

A Devotion to Duty

*“He who does his duty is a hero, whether anyone rewards him for it or not.”
George Failing*

Tom Brokaw calls them “The Greatest Generation;” the men and women who came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War and went on to build modern America.

But to Baby Boomers like me, we didn’t think of the men who answered the call of their country in the 1940s as the greatest generation; we simply thought of them as our fathers.

What was it that compelled these young men to willingly line up to enter the line of fire to defeat ruthless enemies? Men like Harlon Block. Block is in what has been called the most famous photograph ever taken; the iconic shot of the six flagraisers on Mount Suribachi at Iwo Jima. In the photo, Block is at the base of the pole planting it in the ground. He enlisted in the United States Marine Corps with all of the senior members of his high school football team. Why? Many reasons, but one in particular; a steadfast devotion to duty.

These men were rugged, self-reliant, yet, surprisingly reticent. They rarely spoke of what happened “over there.” Seldom revealing and never broadcasting their individual roles or collective victories in this ugly war. This attitude is epitomized by John Bradley, also one of the six “flagraisers.” (He is the second man from the right in the flagraisers photo.)

Bradley’s son, James, author of *Flags of our Fathers*, said this about his father in a speech commemorating the event in 2000 at the 55th Anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima: “So there’s my dad in the tallest bronze monument in the world, but that’s about all we knew growing up. He wouldn’t talk about Iwo Jima; he would always change the subject...My father had kept his heroism a secret from his wife, from his family, and his community for half a century.”

When our men came home from World War II they never looked back. Instead, they looked forward, to the future, and stuffed the memories of war so deep in the recesses of their minds that you couldn’t distinguish a hero from a non-participant. Now, these men turned their attention from raising flags to raising families and shaping a great nation.

My father was a member of “the greatest generation,” although he would scoff at this inflated label. He too, volunteered to serve in the United States Marine Corps and his tour of duty included stints at Pearl Harbor shortly after the surprise attack, followed by brief stops at Guam, Saipan, Tinian, Eniwetok, and Kwajalein before engaging the enemy at Iwo Jima. Here he would fight on this tiny pork chop-shaped island until the flag was raised and victory secured.

So, what is it then that makes America great? Many things but none more than an intense devotion to duty and a willingness to risk your life to keep others free. In his speech at the 55th Anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima, Bradley struck this compelling comparison: “This was

America's Battle. What else can you call a battle that in one day had more casualties than two and a half months at Guadalcanal? Normandy was terrible, but at the end of one day, at the end of 24 hours, you and I could have had a tea party on the beaches of Normandy. It was completely safe. Boys died on the beaches of Iwo Jima—on the beaches---for two weeks.”

When the war ended in 1945, my father was honorably discharged and continued his college education previously interrupted by the war. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in finance in 1947 from Northwestern University. In 1948, he married my mother and by 1950 would have the first of six children over a 10-year span. I was the third born and growing up in the 1960s I watched many television shows glorifying the war. Invariably, my siblings and I nagged my father to tell us about his role in this conflict. He wouldn't bite.

He dodged all our questions; even the ones designed to make him a hero. And he dismissed the Bronze Star we found buried in the bottom drawer of his dresser.

“They had a few left over after the war so they gave one to me as a souvenir,” he said. It wasn't until I was an adult with children of my own that my then 95-year old grandmother set the record straight. Late one August evening, she dug out a letter of commendation for bravery in the line of duty at Iwo Jima. My father nonchalantly enclosed it in a Christmas card he mailed her in 1944. He never mentioned the letter in the Christmas greeting he scrawled inside the card.

In 2008, at 88, he died after a five-year battle with Alzheimer's. After all these years, I remained curious about the details behind the Bronze Star so, at my sister Mary's urging, I picked up the phone last year and called a man who shared a foxhole with my father in Iwo Jima. His nickname was Ski and he became my father's closest friend during the war. Ski would later stand up for my father in his wedding. Ski had met me only once as a young boy so I wondered

how this 91-year old man would respond to my phone call seven decades after the war. I had one advantage. I was named after my father so he would immediately recognize my name and hopefully talking to me would be the next best thing to speaking to my father again.

Ski was delighted to hear from me and warmly answered my questions about my father with joy, gentleness and grace.

“How did my father feel about being in this war?” I began.

“He simply accepted it,” Ski replied. “He used to say, ‘There’s a war going on and we’re in it. That’s just the way it is.’”

“Did you have any close calls?”

“An enemy shell exploded on the edge of our foxhole late one night. For some reason the shrapnel exploded away from us. Had it exploded toward us we would have died together that night.”

“My father had a Bronze Star in his drawer since 1945 can you tell me how he earned it?”

Ski paused. I waited for his answer. “We both earned one,” he said quietly. “And I don’t remember how we earned it exactly.”

“You don’t remember?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter.”

I pressed him. “Why doesn’t it matter?”

“Because at the time we both said we earned it for the same reason.”

“What reason?”

“We used to say, ‘we earned it for doing our jobs.’ We were there to do a job. We did it. The war ended and we came home. That’s it.”

They both never brought it up again---until I called---70 years later.

This calling to serve is not reserved only for our fathers. Today, our sons and daughters still answer this call to serve their country to keep us safe and free.

It all begins with a personal devotion to duty; a duty that has made great men and women---and a great nation.

James C. Magruder

###