

Duty and Friendship:

Judge John Sammons Bell and Judge Anthony A. Alaimo

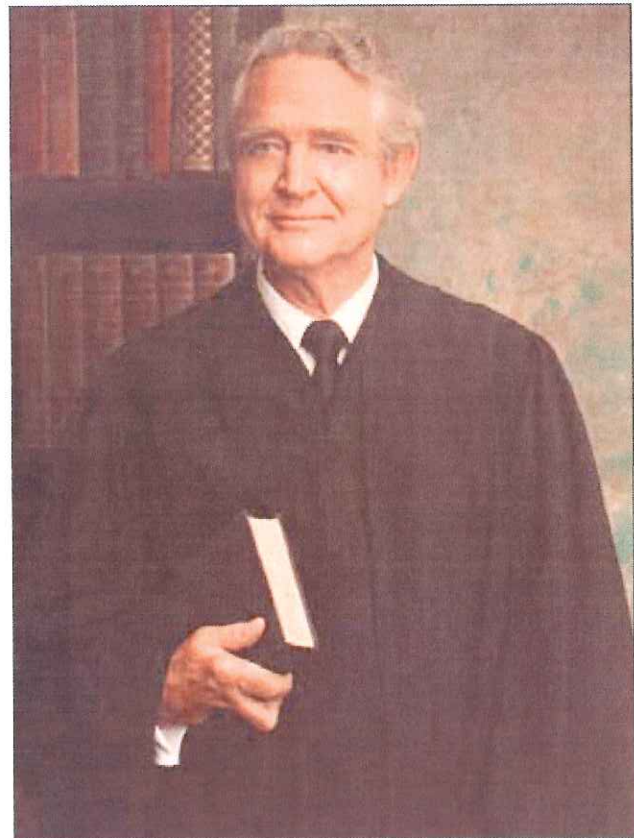
by David E. Hudson

John Sammons Bell was a native Georgian; his father was a baptist pastor. He attended Richmond Academy in Augusta and Mercer University. His family had been in the state for several generations and one of his ancestors was a Confederate veteran.

Anthony A. Alaimo was born in Sicily and immigrated with his family to Jamestown, N.Y. He was raised and educated in New York and Ohio.

In World War II, Maj. Bell led a battalion of soldiers and was injured at the Battle of New Georgia in the Solomon Islands in the Pacific. American air power was diverted to meet a threat from an approaching Japanese fleet. With no air cover of their own, the American ground forces were at the mercy of Japanese aircraft. Bell remembered the planes, taking cover and seeing the bomb tear his radioman apart. The same bomb gravely injured Bell. The rest of his life his handshake showed the missing fingers, and scars marked his arm and side.

In 1943, Lt. Alaimo piloted his B-26 bomber on a raid against German-occupied Holland. Every plane in the attack was shot down. Alaimo was shot through the shoulder and leg but was able to ditch his burning aircraft in the North Sea. He was the only one of the crew who survived. Alaimo was captured by the Germans, treated in a hospital and then made a prisoner of war. At the Stalg Luft III POW Camp, he helped the tunnelers who broke out in the Great Escape. But before the breakout occurred, he was transferred with other Americans to an adjacent compound in the camp. He tried unsuccessfully to escape two more times before he



Hon. John Sammons Bell

Photo from the Court of Appeals of Georgia

finally succeeded. He made his way from Germany to Northern Italy, then to Switzerland, and then home to America.

Both Bell and Alaimo entered Emory University School of Law after the war in 1945. They were Purple Heart heroes, one the courtly native Georgian, and the other a skinny, black-haired Italian-American yankee.

Bell went on to become twice-chairman of the Democratic Party of Georgia, and was appointed to the

Court of Appeals of Georgia where he served for two decades, serving as chief judge for nine of those years.

Alaimo practiced law in Atlanta and eventually made his way to Brunswick where he established a successful plaintiff's practice and became involved in community affairs. He led the rebirth of the Republican party in southeast Georgia and was the first republican elected to county office in Glynn County since Reconstruction. He later became legal counsel to the Georgia Republican Party.

Some 20 years after Bell and Alaimo graduated from law school, President Nixon nominated Alaimo to be a U.S. District Judge for the Southern District of Georgia. A handful of lawyers in the region opposed his nomination and gave unsatisfactory reports about him to the American Bar Association (ABA) evaluation team. The confirmation process came to a halt and Alaimo waited in uncertainty.


When Bell, now Hon. John Sammons Bell of the Court of Appeals of Georgia, and Hon. Griffin B. Bell (a Kennedy democrat then serving as a judge on the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals) heard of this, they knew a great injustice was about to take place. Together they contacted E. Smythe Gambrell of the Gambrell Russell firm in Atlanta who was a former president of the ABA. They persuaded Gambrell to intercede with the ABA and seek a re-evaluation of Alaimo.

The ABA agreed and appointed prominent lawyer Albert Jenner of the Chicago firm of Jenner & Block to undertake the new evaluation. Jenner came to Georgia during 1971 and investigated Alaimo both with lawyers in Atlanta and in southeast Georgia. Jenner and the ABA found Alaimo to be exceptionally well-qualified. As a result, the president's nomination was confirmed by the U.S. Senate and Alaimo became District Judge Anthony Alaimo in 1972. At his investiture, the person he asked to administer the oath was not

a federal office holder, but his friend from law school, Hon. John Sammons Bell.

Thirty-five years later, Bell was living in a retirement home in Amelia Island, Fla. Alaimo and other judges and lawyers from the Southern District of Georgia were at a meeting at Amelia Island and invited Bell to the Friday night dinner. Bell, now in his 90s, was driven to the dinner by his daughter. He struggled from the car and started making his way across the parking lot using a walker.

Alaimo, now 87 and recovering from hip surgery, saw him coming and shuffled as fast as he could to meet his friend. There they embraced and were heard to say to each other "I love you, Tony," and "I love you, John."

Bell died in 2006 and Alaimo in December 2009. These were noble and heroic men. They devoted their lives to their country and to the service of justice. Though they came from different backgrounds and held different political allegiances, being loyal to a friend and doing what was right always came first. 



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Hon. Anthony A. Alaimo

Photo provided by Bobby Haven of the Brunswick News

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