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Ed Dyess, Hero of Agoloma Point,
April 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1942

We had been fighting the Japanese since February 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1942, when we set out through the jungle with our mobile reserve unit to wipe out the Bataan Peninsula. With no planes left to fly, our commanding officer Ed Dyess trained with those of us remaining in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Pursuit Squadron for infantry combat. In the entire 24\textsuperscript{th} Pursuit Group, fighter pilots were put right into the front lines, air crews added wherever they needed men capable of fighting. Other grounded squadrons, we heard, had fallen into disorder and bad morale. But those of us who flew under Ed’s command followed him without complaint even into the doom of earthly combat. For the past two weeks, we had held off the Japanese invaders on Agoloma Bay, stumbling on weary legs, our bodies weak from dysentery and a diet of rice accompanied by the occasional monkey or lizard that we shot in the jungle. Dates had evaporated into meaninglessness and only the faintest of realizations, that it was around Easter, marked time.

Then one night, Captain Dyess called for twenty volunteers to mop up the Japanese still holding out on Agoloma Point. All we had to fight them with were some battered Lewis guns, and we’d have to strike from behind enemy lines to have any chance in hell: land on the beach, surround their headquarters cave and blast them out; this was no milk run. Only three of us pilots signed up. A wingman never abandons his leader.

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Before daybreak, twenty-two of us were split between the two rowboats—ten soldiers under each of our commands, four Air Corps fighter pilots, some infantrymen and artillerymen, half a dozen Filipino scouts and some naval raiders who had come along the day before from the base at Mariveles for the action. In the hour before dawn, two naval whaleboats brought us from Mariveles to Agoloma Point on the western rim of Manila Bay. We had cleaned out the west coast of the Bataan Peninsula; the Japanese had been trying to clean us out across the neck of the peninsula by sending invasion barges along the China Sea coast and Manila Bay coast at night, which were coming closer to cracking our front lines every hour.

The Japanese left cornered on Agoloma Point were marine troops with plenty of snipers to boot, as we had discovered over the past two weeks of mixing it up with them in the stinking jungle. Even with our many pairs of keen eyes, the dense vegetation made visibility poor. They had special green uniforms and green nets and special rubber shoes they used to climb trees, which camouflaged them in the dark. As pilots we did not know the exact names of such sophisticated
infantry equipment, and this unnerved us as we were masters of precision. Some wore polished sabers hung at their waists. About fifty were still holed up there, or so we had estimated the day before.

Each of us had rigged up our old Lewis guns from the First World War on leather shoulder harnesses so we could fire them from the hip. And because the guns got too hot, each of us also had an oven mitt which we’d scrounged up at Mariveles the night before. The Lewis guns worked but we’d still need divine intervention.

Now we waited in the rowboats about two hundred yards offshore, a clear early morning sky overhead and a faint sea breeze rippling our parched skin. We made things worse by picturing the bandits hidden in the steep jungle terrain of the point, invisible as the sounds of their guns, amorphous green men who stopped to gawk through field glasses or to spy on radios while they awaited us. Other Japanese fanned out in the jungle and plastered leaves all over their bodies up in the trees, tied themselves into position, and overlooked the paths from the beach to the point, with short, stubby sniper rifles at their sides. In the rowboats we exchanged glances fleeting as contrails that disclosed our collective imagination.

Captain Dyess (his surname used to be “Dyes” but he thought it bad luck) sat in the first rowboat slightly closer to shore at two o’clock, watching the Japanese headquarters on the end of the peninsula with badly scratched field glasses, his tan pilot’s shirt untucked from his belt. We knew him as Ed, Eddie mostly. He’d been in every kind of land and air operation that can be fought and living on rice and lizards for so long that when you caught a glimpse of him from the side you wondered how he could even stand upright with a Lewis gun. His thinness made him a walking reminder of the close proximity of death, which couldn’t be ignored by any of the men in the boats. Ed had a talent for bringing together unusual elements to forge a path where one didn’t exist, and fast—today’s armaments, for example. Like a holy man in a crowd, Ed fueled our desire (wavering on land but always naturally relentless to the very best who flew P-40s) to seek the action rather than cower and allow it to seek us.

A Japanese dive bomber flew over the beach below the cliff, where there was a big rock painted white. He opened his belly over the beach, where a large cardboard box full of supplies fell out and landed close to the sharp white rock. He tipped his wing, and a few Japanese ran down the cliff to the beach to bring the supply box back up. The Japanese showed no fear in running out to the open beach. They made their way down the cliff face quick and sure, without rifles, as if to taunt us to doubt their confidence, as though they knew something we didn’t about the whole invasion and so didn’t have to worry about us coming to wipe them off this peninsula.

The men in the rowboats shifted in their seats and prayed.

One of the Filipinos said, “Mother of God, there better only be fifty of them and not a hundred.”

We felt as if we were at the edge of something galactic, rising from all sides like a tidal wave. In quieter moments we were aware of the other side of the world where brothers and sisters still set out the empty bottles for the milkman and gathered around the radio like a warm fire. We could not let this tide of starvation and filth, the rice that tasted like boiled straw and the constant coat of dirty sweat, to touch them.

The two naval whale boats, armed with thirty-seven millimeter cannons and twin fifty-caliber machine guns, led us in first. Ed signaled to our boat and shouted at us to get ready.
The whale boats cut us loose offshore and all of us let go with everything we had toward their headquarters cave along the cliff at the end of Agoloma Point. We did fine with the Lewis guns until nine dive bombers came along, and they sank one of the whale boats, diving and firing down at us. Our men left the rowboats and headed in for shore, the Filipinos firing back at the bombers low overhead, like they could bring down all of them.

One of the other pilots, the First Lieutenant said, “I knew this would be tough but Eddie wasn’t kidding when he called it a goddamn suicide mission.”

The gunfire blasted huge sprays of sand up into our faces.

A Filipino scout was hit climbing out of our boat. One of the naval raiders ran back for him. As the raider dragged the scout over the side, a bomber came along real low and strafed them dead. The rest of the men kept going in.

Phist, phist went the sand. Daylight began to shine, illuminating little sections of jungle along the beach. Smoke from the Japanese machine gunners wafted out from the brush along the cliff and drifted up through the trees.

Ed Dyess went for the right side of the beach with his men, sprinting ahead on that skinny frame of his and the old Lewis gun in his hands, shooting it from his hip, the oven mitt pressed against the barrel.

He yelled, “Come on out, you pillaging lizards! Remember how we came knocking real nice yesterday and offered all the honors of war? Now we’re back! We’re sure sick of eating rice. We want to go home to our land of beef steaks.”

We veered off to the left to head for the cave up the cliff from the other side, but one of the men with us blocked the path and said, “The Captain needs us.” A bullet nabbed him in the neck and he sunk to the ground. The scout behind us checked but he was gone, a red spurt of blood spraying up in an arc.

In moments like this, we could envision the world before us only as breathing or bleeding, the jungle turned into a prison of death.

A Japanese sniper could hide so well in the canopy that you could look straight at him and never see him. A few weeks back, a Filipino soldier on the path near our camp got shot and the Doc called some of us over, and we all went to the place where the Filipino went down and searched for two and half hours without finding the sniper. In less than five minutes, only seven of us remained from the eleven we had started out with this morning in our rowboat.

I said to the second lieutenant pilot, “Better go back and follow Ed ‘cause he’s got the match to my oven mitt, and if I’m going to die today with an oven mitt it’s at least got to have a matching one. Won’t look right showing up at Heaven all mismatched.”

The lieutenant replied, “You know the trouble the two of you got me into with this? I had to wrestle it from a Filipino cook and then she jumped all over me. She left me in the alleyway with my dick hard and holding onto this goddamn stupid mitt.”

I said, “Told you to watch out for the cooks. They don’t know what to do, what with only rice to prepare.”

Fatigue along with a steady rice and feral protein diet made us half-crazy.

We hacked through the jungle, heading for our friends, seeking camaraderie in death’s labyrinth, trembling in the heat with our bolo knives. The Japanese seemed like ghosts in the jungle, any noise they made moving chased by chugging bursts of gunfire. Any pilot who had seen
flying as a game even remotely, hadn’t made it this far but was back in Mariveles. The last weeks’ assignment in the jungle had left those cocky types stripped, broken, because all of a sudden, we were back on land like we were hunting back home and without our steeds; beyond medieval, it was primeval. Other flyers like Dyess who didn’t break down, arose like mythical creatures now shape-shifted to land. Dyess didn’t see the land business as a game but played his own role with a certain upbeat attitude of mockery—whether for himself or for us, it was impossible to tell. All the enthusiasm of sport with none of the delusions of pride, like he knew the fighting was serious yet absurd at the same time. This balled up in his spirit; we had never seen anything like it. We were under his spell; we would follow him to the ends of the earth and even into hell which was how we found ourselves here. During those weeks in this jungle on Agoloma Bay, he became half man, half God. One pilot even coined him Aeneas.

Two other men from our rowboat were eaten up by gunfire. No one doubted that if Ed got killed, we wouldn’t make it off Agoloma Point alive.

Eddie alone met us and said thank God, that the Japanese held up were hunkered in the brush by the cave that the five of us had to circle around. As he said this, the second lieutenant gasped and dropped. The four of us hit the ground, rolled into the brush and dragged the lieutenant over by his feet. No use; the bullet hole stared out of his forehead like a third eye. The Filipino made a quick sign of the cross over the dead lieutenant’s chest; Ed swiped the oven mitt and stuffed it down the back of his pants’ waist.

“For good luck?” I asked. “Not like we need any extra.”

“Seat cushion,” he muttered.

The Filipino caught a snort of laughter.

We circled around, our hips sore from the weight of the Lewis guns. Outnumbered in that jungle, pressing ahead for the enemy to swarm out shouting and firing from the cave, we traveled in a zone ensnared by darkness and vines and thorns like fishhooks. Light came down in patches.

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Everything seemed certain and tangled. We had made it to this same spot at Agoloma Point the day before. At noon yesterday, we had yelled over the cliff toward their cave and promised them an admirable surrender with all the honors of battle. In return we received a hail of gunfire, and the raising of flags showing these crack marine troops had been in every Japanese campaign in China since the last world war. Obviously, the Japanese are not soldiers taught to surrender but to die. Today they fired into the brush over the side of the cliff (phist, phist against the sandy rock), making us split up and approach from different sides toward the cave.

Wielding our Lewis guns with our oven mitts, we turned loose and kept at them for four hours, firing at any movement in the brush. A ledge, too steep to climb, covered us on the left side. The Japanese bullets bounced off the ledge and towards the sea, thankfully. Ed was using an uprooted stump for cover on the flank. The gunners kept missing him.

“Think this might end like some Greek tragedy?” I asked between hails of gunfire.

“Why?” Ed answered, huffing. “That how you want it to end?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just want it to end.”
Ed returned with a burst of gunfire, wielding his gun like a fireman’s hose, as if by visualization alone he was able to implant each bullet into its target. Then, panting and weak, he said, “You know you could have invented some disease. A brittle bone disorder or eyesight like a fruit bat would’ve kept you at home, roasting chestnuts with your chin between your girl’s tits right now. Bullshit if you tell yourself any different.”

Because we were certain we knew our commander like our fathers and older brothers, we had no doubt that what he said was true. Although something in his delivery sounded unusual, doubtful.

Sudden, the first lieutenant got hit three times in the spine, pow, pow, pow! We noticed one of the Japanese bodies move—they are famous for playing dead to trap unwary enemies—and this one had a leaf over his face for courtesy while his stomach was moving, drawing in air. The Filipino nodded and aimed. We blew his head off.

The first lieutenant didn’t stir. Only three of us remained.

“What’d you rather be doing?” I asked Ed.

“You mean rather than starving and stinking and killing?” he said. “I wouldn’t mind being a Hollywood actor.”

“You’ve got the swashbuckling part down,” I said.

“Do I?” he said with a scoff, as if he didn’t believe it. “Every role has its perks, once you figure out your angle. Only one role I would flat-out refuse.”

Gunfire bit the ground a few feet in front of us.

“Jesus,” Dyess said.


“Never could pull that one off,” he went on. “But until I land the opportunity, I’ve got to make the best out of this war. Save the world? Better to save yourself.”

This rippled through us like a tsunami, especially the Filipino who clutched his crucifix and eyed the Captain as if he’s just announced that he’d like to hop the first bomber to the underworld. Somehow it had never occurred to us that Ed might not, did not, want to be there just like we didn’t and kept such desires hidden. Before this we’d only believed Dyess loved every minute of the fight—land or sea or air. But now we glimpsed the true Dyess—a man we didn’t know at all. Did any one of us fighting over those long weeks even come close to seeing each other’s souls, these men we’d crouched alongside and shuddered shaky breaths, whose asses we’d covered from death while they tromped off to shit in a jungle thicket?

How spirited and primitive we were, in the roles we’d cast ourselves.

The three of us gawked in silence: green uniformed bodies dead at the thirty-seven millimeter cannons, slumped officers cradling army cameras, and dying soldiers moaning with sabers drawn, their guts spilling out onto their knees.

The Filipino said, “Let’s get the rest of them,” showed his face over the ledge and got blown away, staring. He scrolled down the cliff, limbs askew. At the bottom, his body looked like a piece of driftwood propped against the white rock they used as a drop zone marker. The Japanese were blasting the ledge with everything they had.

Ed signaled that he saw three in the cave, then motioned that we move in. The Japanese had stopped shooting. We lifted our guns, the hot, blackened mitts over our hands cramped from the firing. Ed Dyess charged, shouting, “Surrender to your new emperor, boys!”
The one Japanese gave up. His fellow comrades ignored him and aimed their guns, which
the traitor among them didn’t like too much because he took his sidearm and shot them each in the
back then surrendered himself. He was the only Japanese to surrender in the whole lot.

Our POW had a saber at his waist which we tossed into the brush and a pair of nice field
glasses Ed took and slung around his neck. Ed kept him outside the cave and searched his little
green uniform with one hand and kept the other in the oven mitt. The POW stared at Ed’s oven
mitt as if he maybe had a stump for a hand, some reason for a strange disguise. We went through
the cave, going through the intelligence, and grabbed maps that proved they knew every detail of
our rear air defense. Ed, ready to black out from hunger and heat, found some pans of cooked rice
and fish and took the mitt off to shove a handful into his mouth. The POW made some protest, and
Ed nudged him with the Lewis gun between swallows.

On land as in the air, we had been proud of our kills, felt a certain satisfaction and buried
the rest, until today. Burying had not factored so much in the kills of the skies. But on land we’d
spilled so much blood, we got used to burying more of ourselves with each death, ally or enemy,
because Ed had seemed to and we aspired to be like him in everything. He had played his role so
convincingly, with such spirit. Is there shame in playing war when the stakes are death? Or is the
only shame in forgetting the play and believing the war?

Ed Dyess, making his way back onto the beach with the POW out in front, said, “They got
everything prepared to the last tiny detail, but I don’t think they expected to be jumped by two
skinny cats with Lewis guns and oven mitts.”

Three weeks later, all of us Air Corps fighter pilots back flying, the Japanese busted our
lines clean open and Bataan fell. Ed Dyess was our commanding officer. The Japanese swept
through and soon fighting broke out on the edge of our aerodrome. Trucks burned along the roads.
We ran to our planes in the field, eyes watering from the smoke and fumes. (Phist, phist, scheew,
 schoom went the shots). We were scheduled to fly a mission, but Ed Dyess met us at the planes.
Our worn-out men rushed with leaden steps. Without a helmet and armed only with a .45, Ed
surveyed us from his jeep below with sunken eyes.

The crew worked fast, taking cover from explosions every couple of minutes. The chaplain
pulling double-duty as maintenance mechanic prayed for us aloud as he worked and promised we
would be absolved of our sins by the time they pulled chocks. Ed Dyess climbed onto the wing and
leaned over the cockpit with his oven mitt tucked into his waist.

“Fly like hell, I think it won’t be as easy as wiping them off that rock but good luck.”
“I forgot my mitt but it might give me trouble at the controls—”

On the edge of the aerodrome, a huge explosion blasted flames and dirt high over the trees.
Ed Dyess clutched the side of the cockpit, his sunken face and chest framed against the lit up
evening sky and the black artillery smoke. The chaplain came up and shouted for him to get off the
wing, thumping the side of the plane that it was time to go.

On the ground Dyess held the oven mitt overhead as he sent us off; the loon was
probably grinning.
The Japanese had fought us for four-and-a-half months. Every day, Ed and the rest of us had fought back. We had killed snipers in the jungle of Agoloma Point without knowing it. When we returned a few days later to remove the remaining maps and intelligence from the cave, the treetops above us stank of rotting flesh, and flies clustered thick on the leaves. Now in a few minutes, their fellow soldiers would swarm the aerodrome, killing and maiming and taking the Filipinos and Americans who were left prisoner.

As a captain, Ed could have easily taken the mission himself, and nobody would have blamed him. Instead he told us to drop our fragmentation bombs on the Japanese, strafe them and then head south and not come back.

What part of Dyess wanted to play savior and stay behind to burn and starve with the rest of our men? Yet he was devoted to himself, the part he let roam free to humor us along the way.

Only then did we fire not out of revenge for lost buddies or mere survival but something else. The enemy shot away our landing gears and hydraulic systems as we lifted over their heads at the edge of the field. We dropped our bombs on a Japanese concentration coming across a bridge farther north and emptied our machine guns on them in low-level strafing. Our guns emptied quickly and our desire opened up like a gulf into the sea. We fought because more than anything, we didn’t want to shoot and kill Japanese, strangers who had meant nothing to us before and still don’t. But the better we performed our roles, the closer we came to waking up the next morning as Hollywood actors and newspaper editors and ranchers. We hoped that we killed many, which was all we could do. We got away to the south and hitched a ride out of Ilo Ilo on General Royce’s bombers to Darwin. Because we have ourselves to gain and nothing but our skins to shed, for sure we’ll be back soon to strafe and bomb, and to kill.
Author Notes

Vanessa Blakeslee’s work has been recognized by grants and fellowships from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Yaddo, the Ragdale Foundation and the United Arts of Central Florida, and has appeared in Harpur Palate, The Bellingham Review, Green Mountains Review, and The Southern Review, among other journals. She was a finalist for the 2011 Philip Roth Residency at Bucknell University and the Sozopol Fiction Seminars. Her short story “Shadowboxes” won the 2011 Bosque Fiction Prize. Please visit www.vanessablakeslee.com for more.

About the Work

The intersection of form and content sparked the vision for “Ed Dyess, Hero of Agoloma Point, April 22nd, 1942.” I wrote it midway through the MFA in Writing program at Vermont College, when I was trench-deep in setting all types of challenges for myself as a writer. I wanted to stretch my abilities, write about people and situations vastly different from my (then) comfort zone of often thinly-veiled autobiographical fiction. I had first encountered the historical incident a couple of years before, when I was hired to co-write a screenplay about fighter pilots in World War II. In my research I came upon a first person radio transcript dated April 22nd, 1942, given by another fighter pilot who had escaped the Philippines to Darwin, Australia—the voice of my story originally stems from this primary source. The screenplay ultimately didn’t fly, but for a long time the bizarre, true story of Ed Dyess and his band of pilots who ended up fighting a land mission in the Philippines with old Lewis guns from the first World War and oven mitts stuck in my imagination. If the screenplay wasn’t going anywhere, why not salvage those great opening scenes, transfer them to another form?

But as with many ideas for potential fiction, I didn’t attempt to put the story on paper because I didn’t yet have a container for the narrative. Not until I studied with Douglas Glover my second semester and came across a short war story of his, “Swain Corliss, Hero of Malcolm’s Mills, (now Oakland, Ontario), November 6th, 1814,” did I have an Aha moment. I wrote the first draft as a self-imposed exercise and turned it in to Glover, noting my intention to pay homage to his tale with my own. The draft came back with all types of red marks and suggestions, but I finally had a style and narrative structure, enough to give it the dramatic thrust needed for a short story to work.

That was the easy part. The big problem I faced as I attempted revision (the story went through about five drafts) was that I had not yet inhabited the point-of-view sufficiently so that the why of the narrative was clear. As my third semester instructor Xu Xi posed to me, the first question was what makes Ed Dyess a hero, beyond the military sense—a hero that warrants this particular story be told of his life in this particular moment by this narrator? Another problem was that my initial descriptions of the action were strategic and not tactical or specific enough—not surprising, considering my lack of military expertise. But a writer’s job is to render the fiction believable, so I had to nail the details. In the screenplay version these were much easier to leave out, of course—a screenplay being comprised of mostly dialogue and scant description, unlike literature.
To better capture the voice and tone, I studied Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” and Ha Jin’s “A Woman from New York.” I also studied James Salter’s excellent novel, “The Hunters,” a book that captures the consciousness of fighter pilots in an entirely believable way. Even after examining these texts I struggled with getting the voice right up until I worked through the other issues in the story. Once I knew Ed Dyess and the narrator better, the voice seemed to straighten itself out.

A somewhat easier task was nailing the concrete details. I moved a sentence from several paragraphs in, making it the opening line of the story. From there I had a clearer vantage point to render the events. This is a common pitfall when learning to write, for everything builds from the opening line you lay down. So if the opening line is faulty, like with a house, the rest of what you build will be on shaky ground. In the early drafts I had a lot of awkward back-and-forth that ended up being confusing; the story could just as easily be told chronologically. Often when writing short fiction you want to keep the backstory to a minimum, but in this case the historical details were integral to the understanding of the story. So for the subsequent drafts I focused on rearranged the telling to a more simple, straightforward approach. Once I had accomplished that, and fleshed out the details more, “Ed Dyess…” started to read less like a writing exercise and more like a story.

Finally, to develop the “why” of the narrative more fully, I focused on bringing out the character of Ed Dyess in a more precise and exacting way. Once he (and the narrator’s perception of him) came into sharper focus, the comment I wanted to make about heroism, war and absurdity at this point in human history coalesced more fully.

Fiction, for me, is about living multiple realities through characters whose lives are radically different from my own, and rendering those inhabited realities believable for the reader to experience them, too. How else would I be able to experience, in a complete sensory and psychological way, a band of American pilots fighting the Japanese in World War II? Walk in the shoes of a young man in a Pacific jungle sixty-five years ago when I’m a woman in the twenty first century? Writing fiction, for those who are called to do it, is among the most important work on the planet, for it shows us what it is to be human. By inhabiting another’s life different from your own, you learn to empathize with that person. The process of doing so is my dharma—there’s nothing more frustrating, exhilarating, or challenging that I care to do. Sometimes it comes easy, sometimes not, but at the end of the day, the work is fun and the rewards infinite.

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