

N-Star

The absolute tests are those we face alone.

Gerald Coffee

Former Prisoner of War

Beyond Survival

The limousine was waiting dutifully when Lewis arrived at the airport, and he quickly jumped in, handing the driver the address. He arrived promptly at 7:00, and the Joneses welcomed him inside.

“Thank you so much for coming, Captain Lewis.” Lewis immediately knew that they had spoken to Ed Charles. That's good, he thought.

“Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.”

The hosts went through the necessary formalities, offering drinks and appetizers and making some small talk about the flight and the weather. Over dinner they informed Lewis that they had spoken to Admiral Charles and that he had filled in some of Lewis's background for them. Knowing that Charles must have at least covered the basics, and probably exaggerated some of it, Lewis tried to downplay his past by quipping, “I suppose the

fact that you allowed me in means that he didn't tell you everything about me."

During dinner Lewis politely responded to questions concerning his playing days, providing minimal information and whenever possible deflecting credit to his former teammates. The boy was fascinated. After dinner, the parents politely asked Robbie and his sister to excuse themselves for a little while. The children dutifully left, and Lewis and the parents adjourned to the family's den, bringing their coffee with them.

The family was much more at ease now but still extremely curious about the stick and the books. Lewis allowed the parents to initiate the discussion.

"Again, Captain Lewis..."

"Jim, please," Lewis interrupted.

"Jim, then. We can't thank you enough for coming. Please forgive our concern, but you have to agree that this whole situation with you and Robbie is quite remarkable. Robbie told us yesterday of a visit he had in which he was taken to your Hall-of-Fame ceremony at the Naval Academy." Lewis smiled and nodded as they continued.

“Of course, as parents our primary concern is that no harm will come to our son. And from the way he has been talking about this stick, it almost seems that it has magical powers, like some sort of witchcraft. We never would have believed this possible, but he is completely convinced that the stick is responsible for these dreams he seems to be having—and he doesn’t even call them dreams. He calls them ‘visits’ because he claims to be totally awake. We just don’t want him getting all tied up in an occult phenomenon that he can’t get out of. Do you understand?”

“Of course.”

“So you believe that these visions or visits are really happening because of the stick?”

“Well, yes, the visions that you described to me on the phone did not surprise me.” The parents felt a chill go through their bodies again. “I had many, perhaps hundreds, of visions—visits—myself when I had that stick.”

“How is that possible?” Mary pleaded, not wanting to believe that such visions or magical powers were possible.

“Well, you may or may not know that Native Americans believe that the spirits of the dead come back in tangible form. Once you get past traditional thinking on the afterlife, it becomes easier to accept.”

“You’ll have to forgive us for struggling with this,” said the mother.

“At first it was difficult for me to believe and understand also,” Lewis conceded. “My parents never knew the full story of this stick. They mostly left me to my own devices, and I worked hard and kept my nose clean, so they left me alone for the most part. ‘Witchcraft,’ the word you used before, never came into our vocabulary. I was a relatively happy and healthy kid, so my parents never had real cause for worry. I just enjoyed having the stick and the things I learned through it. There is really only one other person who knows of my true relationship with the stick, and it’s no one from my family,” Lewis concluded cryptically.

“Is it possible to describe the effect the stick has had on your life?” asked Mary.

“Well, this stick has been a very special part of my life. It’s helped me achieve a oneness with the game, with my family, with my job, and that oneness has helped carry me

through many challenges in my life. It represents so much to me. I have tried to render honor to the stick, its previous custodians, and the game in the way that I played, and to a greater extent, the way that I have lived my life.

“I was also able to maintain a correspondence with Mr. Turnbull for many years after he presented me the stick. I can’t tell you how much that meant to me for all those years. I would like to be available to your son for such a correspondence should he desire one. Mr. Turnbull was about fifty-five at the time I met him, and he passed away several years ago at the age of ninety-two,” Lewis closed with a reverent smile.

“Do you know the other men who have been custodians of the stick?” the mother asked.

“It took me some time to fully understand the history of this stick. I don’t think I would be able to do justice to its history in a few minutes. What I would like to say, though, is that I’m sure Robbie will gain a great deal of insight into what this stick means—the positive energy, passion, love,

respect, and spirit that have been a part of it for all these years.”

“Would you mind if Robbie asked you some questions. We know he really wants to.”

“Not at all. He’s what the stick is all about now.”

Robbie and Catherine came into the den. Robbie dove right into the questions.

“Did you do any of these carvings?” Robbie asked.

“Yes, I did do one of the carvings. Can you guess which one?”

“Was it the top one—the big ‘N’ with the stars?”

Lewis nodded with a smile.

“My dad and I thought that it was some sort of compass pointing to the North Star. Or does it have something to do with Navy?”

“First of all, you should probably know that Native Americans often made carvings or inscriptions on their sticks. The figures, of course, had some sort of personal or spiritual meaning to the player. They also attached various things to their sticks—feathers, claws,

teeth and the like. The carving that I did has very special meaning to me.

“Back when I was playing lacrosse and soccer at the Naval Academy, we used to earn varsity letters like most athletes on college and high school teams. But at Navy we also earned what we call an ‘N-Star’ for our sweaters when we beat Army. It was a big deal back then, and it’s still a big deal today. I was fortunate to have earned five such stars.

“I can’t imagine a more spirited rivalry in any sport in any school than any Army-Navy game. I think it comes from a shared bond. The academies are similar in their fundamental challenges and goals, as well as all of us being on the same ‘team’ in defense of our country. We depend upon each other—the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard—when we go into battle. John Feinstein has recently written an excellent book on the history of the Army-Navy football game. It’s called *A Civil War*, and most of what you learn about the football rivalry applies to nearly the same degree to every other sport at the academies. I just happen to have a copy of that book for you and your parents.”

Lewis pulled the books out of his travel briefcase and handed one each to Robbie and his parents. He also presented Robbie's sister a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

"It's a great book," Lewis pronounced in regard to the Army-Navy book. "You should read it when you get a chance."

The parents and the boy were enthralled. They recalled their discussion with Admiral Charles and were awed by the notion that they were listening to one of the great players of all time talking about his playing days and career afterwards. This was for real. They didn't want to believe it, but it was.

"Anyway, the 'N-Star' carving is not for my playing days but is in honor of one of my teammates who lettered three times each in lacrosse and soccer. His name was Bill Kearns, and he also earned five stars. He exemplified everything that you would want to see in an athlete and in a person. He was a great naval officer who died in captivity in Vietnam after his plane was shot down. His fellow POW's later told of his extraordinarily noble conduct while in captivity. He was the captain of our team, the consummate team player. He always put other people ahead of himself on the field

and in the hall—the dorm. It was no surprise for any of us to hear that when he could ease the suffering of his fellow prisoners of war, he would. He did it in a variety of ways, by mending their wounds, and giving them some of the meager food and water rations he received. In fact, he smuggled his own food to fellow prisoners who were weaker than he was. Late at night, when the guards were sleeping, he found a way to crawl through the ceiling of his cell to cells of his comrades, then return unnoticed. He was one of the most heroic people this country has ever known. His comrades say he died of a severe case of malaria he was too weak to fight off, like a great many other POW's who suffered a similar fate.

“He left behind a wife and two small children, a boy and a girl. At the time he was captured they were about four and two. Many of our teammates have set up and contributed to a trust fund for their education. He was the greatest person I ever knew. I carved the ‘N-stars’ after I learned of his passing to keep his spirit alive in this stick and in the game. I don’t know if you recognize the outline of the maps on either side of the ‘N,’ but on the left side here,” he pointed out to Robbie, “is Vietnam.

On the right side is Long Island, where Bill and I are from. He was from Kings Park, and I'm from Uniondale. He loved the game as much as anyone I've ever known. His life has truly inspired me in all that I've done since we lost him. You'll see a lot more about what the 'N-Star' means in the Feinstein book."

As Lewis concluded his story, Robbie felt his whole body tingle again.

It was getting late, and Lewis wanted to let the boy enjoy some of the same excitement he had experienced in discovering more about the stick *through* the stick itself rather than through him. The boy would learn plenty in due time, he reminded himself. Lewis made overtures that he didn't want to keep the children up too late. Mr. and Mrs. Jones quickly picked up on the cue and asked the children to prepare for bed because Captain Lewis had to fly back to California early in the morning.

Lewis thanked the family for their hospitality and extended the same offer he had at their first meeting, "I won't impose anything on you all, but I will answer questions as best I can. If you don't mind, perhaps I can take the liberty of sending Robbie a book on his

birthday.” Then looking at the sister’s wide eyes, “And his sister, as well, as Mr. Turnbull did for me. I’m scheduled to be in town again in about three weeks. I’m in this part of the country about once a month for two or three days on business—perhaps we could meet again?”

The Joneses nodded their assent. As Lewis strode slowly down the walkway toward the waiting limousine, he soaked in the warm breeze and smiled at the waning full moon.