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## **Alcoholics with Gold Braid**

**by Nancy Olson**

At one point the Senator mentioned to the panel that people often think of alcoholics as skid row bums. "Do you feel like bums?" he asked. Jim B. responded by raising his arm to show the gold braid. (Navy Captain Jim B. testifying before Senator Hughes' Special Subcommittee on December 3, 1970)<sup>1</sup>

I had not been in Los Angeles at the time Joe Zuska testified in 1969, but I met him several months later when he came to my office in May 1970 to meet with me before an appointment he had with Senator Hughes. He brought with him a Navy captain named Jim B. When it was time for them to meet with the Senator, I offered to guide them through the Senate labyrinth to the Senator's office. As we walked through the basement of the Senate Russell Building, where my office was located, to the Senate Dirksen Building, where the Senator's office was located, Zuska asked me how I had happened to come to work for the Senator. I told him that I had wanted to work for the Subcommittee because I was a recovered alcoholic and therefore strongly interested in what Hughes was doing. Jim stopped in his tracks and held out his hand, indicating that he, too, had suffered from alcoholism. Later, we would make good use of Jim and the visual impact of the gold braid on his sleeves.

In late 1970 we held our first hearings specifically on drug abuse and alcoholism in the military. We decided to have a panel of recovered alcoholics who had themselves suffered from alcoholism while in the service. So on December 3 this panel testified in such a way that we could preserve their anonymity. Julien Granger had met a young Army non-commissioned officer, Jim S., who had worked — drunk — on nuclear warheads. I also invited Jim B., from the Navy, and Hal M.,<sup>2</sup> a retired Air Force Colonel. Both Jim and Hal had held highly sensitive intelligence positions during their military service and while they were still drinking.

When I telephoned Jim and Hal and asked them to testify, they agreed without hesitation. Hal told me later that he had told his boss at the State Department that he was going to testify. It was the first time he had told her that he was a recovered alcoholic. She was very understanding.

Jim had more of a problem with his superiors. Not long after I invited them to testify, I received a call from the Pentagon. “I understand that you have invited [Jim B.] to testify before the Subcommittee. Of course, this was done informally — you didn’t go through Navy channels — so I have no official role here. But I wanted you to know that we believe he would be much more comfortable about testifying if he could testify in civilian clothes instead of in uniform.”

“Of course,” I replied in as sweet a manner as I could muster, “we want the Captain to be as comfortable as possible so he may wear whatever he chooses.”

Later that day I got a call from Jim. “Nancy,” he said, “I got a call from the Pentagon. They are not too happy about my testifying and told me that they want me to wear civilian clothes. Do you want me in uniform?”

“Well, Jim,” I replied, “we certainly want you to feel comfortable.” I then told him of the call I’d had from the Pentagon. “But if you’d feel just as comfortable in uniform we sure would like to have you in uniform.”

“Gotcha, kid,” he replied. He showed up for the hearing in uniform.

When this panel was called to testify<sup>3</sup> Hughes made the usual announcement that they were testifying anonymously and there would be no pictures allowed which showed their faces. As they were testifying, one of the TV network reporters approached me and whispered, “We’d like to bring the cameras up to the side to get a picture of their hands. We will not shoot their faces.” I told him it would be O.K.

I was puzzled about why they would want a shot of the witnesses’ hands, but my curiosity was satisfied when I watched the TV news that evening. True to their word they showed no pictures of the faces. But there was a wonderful shot of Jim’s sleeve showing the gold braid of his Captain’s rank. I suspect there was apoplexy at the Pentagon.

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Hal M., the retired Air Force Colonel, testified as follows:<sup>4</sup>

I was a member of the regular Air Force for over twenty-four years. During this twenty-four years, the last ten, in my opinion, I was a practicing alcoholic. During this ten-year period of alcoholism, I drank from the moment I got up in the morning until I went to bed at night, and there was seldom a waking hour that passed that I did not have a drink of whisky. This included work at the desk, and flying airplanes as well.

This ten-year period I speak of started in Warsaw, Poland, in 1955, where I was the air attaché at the American Embassy. Those were interesting times — the height of the cold war, the Hungarian Revolution, et cetera, and I had plenty of excuses for drinking around the clock.

After his service in Warsaw, Hal was reassigned to the United States. At Hamilton Air Force Base he served for four years as the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel Training, then was assigned to the east coast where he became a member of the faculty of the National War College. At the National War College, Hal “started falling apart,” and was reassigned to the Headquarters of the

New York Air Defense Sector at Maguire Air Force Base, where a kind general officer suggested he put in for retirement before he “really got into trouble.”

Hal Marley had a top secret clearance, and added, “behind the Iron Curtain we had a higher clearance called ‘cosmic.’ It was a clearance above top secret. I think this was a ‘crypto’ clearance which we referred to as ‘cosmic.’” The two other recovered alcoholics on the panel had also had access to classified materials: Jim B. had a top-secret clearance and had commanded a ship while drunk. Jim S. testified that he, too, had a crypto or top secret clearance while working with atomic weapons.

At one point the Senator mentioned to the panel that people often think of alcoholics as skid row bums. “Do you feel like bums?” he asked. Jim B. responded by raising his arm to show the gold braid.

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A few months later, Jim telephoned me. “I heard a rumor that the Navy has found a recovered Captain whom they are going to name to head the Navy’s alcoholism program. Do you know who it is? I’d like to contact him and ask him for a job.”

“Jim, you’re the only recovered Captain I am aware of; it’s probably you.”

“Oh, no,” he said, “I’d certainly know if it were me. It’s someone else.” Well, my hunch was right. On August 22, 1971, he was installed as the first Director of the Navy Alcohol Abuse Control Program. It grew rapidly in size and effectiveness under Jim’s able leadership and in January 1972, the Alcohol Rehabilitation Center in Norfolk, Virginia, was commissioned. Other centers were soon opened in Great Lakes, Illinois; San Diego, California; and Jacksonville, Florida, all patterned after Zuska’s Long Beach facility. Smaller units were opened in a total of fourteen Naval Hospitals, and Alcoholic Rehabilitation “Drydocks” were planned as outpatient resources at strategic locations all over the world.

Joe Zuska was impressed with the way these Navy treatment centers eventually began to create a kind of chain reaction effect out in the civilian world as well. Later he reported:<sup>5</sup>

As patients left our Center, I would later learn that many of them had started A.A. meetings in such out-of-the-way places as Rota in Spain, Adak in Alaska, Guam, Japan, and Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands. We placed small flags on a wall map whenever we learned of one of these “Drydocks” springing up, and there were soon over fifty of them. It was obvious that a chain reaction of health was occurring. Sailors and officers were sharing their new found sobriety with others all over the world and many individuals whom we had never met were recovering, and we felt that in a way, we had shared in their recovery.

Several years after Zuska retired from the Navy, he struck up a conversation with the senior dental officer at the Naval Hospital in Long Beach and asked him if he had noticed any changes in the Navy as a result of the alcoholism programs. He replied, “I don’t know of anything special, but I sure don’t see many jaw fractures anymore.”<sup>6</sup>

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The day after our hearings on alcoholism in the military I received a telephone call from a woman who identified herself as the wife of a Navy Captain. She explained that she had read a report in the newspaper about our hearing and about Senator Hughes being an alcoholic. She said she was worried about her husband’s drinking.

“It’s ruining his career. Can you help?” she sobbed.

I told her that if her husband would be willing to call me himself I would introduce him to another Navy Captain — still on active duty, I stressed — who was a recovered alcoholic. A few days later I received a call from Captain Stu B. I arranged for him to meet Jim and let Jim take it from there. Stu was soon sober, and when Jim retired from the Navy, Stu replaced him as head of the Navy’s alcoholism program.

Several years later Stu showed me a yellowed newspaper clipping that he still carried in his wallet. It was the report of our hearings and across the top his wife had written Senator Hughes' phone number, then my name and phone number which the Senator's secretary had apparently given her. Stu told me that after his wife confronted him with the information that she had called me, he went off on a two-day drunk, wound up in the hospital, and after he was released called me.

One day a young Navy Commander, who worked in the Navy's legislative liaison office in the Senate, walked into the office asking for me. I introduced myself and asked how I could be of help. He said: "Do you have any information on alcoholism you could let me have?"

I showed him the copies of hearings, bill reports, and A.A. materials I had on my shelves. "If I knew how you were going to use the materials it would help me choose something for you," I told him.

"Well," he whispered, "my boss thinks I have a problem and told me to come to see you and to do whatever you told me to do."

I immediately invited him to sit and asked, "Do *you* think you have a problem?" He admitted he did. I then told him that I knew a Navy Captain — still on active duty — who was in A.A. Would he be willing to talk to him? He would. I immediately got Jim on the phone.

"Jim," I said, "I have a Naval officer here who thinks he may be an alcoholic. Will you talk to him?" That evening Jim met with him and he was soon sober. Later he, too, worked for the Navy's alcoholism program.

Another recovered Naval officer was Ken A. I had known Ken for some time. I knew his fiancée, Vernon C., even better. She had asked if we needed any volunteers. We *always* could use help answering the mail, so I asked her to come in. She proved of enormous help. One day Jim called asking if I knew Ken.

"Indeed I do," I responded. "His fiancée is sitting across the room from me at this very minute."

Jim told me he had just hired Ken to work with him in the Navy's alcoholism program. Of course I could not resist telling Vernon despite Jim's asking me not to, as he supposed Ken would want to tell her himself.

Vernon told me the next day that when Ken had arrived home that night he said "Vernon, I have big news!"

"You're going to work for the Navy's alcoholism program," she replied. When Ken expressed his shock that she already knew she answered grandly: "Oh, Ken, when you work for Senator Hughes you know *everything*." Jim was a bit annoyed with me, but Ken apparently forgave me as later Ken and Vernon invited Jim and me to be their Best Man and Matron of Honor at their wedding.

It seems that all the recovered officers still on active duty got assigned to the Navy's alcoholism program. This was not surprising because there was really nowhere else they could go in the Navy. As Jim told the Subcommittee:<sup>7</sup>

Due to the lack of understanding by many people in the service, once an alcoholic has been openly identified he can be sober indefinitely but that man's career is pretty much down the drain. Right now in some particular areas, I am unassignable as far as the service is concerned, because they will not put somebody with a history of alcoholism into a number of different jobs. This, I feel, is unfortunate because I certainly feel that I am more competent now than I was two or three years ago when I was commanding officer of a ship — certainly more reliable, if not more competent.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hearings before the Senate Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics, of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *Examination of Drug Abuse and Alcoholism in the Armed Forces*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1971, 799.

<sup>2</sup> Hal M. died in February 24, 2002, at the age of 86. After admitting his alcoholism to his employer at the time he testified, he went on to head the State Department employee assistance program, which included the drug and alcohol awareness programs at U.S. embassies throughout the world. He was a 37-year member of Alcoholics Anonymous, and was known to thousands of recovering alcoholics throughout the Washington area and the world as an apostle of what he called “an attitude of gratitude.” He had thousands of specially designed “attitude of gratitude” pins, one of which he habitually wore on his lapel, and he always carried extras. He gave them away to other alcoholics, along with the suggestion that they should be grateful for their sobriety. He eventually became known as “Dr. Gratitude.”

<sup>3</sup> Hearings before the Senate Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics, of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *Examination of Drug Abuse and Alcoholism in the Armed Forces*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1971, 799.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 792.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph J. Zuska, M.D., “Beginnings of the Navy Program,” *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 2, no. 4 (October 1978), 356-357.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 357.

<sup>7</sup> Hearings before the Senate Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics, of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *Examination of Drug Abuse and Alcoholism in the Armed Forces*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1971, 795.