

AN UNEXPECTED FATE

Shortly after 2:00 pm, Albert, our cantankerous foreman, gave Beau Bather and me permission to take a ten-minute work-break. "Don't take a minute longer," he bellowed in a mode barely masking his distrust and loathing for college students working construction jobs during semester breaks. "Punks with a condescending attitude, an aversion to getting their hands dirty" was in the vocabulary he relied upon to categorize us and Wayne Stamp as well.

Wayne was a second-year college student. Tall, broad-shouldered, the son of Clinton's Deputy Sheriff, he was an engaging, bright individual with a sense of humor and a high level of diffidence. He hardly ever spoke about his experiences as a combat infantryman in WW II, where he had narrowly escaped death in the Battle of the Bulge.

Beau and I enjoyed Wayne's company immensely and cherished his friendship.

The three of us-- Wayne, Beau and myself-- worked for McDonald Engineering, the contractor for a new 120 foot high concrete silo at the Clinco plant. Over a period of ten days the silo slowly ascended to maximum height. At this time, a wooden platform, about 15 by 18 feet, was being installed at its top. The next day heavy concrete would be poured over this platform to create the roof and complete the silo's construction.

Beau and I started our work-break by descending a ladder to a narrow structure below the roof platform. It concealed us from the workers overhead. It was damp and dark. The smell of uncured lumber permeated the air. Beau was in a bad frame of mind, pissed that Albert had not permitted Wayne to join us.

I remained silent and pulled a pack of Salem cigarettes from the breast pocket of my dirty work-shirt. Deeply inhaling my first puff of exhilarating tobacco smoke, I wondered if a day would come when I would acquire sufficient courage and fortitude to kick an addiction to menthol cigarettes, or for that manner, any kind of cigarette.

While puffing on his Camel cigarette Beau's mood brightened. Looking directly into my face, he inquired, "What are you thinking about?"

"My addiction to tobacco-- can I muster enough strength of mind to beat it?" I replied. Beau acknowledged his mania with the same issue. Throughout our work-break we went on to assure each other about discipline already being there for us, providing us the ability to make prudent choices and stand by them!

We disproved that premature conclusion by extending our authorized ten-minute work break to twenty minutes. As we emerged topside, foreman Albert confronted us proclaiming, "Effective the end of this shift, you guys are fired."

The next day concrete was poured on the wood form installed for roof construction. Abruptly the form gave way. Five workmen fell 120 feet to their death. Wayne Stamp, 24, and Albert were among them. A subsequent investigation attributed the collapse to uncured lumber.

This event occurred in 1947. Beau passed a few years ago. Nearing age 90, I linger to speculate about my fate. Do un-comprehended lessons remain?

Joseph Walton
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