REMEMBERING A FORGOTTEN LEGEND – THOMAS DRY HOWIE, “THE MAJOR OF ST LO”

ONE OF THE LITTLE KNOWN ICONIC STORIES OF WORLD WAR II CONCERNS A MILD MANNERED ARMY BATTALION COMMANDER WHOSE LEADERSHIP DURING THE SAVAGE FIGHTING IN THE NORMANDY CAMPAIGN WOULD RESULT IN HIS BEING IMMORTALIZED ANONYMOUSLY AS “THE MAJOR OF ST LO”, AND YEARS LATER HONORED AS THE MODEL FOR A FAMOUS MOVIE FIGURE.

THOMAS DRY HOWIE WAS BORN ON APRIL 12, 1908 IN ABBEVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA; HE WAS ONE OF SEVEN CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY OF A MAN OF SCOTTISH DESCENT, TORRANCE HOWIE AND HIS WIFE CORA DRY. TOM HOWIE WAS AN ADVENTUROUS BOY AND A STAR ATHLETE AT ABBEVILLE HIGH SCHOOL, HE WENT ON TO ATTEND THE CITADEL, THE STATES FAMOUS MILITARY COLLEGE IN CHARLESTON WHERE HE GAINED A REPUTATION AS A WELL ROUNDED CADET WHO WAS AN OUTSTANDING STUDENT, ATHLETE AND LEADER. HOWIE WAS A DEANS LIST ENGLISH MAJOR AND ALL STATE HALFBACK IN FOOTBALL WHO WAS ALSO CAPTAIN OF THE BASEBALL TEAM AND A BOXER; HIS STRONG PRINCIPLES AND LEADERSHIP QUALITIES BECAME EVIDENT IN HIS JUNIOR YEAR WHEN HE ORGANIZED A HUNGER STRIKE BY THE CORPS OF CADETS TO PROTEST THE POOR QUALITY OF FOOD IN THE MESS HALL, HE ALSO BECAME KNOWN AS A FRIEND TO ALL HIS FELLOW
CADETS AND A MAN OF EXEMPLARY MORALS AND DISCIPLINE, QUALITIES THAT RESULTED IN HIS BEING VOTED PRESIDENT OF THE SENIOR CLASS AND BEING NAMED AS THE “MOST VERSATILE, POPULAR AND BEST ALL AROUND”. A GREAT STORY THAT COMBINES HIS ATHLETIC, SCHOLASTIC AND PERSONAL EXCELLENCE OCCURRED IN NOVEMBER, 1928 WHEN THE CITADEL WAS TO PLAY CLEMSON IN ITS HOMECOMING FOOTBALL GAME; ALREADY IN ITS USUAL POSITION AS A HEAVY UNDERDOG THE TEAMS CHANCES SEEMED FURTHER DIMMED WHEN THEIR STAR OFFENSIVE PLAYER, HOWIE WAS SCHEDULED TO BE IN COLUMBIA THAT DAY TO TAKE THE QUALIFYING EXAM FOR A RHODES SCHOLARSHIP (WHICH HE MISSED BY ONE TENTH OF A POINT). THOUGH SCHEDULED FOR 9AM THE START TIME WAS MYSTERIOUSLY DELAYED BY 2 HOURS WHICH WOULD APPARENTLY LEAVE NO CHANGE FOR HIM TO MAKE IT BACK TO CHARLESTON FOR THE BIG GAME; AFTER RACING THROUGH THE EXAM HE JUMPED INTO A STUDEBAKER IN WHICH ONE OF HIS COACHES HAD DRIVEN HIM AND THE TWO DASHED OFF AND MIRACULOUSLY ROARED UP TO THE STADIUM JUST AS THE OPENING KICKOFF WAS TAKING PLACE WITH HOWIE HAVING CHANGED IN THE BACK SEAT FROM HIS DRESS GRAYS INTO HIS FOOTBALL UNIFORM. HOWIE RAN ONTO THE FIELD JUST IN TIME TO CARRY THE BALL ON THE FIRST PLAY FROM SCRIMMAGE TAKING A HANDOFF AROUND THE END AND BOWLING OVER 2 CLEMSON DEFENDERS, FIRED UP BY THE HAPPY SURPRISE OF HIS PRESENCE AND INSPIRED PLAY THE BULLDOGS WENT ON TO PULL A STUNNING 12 -7 UPSET VICTORY WITH HOWIE SCORING THE WINNING TOUCHDOWN.

AFTER GRADUATING IN 1929 HOWIE MOVED NORTH TO ACCEPT A
POSITION AS AN ENGLISH TEACHER, COACH AND ATHLETIC DIRECTOR AT STAUNTON MILITARY ACADEMY IN VIRGINIA, HE BECAME HIGHLY POPULAR AS A MENTOR AND FOR HIS CALM, FRIENDLY DEMEANOR; HIS FOOTBALL TEAMS WOULD WIN 4 MILITARY SCHOOL STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS AND HE HELPED COACH THE BASEBALL TEAM TO MANY SUCCESSFUL SEASONS. IN 1932 HE MARRIED A LOCAL GIRL, ELIZABETH PAYNE AND IN 1938 A DAUGHTER SALLY WAS BORN.

HOWIE HAD ANSWERED THE CALLING OF SERVICE TO HIS COUNTRY BY ACCEPTING A COMMISSION IN THE ARMY RESERVE AFTER GRADUATION FROM THE CITADEL, IN 1934 HE TRANSFERRED TO THE VIRGINIA NATIONAL GUARD AND WAS ASSIGNED AS AN INFANTRY OFFICER WITH THE STAUNTON BASED 116TH REGIMENT OF THE 29TH “BLUE AND GRAY” DIVISION. IN THE SUMMER OF 1941 WITH THE CLOUDS OF WAR GATHERING IN ASIA AND EUROPE THE 29TH WAS MOBILIZED TO ACTIVE DUTY AND SUBSEQUENTLY UNDERWENT INTENSIVE TRAINING AT FAR FLUNG BASES THAT INCLUDED CAMP MEADE, MARYLAND; CAMP A.P. HILL, VIRGINIA; FORT BRAGG, NORTH CAROLINA AND CAMP BLANDING, FLORIDA. HOWIE WOULD LAST SEE HIS WIFE, CHILD AND RELATIVES DURING A BRIEF LEAVE IN THE SUMMER OF 1942, IN SEPTEMBER THE 29TH DIVISION MOVED NORTH TO CAMP DIX, NEW JERSEY AND THEN SAILED FOR ENGLAND ABOARD THE LINER QUEEN MARY. AT VARIOUS LOCATIONS IN SCOTLAND AND
ENGLAND THE 29TH CONTINUED ITS HARD TRAINING THROUGHOUT 1943 AND INTO 1944 AS THE CAMPAIGNS IN NORTH AFRICA, SICILY AND ITALY RAGED ON. HOWIE’S FRUSTRATION OVER BEING ON THE SIDELINES OF THE CONFLICT WERE EVIDENT IN A LETTER TO HIS DAUGHTER IN THE FALL OF 1943,

“…..ITS SOMETHING LIKE FOOTBALL, SOMEBODY HAS TO PLAY THE GAME, SOMEBODY HAS TO BEAT THE ENEMY. ALL MY LIFE I’VE TRIED TO MAKE THE FIRST TEAM IN EVERYTHING, SITTING ON THE BENCH WHEN GAME TIME COMES IS NO CONSOLATION FOR WEEKS OF BRUISING DRUDGERY. I KNOW, I DID SOME BENCH SITTING INITIALLY IN EVERYTHING I SET MY HEART ON. AND I’VE BEEN SITTING ON THE BENCH AND TRAINING HARD FOR THREE YEARS NOW. REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU: SIT UP STRAIGHT, LOOK PEOPLE IN THE EYE AND TELL THE TRUTH........”

IN LATE 1943 HOWIE WAS PLACED IN COMMAND OF THE 2d BATTALION OF THE 116TH INFANTRY BUT JUST WEEKS LATER WAS RELIEVED AFTER STANDING UP TO THE COMMANDER OF THE 29TH DIVISION MAJOR GENERAL CHARLES GEARHART, A FAMOUSLY IMPATIENT AND IMPETUOUS MARTINET. DURING AN INSPECTION TOUR OF THE BATTALION CAMP GEARHART DISCOVERED A DIRTY FRYING PAN IN THE MESS TENT AND FLYING INTO A RAGE ORDERED HOWIE TO CALL HIS MEN IN TO CLEAN IT; HOWIE ACCEPTED RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS MENS ACTIONS AND INSISTED HE SHOULD BE THE ONE TO CLEAN IT, AFTER ORDERING HIM A SECOND TIME TO HAVE HIS MEN DO IT HOWIE STATED IT WOULD BE UNFAIR OF HIM TO DO IT AND GEARHART THEN STATED “ IF YOU
WONT DO WHAT YOU ARE TOLD YOU ARE FIRED”. WITHIN DAYS GEARHART APPARENTLY HAD SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT RELIEVING AN OUTSTANDING OFFICER AND HOWIE WAS APPOINTED REGIMENTAL OPERATIONS OFFICER, A PRESTIGIOUS AND IMPORTANT POSITION THAT EFFECTIVELY AMOUNTED TO A PROMOTION.

ON JUNE 6, 1944 TOM HOWIE GOT HIS WISH TO BE PART OF THE ACTION AND BEGAN THE FINAL CHAPTER OF HIS LIFE WHEN THE 116TH WAS IN THE FIRST WAVE ASHORE AT OMAHA BEACH ON D-DAY, RIDING IN THE THIRD WAVE IN A LANDING CRAFT OCCUPIED BY THE ASSISTANT DIVISION COMMANDER, BRIGADIER GENERAL NORMAN COTA ( A SCENE DEPIKTED IN THE MOVIE “THE LONGEST DAY”). HOWIE HELPED RALLY THE MEN OF THE 29TH THROUGH THE BLOODY FIGHTING ON THE BEACHHEAD AND IN SUBSEQUENT WEEKS AS FIGHTING RAGED SLOWLY THROUGH THE HEDGEROW COUNTRY OF NORMANDY, SLOGGING YARD BY YARD THROUGH DITCHES AND FIELDS IN FREQUENTLY HAND TO HAND COMBAT IN SOME OF THE MOST COSTLY FIGHTING OF THE EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN. IN HIS FIRST LETTER HOME ON JUNE 24TH HE RELATED THAT HIS FELLOW SOLDIERS HAD NOT EVEN CHANGED CLOTHES FOR THE FIRST FIFTEEN DAYS AFTER LANDING IN FRANCE, WHEN HOWIE FINALLY TOOK OFF HIS UNIFORM AND BOOTS FOR THE FIRST TIME HE DISCOVERED SALT CRYSTALS IN HIS SOCKS AND UNDERWEAR THAT WERE LEFT OVER FROM WADING ASHORE.

HAD BEEN CUT OFF AND SURROUNDED NEAR THE TOWN OF LA MADDE-LEINE AND WAS ALMOST OUT OF FOOD AND AMMUNITION. JUMPING OFF AT 4:30AM TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE DARK AND WITH HOWIE SKILLFULLY UTILIZING AN EARLY MORNING FOG FOR ADDITIONAL COVER HIS MEN DROVE FORWARD THROUGH THE “MARTINSVILLE LINE” JUST EAST OF ST. LO USING PISTOLS AND HAND GRENADES IN CLOSE QUARTER AND HAND TO HAND FIGHTING TOO CONFINED FOR RIFLES. HOWIE WAS OUT IN FRONT LEADING HIS MEN AND PERSONALLY TOOK OUT AT LEAST 2 GERMAN MACHING GUN NESTS AS HIS UNIT THOUGH AT ONLY HALF STRENGTH NEEDED JUST 2 HOURS TO BREAK THROUGH TERRITORY THAT HAD HELD OUT FOR DAYS. AFTER SHARING THEIR OWN FOOD AND WATER WITH THEIR COMRADES AND REGROUPING THE FOLLOWING DAY HOWIE PLANNED TO LEAVE THE SECOND TO REST AND DEFEND THEIR POSITION AND LEAD HIS BATTALION INTO THE CITY, DESPITE STRONG AND REPEATED COUNTERATTACKS AND BARRAGES OF GERMAN ARTILLERY FIRE HOWIE URGED HIS MEN TO STAY UNDER COVER AND ENCOURED THEM BY SAYING “WE WILL GET TO ST. LO!”. HE RADIOED GENERAL GEARHART WHO INSISTED THAT THE SECOND BATTALION BE THE FIRST UNIT TO ENTER ST. LO; HOWIE FELT HIS OWN BATTALION HAD EARNED THAT RIGHT AND TOLD HIS COMMANDER “.....THE SECOND CANT MAKE IT, THEY’RE TOO CUT UP....” AND THEN WAS HEARD TO SAY “.....YES, WE CAN MAKE IT.....SEE YOU IN ST. LO!”. MOMENTS LATER ANOTHER ENEMY MORTAR BARRAGE RAINED DOWN ON HIS POSITION, AS HIS MEN DOVE FOR COVER HOWIE REMAINED STANDING TO ENSURE THAT HIS MEN WERE SAFE AND SECONDS LATER FELL FATALLY WOUNDED BY A PIECE OF SHRAPNEL.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING AS THE 29TH DIVISION FINALLY ENTERED THE CITY OF ST. LO AT GENERAL GEARHARTS ORDER TOM HOWIES FLAG
Him did for him after he died. There can be no doubt that Thomas Howie was a charismatic leader, a courageous soldier and a man of outstanding character”. Also present was famed New York Times war correspondent Drew Middleton who after being told the reason behind the incident wrote a story accompanied by a photo of Howie’s flag draped body that was subsequently published in newspapers back in the U.S. and created a sensation, becoming the most widely reproduced image of the war until the famous Joe Rosenthal photo on Iwo Jima several months later. Due to wartime security Howie’s name could not be revealed so it was Middleton who came up with the term by which he would forever be immortalized – “The Major of St. Lo”. The photo of Howie’s body was also published in Life magazine; the story and photo came to symbolize the courage of the Americans fighting in Europe as well as all those who had paid the ultimate price.

In the years after the war many memorials and tributes were made to Tom Howie; in March of 1945 Staunton Military Academy established the Howie Rifles, a drill team whose members were selected on the basis of military bearing, academics, drill proficiency and leadership. In 1947 a bust of Major

IN 1954 HOWIES CITADEL CLASSMATE R. HUGH DANIEL AND HIS OLDER BROTHER CHARLES, CLASS OF 1918 DONATED HALF A MILLION DOLLARS TO ERECT THE HOWIE BELL TOWER ON THE CITADEL CAMPUS, IT CONTAINS A CARILLON WITH THE LARGEST SET OF BELLS IN NORTH AMERICA CAST AT THE ROYAL BERGEN FOUNDRY IN THE NETHERLANDS. SEVERAL YEARS LATER HOWIE WAS THE SUBJECT FOR ONE OF A SERIES OF MURALS DEPICTING CITADEL HISTORY THAT HANG IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY. IN 1956 THE HOWIE STORY WAS TOLD IN AN ARTICLE WRITTEN FOR COLLIER'S MAGAZINE BY CORNELIUS RYAN, AUTHOR OF “THE LONGEST DAY”; SHORTLY AFTERWARD IT WAS REPEATED IN AN EPISODE OF THE TV SHOW “CAVALCADE OF AMERICA” WITH HOWIE BEING PORTRAYED BY ACTOR PETER GRAVES WHO WOULD LATER BECOME FAMOUS FOR HIS ROLE IN THE “MISSION, IMPOSSIBLE” SERIES. FAMED HISTORIAN STEPHEN AMBROSE PROMINENTLY FEATURED HOWIE IN HIS HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL GUARD ENTITLED “CITIZEN SOLDIER” AND AFTER HAVING SERVED AS A SCRIPT
CONSULTANT FOR THE MOVIE “SAVING PRIVATE RYAN” INDICATED IT WAS HOWIE WHO WAS USED AS THE MODEL FOR THE TOM HANKS CHARACTER OF CAPTAIN JOHN MILLER WHO LIKE HOWIE WAS A MILD MANNERED FORMER HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER AND BASEBALL COACH. HISTORICAL MARKERS STAND IN FRONT OF HOWIES BOYHOOD HOME AND THE COURTHOUSE IN ABBEVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA AND THE CITIZENS OF ST. LO ERECTED A LARGE MEMORIAL TO HONOR THE MAN THEY STILL REGARD AS THE “LIBERATOR OF ST LO” AND ON WHICH THEY CONTINUE TO PLACE FLOWERS TO THIS DAY. NATIONAL GUARD ARMORIES NAMED FOR HOWIE STAND IN GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA AND HIS FORMER HOME OF STAUNTON, VIRGINIA; IN 2003 HOWIE WAS ENSHRINED IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA HALL OF FAME, THEN CITADEL PRESIDENT MAJOR GENERAL JOHN GRINALDS DESCRIBED HIM AS “A MAN WHOSE LIFE, COURAGE AND DEVOTION TO DUTY MEET THE EXEMPLARY STANDARDS FOR INDUCTION”. IN 2009 HE WAS HONORED AS ONE OF THE TEN MOST FAMOUS MEMBERS OF THE 29TH DIVISION IN A NEW DISPLAY AT THE MARYLAND MILITARY MUSEUM IN BALTIMORE; AT A D-DAY COMMEMORATION CEREMONY IN JUNE, 2010 A TREE WAS PLANTED IN HOWIES MEMORY OUTSIDE A NEW NATIONAL GUARD ARMORY IN WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA THAT IS NOW HOME TO HIS FORMER BATTALION, ADDED TO THE BASE OF THE TREE WERE FIVE CANTEEN CUPS OF SOIL FROM THE LOCATIONS MOST PROMINENT IN HOWIES LIFE; HIS HOME IN

AFTER HIS DEATH HOWIE WAS POSTHUMOUSLY AWARDED THE SILVER STAR, BRONZE STAR, PURPLE HEART AND FRENCH LEGION OF HONOR. HE LIES BURIED AT THE ST. LAURENT CEMETERY ON THE BLUFFS ABOVE OMAHA BEACH ALONG WITH 9,300 OTHERS WHO FELL IN FRANCE, AT THE VISITORS CENTER HIS IS THE SECOND MOST REQUESTED GRAVE LOCATION AFTER TEDDY ROOSEVELTS 2 SONS AND THE ONLY COMMON SOLDIER WHOSE GRAVE LOCATION THE STAFF KNOW WITHOUT HAVING TO LOOK UP.

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THE CITADEL CLASS OF 1980