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# The Origins of a Name

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## The Origins of a Name

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Chris D'Amico

Clutter, so much clutter. Mom never threw anything away; she was always fearful that whatever went into the garbage would be needed immediately after. Boxes strewn across the floor, little league baseball trophies, winter coats, and decorations for every holiday imaginable. This was the absolute last thing I wanted to be doing within hours of returning home from Iraq, but I knew the rest of my family did not care enough to do it themselves. If only I had been around, would things have gone differently? Maybe I could have gotten Mom better doctors or different medication. I guess I'll never know.

So here I am now, on leave from Iraq, cleaning out my parents' attic. My mother died before I could make it home. Not surprisingly my brothers had cleared out right after the funeral. I pick up a box filled with what seems like ancient Christmas decorations and carry them down to my pickup truck. Two trips to the town landfill today already, and the attic is still half full. I walk back through the old house, up the creaky stairs and survey what I should bring down next. Determining what should and should not be kept is not the difficult part; rather figuring what I should get rid of first is the actual dilemma.

Light comes streaming through the lone window in the room and illuminates a box in the corner, which has seemingly been left untouched for years. I pick up the box and notice a thick leather book with my father's name printed in gold across the top, Oliver Ellison. This book is attached to another book beneath it by a rubber band. I pull the two books apart and recognize the title from something I had read in high school, *The Song of Roland*. My dad had died 15 years ago, but had not failed to leave a lasting impression on me. I open the leather bound book and note the date in the top right corner, 1941. Some quick math leads me to believe that I have found my father's journal from his time in World War II. Fascinated, I drop the box, sit down on the creaky wooden floor, and begin to read. The pages are yellow with age, but the paper has a certain texture to it that gives the book an obvious personality. The first words read, "Men must endure much hardship for their liege, and bear for him great cold and burning heat, suffer sharp wounds and let their bodies bleed."<sup>1</sup> Underneath the quotation my father had offered somewhat of an explanation with yet another quotation, which said, "America will remain the land of the free only so long as it is the home of the brave."<sup>2</sup> I quickly become immersed in my father's writing, it is as though I can feel the cold barrel of the M1 Carbine he kept by his side at all times. I begin to feel as if I was actually there with him, fighting amongst his squad.

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*January 1942 –*

Everything here is repulsive; the food, the streets, and most of all, our living conditions. We are holed up inside of a church right now as bombs rain down on Saxony. We're cold, hungry, and fearful that one of the bombs will stray from its target and end the nine of us all together. I would go into battle with these men any day. We have been together since basic training down in South Carolina, and quite honestly, I know and trust them more than my own

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<sup>1</sup> Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Song of Roland*. [Harmondsworth, Eng.]: Penguin, 1957. Print. (Pg 95)

<sup>2</sup> Elmer Davis

brothers back home. We are playing spades with a deck of cards Guenes found in his breast pocket, trying desperately to pass the time. Guenes and I are the closest. He was the first guy I met down at basic. Neither of us knew what we were getting ourselves into, but we bonded immediately over our love of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Guenes and I competed all throughout basic. You would have thought that would have made us resent each other, but in actuality it drew us closer. On the 32-mile march performed in full winter field equipment in the 100 degree Georgia sun, while carrying three-day's rations, overcoat, extra boots, rifle, and bayonet, Guenes and I were two of ten men in our platoon to complete the march. We were always paired together in the hand-to-hand bayonet fighting drills, and one of us always finished with a nasty injury.

My daydreams have comforted me, but I'm beginning to come back to reality as I realize how brutal our situation here is. We do not have enough food, water, or even ammunition. Morale is low and we still have not received word on our next objective. For now I suppose we will just proceed as though we have not lost contact with Delta Company, and meet up at the rendezvous point.

*"He that has suffered learns many things in life"*<sup>3</sup>  
*Oliver Ellison*

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I knew *The Song of Roland* had been important to my father; heck my name was Roland, which always seemed somewhat of a dated name. Not many people even knew my real name, considering I'd hated it ever since I was mocked back in elementary school for it. I remember that day as clearly as if it was yesterday. I got off the bus and sprinted the quarter mile street back to my house. I found my mother in the living room knitting and immediately began bawling. My mother attempted to comfort me, but even my nine-year old self could tell she was not sure what to say. Later that night my father came home, and explained that my name was my identity, and that I should never be ashamed for who I was. He said, "Always stand up for yourself, and if you get in trouble for that, I'll look the other way." As he turned to leave the room he looked at me and said,

"But remember, 'there is wise valor, and there is recklessness'<sup>4</sup> think about your actions."

My father always had, "his sayings" but I never realized they all came from the same place. During high school my father used to write notes such as, "True man failed never while life in him was left"<sup>5</sup> and slip them into my book bag. I'd find them at the oddest times throughout the day, and never thought much of them. It was not until my time in the military that I began to understand the meanings behind his favorite quotes from his prized book. Mesmerized by his writing, I turned back to the journal and continued reading.

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*April 1943 –*

Things have been odd around camp recently, and I am not about to pretend as if I have not had anything to do with it. Most of the guys in our squad have been on edge, and there have been quite a few brawls between men who appeared to be good friends. To be honest, Guenes

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<sup>3</sup> *The Song of Roland* pg 148

<sup>4</sup> *The Song of Roland* pg 118

<sup>5</sup> *The Song of Roland* pg 131

has been the real problem. Sarge always asks me for advice when he has to make a difficult decision, and he came to ask me my thoughts on an extraction team he was putting together to free a group of POWs a few clicks north of us. Sarge told me he needed one more man for the mission, and I suggested Guenes. In my opinion, he was the best man for the job. Despite his stocky build, Guenes could move very quickly, and I felt he would add the most to an already talented extraction team. Word got back to Guenes that I had suggested him for this dangerous mission, and he came after me with a sucker punch as I was walking through camp. I tried to explain myself to Guenes, telling him that his appointment should have been seen as a compliment, but he was not listening at all. He thrashed at me angrily declaring,

“If it is such an honorable duty then why don’t you go yourself?”

I tried to respond, but I was not sure what Guenes wanted to hear. To be honest, I had never even considered myself for the job. The fact that I had been asked to choose a man to go on the mission made me feel as though I was not worthy to go myself. Regardless of how either of us felt, the extraction team had been made official, and there was no turning back.

*May 1943 –*

My relationship with Guenes has not improved, considering he was wounded badly during the mission. The extraction went smoothly in that we recovered our POWs, but we suffered a few casualties and a few bad injuries as well. Guenes was shot in the shoulder, and he was forced to go through a long surgery back at base camp to remove the bullet. I went to visit him, and trying to be playful I joked that he should be happy that none of his major arteries were hit. Guenes looked at me and snarled,

“It’s your fault I was even on that mission!”

I was not sure what to say to him, so I walked out of the room. I hitched a ride back to camp, and came to the realization that I was done with his shenanigans. I was doing my job to the best of my abilities. Sitting here now, Guenes means nothing to me. He is just another man in my squad. Don’t mess with the bull if you don’t want the horns.

*June 1943 –*

At this point, I cannot stand Guenes. I refuse to believe that I used to be so close with a man with such little pride and responsibility. Ever since the extraction mission for which I innocently suggested him, he has been on a quest to make my life a living hell. It seems as if he is trying to get me kicked out of the military all together. The other day the magazines for the Colt M1911’s were supposed to be sorted into boxes and carried to the east side of camp. I was told to assign a group to get this job done. I knew better than to assign Guenes to such a mundane task, so I got two of the new guys, Fitzgerald and Smith, to do it. The two of them took their orders and began to move the boxes. I made my way back to the opposite end of camp to assist in the unloading of a new shipment of rations that were dropped off along with the additional ammunition. Later that day Sarge came up to me screaming about the fact that the Colt M1911 mags never got unloaded. I immediately realized that Guenes had overheard me giving orders to Fitzgerald and Smith. I ran back across camp, and saw the two, and began interrogating them,

“Why the hell aren’t the magazines unloaded?” I yelled.

It was Smith, who responded,

“Guenes said you talked to him. He said you asked him to tell us not to move the mags. He said Sarge said the mags were fine where they were.”

I pushed past the two, and sprinted up to Guenes and shoved him on the ground. He looked up at me in total disbelief. I snarled at him,

“You know what this is about!” He looked at me and smiled.

“Just doing my job, Oliver,” as if he was mocking me.

If it were my decision I would send Guenes back to the States. The guy is an honest to god liability. The only thing he cares about is his own well-being. God forbid he ends up on the front-line and somebody asks him for covering fire. His first thought will be to conserve his own ammo, and meanwhile, the other soldier is going to end up with a bullet in his brain. On top of it all, he has just been disappearing at the most inopportune times. It seems as if whenever something needs to get done, Guenes is nowhere to be found. I hate guys like that. No loyalty, no honor; the worst type of man that exists.

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Ever since my father had passed away I have been feeling like his memory is fading every day. From reading his accounts of the war I am now feeling the reverse effect. It feels like he is here right with me. For a military family, we sure never spoke about the wars that often. Maybe war had taken its toll on Dad, and he never wanted to talk about it, but now, looking at his writing, I wish I had the chance to ask him about it all. I look down at my watch and realize it has been three hours since I stopped moving boxes and started reading Dad's journal.

“Damn,” I mutter to myself, “the landfill closes in an hour.”

I decide to flip towards the end of the journal, because his stories have been so captivating. I have to get to the end before I do anything else, I think to myself. I figure I'll go through the rest of the entries another time because this will most definitely not be finding its way to the landfill.

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*January 1945 –*

A new year has begun, but an end to the war seems to be nearing. We have heard rumors that we are gearing up for a series of final strikes against the Axis powers. I am scared for what is to come, but regardless of the outcome, I am happy all of this is almost over; I'm not sure how much more I can take. We had Christmas festivities with the guys on base, but needless to say it was not the same as being at home with family. I miss home very much. We have been on the move recently, making our way to the eastern front of Saxony towards Dresden. According to Sarge we will be leading an all-out assault on the city. To me this does not make much sense, as to the best of my knowledge, Dresden is mainly a civilian city of Germans. That being said, I have learned not to ask so many questions. Questions have gotten me in trouble, and these days, I just do what I'm asked. My moral compass is becoming misdirected; I just want to be back home. Hopefully I'll make it through this.

*February 1945 –*

We have moved into Leipzig, about an hour outside of Dresden. We heard from Sarge that our orders were to remain at the ready in Leipzig until we have been called to march through Dresden. It has been rumored that there are 15,000 other soldiers posted just outside Dresden as well. In our briefing Sarge told us that the Air Force plans to execute a long strike over Dresden, dropping a large payload across the entire city all night long. The Germans themselves have

moved many soldiers into Dresden in preparation of the strike. Sarge explained that it was not guaranteed that the aerial attacks would take out the entire German force.

“This is where we come in,” Sarge explained.

We were to move through Dresden eliminating all enemy combatants at all costs. Sarge made it clear our orders were to get through Dresden as efficiently as possible, which meant civilian casualties were a possibility. As the briefing ended Sarge explained that he needed three of us to join the depleted Charlie Company. Guenes whom I had not spoken to in weeks volunteered me, himself, and one of the younger guys, Roland. This was peculiar, but I went along with it because like I said, I had learned not to ask so many questions.

It seemed like five or six hours had passed since our briefing, and we were all starting to get restless. Guenes, Roland and I had reported to Charlie Company and were awaiting further orders. Guenes seemed distracted. I tried to ask him why he had volunteered us to change companies, but he never responded. I didn't care enough to push him, so I just left him alone. No more than 30 minutes later shouting ensued, and before I knew it Guenes, Roland, and I were in the back of a Jeep four by four headed toward Dresden. As we approached the city there was so much smoke and fire that we could not see more than ten feet in front of us. We were reminded of our orders: kill all German forces inside Dresden. The three of us hopped out of the four by four, and the sights that emerged through the smoke were like nothing I had ever seen before. There were limbs, and bodies missing limbs, strewn across the street. There were German soldiers begging for mercy, crawling along the ground. I closed my eyes, and thought back to the words that had gotten me to this point already, “I'd rather die, thus be put to shame;”<sup>6</sup> I refused to let the repulsive sights and sounds get to me. I turned left to Guenes to motion to him to go forward, but he was not in sight. I looked to my right, and the young Roland was dutifully by my side. The two of us sprinted through the chaos and found cover behind the remnants of an old church. A squad of German soldiers was moving across the street a block down. I stood quickly, leveled my M1 Carbine, aimed through the iron sights, and gently squeezed the trigger. The gun exploded, and a tall German soldier flew back on his feet. I quickly shifted to my right and hit another soldier right between the eyes. Roland had taken out two soldiers at the same time, quickly showing his worth. He turned to me and said,

“Right's on our side, and wrong is with these wretches!”<sup>7</sup>

Roland and I continued through the streets of Dresden taking out targets in tandem. The scene was surreal as there were thousands of dead German soldiers and civilians lining the streets. American soldiers went through Dresden destroying all German propaganda. Statues in honor of Adolf Hitler came crashing to the ground as our troops fired mortar strikes from a distance. A woman came crying to me, babbling in German, presumably for help. I tried to get her to take cover behind the walls of an old bakery, but my efforts were not enough, as she was shot in the back and died in my arms. Completely numbed, I placed her on the ground, and kept moving with Roland.

The fighting had died down noticeably when I saw a blur sprinting towards me. Before I could move I felt a strong arm grasp under my neck, and the cold metal of a Colt 1911 pressed up against my skull. An eerie whisper came next; it was Guenes.

“You've been betrayed by him that should protect you,”<sup>8</sup> he snarled.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Song of Roland* pg 94

<sup>7</sup> *The Song of Roland* Pg 98

<sup>8</sup> *The Song of Roland* pg 98

I could not believe it. We had our problems, but I never thought it would come to this. I had no idea Guenes was this far deranged; war had clearly gotten to him. A sweat broke out across my forehead. We were completely isolated; nobody in Dresden would hear my calls for help. Roland fumbled around on his belt for his Colt 1903, and slowly aimed at Guenes in a standoff.

“Take the shot!” I yelled at Roland.

Guenes was hiding behind my head, and chances of me surviving a shot at him were slim. Just as Roland squeezed the trigger, I felt a shot explode by my ear. I stumbled backward to see both Guenes and Roland laid across the ground. Guenes was motionless, and clearly dead. Roland had an obvious wound in the chest and was losing blood quickly. I scooped up him up, and sprinted with him in my arms searching for help. I moved through the war zone dodging bullets from all directions. The fighting had intensified again and there were mortar shells falling to both my right and left side. I made it to the edge of the zone, yelling for a medic, but nobody came. He had bled so much that his eyes were completely glazed.<sup>9</sup> I continued to scream for a medic, but to no avail. I felt the life slip out of Roland, and carried him to the four by four, where he was driven back to base camp. From there he was flown back to the States, a hero of World War II.

As I reflect on my time in Dresden, I cannot focus on anything, but the heroics of Roland. I knew Roland for only a few days, but the man exemplified the qualities of honor and loyalty more so than any man I have ever met. Thinking of Roland makes me thankful for every breath I have been afforded. A man like Roland deserved to live. I hope to pass on his legacy through my own life and live in a manner that would make a man like Roland proud. I made it through the war because of men like Roland. Men like Roland are the reason this country continues to be the greatest country in the world.

*PVT Oliver Ellison*

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I close my father's journal, completely shocked by what I just read. I had never known how brave my father had been. He always made it sound as though he was never on the front lines. He never told me the significance of my name, just that it was something to be proud of. I went down to what used to be my parents' living room and picked up the phone to call my brother.

“Hello?” James had picked up.

“Hey James, it's Roland, just finished going through some things at Mom and Dad's.”

“Oh, hey Ro, I meant to do that myself, sorry I never got down there.” James explained.

“It's Roland now, James.” I say bluntly.

“What?” he asked.

“You can call me Roland now. Anyway, I was wondering if I could stop by, I have something I think you'd want to see. It was Dad's.”

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<sup>9</sup> *The Song of Roland* pg 128

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