

# SURVIVOR

A STORY OF TRAGEDY, GUILT,  
*and* GRACE

DUANE C. MILLER



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*Survivor: A Story of Tragedy, Guilt, and Grace*

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## PROLOGUE

# PERSPECTIVE FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE LAKE

I had never known such excruciating pain.

I was far beyond exhaustion, and every muscle in my body had cramped. My lungs, full of water, felt as though daggers had been plunged into them.

Again and again, I fought and clawed my way to the surface of Opeongo Lake. Breaking through the surface, I grabbed the side of the swamped canoe and pulled myself up and across the top of it, struggling to breathe. Almost instantly, the canoe rolled like a barrel beneath me again—plunging me back under the surface before I could catch my breath. I was still inhaling as I sunk back under the surface—so instead of breathing in air, I sucked in more water.

Even though I was young, a good swimmer, and in good physical condition, I was totally spent. Time and time again I struggled back to the surface gasping for air, only to be pulled under again. There was not one ounce of strength left in me, but I was not going to give up. Frantically, I fought for my life because dying was not an option!

Suddenly, a calm swept over me, and I began to relax. The struggle had ended. I stopped trying to swim to the surface, and I allowed myself to sink into the depths of the lake. Lying back in the water, all

exhaustion and pain began to fade away, and I found myself thinking, *Wow, is this what it is like to die? Okay Lord, I am ready to meet you, so here I come.* An indescribable feeling enveloped me. The fear and terror I once felt disappeared, and my struggle to stay alive faded as peace washed over me.

Just as I accepted my fate, I heard the Lord speak to my heart with a kind but authoritative voice, "I'm not through with you yet, Miller, so get back up there!" Suddenly, my muscles relaxed and uncramped, and I felt Him give me the strength to swim to the surface one more time. It was as if someone had grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and pulled me up. Exhaustion and pain disappeared as a surge of energy shot through my body. I looked up at the underside of the canoe and kicked and swam my way toward it.

I broke through the surface and clutched the side of the swamped canoe. This time it didn't roll. Al DesChamps, one of my canoeing partners, was hanging onto the other side of the canoe—counterbalancing it for me. Locking my armpits over the gunnels of the canoe, I coughed out the water in my lungs and breathed deeply.

I looked around. As I did, I realized that three of us were missing. Where were Don, Chuck, and Tim?

## MAN OF THE STAR

The sweat was still dripping off my chin as I stood with my hands on my hips, catching my breath, when Chuck's feet hit the ground after climbing the ten-foot cargo rope at the end of the obstacle course.

"I can't believe that buzzard did it to me again!" I exclaimed as Howie Reinhold showed me the time on the stopwatch. My cousin Chuck Schnittker had just beaten my record on the military obstacle course at Trail to Life Camp (TTLC). Twice that week I had owned the record, only to have Chuck break it and reclaim bragging rights.

As long as I could remember, Chuck and I had competed in everything—whether it was foot races, cherry pit spitting, or seeing who could skip a stone the farthest. Bragging rights meant everything to us.

The obstacle course was just one thing that made the TTLC programs unique among Christian camps. From the moment the young people entered the mess hall to register, they were "privates" in a military-style boot camp—and they loved it. It was an age- and gender-specific program that was rough-and-tumble, high-energy, and highly structured—and it kept campers on the go the entire day.

Trail to Life Camp was located just outside the sleepy town of Greenwich in North Central Ohio. It was owned and operated by a group of Christian laymen who had a burden for reaching children

and teens with the gospel of Jesus Christ. TTLC was unique in that it was an entirely faith-based ministry—meaning the camp ran solely on prayer and the faithful gifts of people. Because of this, each camper was charged a miniscule registration fee of two dollars for a full week of camp. It was to be a camp for anyone and everyone. As campers lined up at the registration tables in the mess hall, it didn't matter if they were street kids, gang members, farm kids, or wealthy suburban kids; they were now soldiers of Trail to Life Camp.

As soldiers of Trail to Life Camp, campers marched everywhere, saluted superior officers, and stood at attention for daily inspections. Campers were taught skills needed for wilderness camping: how to use a map and compass, tent pitching, first-aid, knot-tying, fire-building, axe and knife safety (as each camper was required to have a knife), along with canoeing and swimming. Add to this softball and soccer games, competing on the military obstacle course, and unbelievable water-balloon battles—some lasting until 2 a.m.—it's easy to understand why no one had trouble sleeping at night.

The love of God permeated every aspect of the program, and the gospel of Jesus Christ was clearly taught. The highlight of each day was the evening program. The squads (each cabin was a squad) would march to the lodge and stand at attention in company formation until given the order by Captain Don Enzor to go inside.

In the lodge the energy level of the meeting seemed to raise the roof. We would sing song after song at the top of our voices. Some were nonsense songs, while most were gospel songs and praise choruses. But the one song that was always sung with the most enthusiasm was the Trail to Life Camp song:

*We are the soldiers from Trail to Life Camp,  
We take our orders from the Lord.  
We learn His Word each day,  
We stop to kneel and pray,  
We're in the army of the Lord.*

About the time everyone's voices were hoarse from singing all out, a high-powered speaker would step to the microphone and give a gospel presentation, calling us to saving faith in Jesus Christ or to godly living and a full surrender of our lives to the Lord. My life was just one of the many that were transformed eternally during those evening meetings.

Every Friday was testing day. Following morning inspections and Bible class, the squads rotated through various testing stations. In the mess hall they faced a written exam that tested them on their canoeing, camping, and very basic first-aid knowledge. At headquarters, each private was handed a length of rope and told to tie a square knot, a taunt-line hitch, a two-half hitch, and a clove hitch. At the lakefront, each one was tested on his or her canoeing skills in both the bow and stern, demonstrating the ability to do canoeing strokes such as the J-stroke, the sweep stroke, and the draw stroke. The final station was the swimming area, where each private had to demonstrate to his sergeant the ability to swim at least ten yards.

These skills were taught every day, and the kids studied and worked hard to learn them. The reward for their efforts was huge. The top fifteen campers would win a weeklong, all-expense-paid canoeing trip in the Canadian wilderness of Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada.

It had been a fantastic week at TTLC. This was my third year as a sergeant (counselor), and my squad had really come together as a team. Several of them had made commitments to the Lord. Even though we lost almost all our softball games, we did take first place in the canoe races and the fire-building contest, and we finished second in the squad obstacle course race and the tent-pitching competition.

Every night after my guys were asleep, I would quietly make my way down to the PX (snack shop) and meet up with my cousin Chuck and a good friend, Bob Scodova, for a bedtime snack of candy bars, potato chips, and suicides—our conglomeration of cola, orange

soda, 7-Up, and root beer. There were those who accused us of being responsible for pulling various pranks during these outings—but I will neither confirm nor deny the accuracy of those reports—though Bob *was* “executed” via water-balloon firing squad for one such supposed crime. He “died” loyal to the cause and never gave up the names of possible accomplices.

In addition to all the fun and goofing around that was part of our evening ritual, our conversations always gravitated to what the Lord was doing in our lives or the lives of the guys in our squads. One evening, Bob shared about a private in his squad, Tim Meadows. “I don’t know what to do. If there is anyone in my squad that deserves to go to Canada this year, it’s Tim. He received Christ on Sunday night and has a voracious appetite for Bible knowledge. There is no one in my squad who tries harder, is more fun to be around, or has developed his camping and canoeing skills more than Tim.”

“The problem is, he doesn’t have a clue how to swim. I’m trying to teach him what little I know, but I don’t think he’s getting it.”

“Remember, he is only required to swim ten yards any way he can,” Chuck chimed in.

“That’s right,” I added. “It doesn’t matter if he dog-paddles, floats, or lies on his back and kicks. He just has to cover ten yards.”

“Well, I’ve got two days to get it done with Tim. He deserves to go,” Bob concluded.

On Friday, the last night of Senior Boys Week, a couple of hours after taps and long after my squad was asleep, I was gently shaken awake. Speaking in a whisper, someone said to me, “Sergeant Miller, you are being tapped out to receive the Man of the Star Award. Please get dressed and follow me.” A few moments later I stumbled out of the cabin, still tucking in my shirttails and pulling up my zipper, to find Lieutenants Mike Mecurio, Chet Weigle, and Howie Reinhold, all in their army-type uniforms, standing there. “Sergeant Miller, fall in and follow us.”

We walked to an area next to the obstacle course where Captain

Don Enzor was standing by a campfire. I was called to attention and Lieutenant Chet Weigle spoke: "Sergeant Miller, you have been chosen to receive the Man of the Star Award. Please listen carefully to what this entails." He looked down at the certificate in his hands and read, "The Man of the Star Award is presented to you for meritorious service for outstanding service in the army of Christ, which includes: active faith in Christ, love for others, deep sincerity, diligence in all labor, honesty no matter the cost, consistent cooperation, always helpful to others, kindness to fellowman, cheerful no matter the circumstances, respectful of authority, and outstanding leadership."

When he finished, he looked me square in the eyes and asked, "Sergeant Miller, do you understand these qualifications and the inherent responsibilities they carry?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Then please kneel so we can lay our hands on you and commit your life to whole-hearted service to our Lord Jesus Christ."

As I knelt there next to the fire and these men prayed for me, I began to sense the enormity of what it meant to be selected to be a Man of the Star and that I was being set apart to be a godly leader.

When the men had finished praying, Captain Don Enzor, spoke, "Sergeant Miller, rise. You are not to speak of this to anyone before the awards program tomorrow morning. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," was my short reply.

"Congratulations! You are now a Man of the Star." With those words, Don stuck out his hand to shake mine, and with a smile that went from ear to ear, said, "I'm so proud of you!"

Receiving the Man of the Star Award was the fulfillment of a goal I had for several years. I couldn't believe it was now a reality. Hearing Don say that meant so much to me! He had been my hero and the person I wanted to be like more than anyone.

Don was my sergeant my first year at TTLC when I was eleven years old. We were in the cabin getting unpacked when he walked in, bigger than life, and barked out, "B-Squad, FALL IN!"

We quickly scrambled, half tripping over each other, as we piled out of the cabin to fall in—even though most of us had no idea what “fall in” meant. We lined up facing him as he called us to attention.

That was the week I realized my need to trust in Jesus as my Savior, and I prayed to do so after one of the evening programs. When I walked into the cabin afterwards, Don met me with a huge smile and boomed, “Where have you been, Miller?”

“I stayed after the meeting and talked with someone about how I can ask Jesus to be my Savior,” I stammered, “and then I prayed and did it.”

Don reached out and shook my hand while putting his other hand on my shoulder, and through a huge smile, bellowed, “That is fantastic!”

He was a man’s man—strong, athletic, and friendly. Don’s relationship with Jesus was so strong that after playing college football for a year, he walked away from it in order to devote himself entirely to his studies, including his independent studies of Bible and doctrine.

Don grew up in a godly home. This, coupled with a terrible tragedy that occurred when he was fifteen years old, gave Don the burning desire that shaped and drove his life.

On New Year’s Day, 1962, Don was hunting predatory birds that were threatening his family’s chickens. He saw a hawk land on a tree branch, took careful aim, fired his gun, but missed the bird. What he didn’t know until later that day when the sheriff came to their house, was that his bullet came down a half mile away, striking an eight-year-old neighbor boy in the head, killing him.

Though it was ruled an accidental death, Don carried the burden of that memory the rest of his life—fanning into a large flame the realization that life is short and that he needed to tell as many people as he could about Jesus. Whenever he met someone, he would look for opportunities to tell him about Christ. Before long, his pastor saw a gift in Don and allowed him to preach on occasion. By the time

he was in college, he was traveling around Ohio holding evangelistic services in churches.

In 1970, Don was hired as the first paid director of Trail to Life Camp. He and his wife, Twila, moved into a house he had built on the camp lake. During the off-season, he worked as an itinerant evangelist throughout Ohio.

Don had an ear-to-ear smile that lit up a room. His booming voice could be heard everywhere, yet it could become soft and compassionate when necessary. Though he often stuttered when speaking, no hint of an impediment existed when he sang. And, oh how he could sing!

Earlier that week at Senior Boys Week at TTLC, a sixteen-year-old camper who was a gang leader in his hometown was brought to Don because he had threatened his sergeant with his hunting knife. Don was sitting on a folding chair in headquarters and happened to be holding a canoe paddle when the teen was brought to him.

“So what seems to be the problem here, Private?” Don asked.

“I don’t have a problem!” the camper snapped back. All talking in the headquarters instantly ceased, as everyone seemed to hold their breath—no one had ever talked to Captain Don in that tone of voice.

“Son, you need to check your attitude and sit down and tell me what’s going on.”

The camper yelled, “I don’t have to do what you tell me!” as he pulled his knife out of its sheath and pointed it at Don.

In an instant, the camper found himself lying on the floor, and his knife was flying across the room. Don had smacked the canoe paddle across the boy’s shoulder, knocking him off his feet.

Instead of calling the police or sending the teen home, Don helped him up, sat him in a chair, and talked with him. Before the conversation was over, Don had led the teen to faith in Jesus Christ. As the teen later shared in a testimony time, Don was the first person he couldn’t intimidate and who beat him at his own game, yet showed real love and care for him. I had never heard of anyone

compassionately witnessing with a canoe paddle before, but that was the kind of man Don Enzor was.

Saturday morning was a flurry of activity. Following breakfast, we were given an extra half-hour to prepare for final inspection. All sleeping bags and personal gear were packed up, carried down to the mess hall, and piled on our squad's table. Our cabin was swept clean, and the area around it was scoured for any candy wrappers or water balloon fragments that might still be lying around before we stood at attention for Captain Don's final inspection of the week.

After inspection, every squad marched down and stood in a single column formation in front of the mess hall for our closing ceremony. Captain Enzor then spoke. "Men, we've had a great week of camp, made some new friends and a lot of great memories. But what is most important is how you allowed the Lord to work in your life. Many of you are going home transformed because you are now children of God through your new faith in Jesus as your Savior. Others of you committed to living lives that are sold out to Jesus.

"In a few moments, we are going to be recognizing the Man of the Star recipient, as well as those of you who have earned the Canadian canoe trip. But those of you who now have salvation through Christ have something far greater than anything else we have to offer."

With those words, he paused and Lieutenant Chet Weigle called out, "Sergeant Duane Miller, front and center."

I snapped to attention and marched forward until I stood directly in front of the officers. I saluted them and said, "Sergeant Miller reporting as ordered, sir."

Captain Enzor spoke, "Sergeant Miller is the recipient of this year's Man of the Star Award. I want to read to you what is inscribed on the framed certificate we will be giving him in recognition of this achievement." He then proceeded to read it aloud.

He then said, "Sergeant Miller, it is with great honor we give you this certificate as a reminder to you to continue to develop these qualities throughout your life."

With those words, he reached out and shook my hand and handed me the plaque. “Fall back in with your squad.”

I saluted him, did an about-face, and marched back to my former position as my squad broke out in applause and cheers. Then everyone else joined in to congratulate me.

The closing ceremony continued with the naming of the fifteen campers who had qualified for the wilderness canoe trip, as well as the three alternates who would go if any of the fifteen had to cancel. Tim Meadows did make the trip, as did my younger brother, Vernon. My cousin Chuck, Bob Scodova, and I were also going as sergeants, along with a fourth sergeant, Gary Kochheiser. Four lieutenants and Captain Enzor would provide the adult leadership.

When I drove out of the camp that day with my car radio cranked up and my passengers, Chuck and Vernon, singing along, I thought everything was going right in my life. I was seventeen years old and on top of the world. My framed Man of the Star certificate, which sat on the car seat next to me, reflected my smile every time I glanced down at it. As a senior at Firelands High School outside Oberlin, Ohio, I was overflowing with youthful naivety. Everything was going to happen just as I planned—play college football, marry my steady girlfriend Molly Brotherton, and return to teach and coach at Firelands.

What wasn't on my radar was how, in a few short days, the Canadian canoe trip we so eagerly anticipated would turn everything upside down and shake me to the very core.