HARD TO KILL
A hero's tale of surviving Vietnam and the Catholic Church

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HARD TO KILL

A hero's tale of surviving Vietnam and the Catholic Church

JOE LADENSACK

with Joseph A. Reaves

For the brave men who were slaughtered
on Black Virgin Mountain
and the far-too-many souls
whose lives were ruined by sexual abuse.

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Introduction

By Joseph A. Reaves

JOSEPH CONRAD LADENSACK was finally ready to talk.

And I was more than ready to listen.

This was twelve years after Ladensack made history by becoming the first priest to voluntarily testify against his peers and superiors in the revolting Roman Catholic sexual abuse scandal, and thirty-five years after an extraordinary tour of duty in Vietnam during which he won two Silver Stars, siz Bronze Stars, a Purple Heart and was told he was being nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor.

I'd tried, without luck, to interview him in 2003 when I was an investigative reporter for the *Arizona Republic* tracking down predator and pedophile priests in the Diocese of Phoenix. I wrote letters that went unanswered. I reached him by phone once and had a very pleasant, totally unproductive conversation. Joe later told me he was impressed how polite and convincing my letters were — and how persuasive I had been on the phone. He said he was on the verge of agreeing to an interview when his wife, Anita, raised her eyebrows and warned him off.

Joe and Anita, who married after he was thrown out of the church, had good reason to be wary. Joe had been receiving death threats, veiled and not-so-veiled, for years since he first reported to police a case of a fellow priest molesting the teenage son of one of his friends in 1984. Those threats only increased in January 2003 after he appeared

before a grand jury investigating wholesale sexual abuse by more than fifty priests and church employees in Phoenix — crimes that were covered up for decades by Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien.

Ladensack's testimony led directly to the indictments of six priests and would have led to O'Brien becoming the first Catholic bishop in the United States to be charged with felony obstruction of justice and perjury but for an immunity agreement that stripped him of much of his power and forced him to make an embarrassing public written admission of guilt.

Luckily for me, my newspaper, and our readers, I didn't need to talk to Ladensack directly in 2003. There were enough court records, church documents, courageous victims, relentless investigators, and helpful leaks to piece together the staggering and sickening scope of criminal exploitation by men of feigned faith.

On June 3, 2003, Maricopa County Attorney Rick Romley, a Catholic disabled Vietnam veteran and dogged prosecutor, announced the indictments of six priests and the stunning confession of guilt by O'Brien.

Romley's investigation lasted thirteen months. I covered it from start to finish and paid a huge emotional price.

I sat with grown men who wept when they abandoned long years of silence to tell me how they had been raped as children by priests they once honored.

Each day, I grew angrier and darker as I learned more about the malignancy rotting inside the church I once revered as an altar boy and retreat captain at an all-boys Catholic high school in suburban New Orleans.

I battled regularly with my editors, who were increasingly reluctant to publish stories on the scandal, particularly as we learned how widespread the abuse had been. My chief editor was a devout Catholic, a member of the Knights of Columbus, the church's largest and most prestigious lay organization. He was unabashed in his desire to protect the church. Once, deep into our investigation, he tried to stonewall

a story I and another determined reporter, Kelly Ettenborough, had spent weeks piecing together. It chronicled how the worst predator priests in Phoenix had been systematically transferred to Hispanic parishes where their new victims were especially vulnerable and far less likely to report their abuse. O'Brien and his predecessor, Bishop James S. Rausch, not only covered up for their criminal underlings, but actually made it easier for them to prey on children for decades.

The editor grilled me relentlessly daily on every date, fact, allegation, court record, attorney rebuttal, and victim quote in the story. Fair enough. That's what a good editor does — and he was a good editor. But one afternoon, in obvious exasperation, he looked at me and said: "I just don't get it. Why is this a story?"

We were in his glass-walled office just off the newsroom and his door was open.

I was incensed and reacted in a way I regret today, but can't undo. I stood and slammed an open palm on his metal desk with an ear-shattering thud.

"What don't you get?" I screamed. "This is about priests bending little boys over the altar and fucking them up the ass in the name of God!"

That was the last time I spoke to that editor. I worked with another, more objective editor for the rest of the project. The original editor died of cancer in 2010 and was given a full Catholic funeral mass. I slipped into church shortly after the service began and sat alone in the last pew. Seven years had passed and I was still so angry I couldn't find it in my heart to forgive. I'm not sure I ever will.

IN EARLY 2005, eighteen months after the church investigation ended, I took a new, happier job as national baseball writer for the *Republic*. That may sound a strange transition — investigative reporter to sports columnist — but I had a history of similar strange transitions.

In 1991, I was the *Chicago Tribune*'s Warsaw bureau chief covering the heady days of Poland's unexpected conversion from communism to capitalism. I'd been with the *Tribune* since January 1982 when I was

hired away from the United Press International bureau in Vienna, Austria, where I was Chief East European Correspondent, chronicling the Solidarity uprising in Poland. In all, I'd been a foreign correspondent since 1979 and, as I told my boss at the *Trib*: "I'm tired of getting shot at, shit on, and never knowing when I'm going to be home."

I had been accepted into a PhD program at the University of Tennessee and planned on getting my degree and teaching journalism the rest of my life.

My boss at the *Trib,* F. Richard Ciccone, a Marine veteran who won a Bronze Star in Vietnam, was the most inspiring leader I came across in a forty-year career. He refused to let me quit. Dick offered me everything until he finally hit on something I couldn't refuse: The Cubs. I came home from Warsaw to Wrigley and eventually wrote a book by that name.

I covered the Cubs and White Sox for the *Tribune* for four years from 1992-95 until my wife, Lynne, was offered a job as vice president of the most prestigious British public relations firm in Hong Kong. From 1995-98, I was the spousal appendage, working on a master's degree at the University of Hong Kong and turning my thesis on the history of baseball in Asia into another book while my wife was the power broker.

In July 1998, we decided to come home to the United States. Lynne is a Texas girl. I am a New Orleans boy. And we had lived around the world — New Orleans, Houston, Dallas, London, Vienna, Chicago, Beijing, Hong Kong, Manila, Rome, Warsaw. We opened a bottle of wine in our beautiful flat overlooking Victoria Harbor and talked about where we should move. I chose Hawaii, where I had done a fellowship at the East-West Center before becoming Beijing bureau chief for the *Tribune*. Lynne chose Arizona, where she reveled in the memory of picture-perfect Spring Training mornings when I covered the Cubs.

We looked at real estate prices and moved to Arizona.

My bizarre career took another twist in 2007 when Los Angeles Dodgers General Manager Ned Colletti, who had been a vice president with the Cubs during my years covering the team, came to Arizona and asked me to work for him. I joined the Dodgers' front office as Director of International Relations and was still there October 28, 2014, when Joe Ladensack found me through an internet search. He mailed a short letter to Dodger Stadium.

Hi Mr. Reaves,

You contacted me about ten years ago concerning the priest pedophile investigation in Phoenix, AZ. Since all of the cases now have been resolved and the time for appeals exhausted, I am able to talk about my experiences with the Diocese of Phoenix.

If you are still interested in this story, I am willing to be interviewed by you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,
Joe Ladensack

He included his home address, phone number, and e-mail.

Even though I worked for the Los Angeles Dodgers, my main office was in Arizona where the team had its Spring Training headquarters and where I lived. Joe's letter lingered in the L.A. mailroom for weeks. When I finally received it, I was torn. The anger and darkness of the church investigation swelled over me again. Those times had been so emotional, and my feelings so raw, that my wife and I nearly divorced.

I told Lynne about the letter from Ladensack and said I thought I would go see him. She said no. She talked about what she called the "dark spirits" that enveloped us during the investigation and said she didn't want them in our lives again. I understood and agreed. But I knew from my research that Joe Ladensack was an extraordinary man.

Besides being a fearless whistleblower in the priest abuse scandal, he was a Vietnam War hero — an incredibly highly decorated hero. I told Lynne I thought I owed Ladensack the respect of at least a visit.

Reluctantly, Lynne agreed, and on June 9, 2015, as I was preparing to retire from the Dodgers, I drove one-hundred-fifty miles from our home in Scottsdale, Arizona, to Joe and Anita Ladensack's in Tucson. I'd never laid eyes on Joe Ladensack. We had been "partners in crime," but we'd never seen each other. I'd come to pay my respects to a man worthy of respect and planned on leaving as quickly as possible.

I rang the doorbell on a modest white adobe house and stood outside a dark screen door that swung open surprisingly quickly. The transom revealed a bear of a man — no, a cub of a man, because he was burly, but compact; not intimidating like a grown bear, more cuddly like a cub. Joe Ladensack stepped onto the porch and I heard his lovely, infectious, high-pitched laugh for the first time.

"Joe," he said to me in what only could be called a priestly tone. "I'm dying. And like everyone who's dying, I made a bucket list. You're at the top of my bucket list. I wanted to meet you. We did some good stuff together."

That's how this book came to be.

LITTLE DID WE know that our work together was not yet finished. Fourteen years after Ladensack's testimony helped bring down Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien and indict a half-dozen predator priests, a new lawsuit accused the bishop of personally serially molesting an altar boy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The impressive young lawyers who brought the case — Tim Hale of Santa Barbara, California, and Carlo Mercaldo of Tucson — met Joe and me to review what by then had grown to more than seventy-five cases of priestly abuse in the Phoenix Diocese.

Joe had been battling cancer for little more than ten years by then and his white blood cells, platelets, and red blood cells all were critically low. Any infection almost certainly would be fatal. He rarely left

the protective bubble of his home and in the two years we had been working on this book, we'd never been anywhere together other than his house. But when I told Joe about the lawyers, he was determined to meet them. I drove to Tucson to pick him up and found him in a shirt and tie, in his usual good humor, eager to climb into my car for the meeting at Mercaldo's office.

"Let's go, Joe," he said as we stepped into the searing August Arizona sunshine. "We've got more good stuff to do together."

Chapter 1

Tucson, Arizona ~ The End

Father Joe Ladensack

BY THE TIME I got there, Harry Takata was drunk and had a gun.

That's when I should have known my days as a priest were numbered.

Takata, a longtime friend, was in a blind rage. Two hours earlier, he had walked into his son's bedroom where another priest — another longtime family friend — was orally copulating the fifteen-year-old boy.

"I'm going to kill him!" Harry barked when I stepped into the living room of the Takatas' cinder-block home in Chandler, Arizona — then a quiet, but soon-to-be-sprawling, suburb of Phoenix.

Harry's wife, Mary Magdolna Takata, a Hungarian-born World War II bride who immigrated to Arizona from Japan with her husband in 1970, had called me and begged me to come to the house.

"Father Joe, you're the only one we thought might believe us," she wept. "You have to help, please! Harry is going crazy."

It was a Saturday night on Memorial Day weekend in 1984 and I was unpacking at a new assignment in a parish in far West Phoenix. The last thing I wanted to do was drive forty-five minutes across town to calm a hysterical friend. But Magda was as relentless as her namesake, Mary Magdelene, had been at the tomb of Jesus. She implored me in broken English with her heavy Hungarian accent until I finally gave in.

Harry, wearing a tight-fitting "wife beater" sleeveless white cotton tank-top, was seated on a beige and mauve fabric sofa when I arrived.

He was clutching what I later learned was his sixth twelve-ounce can of Coors in less than two hours.

On the arm of the sofa was a loaded pistol.

"Harry, you don't want to do this," I told him when he spat out his threat to kill John Giandelone, the serial pedophile who had just molested Harry Takata Jr. "You kill him and your life is ruined. You'll go to prison and your son will lose a father."

Giandelone had fled as soon as Takata walked in on him. Harry Jr. remained in his bedroom weeping the rest of the night.

I spent more than an hour patiently cajoling Harry Sr. before I convinced him to let me call the police.

The moment I did was the beginning of the end of my life as a priest.

Incredibly, and horribly, I had reported Giandelone to my superiors for an attack on another boy in a different parish five years earlier. Then-Bishop James S. Rausch assured me he would take care of Giandelone. Instead, Rausch, a former general secretary of the National Council of Catholic Bishops who had his own sexual demons, did what church leaders across the world were doing — and continued to do — for decades. He quietly transferred Giandelone to a new parish, hid his crimes, and blindly allowed him to continue preying on children.

I'd reported a half dozen other predator priests in the five years since Giandelone's first molestation and every one of them was handled the same way — first by Rausch, then by his successor Thomas J. O'Brien, who became bishop in 1981 after Rausch died of a heart attack at age fifty-two. They quietly transferred the guilty priests.

Finally, I'd had enough. I wasn't going to let it happen again. The Takatas and I called Chandler Police and filed a formal report. Then I drove to my new rectory and happily let Bishop O'Brien know what we'd done.

I must admit, it felt good on so many levels — not the least of which was knowing I was rubbing O'Brien's nose in his own filth.

A diminutive man who entered the seminary at age thirteen, Thomas J. O'Brien was never in touch with the real world. He hated

controversy and confrontation and dealt poorly with all but the most meek priests under his rule.

The bishop had what he called a "Bat Phone" with a private number available only to his priests, who were under orders to use the line judiciously, if at all. I called the "Bat Phone" and knew immediately O'Brien was put out.

"This had better be good," he snapped before I could say a word.

By the time I finished relaying the gory details of John Giandelone and Harry Takata's son, O'Brien was beside himself. He was livid. Sickeningly, not because of what had happened, but because of the complications it would bring. Then, when I told him I'd already reported the incident to the police, O'Brien blew totally out of control.

"Why did you go out there?" he yelled over the Bat Phone. "Why did you call the police? You have to come to me with this immediately. To me first, and only to me.

"You owe me obedience. You took a vow, and I must remind you, young man, that you need to keep your vow."

The bishop ordered me to go back to the Takatas and have them recant the story to the police.

I reminded O'Brien that I was a military veteran and asked him if he remembered the Nuremberg Trials.

To my astonishment, a prince of the Roman Catholic Church, which celebrates intellect and scholarship, said he'd never heard of the Nuremberg Trials.

"No, what are they?" O'Brien said.

When I recovered from the shock, I told the bishop I had been trained as a young officer that there was such a thing as an unlawful order — that I thought what he was telling me to do was immoral and I refused to do it.

THREE DECADES AFTER that painful confrontation, the end is near.

Finally.

It's long overdue.

I've been to the brink, what? Two? Three? Four times?

The truth is, I'm hard to kill. I've always been hard to kill.

But this time, I really am dying. And I'm at peace with it. I've had a good life. I've been a warrior, a Catholic priest, a good husband, and a loving father. I knew how to obey orders and when to ignore them; how to storm in for the kill and when to run and hide.

From May 1969 to April 1970, I served in Vietnam with the 2nd Battalion (Mechanized), 2nd Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division — the storied Big Red One.

During those eleven months of hell, I was shot in the head, survived dozens of major battles and firefights, and became what my officers called a "highly decorated soldier." I was awarded two Silver Stars, six Bronze Stars with V for valor, a Purple Heart, and Vietnam's Cross of Gallantry with Palm — given by the South Vietnamese government for heroic conduct in combat. I was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor — until I made the mistake of telling two *Stars and Stripes* reporters the truth about a bombastic brigadier general who got too many good men killed for no good reason.

Vietnam changed me. War changes everyone, of course. But in my case, the transformation was epic. I morphed from warrior to Catholic priest. Living through hell made me want to be closer to God. Unfortunately, being closer to God eventually drove me from the Catholic Church.

On September 1, 1970, just two weeks after my discharge from the Army, I registered at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California, as a third-year undergraduate. I already had my history degree from Arizona State University and had started work on a master's in Oriental history with Mandarin language classes before I went to Vietnam. But the faculty at St. John's didn't know how to handle a twenty-three-year-old newcomer to religious study. Most of my classmates had been in the seminary since they were freshmen in high school. The powers-that-be eventually decided my ASU degree wasn't really the right track for a priest, so they enrolled me as a junior in a four-year program to earn a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy.

From my first days in the seminary, I was uneasy with the unusually high number of faculty and students I perceived to be — how can I put

this? — well, effeminate. Thirty years later, news reports would reveal that St. John's was one of several notorious nesting grounds for would-be priests who went on to become serial pedophiles and sexual predators. The seminarians at St. John's all professed the values of priestly celibacy, but many ignored it in practice.

Less than three years after my ordination, in 1976, I made my first report of child sexual abuse by a fellow priest — the despicable John Maurice Giandelone; the very one who would later attack Harry Takata's son.

During the years that followed, I witnessed an unrelenting muster of monsters who preyed on innocents that was as ghastly — and dangerous — as anything I lived through in Vietnam.

In war, I learned I was hard to kill. I learned it again during the agonizing years it took for the enormity of children abused by clerics to become public. Members of the church, and some of its strongest political allies, threatened to kill me if I spoke to the media. The threats were constant and real.

Two years after the Takata showdown, O'Brien withdrew my priestly privileges and I went into hiding in remote Southern Arizona for nearly two decades. One wonderful blessing of that time was meeting and marrying Anita Cooper, a widow, whose sons became mine.

Anita, John, and Charlie brought me more happiness than I ever could have imagined.

Now, I'm finding I'm still hard to kill.

On Memorial Day 2013, I entered hospice six years after being diagnosed with Hairy Cell Leukemia, a rare cancer of the blood in which my bone marrow makes too many lymphocytes, a type of abnormal white blood cell that destroys the body's natural white blood cells. Doctors gave me six weeks to live. Twenty-five months after I went into hospice, they threw me out. I wasn't dying fast enough for them.

Three years after that, I'm still around, still working to bring Bishop O'Brien and his legions to justice.

The end may be coming, but I'm still hard to kill.