

October 1, 2007

A Veteran of Secrets

My father, like many in his generation, didn't talk much about his past. And, as much as that past fascinated me (as a petulant young man in the 1960s and 1970s I was used to demanding answers), I learned not to ask. My father was good at keeping his secrets. But there were exceptions, small gems that surfaced now and then without announcement or demand.

In 1994 my father came to visit me and my new wife at our new home on the outskirts of DC. It was a special event because he didn't like to travel alone (his wife, my stepmother, chose to stay at home). This man who was so solitary in his thoughts had a hard time being alone with them. In fact, it was the only time he would visit us.

My father had been an aerospace engineer at Lockheed's super secret Skunk Works. His job fit his personality. He could never tell us what he was working on or where he was going. (After he retired he set out for the Middle East to "observe Lebanon." That was all he would tell us.)

So when we planned his visit I wanted to take him to places he'd enjoy. We went to the Air and Space Museum and I arranged for us to tour the Smithsonian's Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration, and Storage Facility where they were restoring the Enola Gay. He said he also wanted to visit the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to see them print money. As we were walking towards the Bureau we passed the Holocaust Museum. Without any warning he suddenly declared: "You know, Jeffrey, I was one of the first to liberate Dachau."

I knew little of his time during World War II. I had always found it easier to query John Wayne than my dad. So I was shocked. Yes, my father was typical of his generation, but it was more than that. Maybe today I would have been able to ask him for more details. But back then he was a formidable character who worked hard to control access to his persona. As long as he had his hand firmly on that door, all was fine. Get too close and he'd slam it as fast as he could. I had learned to both respect and fear that portal.

On April 27, 1945, near the end of the war, the 103rd Infantry Division entered the German town of Landsburg only to discover the Kaufering concentration camp, a subcamp of Dachau. The camp had been set up for prisoners who were forced to build subterranean fighter aircraft production facilities. In fact, in the photographs my father left me I found a snapshot of a captured Luftwaffe jet fighter (I believe it's an Messerschmitt ME-262).



Gene Gates in 103rd "Cactus" Division during WW II

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My father never revealed what he'd witnessed. But he did leave me a book on his army unit, *Report After Action: The Story of the 103d Infantry Division* which describes what he must have encountered:

At one camp alone 300 bodies lay on the barren, filthy ground while 600 living "zombies" —weak from five and six years of starvation shuffled aimlessly.

Inside many of the huts which lie half-dug into the ground—about five feet high and 24 feet long—lay prisoners who could not walk, or move—those who would not live. Military government officers who took charge immediately cautioned the soldiers not to offer food or cigarettes to these people, who would automatically cause a riot and die attempting to get a morsel of sustenance. Military doctors prescribed a diet, and military government officers scoured the countryside for supplies—1,000 loaves of bread, 1,000 quarts of milk, 750 pounds of fresh meat a day, plus all the Wehrmacht stocks in the vicinity—in an almost futile attempt to save the lives of these 50 and 60-pound remnants of human beings.

As I watch Ken Burns' *The War* on PBS I listen intently to the men and women describing their firsthand experiences during World War II. They are powerful memories. My father's contribution, only a brief moment in our time together, was just as potent. A small gem.

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Jeff, thank you for this very powerful post.

Secrets like this one are very difficult to carry. It makes it difficult to have the kind of relationships you want when what you hold as a secret cannot be seen by others.

Your story and acknowledgment of your dad is exceptionally powerful. I got coached to interview my mom a long time ago in a non-threatening way about the harm brought to my family in Poland. It was a difficult and important conversation.

My mom never healed from what she saw and it made it hard on many others including me and my daughter. I am glad you can tell these stories to your children, When they grow up they will have this journal.

Posted by: [Lavinia Weissman](#) on October 1, 2007 6:48 PM

This was a wonderfully moving story. My family (like many others) also had secrets and, from

that, a pretty insurmountable inability to communicate. I'm still trying to overcome that with my own family.

Posted by: Lorraine Vinograd on October 2, 2007 8:19 PM

Thank you so much for this. My grandfather who was in the Korean war never talked about anything he saw. I am currently deployed to Afghanistan and sometimes I wonder if I will tell my children and grandchildren about the things I have seen and will see. I think I will tell them. Your story inspires me to share my experiences with my family and my family yet to come.

Posted by: Kngofflannganistan on October 3, 2007 7:52 PM

Thank you for your post. My grandfather also served in the Cactus Division during The War. I was too young to ever hear my Pa tell me any stories, as I was 7 years old when he passed. However, through pictures and books, I have pieced together some amazing stories that try my soul to this very day. Thank you again for your post.

Posted by: Melissa on October 5, 2007 2:39 PM

My father was in the 411th regiment of 103rd. I had exact same experience as you. He never would tell me anything about what he did in the war. I inherited his souvenir box. It had his unit insignia badges and the booklet that was published by 411th in Innsbruck in summer of 1945.


Posted by: don on October 24, 2007 11:04 PM

Thank you for some insight as to what our grandfathers and fathers witnessed while serving in this division. My Dad also served in the 103rd and although he spoke of his travels from October 1944 through November 1945, he never shared the horrors of the war. I believe that is how he kept his sanity when he came home to his bride of two years and his year old son. I wish he were still here; I have so many questions I will never hear answers to. Thank you for this very special story of your Dad.

Posted by: Eileen O'Regan Wheeler on November 14, 2007 9:26 PM

Comments are now closed for this post. But there are a few other [entries](#) which might provoke an opinion or two.

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