

A Cause Greater Than Self:
The Journey of Captain Michael J. Daly (1925 – 2008)
World War II Medal of Honor Recipient



Good Morning. It is a great honor for me to be able to share highlights of Michael Daly's remarkable story with you, especially with members of his family joining us here today. One of the great blessings in my life was the opportunity to get to know and write about Michal Daly.

History is a story. It always begins "once upon a time." And so begin

Nuremberg, Germany, 1945

On April 18, 1945, the 3rd Reich was in its death throes, but fanatical Nazi resistance continued. That morning, amidst street fighting in bombed-out and rubble-strewn Nuremberg, twenty-year-old Army Captain Michael J. Daly, sleepless for more than twenty-

four hours and running on pure adrenalin, had one overriding goal in mind: to protect his men. With his company pinned down by blistering enemy machine gun fire, Daly ordered them to stay put. Then, in the words of Sgt. Troy Cox, a machine gunner from Mississippi, “that long-tall boy (6’3”), stooped-over with his carbine, ran forward alone.” With bullets whining about him, Daly, the target for concentrated machine gun, machine pistol, rifle, and rocket fire, single-handedly engaged in four separate fire-fights defeating heavily armed German positions manned by a total of 15 German soldiers.

The following day, Daly’s company received orders to scale the wall, now a very high pile of rubble, in the “old city” of central Nuremberg behind which lurked enemy snipers. Daly insisted that he would go first rather than send a subordinate. As he did so, he was struck by a bullet fired from below that passed through the right side of his face and exited the left, passing through his palate and fracturing both his upper and lower jaws. Seriously wounded and choking on his own blood, Daly was not expected by Army doctors to survive. He did, but spent the next year in and out of hospitals.

Medal of Honor

August 23, 1945: the gilded, chandeliered East room of the White House. President Harry Truman held the gold, five-pointed star slightly away from the chest of Michael J. Daly. The tall, young, infantry captain in his tan service dress uniform stood at attention before the President. Truman had just draped the medal around Daly’s neck and now reached back with his left hand to adjust the bright, silky, light-blue ribbon from which dangled the gleaming star. At age 20, Daly was the youngest of the 28 recipients gathered that day to receive the Medal from the president’s hand. Then, in keeping with tradition governing the ceremony, the commander-in-chief saluted the captain first rather than wait for the captain to render the courtesy. Daly solemnly returned the salute, feeling a mixture of pride, humility, and grief, and vowing silently to try to live a life that would reflect honor on those who, he believed, truly deserved the medal: “The guys who didn’t come home.” Michael travelled to a hero’s welcome in his hometown of Fairfield, Connecticut, paid a low-key visit to Prep when the school year commenced, and was named Georgetown Prep Alumnus of the year. [Over 400 Prep alumni served in the armed forces during WWII, twelve of whom died.]

The events of April 1945, were the culmination of a remarkable eleven-month stretch of time during which Daly landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944, and thereafter fought his way through France, Belgium, and into Germany. Convinced of the justice of the Allied cause against Hitler, Daly selflessly and repeatedly placed himself in harm's way to achieve his unit's objectives and to protect those with whom he served and later commanded as an officer. During his time in combat, Daly advanced in rank from private and assistant squad leader to Captain and company commander. In the process, he received a Bronze Star with V-attachment for valor, 3 Silver Stars for valor, two Purple Hearts for wounds suffered during battle, and, of course, the Medal of Honor – all before the age of 21.

On one occasion in eastern France, 3 enemy machine guns opened up and caught Daly and his platoon in a crossfire, leaving only 9 of the 22-man platoon unwounded. Daly directed his men to withdraw down a ditch and then ran into the middle of the road, firing his pistol to draw the concentrated fire of the enemy upon himself. For 30-minutes, he moved about in plain view of German machine gunners and infantrymen who were armed with submachine guns, a hail of bullets ricocheting at his feet as he covered for the last wounded men. The company sergeant of Mike's A (Able) Company kept a scrapbook in violation of Army policy. One morning, he snapped a photo of Daly returning exhausted from a dangerous night patrol for which he had volunteered. The sergeant later mounted the snapshot on the scrapbook page, and then wrote underneath it, "Captain Mike Daly, the finest officer and bravest man I have ever known."

ROOTS

Michael Daly came from a large and prominent Irish-Catholic family from Fairfield Connecticut. His father, Paul G. Daly, was a lawyer dealing in real estate in New York City and raising steeplechase horses at his home in Fairfield, Connecticut. Paul Daly was also a highly decorated officer of World War I, having received the Distinguished Service Cross and nomination for the Medal of Honor, among other awards. Michael, therefore, was

raised to view military service, especially in the cavalry or infantry, as a high calling, and a strict obligation for people of his social class who had been blessed with so much. His father also preached the duty of military officers to lead from the front, to make the welfare of their men a top priority along with accomplishing the mission, and to never waste lives in pursuit of vainglory, pride, or foolish bravado. He advised Michael that while he would feel fear, a leader should not show fear to those he was leading. "Only fear to show fear," he urged his son. Despite the many conflicts that Michael would have with his father during his teenage years, and despite the many ways in which Michael would disappoint his dad, Paul Daly had planted the seeds of leadership and heroism in his son.

GEORGETOWN PREP

When it came time for high school, Michael's parents, at the suggestion of Jesuits they had come to know, sent Michael to Georgetown Prep as a boarding student. Michael entered Prep as a freshman in 1937, fully one year younger than most of his classmates because he had skipped the 3rd grade. He was tall for his age, however, and this helped.

Michael had a checkered career at Prep. On the one hand, he was popular among his classmates, enjoyed close friendships, and his dorm room served as the site of many late night gatherings. He played on the football, basketball, and baseball teams, and was a member of the rifle club. Michael also grew in piety, serving as an altar boy for four years, visiting the Chapel on his own time, participating at Mass and other devotions, and writing for the *Little Hoya* newspaper, including an article stressing the importance of the Eucharist in the lives of students. (During the war, Michael would draw upon the religious formation he had internalized at Prep, praying frequently, and especially asking the intercession of St. Michael the Archangel and St. Maurice, the patron saint of infantrymen.) In class, he was particularly interested in history and English, his grades overall were solid, though he never suffered from overwork, and he felt great respect for the Jesuits on the faculty. His fellow seniors elected him senior class president, the equivalent of today's vice-president of the yard. But, as Michael would say in looking back at his time in high school, "I was pretty full of myself."

Indeed, by senior year, Michael, who possessed an anti-authoritarian streak, had developed a definite "swagger," and found himself repeatedly in trouble for infractions of

the disciplinary code — misbehavior in class, tardiness, messy room. He was removed as senior class president after an argument with a young Jesuit scholastic escalated to a thrown Coke bottle and then a reckless drive around the golf course on a purloined tractor, including over a green or two. At the end of his senior year, the Jesuit Prefect of studies wrote on Michael's Prep transcript under the heading, Discipline: "Very poor . . . gave everyone trouble."

In all of this, however, Michael benefitted from the *cura personalis* shown him by administrators, teachers, and coaches. Prefect of Discipline and moderator of athletics Bernard T. Kirby, S. J., for example, who saw Michael frequently for JUG and at practice, noted that Michael had almost no discipline problems on the field, court, or diamond and that Mike was at his best when others needed/depended upon him. Fr. Kirby encouraged Michael to cultivate that admirable quality, and hopefully with it, greater self-control in other areas of his life.

In Mike's case, the playing fields of Georgetown Prep (in addition to the lessons taught him by his hero-father and the wise counseling of Father Kirby) served as an incubator of selflessness. He played varsity football, basketball, and baseball, and while Michael was not a great athlete, he was a great team player, encouraging teammates and putting forth maximum effort in practice and during games. He had no discipline problems with coaches because he was involved in an activity that he loved, and because, in the context of team sports, the rules and requirements that he found so onerous and flaunted so freely in other settings made sense to him. On a team, he felt a sense of a greater purpose – something larger than himself for which he was willing to sacrifice-- and he treasured the camaraderie that flowed from the pursuit of a common goal

Absent that sense of a greater cause, however, Michael often reverted to self-defeating behavior – a pattern that would continue into adulthood. For example, he was expelled in the fall of 1941 from a post-grad year at Portsmouth Priory in New Hampshire for sneaking off campus for a late-night spree. Then, as a first-year cadet at West Point in 1943, an institution he did not want to attend in the first place, Michael racked up numerous demerits while defying Cadet officers whom he loathed for their hazing. Dismissed from the Academy at the end of his first year after purposely failing a math re-

entrance exam, Daly then enlisted in the infantry feeling that he needed to prove his worth -- a not uncommon story line among MOH recipients. The result was that Michael found his best self – that of a rescuer/defender -- in the midst of the world's most terrible and deadly war.

Escaping “The Hero’s Cage”

But MOH recipients often pay a high price for their heroism. They face the challenge of what to do with the rest of their lives after the cheering stops. This has been as daunting a challenge for some as the danger they faced during wartime. MOH recipients are also painfully aware that many of the bravest soldiers go unrecognized because their acts of heroism died with them. This is a heavy burden to bear. It produces in many feelings of unworthiness, anger, and guilt, and such was the case with Michael. Daly spent the ten years following the war trying to escape what he called “the hero’s cage” and, like a number of Medal of Honor recipients, not succeeding very well at it. Suffering from symptoms of PTSD, and thus feeling disconnected and adrift, he sought the company of fellow veterans, usually at bars, and reverted to his prewar adolescent behavior. He closed down a lot of those bars, sometimes by brawling, even landing in jail in NYC for one such fight. A respected, elderly family friend finally took him aside and told him simply and directly that he needed to get a job. He heeded that advice and the next day landed a job with Atlas Supply Company, a subsidiary of Esso Oil. Uneasy in a large corporation, he ultimately started his own business selling automotive accessories to oil companies.

But even as he built that business, he felt a great void and lack of purpose in his life. That emptiness was filled in part when, at the age of thirty-four, he found the love of his life in Margaret “Maggie” Miller. Marriage and family (four children) gave Michael a new sense of meaning and purpose. In the mid-1960s, he found an additional cause in St. Vincent’s hospital, a then struggling institution run by the Daughters of Charity in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Over the decades, Michael raised millions of dollars for the institution, chaired its governing board and the board of its development foundation, and became known as the “conscience of the hospital” for his advocacy on behalf of the indigent and terminally ill.

Daly’s passion for the hospital stemmed from his own periods of time in hospitals during and after the war, and from a searing experience in the dead of night, on a snowy battlefield in the winter of 1945. That night, as Daly and his men fought a German

encirclement, 19-year-old Private Joseph Daly (no relation), suffered a spinal wound and died a slow death. Michael told me that watching the death of that young man, and being unable to relieve his suffering, was the single worst experience of the war for him. At St. Vincent's, he sought to give others what he could not give to Joseph.

The anguish that Mike felt for Joseph Daly and the other of his men who perished during the war never left him. Every Memorial Day, Mike would attend Mass and the annual parade in Fairfield, and then drive alone up Long Island Sound, or down to the parade ground at West Point, recalling his lost comrades in arms. He would return after darkness and then silently go to bed.

On receiving the Medal of Honor, Michael Daly silently promised himself to live his life in a manner that would reflect honor on the Medal and the men who had not returned. But in the immediate post war years, Mike fell short of that promise. He subsequently found two new causes – family and St. Vincent Hospital -- to which he could devote his life. It turned out that Michael's deepest desire turned out to be selfless service to those in need, whatever form that need took: those once young boys, now elderly men in the French village of St.-Loup-du-Gast, who gathered on a beautiful Sunday morning to talk with me about the day that that "tall American boy" freed them from Nazi tyranny; those GIs who served with him, and for whom he risked life and limb; the terminally ill and desperately poor patients at St. Vincent's Hospital whose suffering he helped to relieve. Michael Daly's life journey, blessed by the grace of God, transformed a youth full of self into a man with and for others. His funeral in 2008 witnessed an outpouring of love for this courageous and good man who devoted so much of his life to causes greater than self. It is his service and that of all our veterans that we gratefully observe today.

Thank you.