

Former Klansman reflects on how God's grace redeemed a life of hate

January 18, 2008

Posted: 1/18/08

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By Roy Hoffman

Religion News Service

SPRINGFIELD, Va. (RNS)—Softspoken Tommy Tarrants leans back in his office chair, surrounded by books on religion and philosophy, and looks down at a newspaper headline from Nov. 28, 1968. It reads: "Tarrants Found Guilty, Sentenced to 30 Years." The 60-year old sees a mugshot of himself at age 21 next to the story.

"A self-styled guerrilla waging a holy crusade' against a 'Communist-Jewish conspiracy' was convicted Wednesday night of the attempted bombing of the home of a Jewish businessman," the article said.

Former white
supremacist
and KKK
member
Tommy
Tarrants now
leads the C.S.
Lewis Institute
outside
Washington,
D. C.,
mentoring
young
scholars who
want to delve
deeper into
the Christian
faith. (RNS
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of Mobile,
Ala.)

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long-ago
victim](#)

“I feel shame and disgust,” he said. “You can see what a head case I was.”

Today, he is president of the C.S. Lewis Institute, a nondenominational organization with the motto “discipleship of heart and mind.” His life is a stark contrast to the violent bigotry of his youth.

His work includes mentoring C.S. Lewis Fellows—men and women who come to the institute to deepen their understanding of spiritual matters. He tells them of his own trials as “an example of the life-changing power of God’s grace.” He talks about his boyhood in Mobile, Ala., the sin of hatred that consumed him, and his salvation in a jail cell.

His listeners find it hard to envision him as a young man raising his hand to grab the throat of a Jewish classmate or a gun to blast into homes of black families.

“I was filled with rage,” Tarrants said. In his 1979 memoir, *The Conversion of a Klansman: The Story of a Former Ku Klux Klan Terrorist*, Tarrants sketched out his slide toward vehement hatred of Jews and blacks.

While he was aware of Jewish people in town—he describes a grammar-school crush on a Jewish girl and notes his grandmother worked at a Jewish-owned jewelry store—he knew nothing of Jews personally, nor the tenets of their religion.

As a teen, he became a loner, alienated from his family.



Press
clippings
document
the life of
former
white
supremacist
and KKK
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Tommy
Tarrants.

“I hated my father,” he said. He stored a handgun, a sawed-off shotgun and a machine gun in his bedroom, all bought with money from after-school jobs.

He glimpses something of his own youth when he sees stories of alienated teens who explode, such as the massacres at Columbine and Virginia Tech.

“I was a problem waiting to happen,” he said.

The anti-Red fervor of the 1950s and '60s, along with a conviction that the Jews were behind an international Communist conspiracy, focused Tarrants' rage. He devoured propaganda literature about an alleged Jewish plot to control the world. He linked up with members of the Klan, a secret paramilitary troop known as the Minutemen and the National States Rights Party. He would drive through black neighborhoods, shooting into people's homes. He prayed for the coming race war.

“I thought I was a Christian fighting against the Communist-Jewish conspiracy,” he said. “I was doing it for God and country.”

In the fall of 1963, the integration of his high school proved to Tarrants

that his world was being turned upside down. He angrily called the office of Gov. George Wallace and left a message asking for intervention. A response came from the FBI, which called his home looking for him. He was suspended from school 10 days. Surely “the Jews were behind it,” he thought.

Tarrants headed to Mississippi, met with the Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and joined their ranks.

An application for the White Knights stated, in part: “We do not accept Jews, because they reject Christ, and, through the machinations of their International Banking Cartel, are at the root center of what we call Communism today. We do not accept Papists, because they bow to a Roman dictator. ... We do not accept Turks, Mongols, Tartars, Orientals, Negroes nor any other person whose native background or culture is foreign to the Anglo-Saxon system of government by responsible, free individual citizens.”

He had been grievously misdirected, he says now.

He felt certain that he would go to heaven.

“I went about feeling like I had had my ticket punched,” he said. “I had made a profession of faith. But I had no change of heart, of life.”

He was unbowed in that arrogance, even after being convicted in 1968 of the attempted bombing of the home of Meyer Davidson, a Jewish man in Meridian, Miss.

Placed in solitary confinement at a Mississippi prison following a brief escape, Tarrants began to plumb his soul.

In a 6-by-9-foot jail cell—“reading was the only thing that kept me from going crazy ... crazier”—he began to reflect on the meaning of his life.

He embraced Matthew 16:26: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain

the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

He recalled, "I fell on my knees and prayed and felt a thousand-pound weight lifted from me."

That began what he describes as "a startling transformation."

Others came to believe Tarrants was a changed man and spoke on his behalf, including Al Binder, a Mississippi lawyer who was Jewish and influential in political circles.

In December 1976, Tarrants left prison on a work-release program that enabled him to enroll at the University of Mississippi. Three years later, he published his memoir.

Knowing the Klan would call him a traitor and possibly try to harm him, Tarrants moved to Washington, D.C. He completed a master's degree in divinity and a doctorate in ministry, and became a minister and spiritual counselor.

When he looks back over his life, he realizes he had close calls along the way.

When he dropped a homemade dynamite bomb, it didn't go off. He was wounded in a police ambush where his accomplice was killed. In a prison escape, one of the two inmates who fled with him was killed by FBI gunfire.

"In every one of these situations, I deserved more than the other person to be the one who died," he said. "But I was spared."

He dedicated his life to helping people reconcile their differences—race, religion, differences of the heart.

"By God's grace I was protected, despite my vile behavior," he wrote in his memoir.

“It was a miracle. ... Truly, the living Christ was active to redeem me and work out his plan for my life.”

Roy Hoffman writes for The Press-Register in Mobile, Ala.

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