

A Walking Distance

Robert Ortiz

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Ex-U.S. Marine Sergeant and former high school football and track star Robert (Roberto “Tito”) Ortiz of Laredo Texas has completed his self-styled “autobiography” as one of his lifetime goals. Although more of a series of memoirs personal observations and occasional rants than it is a full-fledged autobiography *A Walking Distance* makes for interesting reading. Grammatical and typographical errors and occasional glaring inaccuracies present some difficulties; for example reference is made to the “rector scale” for the Richter magnitude scale. But what the book lacks in professional authorship it makes up for in the author’s forthrightness integrity and honesty.

Ortiz is brutally frank in describing his childhood and his father’s troubled life leading to his incarceration then unexpected release from prison. Nevertheless after a religious conversion and a stint running a moderately successful church the senior Ortiz became a lifelong role model for Robert and his brothers. Episodes of the author’s early distrust even hatred for his older brother Rafa and of his run-ins with his younger sibling Eli while they were all young teenagers are well-documented. But so too are the later years when Rafa became a trusted confidante and when Robert and Eli co-starred on the high school football team the Nixon Mustangs bringing home various divisional championships and individual awards. Much of the book in fact describes the brothers’ athletic exploits especially during the author’s senior year when he advanced to the track and field regional meet as the lone entrant from his school only to lose because of faulty starting blocks. Characteristically he took the loss hard but also typically he learned from it and strengthened his resolve to do better in other pursuits.

Ortiz’s resolve faith and dedication shine through in other parts of the book as well especially in his recounting of his four years in the Marine Corps the second major section of the book. Here his candour and objectivity in telling his story is obvious from his first day at age nineteen at the mind-numbing soul-destroying boot camp. Three constantly yelling Drill Instructors acted like “maniacal machines correcting every recruit even when nothing was wrong.” Never losing sight of his goal to graduate Ortiz took everything thrown at him learning from both his strengths and his weaknesses even serving briefly as a Guide before his inexperience caught up with him. What also caught up with him was Operation Enduring Freedom barely on the horizon when he enlisted. Although he grumbled at the Middle East assignment as a loyal Marine and a perceived patriot he accepted three consecutive overseas postings there. He describes these tours at length with references to the racism he saw the boondoggling he participated in and the allegations of arms smuggling by Marines. On balance however Ortiz concludes that despite the death and destruction he observed his fears and personal demons the suicide of a roommate and his break-ups with two long-time girl friends his time in the service was worth every moment.

Ortiz ends with an exhortation to remember that “our dreams goals and desires are only a walking distance away.” And his “Update and Acknowledgements” notes how he continues to follow his own advice.

M. WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (January 11, 2008)

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