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Introduction

by William E. Swegan

Veterans Hospitals did not take alcoholics: 1945

I would like to begin this book by telling two stories about things that happened to me during the 1940's. The first story took place during the latter part of 1945. I had been discharged from the Army Air Force in August. During my period in the service, I had somehow lived through the bullets fired by the airplanes which were strafing Hickam Army Air Base in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, as part of the Pearl Harbor attack, and then had sweated in the jungles of New Guinea and the equatorial island of Biak as part of the war against Japan. I had contracted dengue fever, from which I had recovered, but also malaria, from which I was still suffering. I was also drinking uncontrollably, and had quickly lost my first civilian job after my discharge because I kept showing up for work drunk.

The Second World War was over, and I had somehow escaped death by enemy bullets during those years, but I was now in the local town hospital, in bad shape. I was only twenty-seven years old but already a doomed man. A friend I had known for many years tried to gain admission to a Veterans Hospital for me. They refused to admit me—the V.A. Hospital would have been willing to treat the malaria,

but the fact that I was also a drunk meant that I was barred from all medical aid.

This had been the doom of alcoholics in the United States since the founding of the republic. Hospitals refused them admittance, and no one really knew how to treat them. There were a few expensive private facilities where drunks whose families had money would send them periodically for “drying out,” but there were almost no lasting cures. Many alcoholics died in alleys, others were sent off to long imprisonments in state and federal penitentiaries for things they had done while they were drunk and out of control, while others were labeled “dipsomaniacs” and sent off to rot in mental institutions with the other maniacs. Drunks and lushes like myself—the term “alcoholic” had only recently been developed, and was still not in common usage—were regarded either as morally defective people who were to be scorned and cast out by all decent folk, or as simply insane. Most medical doctors regarded us as hopeless and doomed, and refused even to treat us at all, even when we were clearly dying. In all fairness, they did not really know anything to do anyway: if they kept us from dying this time, we would simply go right back out and start drinking again. We were going to die, and nothing could be done to save us from eventual death. And we embarrassed people and made them feel uncomfortable, and some of us were argumentative and violent, and caused trouble.

After the end of the ill-fated experiment of National Prohibition (1920-1933), the federal government had abandoned practically any national attempt at alcohol treatment and awareness, and the military dealt with alcoholism by purely punitive measures: when drunks like me got too far out of hand, we suffered reductions in pay, demotion, imprisonment, or were kicked out of the service. As far as most decent folk were concerned, there was no help for people like me, and we were simply abandoned to our fates.

So there I was in the hospital. I was sick, very sick. A judge granted my wife a divorce. My beautiful little daughter I was not to see again for forty years. I was a veteran of the Pacific campaign, but the United States government had cast me off. The Veterans

Hospital refused to admit me on any grounds. This was America in 1945, if you were an alcoholic.

Three years later, my talk on alcoholism at a military base: 1948

But a revolution was taking place—in fact had already begun quietly in the latter 1930's among a small group of recovered alcoholics—and three years after being refused admittance to that Veterans Hospital, I found myself on the forefront of this revolution.

I had reenlisted in the Air Force, because I had not found any civilian job I could handle. I was eventually sent to Mitchel Air Force Base on Long Island, New York. My drinking had continued. But on July 5, 1948, I was able to stop drinking for good after I began attending the meetings of an Alcoholics Anonymous group on Long Island and actually taking the program seriously. That was almost fifty-five years ago, and for that entire half century—more than half century—I have remained continuously sober.

Back in 1948, Alcoholics Anonymous was still almost brand new. A stockbroker from New York city and a surgeon from Akron, Ohio had begun working together in the summer of 1935 on a new method of treating alcoholism. Recovered alcoholics helped one another to stay sober: that was an essential ingredient in its success. Within a relatively short period, they had enough alcoholics staying sober on the basis of their new approach, that they decided to write a book about it. The description of their method was published in 1939 under the simple title *Alcoholics Anonymous*. It was printed in fairly large type (for the benefit of blurry-eyed drunks who stumbled into their meetings) on very thick paper, so from the size of the volume it quickly became known simply as the “Big Book.”

Small A.A. groups began to be established here and there across the United States (and even abroad) during the early 1940's, but even in 1948, it was still a very small and struggling organization. Nevertheless, by that time they had amply proven their point: almost anyone who took their program seriously, and was capable of self-honesty, and was willing to actually carry out the principles and

steps in his or her everyday life, could get sober and stay sober. The discoveries made by the A.A. people, coupled with new understandings of alcoholism being developed by alcohol researchers like Dr. E. M. Jellinek at Yale (with whom I later studied), were revolutionizing the whole concept of alcoholism and its treatment.

And there I was in July of 1948, an alcoholic who had certainly been doomed to an early death, joining this quiet revolution and staying sober for the first time in almost twelve years. I had just turned thirty. And after just a short period of sobriety, impassioned with zeal, I asked my Squadron Commander if I could give a talk on alcoholism to the members of my Squadron. At first he looked at me as though my sanity had left me, but finally gave his permission.

I stood up before the other 159 members of my Squadron and said, “My name is Bill, and I’m an alcoholic.” And they laughed uproariously, because they certainly already knew that. I had been the Squadron drunk. I saw them laughing at me, and for the first thirty years of my life, I had been the kind of person who would have slunk away feeling totally humiliated. Even the slightest thing—things that would not have bothered a normal person—would send me running, feeling totally rejected and shamed. But some enormous change had taken place inside me, and I just plunged on:

“I am an alcoholic and have found a way to live a useful life without having to drink alcoholic beverages.” I kept on talking, and tried to explain to them what I had learned. After my talk, two people came up and asked for my help. I started taking them with me to the little civilian A.A. meeting there on Long Island. Two people became four, and four people became eight, and finally I had so many who wanted to go to the meeting that I could no longer find a vehicle large enough to hold them all. So I started an A.A. meeting there on the base.

Marty Mann and Senator Hughes

A.A. was still small enough in those days that news could travel fast, all across the country. What I had been doing on my own at

Mitchel Air Force Base on Long Island came to the attention of Mrs. Marty Mann. She was the first woman to get continuously sober in A.A., and her story, “Women Suffer Too,” began to be included in the Big Book from the time of the second edition in 1955. It has remained in the Big Book ever since, and is the third story (beginning on page 200) in the current fourth edition, which came out in 2001. She founded the National Council on Alcoholism, and teamed up with Senator Harold E. Hughes from Iowa (another A.A. member) to help produce massive changes in the way alcoholics were treated at the federal and national level. Marty was also one of the most impressive women I have ever known, and had a spontaneous, instant generosity and compassion unlike anything I have ever seen. I owe a good deal to her for the help she gave to me at many points in my life.

Marty had numerous connections with society people, major educators, government figures, authors, and people in the publishing business in New York City and Washington D.C., and in fact the entire east coast. She brought my work on the military base to the attention of several key people, and the next thing I knew, I was accepted at Yale University’s School of Alcohol Studies and invited to study in their summer program. They granted me a nice scholarship as well. I got to study with Dr. E. M. Jellinek and other Yale experts, and learn about the latest developments in the medical and psychiatric field, and eventually was able to combine forces with Dr. Louis Jolyon West at Lackland Air Force Base to establish a treatment center for alcoholic rehabilitation to which airmen and officers from bases all over the world were sent.

Marty Mann was the inspiration for a good many of the things going on in alcoholism treatment and awareness programs during this period, all across the nation. Senator Harold E. Hughes eventually joined in the cause at the national legislative level, and he was one of the people who backed me too.¹ Among other things, the senator got Congress to pass a law stopping hospitals in the United States from refusing to admit sick alcoholics: he opened up the

closed hospital doors I had found back in 1945, when I was so very ill.

Marty Mann, Senator Hughes, and I were part of the activist wing of A.A., a side of the movement which has had an enormous impact on government at all levels (federal, state, and local), the military, large national institutions, and even local communities all across the country over the course of the last sixty years. There are now treatment centers and alcohol awareness programs in place. Americans in general still use the old words on many occasions—he’s a drunk, a lush, a sot, and other similar terms of abuse—but the technical term alcoholic is now also used, and most people in this country are now aware, to some degree, that it refers to a kind of illness and that it is treatable.

We who belonged to the activist wing of Alcoholics Anonymous followed the Twelve Traditions: we did not mention in public that we were A.A. members, but we did say openly that we were recovered alcoholics. We went out into the public domain to carry out the spirit, as we saw it, of the Twelfth Step: having been awakened, “we tried to carry this message to alcoholics” and also to those who had to deal with them, by creating structures and institutions which were not part of A.A., but were nevertheless working toward program-inspired goals. We never mentioned in public speeches or in anything we wrote that we were A.A. members ourselves, so that if we failed or disgraced ourselves or became overzealous in inappropriate ways—or went out and got drunk again, although I did not personally know many of us who were genuinely deeply committed who actually did this—then it would not reflect harshly on the A.A. organization itself. If I failed, I did not want the general public to think that this meant that the Twelve Steps and the meetings did not work, because they certainly did. If I inadvertently said something inappropriate, I did not want to drag my fellow A.A. members into any bitter public disputes my remarks might have caused, nor could I ever appear to be speaking as an official representative for the groups as a whole

The program of Alcoholics Anonymous

The most successful program for bringing about recovery from alcoholism is Alcoholics Anonymous. If we look at the percentage of people who will actually accept a recovery program and commit themselves to it, or the number who continue to stay sober for any great length of time thereafter (say by carrying out a three-year or five-year follow-up on who is still staying sober and out of trouble), there is no other program which can boast of much appreciable success at all compared to A.A.

During the past almost seventy years now, A.A. has been responsible for providing recovery to untold numbers of alcoholics because of its unique and non-evasive approach to coping with the disease. And this is accomplished without imposing any financial burden on the individual who is afflicted or that person's family, because Alcoholics Anonymous people refuse on principle to accept payment. They own no property as a group, and they rely almost totally on volunteers who pay their own way.

People in all walks of life have found the solution to this disease through participation in A.A. Now that more and more people are coming into the program early enough in the progression of the disease, we are finding that long-term hospitalization, loss of work, and loss of loved ones is beginning to become the exception rather than the rule. But this only happens when people not only start coming to meetings, but also practice the principles of the A.A. program in their daily lives

Hope

Above all I want to stress that this book is about hope—real hope, thoroughly proven hope. The story of my own life demonstrates how concrete this hope is, and the extraordinary benefits that are gained through recovery from alcoholism. Treatment in my own case not only dealt with the internal and external effects of the heavy drinking itself (which had gone on for almost twelve years), but also involved the healing and modifying of deeply ingrained attitudes and

feelings and perceptions that had been ruining my life and my happiness since I was a small child.

And I also demonstrated that proper alcohol awareness and treatment programs in the military could produce impressive concrete results. No, we could not save all the alcoholics we attempted to treat, but we did in fact rescue a significant number of them. Even for a very cold-blooded financial accountant, the costs saved the military by our successes far more than paid for our program. We proved that it was in fact a profit-making venture in the purely business sense.

But I worked with the incoming patients myself, and I cannot exaggerate the human sense of joy that came from seeing enlisted persons or officers who were destroying themselves, overcome with guilt and despair, learn how to turn their lives around. I saw them as real individuals, learning to work productively and reestablish meaningful relationships with other human beings, and learning how to experience real happiness and a deep sense of simply feeling good about themselves. This is a book about concrete hope based on what has actually been proven and demonstrated repeatedly. I am now in my eighties, one of the generation that fought in New Guinea and Iwo Jima, North Africa and the mountains of Italy, on the beaches of Normandy and at the Battle of the Bulge. I have seen this hope fulfilled during my lifetime, of producing real recovery from alcoholism, and I want to pass this hope on to the next generation. It can be done, because we showed it could be done.

NOTES

¹ Sally Brown and David R. Brown, *A Biography of Mrs. Marty Mann: The First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City MN: Hazelden, 2001), tells the story of this notable woman. They describe how she acted as my mentor and major backer as I was setting up my first treatment programs, and used her influence to help ensure that this “ground-breaking example spread to the other armed forces” (pp. 170-1). Marty was especially aided in the latter “when Harold Hughes offered an amendment to the Selective Service Act requiring the military to offer treatment and rehabilitation to alcoholics” (p. 341 n. 2). Senator Hughes wrote his own autobiography later on after he had retired from politics: Harold E. Hughes, with Dick Schneider, *The Man From Ida Grove* (Waco, TX: Word Books/Chosen Books, 1979). But the enormous amount of work he did in the United States Congress to help alcoholics at the national level has now been described in far greater detail in a book which has just been published: Nancy Olson, *With a Lot of Help from Our Friends: The Politics of Alcoholism*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on the History of Alcoholism Treatment, ed. Glenn F. Chesnut (Lincoln NE: iUniverse/Writers Club Press, 2003); see pp. 144, 146-7, and 487 nn. 136 and 140, for Olson’s description of my work at Mitchel and Lackland and its place in the overall development of military alcoholism treatment.