

by Roger D. McGrath

Submarine Ace of Aces

Now that the youngest of our World War II veterans, with but a few exceptions, are in their 80's, I fear that, as they die, memory of them will die also. While teaching history in college for more than 30 years—15 of those at UCLA, where a single class could have more than 400 students—I was the target of book representatives from a dozen or more publishers. Nearly every year, I was presented with sample copies of new U.S. history textbooks. Each new textbook devoted more space to obscure figures of modest significance who were black or American Indian or female. I searched the same books in vain for mention of the most prominent of our World War II heroes. Where was the most decorated American, Audie Murphy? The hero of the Battle of Midway, Wade McClusky? The first recipient of the Medal of Honor, Butch O'Hare? The top ace, Dick Bong? The top naval ace, Dave McCampbell? The top Marine ace, Pappy Boyington? The commander of the 101st Airborne who replied "Nuts" to the Germans and held fast at Bastogne, Anthony McAuliffe? Or the submarine ace of aces, Dick O'Kane? Nowhere to be found. These were the heroes I learned about as a child. They were written about in books, depicted in movies, and, most importantly, were the topic of conversations in the homes and neighborhoods of America.

The Silent Service held a special fascination for many, and Hollywood was not remiss during the 1940's and 50's in portraying American submarines in death-defying missions against the Japanese in the Pacific. Two hundred and fifty U.S. Navy submarines went on at least one patrol during World War II. Fifty-two never returned. Their epitaph: "Overdue, presumed lost." More than 3,500 submariners lost their lives, a fifth of all who went on patrol. Their rules of engagement were simple: "Find 'em. Chase 'em. Sink 'em." And the submariners did just that, sending more than 1,100 Japanese merchant ships and 214 Japanese naval vessels to the bottom.

The submariner who sank the most Japanese ships was Richard "Dick" O'Kane. He performed best under the greatest pressure in the most dangerous circum-

stances. Before he went into action, he was described by a fellow officer as talkative and boastful and something of a loose cannon. The same officer said that, once a battle commenced, O'Kane

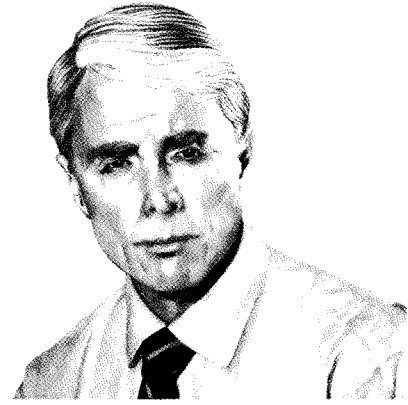
was calm, terse and utterly cool.

My opinion of him underwent a permanent change. It was the most dramatic example I was ever to see of a man transformed under pressure from what seemed almost adolescent petulance to a prime fighting machine.

The prime fighting machine, first as the executive officer of *Wahoo* and then as the commander of *Tang*, sank 31 Japanese ships. Once, while on the surface and surrounded by Japanese ships, O'Kane sent *Tang* headlong into a Japanese destroyer that was racing directly at her. O'Kane miraculously put his last torpedo into the bow of the enemy ship, and down she went, allowing *Tang* to escape. If sinking the most Japanese ships and a surface duel with a Japanese destroyer were not enough, O'Kane also set the record for rescuing downed American pilots. During April 1944, he guided *Tang* dangerously close to reefs at Truk to rescue pilots by the ones, twos, and threes until he had 22 smiling aviators aboard his sub.

Although the Japanese had many chances to sink the daredevil O'Kane, they never succeeded. O'Kane sank himself. In October 1944, after sinking five Japanese ships in a series of spectacular encounters in the narrow waters of the Formosa Strait, O'Kane was gunning for a sixth Japanese ship when one of *Tang's* own torpedoes malfunctioned, turned about, and hit the sub. The explosion rocked the boat from stem to stern. O'Kane and eight others on the bridge were hurled into the sea. Hanging on to debris, they watched as *Tang's* stern suddenly sank, pulling the rest of the sub to the bottom, 180 feet below.

About two-dozen sailors remained alive inside *Tang*, her stern resting on the ocean floor and her sleek hull pointed toward the surface at a steep angle. An officer alone in the conning tower took a deep breath, opened a hatch, and made a free ascent to the surface. A dozen others,



some with the Momsen lung, were able to get out of the sub also. Eight made it to the surface alive. Only five survived to be captured by the Japanese. The officer in the conning tower and the others were the only American sailors in the entire war to escape from a sunken submarine.

Meanwhile, O'Kane and the eight men with him swam, treaded water, and clung to wreckage. By the next morning, only O'Kane and four others remained alive. Picked up by a Japanese destroyer, they were beaten and interrogated. Taken first to Formosa, they were eventually confined in a prison camp near Tokyo. The Japanese failed to notify the Red Cross, as required by conventions, of their capture. O'Kane and the others would remain missing in action for the duration of the war. The Japanese tortured and interrogated O'Kane almost daily. He was near death when liberated, weighing only 88 pounds and wracked with scurvy and beriberi. He slowly recovered from the inhuman ordeal and testified at the Tokyo war-crimes trials. His gallantry during the war earned him the Medal of Honor, three Navy Crosses, three Silver Stars, and, for wounds sustained, the Purple Heart. The Annapolis graduate remained in the Navy until 1957, serving for two years as the CO of the Submarine School and retiring as a rear admiral.

Jack Kennedy, the commander of a PT boat who also served as President of the United States, said, "A nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces, but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers." Yet, America's most decorated sailor of World War II who put nearly a quarter-million tons of Japanese shipping on the bottom, hastening the end of the war and saving countless Marine lives on Pacific islands, is left unmentioned in today's textbooks. c

Pop Culture and Politics

Passing By the Train Wreck

by Christopher Sandford

If Macbeth were alive today, he would probably make an appearance in the public confessional with Oprah Winfrey and, in all likelihood, would emerge as a prime candidate for *Big Brother* or one of the other “reality” shows that crowd our airwaves. Macbeth would be helped to come to terms with his domestic issues and would, in turn, deliver some wrenching monologue to the viewing audience exhorting them to become similarly “empowered,” empowerment being the highest attainment both of mind and spirit known to modern man.

In due course, we could expect to see the thane of Glamis rewarded with his own show, which would spawn the inevitable line of accessories—everything from rhinestone-clad daggers to insomnia medications. There would be a brisk trade in replica witches’ cauldrons among broadly the same audience as that drawn to the occult antics of Mr. Marilyn Manson. Critics would race to fawn over their latest celebrity protégé. The taste-makers at MTV would uniformly speak in Macbeth’s voice and would wrinkle up their noses at anything that had a bad smell for him. As a converted warmonger, Macbeth’s views on the conflict in Iraq would be received with an awe normally reserved for the truisms of Gen. Wesley Clark. The competition for an exclusive interview would be brutal. One can imagine the jockeying between Larry King and Barbara Walters to secure the rights to slip their guest into a media jacuzzi of mutual reassurance and respect.

More to the point, Macbeth’s every pronouncement on the current state of politics and society would be seized upon by a predominantly youthful audience who have increasingly turned away from mainstream sources and instead look to “pop culture” for their news and views. Anyone in doubt about this phenomenon has only to tune in to the shrill, round-the-clock “Rock the Vote” programming fronted by the likes of P. Diddy (a.k.a. Sean Combs) to be found on every available music and entertainment channel in the months preceding a national election. For professional reasons, in the summer of 2004, I was compelled to sit through one such transmission featuring Bruce Springsteen, about whom I had written a book. The musical component of the show, in which Springsteen appeared as a kind of sawdust Steinbeck, was at least modestly engaging, but anyone looking to him for deeper enlightenment on, say, the paradox of securing peace and liberty through a military action was in for a sorry disappointment. According to my notes from the subsequent interview, the rock star’s comments on Iraq consisted of little more than “Yep” and “Nope,” laced with the occasional choice anti-Republican tirade.

With the benefit of hindsight, Bill Clinton’s saxophone-play-

ing 1992 appearance on MTV would seem to be one of those pivotal moments, much like his subsequent ruminations on marijuana and on his taste in underwear, in the evolution of politics as another branch of the entertainment industry. Critics still debate the chicken-and-egg dilemma of which came first, the electorate’s taste for freewheeling, taboo-busting candidates such as Clinton, and the concomitant rise of their celebrity backers, or a sudden awakening on the part of the politicians. The answer would appear to be a bit of both. The sort of bolshie, youth-led cultural radicalism of America in the early 1990’s, largely a reaction to the Gulf War and to mass affluence, provided a new market for supposedly switched-on political leaders as much as for idiosyncratic pop icons of the stripe of the late Kurt Cobain. All it took was for a few socially alert pragmatists such as Clinton to infiltrate the system, which was simultaneously enlivened by a press corps whose mean age had fallen to something on the order of 17, and the emphasis would henceforth be on giving the public what it wanted rather than on any moral niceties. This development arguably reached its apogee in May 2005, when Tony Blair and his wife, Cherie, neither one a martyr to false modesty, took time away from the British general election to discuss their sex life with the *Sun*. In what may have been a characteristic exaggeration, Blair revealed that he and Cherie “do it at least five times [a] night,” adding that, “I am up for more depending on how I feel.” The couple then exchanged views on various body parts, leading Mrs. Blair to invite her husband to strip off publicly. “You keep your hands to yourself, Cherie,” the prime minister retorted. The Labour Party press office appeared bemused at the subsequent controversy, limited as it was to what Mr. Blair has characterized as “the decaying forces of conservatism” in the United Kingdom. “They are married, so why shouldn’t they talk about sex?” a spokesman said.

Meanwhile, it has become almost an article of faith that today’s entertainers should be claimed by partisans of both the left and the right. When television first infiltrated our lives in the 1950’s, one of the new medium’s chief functions was to act as an emotional pick-me-up for a weary public. Somehow, that mission statement got lost over the years. Whatever one makes of their acting skills, many of today’s performers, and an even higher percentage of their pop-music counterparts, offer a monotonous diet of screwed-up nihilism (part of the unrelenting war on family values), crass histrionics, and phony salves, whether delivered from on or off stage. Both they and their various escapades have become culturally polarizing in a way that would have been hard to imagine in the era of Milton Berle. Even without them so much as speaking, these individuals are routinely transformed into politically divisive figures whose every provocation, however trite, is analyzed *ad nauseam* on talk radio and elsewhere. Consider the enduring case of Janet Jackson’s infamous “wardrobe malfunction” at the 2004 Super

Christopher Sandford is a British-born, Seattle-based writer. His biography of the director Roman Polanski will be published this month by Century.