk to the edge of the massed prisoners then he fled into the darkness, running with what strength remained after months of hunger and disease, running despite his unhealed wounds. He ran until he was exhausted and, when he stumbled off the path, fell asleep as soon as he hit the ground. The next day, he joined a band of Filipinos headed for Mariveles on the southern tip of the Bataan Peninsula across a narrow stretch of bay from Corregidor. The group met more Americans at Mariveles and they killed a horse belonging to the Filipinos for food before setting out to cross the bay by paddling a huge log. They were quickly spotted, however, by Japanese fighters, who began strafing the log. Each time the planes passed, the men had to dive beneath the log for protection. They were spared by the arrival of an American PT boat, which returned the fighters' fire and took them aboard and to Corregidor. The boat's arrival was fortunate in more than one way: the currents were carrying the log away from Corregidor and they never would have made it.

The escape spared Tony from the infamous "Bataan Death March." During a forced 65-mile march with almost no food or water, fully 7,000 of the Bataan captives died or were killed by Japanese wielding bayonets and swords. Yet it was questionable whether Tony, assigned to Corregidor beach defenses, was any better off. With the fall of Bataan, the Japanese concentrated all their air power and artillery firepower on the island, the key Allied stronghold in the Philippines. From April 10 to May 6, Corregidor suffered one of the most intense bombardments of the war. Tony was assigned to a machine gun bunker at Monkey Point during the barrage. There was one meal in the morning before daylight and another after nightfall. There was no

leaving the bunker during daylight hours for fear of being hit by shell fragments or being spotted by Japanese artillery observers on the mainland. By the end of the long weeks of shelling, Corregidor was little more than a blackened cinder.

The Japanese landing came on the night of May 5, 1942. After sharp fighting, most of the island defenders withdrew toward the Malinta Tunnel Complex, which was unscathed despite the bombing. Overwhelmed by the enemy's artillery and afraid Japanese tanks would rampage unchecked through the troops and wounded bottled up in the tunnel complex Major General Jonathan Wainwright surrendered the 13,000 Americans and Filipinos on Corregidor the next day. For the second time, Tony became a Japanese prisoner. This time there was no escaping.

The prisoners were taken to Kindley Field, the island's airstrip, and ordered to sit on the ground in the tropical sun with practically no food and water for several days. Then they were loaded aboard small boats and landing barges and taken to Cavite on the south shore of Manila Bay. From there, Tony and other Corregidor defenders began their own "death march." Given only token amounts of food and denied any water at all, the weakened men were marched for four days along the east shore of Manila Bay and north to a prison camp quickly thrown up near Cabanatuan. Any prisoner who fainted or stopped during the march was quickly beaten with rifle butts, bayoneted or shot on the spot.

Tony Tafolla passed his twenty-first birthday in the first prison camp, where he was to spend nine months. Initially, the prisoners were worked little. But after nine months, Tony and others were taken on a work detail to Nichols Field, where they labored to repair the Airstrip under the threat of Japanese rifles. He became so ill with malaria and scurvy, however, that he was taken to the prison camps located in Cabanatuan itself. The camp hospital, run by the prisoners, had a little Atabrine for his malaria and medicine for the "jungle rot" eating his feet. After more than a year as a Japanese prisoner, it was the first medical treatment of any kind he had received.

But life in Cabanatuan was no improvement. As usual, there was very little food. The daily diet consisted of two or three slices of a radish-like root and a cup of tea for breakfast; a little box of rice for supper. Sometimes, if the Japanese prison guards had slaughtered a buffalo for their own tables, they spared the feet and ribs to be boiled in with the prisoners' rice. Otherwise, there was little meat. With nothing in their stomachs, Tony and the others had to work daily in the field, raising vegetables for the Japanese troops. They were not permitted to eat any of the vegetables they raised. Tony suffered recurring attacks of malaria, scurvy, dysentery, "wet" and "dry" beriberi. With "dry" beriberi, the skin flakes off like dandruff; the "wet" variety brought sever swelling of the feet, legs, stomach and testicles. Besides these ailments and periodic problems from his wounds Tony's right ankle and foot were broken at Cabanatuan accidentally while he and other prisoners moved an entire barracks on their shoulders. Not surprisingly, he also suffered a hernia sometime in the prison camps.

There was more to life in Cabanatuan. There was the hose torture, for example: guards shoved a water hose down the throat of a prisoner and turned on the tap. If the prisoner didn't drink fast enough, he drowned. There were the beatings: beatings for doing something wrong and beatings for doing it right; beatings for each Japanese battle defeat and beatings for each

Japanese victory. Tony's share of the beatings cost him three broken ribs on each side, not as the result of one, but of multiple beatings at various times. The cumulative impact of prison life shriveled him from 145 to 90 pounds.

Despite everything, American morale refused to disappear altogether. There was a close camaraderie among prisoners; friendships were formed for life. Tony's two closest friends today, Tony Barela and Herman Tafoya of Albuquerque, were fellow prisoners in Cabanatuan. Tafoya, in fact, was one of the real sparks for camp morale. He pretended to be crazy; so convincing was his performance that the Japanese left him completely alone, believing him to be touched by the gods. This left Tafoya out of the work details and free to wander around camp unmolested shuffling about on feet swollen by beriberi and cracking jokes about putting on his dancing shoes. Tafoya in now an English professor.

Sometime in 1944, Tony was shipped to Fukuoka 23, a prison camp in Japan itself. He can be excused for not remembering the exact date. The trip itself was yet another ordeal. It was made on what the prisoners called the "hell ships." Prisoners were herded below decks like cattle and packed as tightly as a bunch of vertical sardines. Tropical heat, seasickness, dysentery, the crowding and the total lack of any sanitary facilities made the ship's hold an unbearable trap. Those who died were tossed into the sea. Moreover, the Japanese used the prisoner transports to shield other vessels or marked them as though they were combat ships to draw American fire. Many were sunk. While there were attacks on Tony's convoy, his ship made it through.

Tony's new home, however, was not much different, other than climate and the type of work he was forced to do. At Fukuoka 23, he was put to work in the coal mines operating a jackhammer. The heavy work was done on only one meal a day. Twice, Tony's feet were broken by mine cave-ins. There were still plenty of beatings, though perhaps not as many as at Cabanatuan. There was a large pool of water in the Fukuoka camp and the guards released some hostility less harmfully by marching the prisoners into and out of the water frequently. On Aug. 6, 1945, Tony saw and heard the atomic blast at distant Hiroshima without knowing what it was. The second atomic explosion at Nagasaki three days later was too far away to be seen. Unknown to them, the inevitable steps were being taken toward Japanese surrender. To the last, the guards never mentioned it. Finally, the prisoners were gathered to hear a speech about how Americans and Japanese were going to be at peace and friends. The speech was answered with grinding teeth and muttered curses. Then the guards simply disappeared. The prisoners found ammunition left behind and took over the camp, posting their own guards.

Within a few days, an American P-38 flew overhead and dropped a note into the camp telling them that if they were Americans, to splash yellow paint on top of the barracks. They did so. The plane returned that evening and waggled its wings at the message. The next day should have been Christmas. Tony ran outside to the throbbing motors of five transport planes, which flew low over the camp to drop parachutes bearing food, clothing, cigarettes, and vitamins. Doctors told the men not to eat plain meat after months of starvation, suggesting that they start out slowly with soups. One man didn't heed the advice. After eating a can of meat, he died during the night, the last prison camp victim Tony was to see. Around Sept. 15, 1945, Tony's camp finally received its orders to move out. Inexplicably, they were taken through both

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the radiation danger still was very real, before being loaded on a boat for Iwo Jima, the first step home.

The war was over for Tony, but the effects still linger. He fought recurring malaria until around 1957; had to have another bullet fragment removed around 1955; suffered severe headaches and pains in his wounds; and is troubled periodically with sever ulcers, which led to a long hospital stay in 1970. But he counts himself one of the lucky ones. Only about 69 men of the 183 in his original company in the 31st Infantry ever made it back home.

That was thirty-four long years ago; thirty-four quiet years. It was a time for healing the spirit as well as the body. It was a time to see fulfilled every prison camp wish: "Boy. If I ever get out of here, I'm going to…" He married Felice Garcia and the couple had a daughter and three sons. The sons have each spent their own time in military service. And now his children bring their children to sit in his lap. He is a happy man watching his dreams come true, content to pat his stomach and joke about it being a sign of prosperity. He is a successful man; for he and the others who survived the war and the camps, being successful begins with simply being alive. Only once in those years, when Tony risked burns to himself to smother the burning clothes on a woman who had fled her flaming house, did anything approaching the old excitement intrude on his life.

The Tony Tafolla I first knew seemed a product of those thirty-four years: a nice man who was good to his family and found pleasure in simple things. But the Tony Tafolla I know now is much more. He is a man I deeply respect, a man from whom I know I can learn many things. He is my hero; not simply because he suffered terrible hardships, but for those reasons and more. He took the worst punches life had to offer and didn't go down for the count. In spite of all the evil inflicted on him, he shows his love for others unashamedly. And after all of these towering events in his life he is thoughtful enough to take interest in what others do and make them feel important. Even just a son-in-law.

I humbly offer this story to make him feel important for a change, if only for one day. For Father's Day.