

What It Means to Be an EAGLE SCOUT

A new book explores the impact—from World War II to the present and beyond—of men who earned Scouting’s highest rank.

As a prisoner of war in Vietnam, Eagle Scout George Coker refused to write a statement denouncing America. And so he was forced to stand against a wall, arms over his head, for 13-hour stretches, day after day after day.

Coker tried everything to survive those long hours: praying, counting to himself, thinking about his family. By the end of two months, however, he could barely remember his own name.

LEGACY OF HONOR:

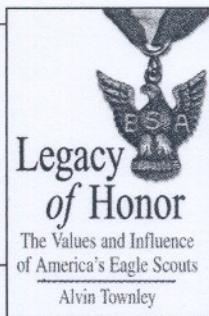
The Values and Influences of America’s Eagle Scouts

By Alvin Townley

256 pages

Thomas Dunne Books, \$24.95

www.thomasdunnebooks.com



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ALVIN TOWNLEY

Townley’s interviewees included Eagle Scout and Sept. 11 NYPD hero Scott Strauss; Charlie Chapman, who showed how the badges of his Eagle Scout son, Jonathan, survived Hurricane Katrina; and BSA Florida Sea Base Eagle Scout staffers Jeff Zavatsky, James Agnor, Chris Hoover, and Gary Heimbach.



But he remembered the Scout Oath. “The very last thing I could consciously hold onto was the Scout Oath,” he said. “By the end, I could only get out the first verse: ‘On my honor I will do my best.’ That forced my brain to function and say, ‘I will do this again. I will not do what they want me to do.’”

Coker’s remarkable story is just one of dozens Alvin Townley uncovered as he traveled the country, interviewing Eagle Scouts of all ages in gathering ma-

terial for his book, *Legacy of Honor: The Values and Influences of America’s Eagle Scouts*. The book was published at the end of last year by Thomas Dunne Books, a division of St. Martin’s Press.

An Eagle Scout himself, Townley set out to gauge the lasting significance of Boy Scouting’s highest rank. “After I was several years removed from Scouting, I really began to wonder what it means to be an Eagle Scout when you’re not wearing a uniform every day,” Townley said in an interview. “Beyond that, what difference has the program made? Has

it really matter- ed? I wanted to find out, and I did.”

Townley was so committed to finding out that he quit his job, sold his house, and spent a year as a self-described “homeless vagabond,” crisscrossing America in search of Eagle Scouts. In all, he traveled 40,000 miles and interviewed well over 200 Eagle Scouts and Scout leaders.

The Eagle Scouts Townley profiles in *Legacy of Honor*—men who earned their badges over a span of eight decades—are a study in diversity, reflecting every race and embracing many creeds and political persuasions. They include Christians, Jews, and Muslims; Democrats, Republicans, and independents. Some would seem right at home in a Norman Rockwell painting, while others are less conventional (like the Eagle Scout Townley met who had sported a Mohawk haircut, earrings, and tattoos at his Eagle Scout court of honor).

“There are Eagles of every stripe, shape, and color; yet they all have this common thread,” Townley said. “And that to me is the great thing about the story.”

Townley’s highly readable book falls neatly into two halves. The first focuses on achievements, past and present, telling of Eagle Scouts who served in the military and the government, who founded and led Fortune 500 companies, and who became heroes on Sept. 11, 2001, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Many have familiar names,

BY MARK RAY

including Michael Bloomberg, Bill Marriott, Sam Walton, and Jim Lovell.

The book's second half focuses on Eagle Scouts who are building a legacy for the future by conserving natural habitats, leading colleges and universities, and serving as camp counselors and Scoutmasters. This part of the book also explores how the legacy of Scouting lives on in so many families.

For example, Townley introduces one Nevada family in which all 11 brothers became Eagle Scouts. Their mother, Sherry Thomas, explains that she had to motivate only her first four sons to reach Eagle. "Especially when we got to number 10 and 11, the older boys really put pressure on the younger ones," she says. "They weren't going to let the tradition end!"

In Search of Eagle Scouts And Their Stories

A third-generation Eagle Scout, Alvin Townley earned his Eagle rank in Troop 103 of Atlanta, Ga.

Leaving behind a career in business and college administration and teaching, he set out on a 40,000-mile journey across the country to discover the legacy of America's Eagle Scouts, recording the personal stories of such Eagles as attorney and father of Microsoft's founder Bill Gates III, Bill Gates Sr.; former basketball star and congressman Bill Bradley; hotel scion J. W. (Bill) Marriott Jr.; businessman Ross Perot; New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg; Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer; Treasury Secretary Henry M. Paulson Jr.; and former astronaut Jim Lovell. He eventually met with Eagle Scouts from every walk of life, including decorated veterans, teachers, athletes, volunteers, doctors, and longtime Scout leaders.

Townley currently resides in his native Atlanta, where he works and coaches at Marist School. He also serves on the board of directors for Reach for Excellence, a not-for-profit education program benefiting talented, economically disadvantaged middle-school students.

Anecdotes like that are sprinkled throughout *Legacy of Honor*. Readers will meet a U.S. representative who can still recite the Order of the Arrow ceremonies he led as a Scout and the Scouter who took an FBI team with him on a Philmont trek. They will read about a Scoutmaster who helped 75 boys become Eagle Scouts over 44 years and the camp staffer who survived a diving accident, thanks to a Scout to whom he had taught the skills to earn the Lifesaving merit badge.

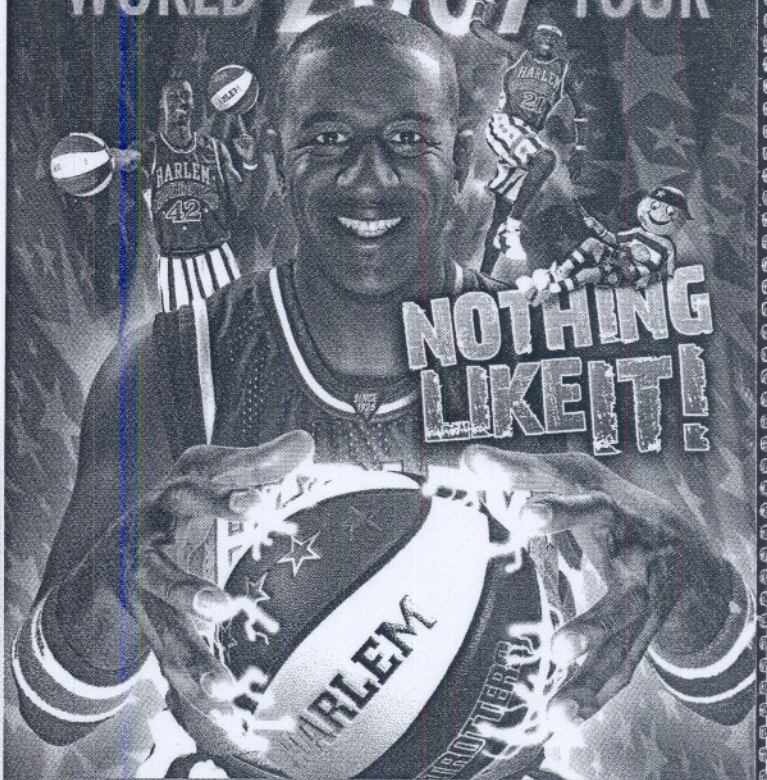
But most of all, readers will learn about Eagle Scouts who are giving back to their communities in ways both large and small.

"The people I met with are doing an incredible range of different things in different places," Townley said, "but they all have this sense of duty to other people and are all linked together by that. And that fact has given rise to an incredible legacy of service."

Townley called this legacy "an untold and absolutely inspiring story." Thanks to *Legacy of Honor*, readers now have the chance to see just how Eagle Scouts have served, loved, and led America for nearly a hundred years. **S**

Mark Ray is a frequent contributor to Scouting magazine.

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