

TROPHIES OF WAR: A PERSONAL VIEW

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A great war leaves the country with three armies – an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves. – German Proverb

I saw my father visibly emotional only once in my life but the incident replays itself in my head more frequently than I care to admit. It was Christmas time 1961 and my father and mother had just returned from Christmas shopping. He had caught me handling his war trophy – a German pistol that he kept hidden, wrapped in an old Army sock in a footlocker. My brother and I knew that the pistol existed and where he kept it hidden but nothing more. That pistol was never spoken about- ever. To my brother and me, that pistol represented our youthful dreams of glory in war. It represented the victory of Good versus Evil and the heroism of our father. Good Americans against evil Nazis. What could be more just? But now, as he stood over me looking at me with the pistol in my hand, I just did not know what was going to happen next. As he approached me, he averted his gaze and I got the feeling that I had done something wrong. I knew I was not supposed to know about the pistol. That much I understood. He sat down next to me without a word. After a long pause, he spoke, his voice cracking with emotion.

“We were taking sniper fire. I was on the back of a jeep. I swung around and lifted my carbine and killed the sniper. He was shooting at us with that pistol. He was ... about your age....” I was twelve years old but as I grew older and had children of my own, I now believe that he was realizing at that very moment the magnitude a very personal tragedy. Up to that moment, he had killed a sniper. After that moment, he knew that he had killed a boy very much like the one sitting next to him. And it began to haunt him. But that wasn’t the worst of his emotional and spiritual baggage from World War II. He had many other trophies. If you do not think that recalling a memory qualifies as a trophy, watch any combat veteran stiffen his backbone and pull back his shoulders while saying “I was there” in response to a question about this or that battle. The tangible only serves as a placeholder for the real trophy: an experience earned by courage and sacrifice. But the trophy may change its meaning as one matures and begins to see life as more complicated than it seemed back then. The trophy may become like a beloved but drunken relative who ruined a family gathering. I watched my father’s pistol go from being the heroic act of killing a sniper and saving lives to being a symbol of shame and tragedy at killing a child-soldier. By the time I was in my late teens, the pistol was never mentioned again. I have no idea what became of it. My father spoke more often about the war in general as he aged but less about the details. He changed dramatically from his youth to old age in so many ways.

My father saw his first airplane sometime in the 1930’s and from that moment on, all he wanted to do was fly in an airplane. A few short years later, his wish was granted, courtesy of the Army Air Corps. My father flew an A20 Attack Havoc, a low-level fighter-bomber. His squadron was a special unit called upon when targets needed to be removed ‘surgically’ and with certainty. He had to fly many more than the usual 25 missions because the Army Air Corps exempted his unit: they were just too few of them in the squadron flying this type of specialty and becoming fewer and fewer each mission. He was in combat for what they called back then – “the duration”. He flew so low that he often returned to base with tree leaves stuck on his wings. Once, he was coming in so low over a target that he clipped a

chimney with his wings and almost crashed. The life expectancy of a pilot wasn't very long in his unit. I believe only three of the original hundred plus survived the war.

World War II was like another family member in the Greene household. Almost anything would trigger a memory. And like a much honored relative, the War was mentioned on holidays. Christmas had its own special set of memories and whenever we'd hear Bing Crosby's "White Christmas", he would tell of his first hearing of that song – as he dashed to escape a German fighter plane on a strafing run, bullets slamming into the hard ground nearby, and jumping for cover into a bomb crater filled with freezing cold water. "I still shiver when I hear that song", he'd say.

But other stories were not so innocent. There was his first bombing mission over Germany. "We were taking a lot of flak", he'd say. "We couldn't talk to the bombardier so I decided to go down and see why. As I stepped down, I slipped and almost broke my leg! I looked down on the deck and I realized I had slipped on the bombardier's brains!" and then he'd sit back and softly chuckle to himself. I remember retelling that story to my friends and seeing their horrified faces and wondering why this war story seemed more amusing when my Dad told it. It was only many years later I realized that my father laughed because he didn't want to cry and had to do something to let out all the emotion. And among his legacies to me was an acute awareness of the cost of war in raw human suffering. His severe Post Traumatic Stress was part of him to his dying moment in a VA hospital many years after WWII. In some twisted way, our family was also a casualty of that war. Relatives told me that my father had changed and was very different before the war. They said he wanted to be a doctor and was very smart in school. He was a good athlete and liked by everyone. He was described as 'happy-go-lucky' by my grandmother. That wasn't the dad I knew. He wasn't the kind of dad who played catch or took us fishing or even on any kind of vacation. His idea of bonding with his sons was having us sit next to him while watching the Gregory Peck film *Twelve O'Clock High* whenever it was on TV. During the movie, he'd annotate every scene with a personal memory. He'd explain what 'ditching' was and what the procedure was to ditch. He'd talk about 'ball turrets', '50 calibers', 'nose cannons', 'widow makers', 'catwalks', and how he'd have to ring an alarm bell when it was time to 'bailout'. He'd critique the bombing formations, yell at a pilot to 'feather his prop' and give orders to the waist gunners about bandits at 3 o'clock. And then he'd scream in his sleep all night long, often waking my brother and me. The next morning, my mother would say "Your father had a bad night last night. It was that damn movie again". And his nocturnal screaming would continue for many years after for so many more movies and TV Shows that were to follow both on TV and the cinema.

The D Day extravaganza *The Longest Day* especially angered him because the role of the Air Corps was not depicted. When the movie debuted in our town, he couldn't wait to take us all to see it as a family. He left the theater agitated and I know he ended up reliving D Day that night in his dreams. He spoke to me of D Day from time to time. He fully expected to go toe-to-toe with the Luftwaffe that day and was let down when he discovered Germans moved their bases to the rear before the invasion. That much was shown in the movie but what the movie failed to show was the grim faced American air crews in the ready rooms preparing for what they believed was going to be the epic air battle of the century. My father's primary mission that day was to take out the Panzers headed for the beaches. It was believed that a strong armor counter-attack might repel the invasion so he was told to expend all ordinances stopping these tanks. German armor simply had to be stopped and his orders were to stop it or die trying. And if he had a single bullet left after that, he was ordered to continue to the German airfields at Caen and mix it up with any Luftwaffe fighters headed to the beaches to strafe our troops. On the way, he told me, they expected the Germans to use kamikaze tactics to stop the invasion. He did not really expect to survive that day. In retrospect, I may owe my life to Hitler's blunders, luck, and the skill of my dad

evading flak. Today, it's easy to forget how desperate D Day was and the high casualty estimates prior to the landing were totally acceptable to the Allies. American lives would simply have to be spent freeing Europe and if that meant my Dad, so be it. Eisenhower had prepared two speeches, depending on the outcome. There would have been a D Day II and a D Day III if necessary. I've come to believe that many children of combat veterans owe their existence to pure luck.

Many of my playmates were children of combat veterans of World War II and Korea. Growing up, I thought everyone's Dad was similar to my own ...and many were. Once at a local shopping center my father ran into one of his friends. The guy was really an odd fellow– he squinted constantly and stared at my Dad's mouth as my father spoke. He was tall but had very poor posture – he was hunched over and his body seemed to move in spring-loaded jerks. He stooped over even farther to shake my hand and look me in the eye. My father bent over and whispered to me that this man was a 'real hero'. After the man had left, my Dad leaned over to me and said that his friend was one of Patton's "Hell-on-Wheels Tankers" and had spent several years from North Africa to VE Day cramped up inside of a tank, including the Battle of the Bulge. I did not understand what that really meant until I saw the movie *Patton* years later. Then I began to understand. He had given his hearing to the cannon fire and his posture to the cramped quarters in the tank and what was left of his sanity to save our country from Nazis. Remember the scene in *Patton* when the General arrives at the aftermath of a tank battle and finds a lone surviving tanker propped up against his tank? "After we ran out of ammo early this morning" the tanker says "the fighting was hand-to-hand" and Patton kisses the tanker on the forehead. Small wonder my Dad's friend seemed a little 'off' to me. I now think that the disturbing thing would have been for man to be totally unaffected by the War and to behave as if he'd returned from a grand tour of Europe instead of "Hell-on-Wheels". I'm sure he had some War trophies, too.

Our neighbor Mr. Jack Smith also had a pistol from World War II. It was the vaunted .45 caliber service pistol used by American soldiers in close combat. Mr. Smith was also a tanker and fought in Italy. I was saddened to learn several years ago the he took his own life with that very weapon. I can only guess why. He was old and in failing health. His wife had died a while back and his kids had grown up and moved away. He was alone for the most part and I, for one, was interested in his wartime service but never had asked him directly. I'm sorry now. To my knowledge, his only son Gil never talked to him about his wartime experiences and showed little anything except that pistol. The apathy of many of us continues to haunt me.

A more recent incident comes to mind. A friend from work was complaining to me about his aged father. His father was just plain 'weird', he told me. "He just doesn't behave like a normal person" he told me. "I can't explain it. He's just odd and I've been embarrassed about him most of my life", he said. The behavior he described to me was very similar to my own father. In fact, I told him that our fathers seemed interchangeable – I felt I knew him already. Then, almost as an afterthought, I asked "Was he in World War II?"

"Yes", said my friend said. "But I don't know what he did. He really never said much. I really have no idea. Probably nothing, knowing him." I urged him to ask his father all about the War. And what happened afterwards, I will never forget as long as I live. A few weeks went by and he came into my office and placed a German SS dagger on my desk.

"My Dad was a ranger. He got this dagger from a dead German." He told me his father started to cry as he was talking about his time in Europe for the first time with his adult son. The next year I went on a vacation to Normandy and took pictures of Pointe du Hoc as it is today and gave them to his father – out of my profound respect for this man and, I suppose, a way of atoning for my shameful attitudes toward my own father. Upon viewing the pictures of his old battleground, the old soldier started sobbing

anew. My vacation pictures were his private hell, the impact to him inexpressible to those of us not in the next foxhole.

My father was the same way with his pictures and medals. I have many of them today. He was awarded the Air Medal for valor in combat and to this day I do not know any details. As for pictures, he kept two types: those for public consumption and those for his eyes only. One of his pictures used to hang in the Pentagon. Once, as an adult, I actually pointed it out to USAF B52 pilot I was working with and we stopped to look at it. The pilot had logged no combat and, for the first time, I realized that WWII memories were fading fast. He had never heard of an A20. Another picture taken by my father was voted one of the ten best of World War II and for a while after the War, he thought about being a photographer. But it was his private pictures that drew me one afternoon while he was watching football on TV. I thought I was safe – he'd never pull himself away from a Buffalo Bills game. Looking at the pictures in the envelope, I could see why some were private – they were too gruesome to speak about here. I am thankful they were not in color. However, some were actually comical. Of the comical pictures, one picture was an aerial shot of a small group of people who were looking upwards (at my dad's plane?) and waving. He ultimately caught me looking at the secret picture stash and decided to tell me about this odd picture of the waving people.

"We were on a photo recon mission over the beaches" he said. "Just prior to D Day. The bombardier saw something suspicious hidden away just behind the beaches and we decided to swing the plane around again to get a better look. Well, it turned out to be a nudist camp! They waved up at us! I took their picture!"

I have thought about that picture from time to time. Did the nudists survive the War? Are there some French and German people my age who were told by their parents of an airplane who swooped down low over them and of a crazy American that was taking their picture as if he were on vacation?

One of the last adventures that happened to my father before he retired from civilian life was an incident that almost got him fired and nearly sent our family back into poverty. My father worked for the Army at Redstone Arsenal, home of Werner Von Braun and his German Rocket team. It was the early 1960's, not that long after World War II. At dinner my Mother asked him "So how was work today?"

"Well", he said "I was almost fired. I still may be". As it turned out, the United States was forming ties with the new German military and invited a serving German Luftwaffe General, dressed in his uniform and decked out in full regalia, to tour my Dad's office as VIP. NATO was fairly new and it was clear we were gearing up to fight our new enemies, the Russians. No doubt the General begun his career in the Nazi Luftwaffe prior to his promotion and now was the face of the modern, post war German Air Force. My father bristled at this "VIP" whom my Dad decided was a "typical arrogant Nazi". The General tried to make conversation with my Dad and asked "Have you seen my hometown Hamburg before?"

"Yes" my father said "many times – from my bomber". After saying this to us at dinner, my Dad paused and spoke softly but sternly, looking directly at us: "That kraut needed to be taken down a peg or two. He needed some humility and respect". As I grew older, I realized my Dad must have felt very confused. A few short years earlier, he was in a life and death struggle with this man and now, he was supposed to treat him as a VIP. To my father, the Luftwaffe was the mortal enemy. Their fighters had killed his closest friends. Their Stuka dive bombers had sirens on them to inflict additional terror into their civilian targets. To my father, this guy wasn't a VIP but the instrument of agony to so many grieving families now living among us. This man might be a VIP and a General and my father basically a nobody but, to my father, this man was going to realize that if he and his ilk ever decided to take over the world again, he'd be up against my Dad and his A20. My father knew who had beaten the Master

Race: it was ordinary American farm boys, soda jerks, and sandlot baseball players. They were people eager to resume civilian life with no special claims to being special in any way.

My Dad wasn't fired but received an official letter of reprimand for insulting the US Army's honored guest VIP. I like to think that the high-level manager who held my father's fate in his hands may have been the son of a WWI doughboy and maybe as a kid he, too, was caught with his father's World War I trophy in his hands. Maybe the bureaucrat realized that hate and fear are not so easy for a country's leaders to turn on and off as they wish.

The politicians spend a lot of time and effort turning the hate and fear on - but not so much effort turning it off again. My father had taken me to many Veteran's Day parades and I had personally witnessed the survivors of gas attacks and "over the top" bayonet charges, now stooped over old men in the 1950's, proudly marching to the cheers and applause of their communities. When my Dad would speak with them afterwards and shake their hands, they would speak in language spiced with "huns, krauts, and heinies". It still wasn't over for them 'over there', either. We need to remember this lesson: War lives on for a long time after the shooting stops. The trophies of war are charged with very strong emotions...and not limited only to Americans.

The power of these relics of war continues long after the shooting stops and affects individuals and families on both sides. Heinz Kruse, an 81-year old German man who was 16 years old in 1944, witnessed a B-24 bomber crash near his village and helped retrieve an airmen's body. He stripped a silver ID bracelet from the body and gave it to the mayor of his town who gave it right back to him as a 'reward' after writing down the dead American's name. The German was so haunted by his trophy that he returned it to the airman's surviving family in 2009. I can only imagine the power of this simple bracelet to conjure memories of that day in 1944. Perhaps the memories made him proud to have helped clean up after the air raid. But, later, as the man grew and matured, those memories must have caused him enough emotional pain to act.

In another recent incident, an 85-year old former Marine returned a photo of a little Japanese girl and some of her drawings he extracted from a dead Japanese soldier on Iwo Jima. The trophies were returned after a successful search for the dead man's daughter, now 65 years old. She called the picture 'a treasure' and sobbed as she realized how much her father must have loved her, something she tried not to think about for 65 years. This trophy was a dual-edged treasure. It was a symbol of American courage in battle as well as a father's love for his unseen child. Both of these people had served their time in Hell.

Our country is now fighting a War on Terrorism and our soldiers are again bringing home trophies and I'm sure our enemies are doing the same. I cannot help but wonder whether this essay will be updated in the future by someone who is about 8 years old now.

I feel compelled to complete this essay by finishing a task my father wanted done. His most famous photo is shown below. Some people reading this essay may remember seeing this picture in any one of a number of books about World War II. No mention is made of the crew.



(Courtesy Photograph)

My father wanted the story behind the picture told but it never was. This was the story: It was very near the war's end – maybe March-April 1945. There was a giddy feeling that the War was going to end soon and they just might make it back alive after all. This particular mission was considered a 'milk run' - very little danger expected over the target. The men onboard this plane were my father's friends. He leaned over to take the picture just as the aircraft was hit by a burst of flak. The moment after this picture was taken, the plane exploded into fist-sized chunks of hot metal. No one aboard survived this 'quiet' day on the Western Front. Their names were:

Pilot: Lt. Anderson
Gunner: Sgt. Tinsley
Bombardier: Lt. Allen
Combat Cameraman: Sgt Andersen

This Veterans Day and Memorial Day if you have no one special to remember, I ask you to remember these men whose last moments you see here. They gave their future for our present. To my knowledge, these men are still listed as MIA and presumed dead because no bodies were ever recovered. My father could never bring himself to list the names officially and contact the families whose loved ones were on that plane. He recognized at the time that his picture was getting a lot of press and he wanted to spare the surviving loved ones the continued agony of picking up books about the War year after year and seeing this picture of their loved one's fiery deaths. But the only family my father could not spare was his own. When I look at this picture, I am reminded of the happy-go-lucky teenage boy who wanted to fly. After 1945, he never wanted to fly again. His name was Donald J. Greene. He died a few years ago in a Veterans hospital in Alabama. His nurses told me that he was still working on a scale model of his beloved plane, an A20 Attack Havoc named the *Sleepy Time Gal*. Please remember him also. The model airplane was never returned to me after his death and I assume it sits today as a trophy in someone's home. ■

* **Dr. RICHARD J. GREENE** was born in Niagara Falls, New York in 1949 and moved to Huntsville, Alabama on Veteran's Day in 1959. Ironically his neighborhood in Alabama consisted of both German and American Veterans of World War II. Many of his boyhood playmates were the children of the German rocket scientists of Werner Von Braun's rocket team as well as the children of the U.S. bomber pilots who bombed Peenemunde, the Nazi center for rocketry in World War II.