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Perception vs. Reality: WWII veterans are more than willing to share their stories.

Even as a young child growing up I was very conscious of the Second World War and the legacy it had left behind. My paternal grandparents grew up under Nazi occupation during the war and still to this day recount events with absolutely clarity. Despite their reluctance to reveal what they endured, they realize that they can never forget what they witnessed. The war ravaged Greece and my grandparents and thousands of Greeks were subjected to immense suffering with 300,000 people perishing from famine.¹ My grandparents, growing up in the small mountain village of Loganikos (located just north of Sparta) had to hide their valuable food possessions and even hide themselves in an old mountain castle and a dugout.

My grandfather eventually went on to fight for the Hellenic Army in the Greek Civil War against the communist forces which lasted from 1946-1949, a war that was a direct result of WWII. As I grew older he recounted stories of innocent civilians being killed, villages being torched to the ground, heads hanging from light posts, and his narrow escape after being captured although many of his comrades were gunned down. This left quite an impression on me.

My maternal grandfather was too young to fight in WWII but old enough to see substantial action as a U.S. Army medic with the Second Infantry Division in Korea. He compiled his wartime experiences into a scrap book which I viewed after his death. He also gave me two additional scrap books he made about WWII. These sources taught me more about the war at a young age than I ever could have learned on my own. After his death in 2001, I found a

¹ After the Greek Army thwarted Mussolini's 1940 invasion of Greece, Hitler invaded Greece in April of 1941. The subsequent occupation was devastating for Greek civilians who were subjected to severe famine (particularly in the cities) and reprisals from the occupying forces.

box of Nazi party medals along with the German paratrooper sidearm in the drawer upstairs in his house. This piqued my interest even more.

As time passed and I grew older, I became much more aware of the fact that World War II veterans, the people who I truly admired, lived all around me. These people were not a thing of the past, or just a blurb in a history book, they were living history. During my sophomore year in college I wrote a paper on veterans stories in the community, as the veterans home for the entire state of Rhode Island lay just down the road. I had the privilege of interviewing three Pacific War veterans and devised a plan for the town library to record local veteran's stories. Roughly a year passed before I actually submitted the proposal to the Rogers Free Library in Bristol, RI.

When I finally submitted my proposal in October of 2011 to the Library Director, Joan Prescott, she gave me instant support. From that point on, I began interviewing local World War II veterans from Bristol. Eventually, though, I interviewed veterans from all across the state. As a result, I met some of the most amazing people and heard some of the most harrowing stories, stories that no television program or history book could convey. I was in awe of these individuals. I wondered whether it would ever be possible for me to measure up.

I have compiled fourteen interviews. It is my hope that they will be used as a resource for future generations so that they can understand what these men and women endured during some of the most trying times the world has ever known.

The more veterans I interviewed, the more I discovered that although some people were very open with me about their experiences from the onset, some were more guarded and clearly did not want to share various memories of combat. Thus my experiences with these veterans corroborated the view of Tom Brokaw that "The Greatest Generation" tended to avoid attention.

However, the belief that they do not want to share what they experienced is not at all common, and in many cases is very far from the truth.

Students and historians of the Second World War may be familiar with two of the most famous books about the conflict; *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* by Eugene Sledge, and *The Greatest Generation* by Tom Brokaw. *With the Old Breed* is widely considered to be the greatest combat memoir ever written, and is about Private Eugene Sledge's combat experiences on the Pacific Islands of Peleliu and Okinawa as a mortarman with the 1st Marine Division. Sledge was one of the many veterans who were severely bothered by what they saw during the war, and he was never able to fully let the war go as he suffered from PTSD and constant nightmares. He wrote his memoir as a way to escape the war that was still waging within him. While he was willing to recount his experiences in his book and later on for documentary interviews, he was still disturbed when revisiting his brutal days in combat. His attitude during the war certainly sheds light into why many veterans have been unwilling to share what they went through. This is exemplified when he said "the folks back home didn't, and in retrospect couldn't have been expected to, understand what we had experienced, what in our minds seemed to set us apart forever from anyone who hadn't been in combat."

The Greatest Generation profiles a variety of WWII veterans ranging from everyday people to the former President of the United States, George Bush Senior. Throughout this book there are many chapters about veterans who fought on all corners of the globe. Some of these veterans provide vivid stories of intense combat such as Leonard Lomell, who as a member of the Second Ranger Battalion, scaled the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc on D-Day and subsequently destroyed several German artillery pieces that were poised to threaten the two American invasion beaches. However there are stories of other veterans such as Gordon Larsen, a Marine with the

3rd Marine Division who spent most of his life trying to forget the war and “figured those who were willing to talk about combat had never really experienced it.”

Gordon Larsen and Eugene Sledge represent the large group of World War II veterans who were clearly affected by the war, and were reluctant to recount what they went through because the experiences were so terrible. However as I had mentioned before, this is certainly not always the case. This was no more evident than with one particular man I interviewed, Sergeant Bill Conley, who fought with Company K of the 3rd Battalion, 21st Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division at Bougainville, Guam, and Iwo Jima. Bill described the war to me in a way no other person I spoke to did, no matter how morbid it may have been.

In fact, most of the 14 veterans I interviewed were willing to share their stories. For example, Morphis Jamiel, a platoon leader with the 7th Armored Division during the Battle of the Bulge, recounted the five bitter days he endured with his men in defense of the town of St. Vith. During its defense he lost a majority of his platoon due to repeated German attacks that at times led to hand to hand combat.

Other men such as Michael Minutelli, a torpedoman aboard PT Boat 254 who saw heavy action in the Solomon Islands campaign against the Japanese and Ralph Cirillo, a rifleman who fought with the 6th Marine Division on Okinawa who were more than willing to discuss their combat experiences on the first day that I met them. Michael Minutelli vividly described to me various instances of night action against the Japanese in which he knew he killed men as he heard their subsequent screams following bursts from his machine gun. Ralph Cirillo recounted civilians jumping off the cliffs at Okinawa, choosing suicide for fear that the Americans would rape and torture them.

Prior to these interviews, I had prepared myself by reading published accounts and watching documentaries featuring combat veterans including Eugene Sledge's *With the Old Breed*. I understood why many veterans simply did not want to revisit those brutal days during the war. Therefore I was unsure how to approach many of these men about their combat experiences because I did not know them and did not know the true extent of what they went through. Thus, I decided I would let them dictate what they wanted to say and merely try to guide them in directions I hoped would divulge the most information. While this approach certainly worked for many of the veterans. I was fortunate enough to have some that immediately were willing to describe the true carnage of war and not leave out a single detail.

Unlike the public image that veterans are reticent about their experiences, I found the opposite to be true in regards to Bill Conley whom I spoke to several times. The very first time I met him was at his home in Bristol, RI in January of 2012. During this visit He chronicled his experiences in the fierce island battles of Bougainville, Guam, and Iwo Jima without me even asking him to do so. To me it seemed as though he knew he had a special story to tell, and he enjoyed telling it. As time went on, I was able to develop a rapport with him, and every time we met his stories would flow out effortlessly. However what impressed me the most was not that he was able to vividly recount everything after nearly 70 years, but that he was able to describe his combat experiences as if I was right there with him during each firefight, patrol, or advance. For example, he was able to describe his actions with his machine gun crew on the night of the large Japanese banzai attack on Guam as if it happened just yesterday. In his words, the story is as follows:

“It seemed to me at 11 or 12 o'clock, I could hear voices way out in front of us. And it always reminded me of young fellas playing baseball out in a cow pasture. They were always

yelling ‘Hey, ho, hey, ho’ way off, far away. During the flares I saw helmets begin to shine, the flares made their painted brown enamel helmets shine in the night. You could hear them coming and hollering. We heard them firing out in front and they got up real close to us, then we started to fire. The next thing I recall is I saw them bayoneting the two riflemen to our right about 30 yards away, I could make them out poking their bayonets at these two Marines, then the flares went off. I couldn’t fire at them because I had barriers to prevent us from firing into our own line. The Marines were fighting back. They pushed the guys back on our left and right. We had Japs within 10 feet of us, maybe less than that. They were so close that we had used all our fragmentation grenades [which are anti-personnel weapons that disperse shrapnel or small sharp metal objects upon exploding]. I said to old Rick Frolich who was in there with me ‘Do we have any more fragmentation grenades?’ He said ‘I have one phosphorus.’ I said ‘put it out in front of us’ and he did; it threw out gold sparks. It sounded to me like the Japs were saying ‘Gaz gaz gaz.’ They thought it was gas apparently and they were splitting and going by on both sides of us but we were pilling them up in front of us. They went passed us/through us almost until the artillery, which was a half a mile in back of us. This went on all night long.”

There are many stark differences between how Sledge and Larsen dealt with the war and how Bill dealt with it. First of all, Sledge discusses the gruesome practice of extracting gold teeth from Japanese soldiers. He describes this as a disturbing practice of trophy taking that characterized the brutality of the Pacific War; an act which he never participated in himself. However on the very first day I met Bill he told me about his souvenir, Japanese gold teeth he and his friend Washburn had collected throughout their time in the Pacific. Although mentioning that people frown upon the practice of extracting gold teeth today, he laughed at the fact that he had them. Second, in regards to Larsen’s quote about those who were willing to talk

about combat never really experienced it, Bill said: “When I was growing up in the 1930s, World War I had just ended in 1918. Some of these guys were guys I knew well in the neighborhood. I’d wanna talk to them about the war and ask them questions. Their wives would say, ‘No Billy, no, he doesn’t wanna. He saw too much.’ Well, I finally came to the conclusion later on that they didn’t see anything. They had nothing to talk about. If they had something to talk about they would have been happy to talk about it.”

The more I spoke to Bill, the more I believed that he truly relished speaking about his experiences. Bill had no shame in telling me he “killed a lot of Japs on Guam.” This is a direct contradiction to Bob Bush, a Navy medic who won the Medal of Honor for his courageous exploits Okinawa, who is written about prominently in *The Greatest Generation*. As Tom Brokaw writes, Bob “almost never talked about those awful days on Okinawa.” Furthermore, when Bush’s own son asked him what it was like on Okinawa, Bush had a simple response of “It was very difficult. We had to dig foxholes. Hygiene was terrible. We had hair lice but we had a job to do, and mine was to help people hurt in the war. I was happy to do it.” For a man who without a doubt saw war at its worst and won the Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry above and beyond the call of duty, he certainly had no intent of telling even his son what his war was really like. To me, that is truly remarkable, especially because in the case of Bill Conley and many other veterans I interviewed, I was just a college kid who they did not know but they were more than willing to tell me what I wanted to know. But Bob Bush refused to tell his own son about his combat experiences and his son was no stranger.

Each of the veterans I interviewed told a vastly different tale of a war in which they all took part. Veterans who were next to each other in battle even have different memories of the same events as everything unfolded and affected each individual differently. Utmost respect

must be given to these brave men and women as it is clear that although the war ended decades ago, many still have trouble coping with the carnage they witnessed. To date three of the fourteen veterans I have interviewed have passed away; this further reinforces how important it is to preserve their stories and gives me gratitude that I was able to start my project when I did. By recording the memories of those veterans who are still with us, it is possible to give the average American citizen a glimpse into the inferno that engulfed the world seventy years ago, and in turn make them more cognizant of the fact that these veterans still live among us and all have an incredible story to tell.

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