

Heavy mettle

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Pulling the dead seals behind them, Baywillow and Tiger moved cautiously across the snow-covered ice. The older, more experienced Baywillow led the way toward the mainland against the wind which hurled masses of wet snow in their faces.

Far away at first, then nearer at hand, the two men heard the continuous sound of cracking ice. Soon they could feel the shocks in the sea-ice under their feet.

Then, in the utter darkness ahead, Tiger heard a sharp crack, a cry and a splash as Baywillow broke through the ice into the frigid sea. Tiger, hearing his friend struggling to reach safety, started forward to help but stopped at Baywillow's sharp command.

Soon Tiger realized he was alone in the frantic wind and the gusting snow. Overwhelmed with panic, he stood rooted to a small piece of solid ice.

Then, slowly, his mind began to function again. His situation was perilous, life-threatening. He had to reach the mainland soon; the ice floe beneath him was breaking up.

At last, thinking to himself, "What would Baywillow have done now?" Tiger started off again, carefully testing the ice ahead with his ice prod. Eventually, just after dawn, he reached solid ground and collapsed.

That harrowing scene is described in "Dance of the Tiger," a novel by paleontologist Bjorn Kurten (Berkley Books). It is the author's imaginative account of what life was like in Scandinavia during the ice age 35,000 years ago.

I tell the story here because it illustrates the way in which courage sometimes takes form in life-or-death situations.

Such situations can immobilize people. But, sometimes, through some mysterious process, people call up reserves of strength and find the courage to devise a life-saving plan.

But courage wears several faces. In another situation, the desperate needs not of oneself, but of others, become the catalyst for courageous action.

One such true story about Paul Hensler is told in a Christopher award-winning movie titled, "Don't Cry, It's Only Thunder."

Medic Paul Hensler probably didn't set out to be a hero. He was just minding his own business serving in wartime Vietnam. Then, on an off-duty junket, a 10-year-old Vietnamese orphan deftly picks Hensler's pocket.

That chance encounter changes

Hensler's life. He took on as a challenge a situation that others would have found impossible.

For in chasing the youth, Hensler follows him into a half-collapsed church, his temporary home. Here Hensler meets two courageous Vietnamese nuns and discovers the sisters are defying impossible odds to care for 10 orphaned and abandoned children.

The sisters, recognizing the encounter as a moment of grace, plead with Hensler for help. They explain that every day is an uncertain struggle for survival. Reluctantly Hensler hands over his spare cash.

But thinking back on his own Catholic upbringing, Hensler finds he can't simply put the needy group out of his mind. Soon he is using all his spare time and ingenuity figuring out ways to feed, clothe and house the children. In the process:

—He establishes a permanent orphanage in Saigon.

—He enlists for a risky second tour of duty in Vietnam to continue his work for the 70-plus children dependent on him.

He sets up a network of people to maintain the orphanage.

As a civilian, Hensler continues to work for the cause of abandoned children, publicizing their needs in lectures and writing. Where possible, he sponsors refugee families so they can build a new life in the United States.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Beyond the bigger-than-life hero

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Mary was a simple girl from an obscure, backwater village. She was called by God to cooperate in a venture which completely baffled her. When she responded to the angel's words by saying, "Let it be done to me as you say," she displayed amazing courage.

One thing was sure: God was asking Mary to play a role in a venture of great moment. What it would cost her she had no way of knowing.

Yet because God asked it, because it was right, she accepted.

People the world admires as heroes are conspicuous for courage. Often, however, this virtue is identified with a certain bravado and show of brute strength.

I think there is a type of

courage much closer to the real thing. It is the quiet, unselfish acceptance of challenges people meet in their own lives — challenges to rise above their limitations and do what is right, what they feel is God's will. This brave acceptance has produced thousands of unsung heroines and heroes.

Jesus felt called to a mission. There had been "messiahs" aplenty in his society, men pandering to people's notions of what a messiah should be: a spellbinder, a political leader gathering the masses for a rebellion against their Roman overlords.

Jesus could have followed their path in the hope of succeeding where they failed. It was an attractive prospect, as the story of his temptation in the desert suggests. But Jesus was convinced his Father wanted him to follow

another path. It led to apparent defeat, the way of the cross. He accepted it with courage.

How difficult this was comes through strongly in the tradition of the Agony in the Garden. Three times, according to Mark's Gospel, Jesus cried out to be spared his torment, the loss of what little he had accomplished. In the end, echoing his mother's words, he said: "Let it be as you would have it, not as I" (14:36). Who will ever know what this cost him?

It has been the aim of all true disciples of Christ to be courageous like him. St. Paul is one case in point.

Once when Paul was in prison, not knowing whether he would be released or executed, he expressed his sentiments this way: "I firmly trust and anticipate that I shall never be put to shame for