

A Prize for All Saints is the story of John Maletesta, a one-armed vet who is engaged to ride shotgun for a risky expedition to Borneo in search of the Missing Link. An unknown enemy wants to stop the expedition by any means necessary.

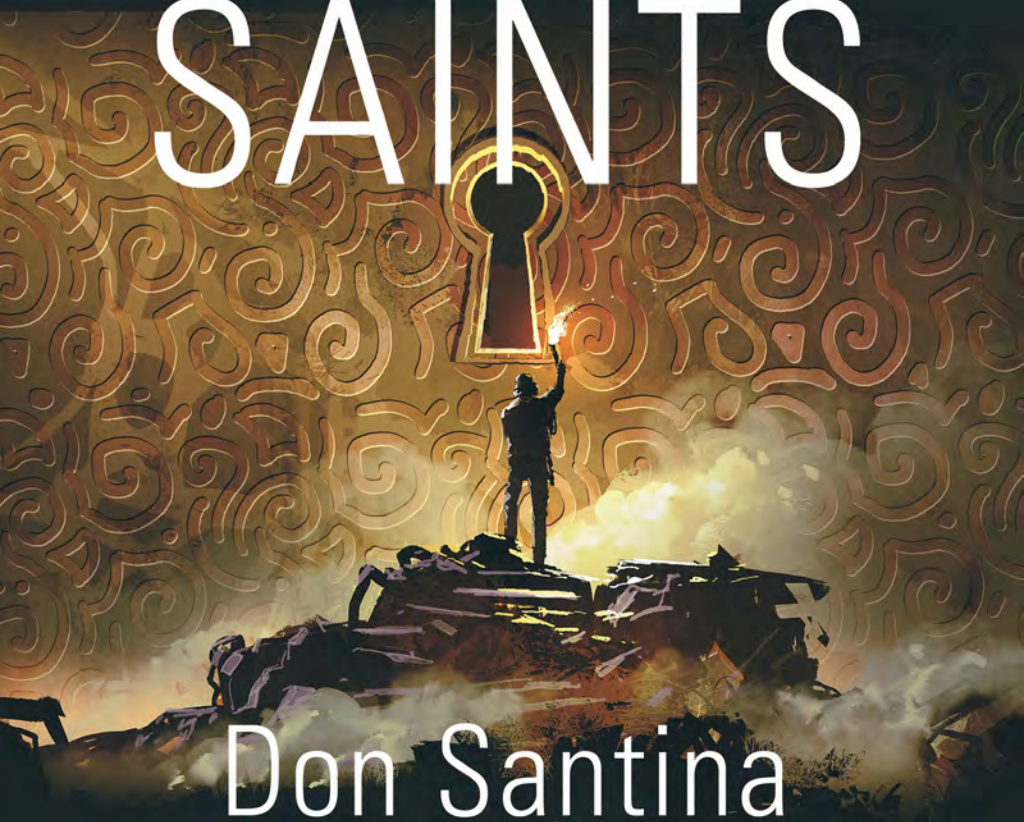
A Prize for All Saints

By Don Santina

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Don Santina

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ONE

Leyte, the Philippines, December 1944

“Baker Two, Baker Two! This is Baker One! Japanese everywhere! We are being overrun! Hold your position! Hold your position! Do you read me?”

The walkie talkie crackled and was silent. Lieutenant John Maletesta looked at Corporal James “Lonnie” Vennemeyer. They could hear the small arms fire increasing on their right flank about a mile away. Maletesta pushed the walkie talkie button down.

“Baker One, this is Baker Two. Do you read? Come in, Baker One. Over.”

There was no answer.

“Baker One, come in. Come in, Baker One,” Maletesta repeated.

“Looks like Captain Calloway's in for it,” Vennemeyer said. Vennemeyer had a long-jawed face with naturally doleful eyes. He peered out into the encroaching darkness as if he could see Calloway's unit.

“And nothing we can do about it. Damn!” He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Lonnie, pull the scouts in and gather up the rest. We'll dig in here on the high ground.”

“Yes sir.”

Vennemeyer disappeared silently into the trees. Maletesta scanned his “high ground”: a slight rise in the forest floor dotted with small boulders and clumps of brush. From here, Maletesta's platoon could form a 360 degree perimeter to defend themselves. The scene from Hemingway's “Fight on the Hilltop” flitted through his mind as he reviewed the position, but he brushed it away quickly.

I'm not El Sordo, and there's no air force to worry about here.

Maletesta removed his helmet and scratched his head, contemplating the position around him. He had black curly hair and a hawkynose which separated hazel eyes that were called enchanting by his girlfriend and scary by an opposing pitcher. He strode around the site with an athlete's grace, calculating fields of fire.

A few minutes later, the platoon emerged from the trees and gathered quietly around him. Counting the two Filipino scouts, there were only fourteen of them left. They had slept in the rain the night before and had kept moving all day. They were hot and tired and shifted on their feet as they stood in formation. In the six weeks since the landing, they had been in at least one firefight with the enemy every other day. Maletesta quietly pointed out a position to each man as he circled the hill with them. They pulled out their shovels and began digging in as the small arms fire diminished and the sky grew dark. They ate cold rations and waited. There was little talking between them. Fortunately, there was a full moon, so there would be no surprise attack.

At eight o'clock by Maletesta's watch, the gunfire at Baker One's position ceased. The night was quiet with the exception of a pair of eagle-owls calling to each other and a slight high breeze rustling the leaves.

"Captain Calloway?" whispered Vennemeyer, who came up on Maletesta's left.

"Maybe some of them made it back to the river. Anyway, be ready. *Pazienza*, huh?" Maletesta replied.

"Yeah, yeah, I know--patience. Between you and Barreras, lieutenant, by the time this war is over, I'll know three languages." Vennemeyer returned to his position.

Maletesta whistled low in imitation of a night bird. One by one, each man in the platoon answered. They were in place and ready. Maletesta checked the chamber of his M1 carbine.

Satisfied that there was a cartridge in it, he pushed the safety off and peered down the slope.

Nothing.

He settled his legs farther into the shallow depression he had dug behind the rocks. He brushed some dirt off the walnut stock of the carbine and his thoughts went inexplicitly to his mother's walnut dining room table. He could smell the red oil he used to polish the table on the holidays. He thought of Annemarie and their Christmas Eve date and smiled.

Maybe they're not coming this way.

Maletesta set the carbine down, reached into his pack and pulled out a battered baseball.

His good luck charm, the home run ball he hit during the tryout at Seals Stadium. He squeezed it and tossed it in the air catching it lightly.

I'll be back.

He squeezed the ball hard.

I'll be back.

Abruptly, he shoved the ball back down into the pack and picked up the carbine.

Have I forgotten anything?

He had placed the .30 machine gun facing the densest part of the woods. The rest were in a rough circle about 60 feet in diameter with the two grease guns on opposite sides. Lonnie with his BAR was in the center, in reserve, ready to back up any weak spot.

Wait a minute! Something moved. That bush wasn't there before.

Maletesta squeezed off a shot into a bush about fifty yards down the slope. The bush jumped and yelled and he fired two more rounds into it.

"Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!"

All hell broke loose on all sides. The bottom of the slope around the perimeter was alive with crawling, running, and dodging Japanese soldiers. Maletesta emptied his carbine, shoved another banana clip in, and emptied that one too. He was aware of the intense gunfire around him, the furious bursts from the full automatics and the steady blasts of the M1's. Bullets from the enemy fire buzzed around him, smacking into trees and rocks.

He looked back quickly at Lonnie and over at Jimmie Higgins on his right. Higgins' M1 had jammed and he was trying desperately to clear it.

"Lonnie, cover Jimmie!" Maletesta yelled.

Vennemeyer slid in behind Higgins, firing as he moved.

"Jesus! I'm hit! I'm hit! Oh, Jesus, I'm hit!"

It was Daly, about twenty feet from Maletesta's left. He had dropped his rifle and rolled out from behind his tree, clutching his side. Maletesta could see three Japanese soldiers moving quickly up the slope toward Daly. He stood up and ran to Daly, firing rapidly at the three shapes on the slope. One of them fell; the other two fired back at Maletesta and then retreated back down the slope. He pulled Daly back behind the tree, just as a Japanese non-com suddenly appeared out of nowhere, a Nambu pistol in one hand and a samurai sword in the other. As he saw Maletesta, they both fired simultaneously. The non-com's shot went wild. Maletesta's hit its mark and the non-com sank to the ground.

As suddenly as the engagement began, it was over. The firing stopped. The air was heavy with the smell of gunpowder and the groans of the wounded and dying. Maletesta's platoon could hear the Japanese crashing back through the woods in full flight. They reloaded their weapons and watched the forest warily.

Maletesta tore Daly's shirt open and looked at the nasty oozing hole below his rib cage. Daly's face was pale, and he writhed in pain.

"You'll be alright, Mike, you're going home," Maletesta said and motioned to Higgins, who carried the medical bag, to bring the morphine. "You'll be back with Millie before you know it, Mike. You're a lucky guy. Hurry up, Jimmie. That's it."

Felipe Barreras, one of the scouts, scooted over to where Maletesta sat, taking stock of the situation.

A miracle, only one wounded.

"I see if they're really gone?" whispered Barreras.

"OK, *kaibigan*. Careful though. So far, so good," Maletesta smiled and punched

Barreras on the shoulder. Barreras gave a thumbs-up back to Maletesta.

Barreras slipped down the slope and Maletesta watched him disappear into the forest.

Then he stood up cautiously and stepped out from behind the tree. The non-com was sprawled over its roots. There was no movement in the woods.

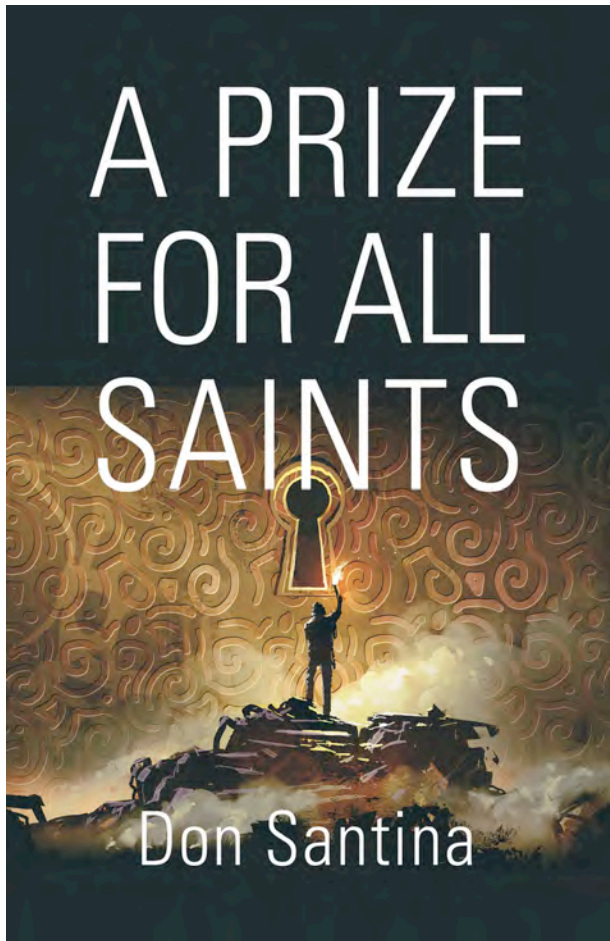
They're gone, thank God.

He leaned the carbine against the tree and lit a cigarette. He exhaled loudly and shook his head in disbelief at Vennemeyer, who stood at a nearby tree, scanning the forest. Only one wounded. Vennemeyer held the BAR loosely at his side.

"Luck o' the Irish, Lonn..."

Suddenly, the Japanese non-com was on his feet, swinging his sword. Instinctively, Maletesta raised his left arm in defense and tried to back step. In a blur he saw the flash of the blade slicing through his arm and the blood spurting out. He screamed. He saw the non-com hammered back by a burst

from Lonnie's BAR. He saw his arm on the ground. He screamed again. And again.



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