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August 16, 2007

What Happened to Gene DeBruin?: How Hollywood Robbed an American Hero

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By [Debbie Schlusssel](#)

What if your dear brother was Missing In Action while working on behalf of America in a war zone? How would you feel, if Hollywood--adding insult to injury--portrayed your brother as Charles Manson in a widely acclaimed movie?

That's what the makers of "[Rescue Dawn](#)" did to a great American.

I [picked "Rescue Dawn" as the best movie of 2007](#). But now that I've learned more, that praise comes with a major asterisk. Actually, with a dark stain.

It's no secret that Hollywood distorts reality. But what the makers of "Rescue Dawn" did to the memory of Eugene "Gene" DeBruin is unforgivable. And an outrage.



Gene DeBruin, POW & Hero (Left),
Defamed in "Rescue Dawn" Like This (Right)
(Thanks to [David Lunde](#) for Assistance with Both Images)

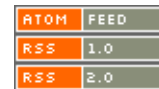
In "Rescue Dawn," the story of Navy Pilot Dieter Dengler's escape from a Laotian POW camp, DeBruin is portrayed as a crazy Charles Manson-esque fellow POW. In the movie version, he tries and threatens--at every step--to turn in Dengler and the other POWs to their barbaric Pathet Lao captors.

To make the point, DeBruin is played by actor Jeremy Davies, who played Manson in the TV movie, "Helter Skelter." In the film iteration, Dengler shoots the prison guards and stages the escape, and DeBruin is portrayed as a spaced-out, lazy, uncaring person who fails to do his part and then asks Dengler, "What will I do now?"

But that's not what happened. And it's not the kind of person Gene DeBruin was. It



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But there's another side of the story you won't see on PBS unless you tell them to show

pains his brother Jerry DeBruin and other family members and friends--including the one surviving member of the POW camp escape--to see this fiction, this great defamation of a POW who was actually a hero and is still missing.

Reality's Gene DeBruin did not sabotage Dieter Dengler's escape from Ban Houei Pathet Lao Prison in 1966. He helped plan and implement it. But he heroically stayed behind to care for a sick fellow POW who could not make it. That was his "crime." That was his "Helter Skelter."

The real Gene DeBruin was spoken of highly by Dieter Dengler, the movie's hero. He described DeBruin as a strong leader and peacemaker when differences threatened their escape plan, NOT the man who sabotaged it in the silver screen story. In real life, Pisidhi Indradat--the only living, free survivor of the camp--calls this silver-screen "Charles Manson, "The finest man I have ever met." He believes that Dengler would be appalled by "Rescue Dawn," had he lived to see it.

DeBruin's family and friends repeatedly tried to reach out to "Rescue Dawn" Director Werner Herzog to get the story straight. But they were blown off. Ditto for Indradat, who was actually there. And while Herzog claimed he was loyal to his friend, Dengler's story, his movie is starkly at odds with the Dengler's own words--his letters, his book, "Escape From Laos," and this statements in the Herzog documentary, "Little Dieter Needs to Fly."

The real story is at [Rescue Dawn, The Truth](#), a site compiled by the friends and family of Gene DeBruin.

Since Mr. Herzog would not tell the truth, I will. I feel a special responsibility to do so, since I gave such accolades to a film, I now know defamed not only an innocent American POW, but a heroic one.

Gene DeBruin was a Staff Sgt. in the Air Force for four years and obtained his pilot's license. After being honorably discharged and graduating from college, DeBruin ultimately became a smoke jumper and a cargo "kicker" for the CIA's secret airline, "Air America," in Laos. He and his crew were shot down over Laos, while they were delivering rice and buffalo meat to the people there. They were sent to several brutal POW camps, and repeatedly tortured.

DeBruin was shuffled to a fifth prison, where he spent 2.5 years before Dieter Dengler ever arrived. He and fellow prisoners spent that time formulating an escape plane and storing rice in bamboo tubes in preparation. In the movie version, DeBruin is not only against any escape, but it is Dengler who comes up with the idea to store rice in the tubes (and DeBruin who tries to eat it beforehand).

In the movie, DeBruin is cold, callous, and inhumane. In real life, DeBruin taught his cellmates English, shared his blanket with them on cold nights, and shared his food with them.

DeBruin was every bit a part of the attack on the guards and the escape. And by the way, the prison guards were killed by fellow POW Indradat, NOT Dengler (as in the movie version).

DeBruin was healthy and could have escaped through the jungle with Dengler. But he chose to stay behind to care for Y.C. To, whom he knew was too ill to make it without help. Dieter Dengler, himself, testified that DeBruin shook his hand after the escape, shouting, "See you in the States," and returned to help To. Truthfully depicting that act of courage on-screen would not have taken away from "Rescue Dawn." It would have enhanced it.

As DeBruin's brother, Jerry, points out, it is false to say that only those who successfully escaped the POW camp are heroes. Gene DeBruin was every bit as

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heroic to give up his chance at freedom to help a sick, helpless fellow POW. Maybe even more so. It is that sacrifice, that humanitarianism that helps make America great, sometimes to our detriment.

Dieter Dengler's escape from the POW camp and survival in the Laotian jungle is certainly still heroic. But there was no reason to devalue and defame DeBruin to tell Dengler's story. If Herzog was so intent on twisting events and characters for dramatic purposes, he could have used fake names for fake personas. There is no decent explanation for giving an honorable and decent man--a hero, no less--the undeserved persona of Charles Manson.

Eugene DeBruin is still Missing In Action. If he is still alive, he is 74 years old. His family has not given up on him and wants to bring him home. Photos of him in a Pathet Lao prison and subsequent sighting reports are all proof that he is a Pathet Lao prisoner, and that they should be held accountable for his fate. September 5th will mark 44 years since he was shot down by the Viet Cong-allied Pathet Lao.

Says Jerry DeBruin,

My basic fear is that the makers of movies such as "Rescue Dawn" will prey upon both released and missing POW/MIA family members, purporting untruths, and dragging them through what our family is going through today.

Let's hope that, some day soon, Gene DeBruin is brought back home to America alive.

And that his reputation is brought back with him.

Director Werner Herzog and his Hollywood friends tried to take that away from him.

But they cannot take Gene DeBruin's honor and heroism.

Posted by Debbie at August 16, 2007 05:30 AM

Comments

To answer your question: The same thing that happened to Canadian WW1 hero Wop May in "The mad trapper".

May, a flying ace, was portrayed as a mad pilot who eventually flew himself into a non-existent mountain.

Based-on-a-true-story my a\$\$.

Posted by: stevecanuck  at August 16, 2007 11:10 AM

An excellent example of how blogs, unlike films and most other media, are self-correcting.

Posted by: Jeremiah  at August 16, 2007 11:39 AM

I came to the conclusion long ago, that with rare exception, someone would know more about a historical event if they DO NOT watch the movie. in most cases much more.

"Advertisements contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper (or movie)."

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- Mark Twain

Posted by: feralcat9  at August 16, 2007 03:14 PM

Good article Deb, thanks.

ML

Posted by: Moe Larry  at August 16, 2007 07:58 PM

It is a fact that Laotian POWs experienced severe protein deficiency. That would have effected both judgement and motor ability. However, the fact that DeBruin chose not to leave Pathet Lao custody and make propaganda for the Viet Cong, is testament to his obvious high moral standards.

Posted by: supercargo  at August 16, 2007 10:43 PM

I always liked Charlie. He must've had a lousy lawyer.

Posted by: steve ventry  at August 20, 2007 01:17 AM

Debbie,

In your article you said, "And by the way, the prison guards were killed by fellow POW Indradat, NOT Dengler (as in the movie version)."

I have to point out that in Dieter's book Escape From Laos, Dieter confirms that it was he, Dieter, who killed the guards. Is the DeBruin family now taking the side of Indradat on this issue and disputing Dieter's account?

Please get to the truth on this.

Posted by: Kurt  at August 26, 2007 12:59 AM

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