

Chapter 14

“The Work of Death”: Hugh Nibley and War

During Operation Market-Garden, the seventy-two-day, bloody, and ill-fated invasion of Holland, Master Sergeant David Harmon was on patrol with Colonel Howard R. Johnson when they saw a car being driven by a German officer. Johnson ordered Harmon to shoot the German since he might be carrying information that would help the Allies. It was a moving target but only medium range. Harmon lifted his rifle and fired, hitting the driver in the head and killing him instantly. Sure enough, in the car they found a briefcase crammed with secret documents. Although he had obeyed an order during a wartime patrol, Harmon was deeply troubled by having killed the German officer in such a calculated way. “He’d done a lot of shooting,” Hugh remembers, but for some reason, the fact that he had shot this officer in the head “preyed on his mind.” Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces to Mourmelon-le-Grand on 28 November 1944, Hugh was sharing a tent with Harmon. Harmon gave Hugh the German officer’s briefcase, locks broken and its fine leather stained with blood, but still functional. One night, Harmon came into the tent, sat down on the bunk next to Hugh, and asked, “Nibley, if I want to kill myself, it’s my own goddamn business, isn’t it?” As calmly as he could, Hugh tried to assure Harmon that killing himself would affect a lot of other people and was really not a good solution. But “suddenly he whipped out a little Beretta automatic that he had in his pocket, a little Italian Beretta. Shot himself right through the head. Blood splattering all over the place. I put towels around his head and then ran over to the medics but he was dead before that. He just couldn’t stand living with it.”²

²Hugh Nibley, “Faith of an Observer,” 155, compilation of interviews, ca. 1983-84 for a video documentary of the same name aired in 1985, photocopy of typescript in my possession, pagination added. In this quoted passage, I have silently removed the transcriber’s ellipses which indicate, not omitted material, but pauses in the narration.