The Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High

WARRIORS DON'T CRY

Includes 8 pages of photographs

Melba Pattillo Beals

winner of the Congressional Gold Medal

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MY GRANDMOTHER INDIA ALWAYS SAID GOD HAD pointed a finger at our family, asking for just a bit more discipline, more praying, and more hard work because he had blessed us with good health and good brains. My mother was one of the first few blacks to integrate the University of Arkansas, graduating in 1954. Three years later, when Grandma discovered I would be one of the first blacks to attend Central High School, she said the nightmare that had surrounded my birth was proof positive that destiny had assigned me a special task.

First off, I was born on Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1941. Mother says while she was giving birth to me, there was a big uproar, with the announcement that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. She remembers how astonished she was, and yet her focus was necessarily on the task at hand. There was trouble with my delivery because Mom was tiny and I was nine pounds. The doctor used forceps to deliver me and injured my scalp. A few days later, I fell ill with

a massive infection. Mother took me to the white hospital, which reluctantly treated the families of black men who worked on the railroad. A doctor operated to save my life by inserting a drainage system beneath my scalp.

Twenty-four hours later I wasn't getting better. Whenever Mother sought help, neither nurses nor doctors would take her seriously enough to examine me. Instead, they said, "Just give it time."

Two days after my operation, my temperature soared to 106 and I started convulsing. Mother sent for the minister to give me the last rites, and relatives were gathering to say farewell.

That evening, while Grandmother sat in my hospital room, rocking me back and forth as she hummed her favorite hymn, "On the Battlefield for My Lord," Mother paced the floor weeping aloud in her despair. A black janitor who was sweeping the hallway asked why she was crying. She explained that I was dying because the infection in my head had grown worse.

The man extended his sympathy. As he turned to walk away, dragging his broom behind him, he mumbled that he guessed the Epsom salts hadn't worked after all. Mother ran after him asking what he meant. He explained that a couple of days before, he had been cleaning the operating room as they finished up with my surgery. He had heard the doctor tell the white nurse to irrigate my head with Epsom salts and warm water every two or three hours or I wouldn't make it.

Mother shouted the words "Epsom salts and water" as she raced down the hall, desperately searching for a nurse. The woman was indignant, saying, yes, come to think of it, the doctor had said something about

Epsom salts. "But we don't coddle niggers," she growled.

Mother didn't talk back to the nurse. She knew Daddy's job was at stake. Instead, she sent for Epsom salts and began the treatment right away. Within two days, I was remarkably better. The minister went home, and the sisters from the church abandoned their death watch, declaring they had witnessed a miracle.

So fifteen years later, when I was selected to integrate Central High, Grandmother said, "Now you see, that's the reason God spared your life. You're supposed to carry this banner for our people."

Black folks aren't born expecting segregation, prepared from day one to follow its confining rules. Nobody presents you with a handbook when you're teething and says, "Here's how you must behave as a second-class citizen." Instead, the humiliating expectations and traditions of segregation creep over you, slowly stealing a teaspoonful of your self-esteem each day.

By the time I was four years old, I was asking questions neither my mother nor grandmother cared to answer. "Why do the white people write 'Colored' on all the ugly drinking fountains, the dingy restrooms, and the back of the buses? When will we get our turn to be in charge?" Grandma India would only say, "In God's time. Be patient, child, and tell God all about it."

I remember sitting on the dining room floor, writing letters to God in my Indian Head tablet. I painstakingly formed the alphabet just as Grandma had taught me to do in order to distract me from my asthma cough. I could do the multiplication table through ten

An innocent teenager. An unexpected hero.

In 1957, Melba Pattillo turned sixteen. That was also the year she became a warrior on the front lines of a civil rights firestorm. Following the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Melba was one of nine teenagers chosen to integrate Little Rock's Central High School.

Throughout her harrowing ordeal, Melba was taunted by her schoolmates and their parents, threatened by a lynch mob's rope, attacked with lighted sticks of dynamite, and injured by acid sprayed in her eyes. But through it all, she acted with dignity and courage, and refused to back down.

This is her remarkable story.

Includes a new foreword by the author

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