

ALF LARSON'S LETTER TO GOD

Dear God:

I am writing to You to thank You for everything that You have done for me in the course of my life, even though I don't deserve any of it.

When I was frightened or apprehensive, You calmed me and strengthened me with the knowledge and feeling that You were there for me. When I came to You for help, You answered me and gave me hope, and I took comfort in Psalm 31, "Be strong, and let your heart take courage." . . .

My favorite Psalm was, and still is, Psalm 23.

Fear was a constant factor that I lived with in the Philippines at the start of the war and it continued during the whole time that I was fighting. I didn't know what to expect. When the bombing or shelling started, nobody could share similar experiences because nobody had ever been in a situation similar to what was happening. So I received "on the job training" as it were. The most frustrating part of the whole fiasco was that I was unable to do anything to retaliate. Most of our equipment was outdated World War I vintage.

When food was scarce, which was all the time, I would think of Psalm 23, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Now You didn't always answer immediately, but eventually You would provide something such as a snake or lizard or monkey (I believe the message of Acts 10 "What God has made clean you must not profane.") We were told to watch the monkeys because what the monkeys ate we could eat. If we saw a monkey, that is what we ate, so with Your help I survived.

While we were fighting on Bataan, fear rode on both my shoulders. If somebody ever said that they weren't afraid, I could show you a liar or an idiot, and I never saw an idiot on the front line. Maybe being afraid wasn't all that bad because it kept us alert and vigilant at all times. Whenever things were bad or when I let patrols behind enemy lines, I would think of Psalm 23: "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff they comfort me" and You always kept me in your protective arms.

During the period of the Death March after the surrender, (we veterans jokingly refer to it now as "The Hike"), You still were watching over me. We straggled in a loose formation in extreme heat and brutal treatment for 6 days without food and the only water we had was whatever we could scoop up out of the ditches or by sneaking out after the days march in the dead of night to try and fill 1 or 2 canteens of water from the many artesian wells that were everywhere. I never dared to take more than 2 canteens because they would rattle and give me away and I would get caught. Here again Your hand was with me. I never got caught! Psalm 25, "Oh my God, in You I trust" was very appropriate.

After we reached our prisoner destination, Camp O'Donnell, You were still watching over me. When I was near the breaking point and I volunteered for the first work assignment available, You were there. The assignment was to Clark Field, even though I didn't know it at that time, it was the "plum" of all assignments. Our first meal was a pig that the Japanese had given to our cooks to prepare. It was spoiled and full of maggots. The cook asked if we wanted him to skim off the maggots, but we told him very positively "no," because that was protein. The odor from that pig was so strong that I'm sure they could smell it in Manila about 60 miles away. But, we ate it and no one complained or got sick (that was the best meal we had since the start of the war). We worked hard, but at least our camp had cold running water so that we could at least keep clean and keep things sanitary.

You were still watching over me on the journey to Japan when I was in the hold of the Japanese freighter with 1200 other men. It was so crowded that we either had to stand up or sit crouched up in a ball for 21 days, with very little food or water. While I was in Japan, You were still there when I pleaded with you for survival. I was assigned to a machine shop to work, which was relatively easy work, except for the long hours. Psalm 30 is very appropriate, "To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication" and You heard me.

After the war and a short convalescent period and after a long courtship (slightly less than 2 months) I married Jane Stenberg in February, 1946. Our families were old friends.

I was discharged from the service in March, 1946 and we moved to Bataan Rouge, Louisiana to work. We stayed there for 2 years. Jane hated the climate (always damp and hot), so at that point I re-enlisted in the Air Force in 1948. Here again, Lord, You were still looking out for Jane and I. I was assigned to the 43rd Air Refueling Squadron as a flight engineer (a very good assignment).

I am sure that You remember the following incidents that happened while I was stationed there and You were still watching over me.

Once when we flew a training mission, (this particular one was 21 hours long), we flew into severe icing conditions at our altitude of 15,000 feet. The aircraft didn't have deicing equipment because it had been removed due to equipment damage. We couldn't remove the ice build-up and were being forced down toward the stormy water of the Gulf of Mexico and there wasn't a thing we could do about it. Everybody was afraid, but there was no panic even though we all expected to die. The pilot came on the intercom and suggested that we recite the Lord's Prayer. As far as I know, we all chimed in and when we were about 500 feet above the stormy sea, the ice broke loose with a loud clatter and the pilot was able to regain control of the aircraft again. We were able to continue on the mission, which was successful. If the ice hadn't broken loose and we had been forced to "ditch," as it is called, we would all have been drowned due to the severe stormy conditions and huge waves (instead of an airplane, we would have become a submarine).

I find that Psalm 18 is very appropriate for this incident: “He sent from above, He took me, He drew me out of many waters.”

Another time we had just taken off for a refueling mission and on take-off, for some reason, we sheared the nose wheel steering pin. This wouldn't have been so serious except that the wheel had turned 90 degrees from the normal position so that we couldn't retract the nose wheel. We didn't dare try to land because we were loaded with high octane aviation fuel (about 9,000 gallons) and with the nose wheel in that position, we would crash. It was decided to try and straighten the wheel so we could continue our mission because the bombers that we were to refuel needed the gas since they would be extremely low on fuel after their long mission. I was “volunteered” (with my consent) to try and correct this. They tied a rope around my waist and two others held my ankles with ropes and they lowered me into the nose wheel well to straighten the wheel. I was able to do this, but I was unable to wear my parachute because of the restricted working quarters. We were at about 9,000 feet and looking down, there was nothing between me and mother earth except empty space. It was a rather scary feeling to contemplate what would have happened if the holders would have released their grip or if the ropes would have broken. Psalm 31 is very appropriate for this occasion, “In You, Lord, I put my trust.” Some time later, one of the crew members was relating this incident to one of his friends and some wise guy made the statement that I must have owed the men some money and, if they had let loose, they would have never been paid back!

I was discharged from the service in 1954. After some trial and error type of jobs and a lot of schooling, I became an electrical engineer owning my own business. During the course of the years, both before and after my re-enlistment, my wife Jane bore me three lovely children (1 son and 2 daughters) and was a godsend to me in other ways. For 22 years, while I was in business, she was my unpaid secretary and spent many long hours, as I also did, completing many of our projects, sometimes working completely through the night to meet our deadline.

So, Lord, when things are rough and times are hard, especially after the recent death of my wife, Jane, I know I can always turn to You and the Psalms and You will always be there when I call. You give me Your complete support, and with the additional support of my family members, and family members of St. James Lutheran Church to help me, I am surviving a very trying ordeal. I know that I will survive again because of the words of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” are there to strengthen me. Also, it is very reassuring to have the words of Psalm 36 to fall back on: “How precious is your steadfast love, Oh God!” “All people may take refuge in the shadow of Your wings.”

Amen!

Sincerely and with love,

Alf