

GLORY DENIED POSTSCRIPT

Ten Years On

Laura remembers making a kind of pact with her mother after they got their copies of *Glory Denied* weeks before its original release date on Memorial Day 2001. They would read it and be ready to discuss when all three daughters' vacationed with Alyce on the Gulf coast in late May. It didn't happen. The book stirred such deep emotions that "we read it but never talked about it," Laura recalled. The sisters after reading the book, expressed to me sadness at what their family had endured as a result of the war, particularly the colonel, but also satisfaction at the truth of it all. "It's marvelous," Alyce said of *Glory Denied* in the briefest of phone calls. And we never spoke again of her life as an Army wife.

Jim Thompson had mixed feelings about the book, complaining to his friend Charles Ingraham, director of veterans' affairs services in Key West, and later to a writer for the *New York Times*, that too much attention had been given to Alyce and her experiences and perspective. At the same time, Jim was thrilled that, at long last, his captivity and heroics were chronicled and his status as America's longest-held prisoner of war affirmed. Twice that year he appeared at book signings in Key West. His friend and condo association manager, Michelle Montgomery, who every Monday for years sorted his pills and helped him pay his bills, invited Jim for dinner one evening and then they watched together his life discussed in full on the C-Span "Booknotes" program hosted by Brian Lamb. "He sat there in awe, I mean mouth hanging open, while I'm crying," Michelle recalls.

Jim soon was taking other steps to raise his public profile. Working with Michelle he paid to have three flag poles installed in front of Key West by the Sea, his condominium complex, to fly the American flag, state flag and the distinctive black-and-white flag honoring U.S. prisoners of war and veterans missing in action. Beneath the POW flag, Jim had a bronze plaque mounted on a keystone pedestal, announcing that Colonel Floyd "Jim" Thompson resided there. He bought a new black Cadillac and had bolted to its front fenders mounts for a pair of American flags, which fluttered as he drove through town in a motorcade of one, his license plate proclaiming "POW." Jim also contacted the director of Arlington National Cemetery to ask if he might be granted a place of honor there upon his death. By then Jim was nearer to death than acquaintances might have suspected.

In the fall of 2001, at the height of his newfound celebrity, Michelle found Jim unconscious in his condo lying amid vomit and blood. Rushed to the local civilian medical center, he was treated for a bleeding ulcer and alcohol addiction. Michelle visited the next day, posing as Jim's niece to get to see him, and found "colonel" unconscious and in wearing wrist and ankle restraints, his bed linens soiled. "I went to the nurses' station and screamed and yelled. They're said, 'Honey, you just wait a minute. You don't know what we've put up with this guy.' So they kept him strapped in. The doctor came. 'He looked right at me and said, 'If he has another alcohol beverage

he's going to die. Do you understand that?' I said, 'Yes sir.' Of course I understood. But for the person lying there in the bed it was a different story.

Ruth Chamowitz, wife of Jim's lawyer and long-time advocate, Michael Chamowitz, flew to Key West to be at his bedside. Jim still was unconscious and restrained to control delirium tremens, seizures that afflict severe alcoholics in withdrawal. Ruth visited daily through Jim's recovery and arranged to take him home, wheel chair at the ready. But from the hospital Jim had Ruth drive him straight to his favorite steak house on the waterfront. Too weak to walk inside on his own, too proud to use the wheel chair, Jim leaned on Ruth. Finally seated, he requested a pack of cigarettes and a double Scotch whiskey. Ruth began to cry, asking Jim how he could do that after all he had just been through. She also raised the touchy issue of seeking treatment for alcoholism.

Next day Jim had Ruth drive him to the nearby naval medical facility. Though he had no appointment, Jim insisted on meeting with his doctor. When finally taken back to see the physician, Jim had Ruth repeat her suggestion about treatment for alcoholism. The doctor explained that he and Jim had discussed his addiction on several occasions, and it was Jim's choice to continue drinking. Ruth wept. She soon returned home to Alexandria, Virginia. She and Jim never spoke to each other again.

Jim's final tenuous connection to family was his daughter Ruth. They talked by phone once in while. Ruth's son, Michael, had made a few visits to his grandfather's condo over the years. Knowing her dad liked to entertain during the holidays, Ruth began sending a flower arrangement for his table every Christmas. In December 2001 the flowers arrived as usual but the card, through clerical error, was signed only his son-in-law, Kenny, and their children. Jim called Ruth for an explanation. When she delayed calling back for a few days, Jim was livid, saying Ruth had made him worry needlessly. He refused to accept her apology. Kenny found his wife sobbing. Though unfailingly respectful of "the colonel" through the years, this time Kenny snapped. He phoned his father-in-law and blamed Jim for making Ruth miserable, turning a gesture of kindness into an excuse to cause more pain.

With that Jim severed his last tie to family. By spring 2002 he also ended his long personal and professional relationship with Michael Chamowitz, flying to Washington DC from Key West to do so in person. Jim had another lawyer revise his will so it would disinherit each child by name and to make Ingraham his sole heir.

Jim told Ingraham in the spring of 2002 that he was both encouraged by and upset at news that President George W. Bush would present the Medal of Honor posthumously to Army Captain Humbert "Rocky" Versace, an infantry officer who had been wounded, captured and, after two years of brutal captivity, executed by Viet Cong in September 1965. With Jim's encouragement, Ingraham and a few other Vietnam War veterans petitioned the Army that spring to reconsider Jim for the Medal of Honor.

Members of the Special Forces unit at Naval Air Station Key West befriended Jim over the years, expressing open admiration and, whenever

possible, celebrating the colonel's special status. On July 8, 2002, the unit held a birthday luncheon in Jim's honor. In remarks to his hosts, Jim echoed Douglas MacArthur's remark that old soldiers never die but simply fade away. That morning at the White House, President Bush presented the Medal of Honor to Versace's family.

Eight days later, on July 16, Jim Thompson was found dead in his condominium, ending one of the most remarkable lives from the Vietnam War era. With Saturday's newspaper found inside the condo, and later editions piled outside, the coroner estimated death occurred Saturday evening. Jim had laid out dinner for himself in his dining room but the food hadn't been touched. His body was found on his king-size bed, legs drawn up in a fetal position. He was 69.

Jim left conditional instructions that his remains be cremated and his ashes spread on waters off Key West. "If, however, I am awarded the Medal of Honor, then my burial shall be in Arlington National Cemetery," he wrote. His final resting place was thus undetermined for several months until Ingraham received word that the Army would not be recommending Colonel Thompson for the nation's highest military honor.

On a cloudless morning in October, Major David K. Hsu, commander of the Special Forces Underwater Operations School in Key West, organized a pair of small boats to carry Colonel Thompson's ashes out to sea. On the first boat were Hsu, Michelle Montgomery and Charles Ingraham. The second carried three invited guests, former prisoners of war Lew Meyer, Larry Stark and Mark Smith. As Jim had instructed, the boats traveled south and cut engines within sight of his condo, precisely where the turquoise of the reef gave way to the deep blue of the sea. A female chaplain gave a short prayer. Then as Barry Sadler's "The Ballard of Green Berets" played on the adjourning boat Michelle dropped a red, white and blue wreath on the water. Together with Ingraham, careful for the right breeze, she spilled Jim's ashes on the water. The party listened to a recorded version of Amazing Grace and then headed back to the island

"The best part was coming back into shore. We were the lead boat and dolphins came along both sides of our wake and followed us in," Michelle recalls.

No family members had been invited to the ceremony. Jim's daughter Ruth had pleaded with Ingraham that she and son Michael, then seventeen, be allowed to attend to honor his grandfather. If mother and son appeared, Ruth was told, they would not be allowed on the boats. "Michael cried his eyes out," Ruth said.

The John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, hosted a dedication ceremony in the fall of 2004 to rename a street in honor of Colonel Floyd "Jim" Thompson. Officials were surprised to learn Alyce would be joining her children at the dedication. The daughters and Alyce were presented with roses during the ceremony, which included remarks by the commanding general, Jim Jr., and former POW and Medal of Honor recipient Air Force Colonel George "Bud" Day. "In his heart," Day told

attendees, "he loved his country as no one else could love it. He was truly a warrior."

Alyce's oldest grandchild, Catie, whom Alyce and John raised from infancy, sent a note in May 2011 thanking me for writing the book. Catie said she had read it in nine hours, from Saturday afternoon to Sunday morning, feeling nauseous much of the time. "There is nothing in this world so eerie," she wrote, "as to watch your own life unravel on the pages of a book. I am overcome with sadness at all that my family has lost, and amazed at what they managed to pull together for my sake and their own."

Alyce was diagnosed with lung cancer in January 2009. A few weeks later she lost use of her legs and became bedridden with Guillain-Barre syndrome. She died from complications of that disease in her Tennessee home on April 18th at age 74.

That same day, grieving for her mom, Ruth suffered a heart attack, the first of three over the year ahead, cutting short her career as a medical technician. Already a breast cancer survivor, Ruth had her second heart attack soon after she and Kenny lost son Michael, a troubled 25-year-old, to suicide. Ruth and Kenny lived next door to Michael and heard the gunshot.

"The only reason I've survived this long," Ruth told me in December 2011, "is the strength I inherited from both my mom and my dad."

Michael Chamowitz in 2003 established the Floyd James Thompson Memorial Scholarship at a high school in Alexandria, Virginia, for children of POWs and students desiring a military career. He said the scholarship pays tribute "to the good" in his old friend.

Jim Thompson was dead two years when New York City Opera performed the first excerpts of *Glory Denied*, an opera from composer Tom Cipullo. "Music is perhaps the most glorious tool for giving insight into the feelings and soul of another," Cipullo wrote in asking for the rights to base his first opera on the Thompson saga. "Somewhat magically, I believe, it allows us to empathize with others, even those whose motivations may seem selfish or base. To that extent, music heals."

Cipullo selected his libretto verbatim from the most meaningful passages of the book, allowing the characters of Jim and Alyce, as young and older adults, to sing of their tortured lives. Full productions followed, in New York City and Arlington, Virginia, and Cipullo's masterpiece won critical acclaim from *Opera Today*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

Laura attended the Arlington premiere by the opera company Urban Arias. The performance left her overwhelmed emotionally, she told me, as the soaring music and her parents own words evoked all of the anger and sorrow that had engulfed her family following her dad's return from war.

Wrote *Times* reviewer Allan Kozinn of the Chelsea Opera performance in New York: "It is Monteverdi's 'Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria' in reverse, the story of the returning warrior, but in this thoroughly modern version, everything has gone wrong and redemption is out of reach."

-- Tom Philpott, January 2012