

T H E
SOUNDS
O F
RESCUE
T H E
SIGNS
O F
HOPE

A N O V E L B Y

Robert Flynn

with an Introduction by the Author

and an Afterword by

FRED ERISMAN





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Texas Christian University Press
Fort Worth

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First published by Viking Penguin, Inc., 1970.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Flynn, Robert, 1932-
The sounds of rescue, the signs of hope : a novel / by Robert Flynn ;
with an introduction by the author and an afterword by Fred Erisman.
p. cm. — (Texas tradition series ; no. 12)
"First published by Viking Penguin, Inc."—T.p. verso.
ISBN 0-87565-039-2
1. World War, 1939-1945—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series.
PS3556.L9S6 .1988
813'.94—dc19

89-4809
CIP

Cover design by Whitehead & Whitehead



THE TEXAS TRADITION SERIES

Number Twelve

For Mother

Foreword

I was a child of the Great Depression, although I didn't know there was a depression. We were farmers; we owned our own land. Except for salt, pepper, coffee, and sugar we were almost totally self-sufficient—my father's revenge on Roosevelt. We were considered fortunate by sharecroppers, laborers and storekeepers. I didn't know that either. I didn't know any bad people, any deformed or emotionally disturbed children. In the two-room country school I attended there was a child that our parents referred to as "not right," but he went to class and recess with the rest of us. He wasn't popular, but he wasn't shunned either. A few years later when I heard that a child in the community had been abused, I refused to believe it.

What I knew was a benevolent world, a close-knit community of mutual trust. We never locked our doors. We never slept in fear. We expected everyone to be honest. When Dad was cheated, he expressed more disappointment than anger. Neighbors ought to be better than that.

In this garden of eden there was a small serpent. In school, church, and home we were taught the virtue of hard work. But the hardest working people I knew were the poorest, the hungriest, the first to be forced out of their

homes and off the land. Hoboes came to the house and asked for food or work, and they were treated with pity, not contempt. But they brought fear into the heartland because they were workers who couldn't find work. In the school, the church, the home, adults knew something was wrong, but preferred to believe that hard work would save them, while children walked to school without shoes or lunch.

In that benevolent world we feared only strangers. People with peculiar names, different accents, foreign ideas. There was violence in our familiar world, but people were beaten, robbed or killed by friends, neighbors, or relatives. Bad people lived in another world, at least in another part of the state. And to be born male in that benevolent world was to grow up knowing that someday the call would come to defend the familiar from the unfamiliar. Some would answer the call as soldiers, some as preachers, teachers, or lawmen, some as politicians, but all would hear the call.

Our preparation began early. The bad people I killed in war games were sometime Indians, or robbers, or Yankees. More often, I was a crusader and I killed hordes of infidels, my heroes and enemies chosen not by movie magnates, or even by Sir Walter Scott, but by preachers and Sunday school teachers. It was a small world and its verities grew from the land, the rain, the Bible, the love of family, the goodwill of neighbors, and the fear of change.

That world was shattered by Pearl Harbor. I think my father's brother drove to our farm to tell us about the Japanese attack. I'm sure my parents discussed it, but not in my presence. My first clear memory of Pearl Harbor was being told about it at the rural school my sister, brother and I attended. The teacher pointed to Japan on a map, showed us how small it was, and announced that the war would be over in a couple of months. In a couple of months the country was on the ropes and in a northwest Texas rural school

more than four hundred miles from the gulf—the only place from which an attack could be launched—we were taught to crouch under our desks for protection during air raids. And no one laughed. Suddenly there were bad people in our community, rumors of spies, and saboteurs, and loose lips that sank ships.

I think those rumors started at the picture show; it's hard to imagine why a spy or saboteur would wile away his days among northwest Texas farmers. But the picture show had become a force in the community. Before Pearl Harbor not even children took movies seriously. Parents put their children in the movie house so they wouldn't be underfoot while the adults talked about crops, and weather, and gossiped about neighbors. After Pearl Harbor some adults, mostly women, went to the picture show without shame. And the picture show became our introduction to a world outside geography and history textbooks with newsreels about people and events that affected our lives, and with movies that gave us heroes we could adore without reservation and villains we could hate without guilt.

The movies prepared us for fire-bombing and saturation bombing, for Dresden and Hiroshima. "They" were not just our enemies, they were enemies of the human race, and we gloried in the death of each of them; it mattered not whether they were man, woman, or child. And we didn't really care if we had to bomb French and Belgian cities, and Dutch and Polish citizens to get at them. We wanted them dead. But the newsreels also showed us Japanese-Americans being taken from their homes and put in camps. It was hard not to feel pity for them. Nothing in my fragmenting world had prepared me to cheer the screaming death of each treacherous, scheming Japanese soldier, and a few minutes later to see the puzzled faces of Japanese-American children behind barbed wire.

It was in vain that our parents, teachers, ministers warned us that putting an American uniform on a man did not change him, and that some soldiers were Yankees, foreigners, criminals. They were our heroes and we heaped on them an adulation that would be known only by a few athletes and a host of rock stars. I can remember waving at troop trains and following soldiers down the street to stare in awe at their uniforms and run errands with gratitude that they had smiled upon me. But some of the men in uniform were black, a contradiction that must have seemed as strange to them as to me.

I wasn't aware of black people before Pearl Harbor, although I'm sure they lived in the community and I must have seen them. After Pearl Harbor, white men who were not drafted could get jobs at defense plants in the cities, and suddenly there were black people on our farm as farm laborers. They were honest, cheerful, hard-working, and we liked them. But they weren't heroes. They weren't patriots. They were barely citizens and shouldn't be permitted to vote, to hold office, or to fight, although they were superbly equipped to carry the packs of others.

My little world was bursting at the seams with evidence that what I had learned and what I had been taught by those I honored and loved was in fact a lie. Then I learned of Dachau and Auschwitz. Millions of God's chosen people were systematically killed while they begged God to rescue them. And God didn't. And neither did the United States. I saw the atrocities in movie newsreels, and the monsters who had committed them. But they didn't look like monsters. They looked like patriots. They looked worried, and sad, and puzzled that no one could understand that they had just followed orders like good soldiers.

About the same time I discovered things that no one ever talked about although they were in the schoolbooks. That

Muslims had killed Christians who begged God to rescue them, and Christians killed Muslims who begged God to rescue them, and Christians killed Christians who begged God to save them. For reasons I could not explain, I believed that God loved me more than He loved any of my two billion contemporaries; nevertheless, it became increasingly difficult to believe God would rescue me when He didn't rescue the Jews, or the Armenians. He didn't rescue Joan of Arc or Jesus of Nazareth. The serpent had become a cobra. The genie-God, who waited for my call to rescue me from the calamities I had gotten myself into, died.

None of this was apparent to me at the time, of course, although I was aware of a contradiction between the world as I experienced it and the world as it was interpreted for me by all the sources of information I had—parents, teachers, ministers, newspapers, magazines, movies, even books. I was still a few years from the discovery of Faulkner and Kafka, Van Gogh and Picasso. I would have liked some company, but almost everyone I knew preferred to deny the evidence, preferred to believe that the monsters were unique, an aberration limited to a specific political belief at a specific time for reasons that could be explained, and had been destroyed forever in the triumph of goodness. And had nothing to do with lynchings in the South, race riots in the East, Indian reservations in the West. And was categorically different from war-profiteering, fire-bombing, Hiroshima.

I wasn't consciously aware that I began to reconstruct my world, bigger this time, and more complex with lots of strange angles and incongruities, a world that did not deny reality and that made some kind of temporary sense. It was years before I realized that as a writer I wrote about men and women who discovered that their training as human beings was not only inadequate and flawed, it was false. In

North to Yesterday, Lampassas tried to be a success by following a code that was as outdated as he was, in a West that had never existed outside the minds of its fanciful creators.

Pat Shahan, in *In the House of the Lord*, tried to be a prophet in a church that allowed only managers, to be a voice in the wilderness to a church that had all the answers, to succor the oppressed when he and his church had chosen to support the oppressors, to perfect the world in a society beyond redemption.

I don't remember where *The Sounds of Rescue, the Signs of Hope* began. The first clear image I remember of the book is of a man standing in an incredibly beautiful world and blaming God because the air is not clean, the rivers not clear, because children die of disease, of hunger, of neglect, whining in self-pity at how hard life is, and seeking something—drugs, sex, astrology, diet, health foods, television—to rescue him. It is an anti-utopian book but I have never thought of it as a pessimistic one.

I created a man, Gregory Wallace, and through him tried to experience the physical and spiritual extremities of life to see if he—I could endure—not just survive but live meaningfully under those conditions. Gregory is no Lancelot, no Robinson Crusoe, no Mister Roberts. He is a non-heroic everyman who finds that the world he lives in is not the world he was trained for and is almost killed by his equipment for survival. He finds he can live on the island if he is willing to accept his present condition, but he is unable to forget the past and ignore the future. He explores his past for signs of hope and discovers that his family, his history are without significance if there is no future; his present struggle is meaningless if there is no hope. He changes the island to meet his present needs, and reconstructs his past to conform to his present condition.

After the publication of *The Sounds of Rescue, the Signs of Hope*, my own reconstructed world was shattered. Within a few months I went to Vietnam as a reporter, my wife was diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis, and our youngest daughter died.

My wife has had no further symptoms and although doctors never admit a mistake, their predictions of blindness and life in a wheelchair have not happened. We no longer believe the diagnosis and we no longer plan for that kind of future. Nevertheless, I am still trying to construct the kind of world in which Vietnam could happen, in which a family's life could be irrevocably altered by someone else's mistake, in which my daughter could die. In this long and painful process, *The Sounds of Rescue, the Signs of Hope* has been a strength I cannot explain. But that book prepared me for a world that falls to pieces, for happy memories that turn sour, for certitudes that turn to dust. A world in which tears are sounds of rescue, in which death is a sign of hope.

Others have kidded me about the title of the book, calling it, *The Signs of Rescue, the Sounds of Hope*. I have never believed such confusion. Rescue is a sound, whether it's the sound of an airplane, the telephone, the mailman, a trumpet, or a child. Hope is a sign. I am certain that the world as I am reconstructing it will crack and perhaps shatter and I will have to begin again. But in that world, hope is a sign. Sometimes it is the only sign.

Robert Flynn

T H E
SOUNDS
O F
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HOPE





1. DON'T PANIC. RELY ON TRAINING. 2. THINK THINGS OUT. 3. SET DEFINITE GOALS. 4. ENUMERATE CHANCES. MUST WRITE INSTRUCTIONS DOWN BEFORE I FORGET THEM. THINGS I WAS TAUGHT. MY BEST HOPE NOW.

I am alive. On land. Lying under thick tangled shade. Maximum concealment. Plane was hit while attacking Jap carrier. Ducked into clouds to avoid Jap fighter cover. Dis-

oriented. Lost bearings. Engine failed. Got out okay. I'm alive.

Think things out. I was in the water. My chute barely opened and I was in the water. Tangled in parachute. Mae West around neck. Drowning. Felt something grab me. Shark. Kicked at it and arms pulled me free of the chute. Pulled me into the air where I could breathe. Passed out after that. But I am on land. Under concealment. He brought me fruit and water.

Definite goals: 1. Avoid capture. 2. Regain strength. 3. Persuade rescuer to guide me to Allied lines. 4. Watch for rescue. RESCAP will be out looking for me. Must let them know I am alive. 5. Gather information for Navy Intelligence.

Chances: 1. I am alive with only minor cuts and bruises. 2. Am on land. 3. RESCAP will be making intense search for planes lost in strike. 4. Task Force will be chasing Jap fleet. 5. Island has fruit and fresh water. Natives friendly. Can live here for a while. However, I was off course. Am in dense vegetation. Will be difficult to spot. Am on Jap island.

What else? Keep log. Supposed to keep log. Last known position and time of bail-out. Name, serial number, physical condition of personnel. Wind direction and velocity, times of sunrise and sunset, weather, rations used, condition of personnel, inventory of possessions, information of value to Intelligence and Survival officers.

T/O 1812

Grndspd 200k

Course 242°

Wind 305 at 20k

Ship course 330 at 21k

Target 1938

Time over target approx. 8 min.

Track after damage ?

Est. Grndspd after damage 200k

Time in air ?

I don't know where I am. Don't know how far I am from target area, what direction from carrier recovery rendezvous, what time I bailed out.

Lt. Gregory L. Wallace 015323. Weak from shock and near-drowning. Sore from fall into sea. Superficial cuts from shrapnel. Coral abrasions. No signs of panic. Mind clear. Memory good. Have encountered no other Allied personnel.

Wind appears easterly at about ten knots. Sky clear. Towering cumulus in northeast. Lost shoes and survival gear in water. Had to get rid of Mae West and parachute to avoid drowning. Don't know how I lost my watch. Stainless-steel band. Unable to get chart board out of airplane. Have flight suit, three pencils, waterproof case with paper and codes, operating channels, recovery time, IFF and notes on survival. Also six packs of cigarettes in beeswax. Had some matches in waterproof case but Willett borrowed them just before we were launched. Not much of a loss, since my rescuer has a fire.

Survival Instructors should note that a man can be killed by his equipment for survival.

Something else. Some other instruction. Don't be afraid of the jungle. Fit self to country. Travel not recommended.

LOSS OF AIRCRAFT REPORT

Aircraft was hit by explosive shell while in low-level attack on light carrier of Zuiho class. That must have been