

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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Old Soldier, Is It Like This?

Some veterans tell their stories again and again, like well-rehearsed ballads. Others sequester their stories, raw and unformed, reluctant to recount them for many reasons,¹ including the fear that sharing something so profound might cheapen or diminish the true depth of the experience.² My father, aged 90, is the latter kind of vet. As patients have taught me about trauma, they have helped me understand Dad's style and why he has finally told his tale.

My sisters and I could repeat the family lore of Dad's military service. He'd hoped to enlist in the Navy but was rejected for having "flat feet" when the recruiter learned he is Jewish. His outraged father wrote to President Roosevelt. Dad was drafted into the Army and served as an infantryman marching on those same feet. Early in the Battle of the Bulge, he sustained an ulnar nerve shrapnel wound that left two indigo scars on his right wrist. He regained normal function of his hand after six months of surgery and rehab in Luxembourg, France, England, and finally West Virginia. There, one evening while slouching in an armchair, a voice asked, "How are you, Soldier?" and he looked up to find General Eisenhower standing over him. The GI Bill allowed Dad to complete his education.

These vignettes lacked details of how the war had affected him. The only emotional stories were stateside accounts of his family's wrenching good-bye and their equally joyous welcome home. Nothing came from the battlefield. Only since turning 80 has Dad truly told his story of the Battle of the Bulge, on a summer's evening, to interested children and grandchildren. He has also written powerfully about the experience.³⁻⁶ This widened aperture has invited us to consider the impact of combat.

We contemplated a generation of young American men, and some women, all in uniform, the patriotism, the rations, the waiting, the letters—and the telegrams announcing injury and death. We understood that during basic training, Dad prepared with one group of soldiers only to be separated from those trusted buddies as troops like him were sent to replace massive D-day casualties. We pictured endless miles of infantry marching through autumnal French apple orchards, their apprehension and misery growing as the weather turned wet and cold, and with it the realization they were inadequately outfitted to face the coldest winter in 30 years, never mind the enemy. We heard soldiers scrape foxholes from frozen ground, whisper while standing guard through frigid nights, and offer earnest reports of constant heavy traffic behind enemy lines to seemingly uninterested commanders.

And in our minds we heard and saw the roaring explosions, the piercing cries of the injured, and the cinematographic images of the night sky lighting up as each new mortar rocket shell burst on impact, spotlighting the terrified, the maimed, and the dead. Dad described his injury, the searing pain, the slow-motion realization his arm was bleeding profusely, the disorientation of physical and emotional shock, the mayhem, the search for

help, the fright, the wondering if this was going to be it as the mortar shells screamed in, erupting in spray after spray of fire and metal. Shockingly, he described hearing and seeing these scenes daily since that night, something he'd never mentioned. Only on the day our mother, aged 73, passed peacefully at home two months after her diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, through dazed emotions had he remarked, "I'm so grateful to Mom. Since the war, I have been terrified of death. Jean has shown me another version of dying. I'm no longer afraid."

Across this decade, Dad has expressed his belief that in surviving the war, fate arbitrarily awarded him a lifetime bonus at age 19, along with the heartbreaking burden of knowing how many others were denied this bounty. He described a self-imposed mandate to use this priceless gift well. He became a successful trial lawyer, participated actively in the lives of his wife and four daughters, and later their families and eight grandchildren, and nurtured wide-ranging interests and hobbies. We see him as a guy constantly engaged in constructive activities, working to leave his mark. No doubt part of this style is hardwiring. Perhaps staying busy has also kept war memory demons deep underground.

I believe I have also listened to Dad's tales with the ears of a primary care physician. As patients have shared their central stories over 25 years, sometimes with emotion, but more typically as tiny hints or matter-of-fact comments, I have learned to regard these morsels as bread-crumbs dropped over months or years leading to their traumatic experiences. Patients have taught me the profound impact a single (or recurring) trauma can have in a life: The random act of street violence. The torching of a village. The unexplained end of a love affair. The sexual violation by a trusted relative. And so forth. Nothing is ever the same again. I can surmise that one night on the battlefield of the Bulge, the night my father fought and was wounded, might be one such seminal moment.

When patients speak of trauma, I often imagine their lives as trees, with the core of their person the trunks and important experiences the branches. When a traumatic event occurs, a prominent branch is suddenly amputated. While most of the tree continues to grow as the person gets older, if trauma stays hidden or buried, the injured branch remains broken, frozen at the time of injury. Splinters of the shattered limb reappear as flashbacks, fears, or hindrances to progressing in that part of life while the rest of the individual advances. Patients remain terrified to address trauma, lest they re-experience its horror with the same eyes and perspective as the younger self who lived through it.

When, however, people bring forth experience and shape it from inchoate anguish into some version of story, healing begins. The tree starts to grow again. A branch may regenerate in a strange shape or as multiple smaller shoots, comparable to collateral growth of an occluded blood ves-

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sel. But is it not unusually shaped branches that make trees especially beautiful? As painful stories come forth in whatever form—oral or written narrative, painting, dance, or understanding—sufferers step back, view their experience from new perspectives, and accept it as a hand-made bead on the necklace of their lives or a trophy garnered in the ring of life. While painful memories persist, over time people can recognize they are far more than their trauma.⁷

Stories also heal by connecting raconteur and audience. Loneliness is integral to the pain of trauma. Survivors grapple with morality and evil, contemplate fate and luck, and walk the tightrope between normal and crazy. When trauma occurs in youth, these powerful challenges permeate growth into adulthood. Storytelling hands some of the burden to the listener, diminishing isolation.

In great age, the memories of our patients, fathers, (and aging colleagues) surface along with motivation to ensure that loved ones, and perhaps others, understand the most important threads of their lives before it is too late. Storytelling also offers acceptance and healing. For

all the secrecy and hiding that surround trauma, survivors need to share their experiences despite fear of doing so. Remarkably, the human soul carries an imperative to heal as powerful as the body's.⁸

Just as we can know patients for years before learning their central stories, I have known my father for a lifetime but only recently considered the profound effect of World War II on him. I am proud of his service and sorry for the physical suffering, horrifying memories, and gnawing pain of withholding his story. I am grateful he spared us repetitive vivid accounts earlier in life. My love and respect have only grown from considering Dad's ability to comprehend the value of his war bonus and the careful, vigorous way he has lived his life.

In contemplating the impact of combat on my father, I also wonder about the millions and millions of other lives forged by World War II. We have much to learn from all soldiers in this and all wars, including those who remain silent in life and death.

Many an Old Soldier may need to tell his story. Listening will enrich us. Thank you, Dad, for your service. And for sharing your story.

The Old Soldier Responds

One of the perks of being 90 is that all subjects are on the table. This invites reflection on many aspects of life, including the most painful and joyous. In recent years, two factors spurred me to tell my World War II story.

The first is a lifelong love of scribbling, which has offered a means to investigate many subjects. In later years, I have submitted some of these musings to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, with some success. Around December 2007, while fishing for a topic, it occurred to me that the Battle of the Bulge had been a December event, and I might write about this subject. The column was published. While this was good for the ego, what affected me even more were the many readers who responded, sharing their experiences and those of their fathers and brothers, some of whom did not return from that monumental fight.

Even more important was an after-dinner conversation with three grandchildren in August 2011. One asked a question that immediately drew the support of the other two. They wanted to know what happened to me in the Army and why I never spoke about it. My immediate answer was that it was painful to recall the war and pain enough to think about it every day since being wounded at age 19. But those beloved grandchildren got me thinking and moved me to write them an account of my war experience. Although the door to my wartime memories was never tightly closed, writing for them opened it fully. I have continued to talk with my family about my memories. Thanks to those curious, thoughtful grandchildren, in old age, I have finally opened up. They helped me realize this was an important subject for them to know about their heritage and a fitting archive in our family's history.

In considering the question "Old Soldier, is it like this?" two powerful memories come forth. They are connected. The first comes directly from the battlefield. In addition to terror, shock, and bodily pain, as I was receiving first aid and becoming aware that I seemed to be surviving my injury, a profound feeling of the deepest gratitude washed over me that my parents might not have to suffer the loss of a child. I felt yet another kind of gratitude when, after treating my wound, the medic removed my steel helmet, revealing countless shrapnel shards that had not pierced through to my head.

The second unforgettable emotional experience resulted from the letters I had sent to my parents from European hospitals. I am right-handed but couldn't use that hand because of my wound. I had written to my parents explaining my odd left-handed writing. I didn't realize my dear mother believed I was trying to be thoughtful by withholding the fact that my wound had torn off my right arm. In our emotionally overwhelming reunion, after my mother and I shared a loving and tearful embrace, she gently raised my right arm and kissed it again and again.

My physician-daughter draws a perceptive analogy to trees as lives and branches as important experiences. My case is an apt example: bringing out experience and "shap[ing] it from inchoate anguish into some version of story" has been healing. That is precisely what has happened to me since going public with my combat experience. I feel—and I am—much the better for having shared it. This has offered some relief and helped me connect with my family in new ways. I am touched to note that right alongside the most painful memories are protective ones of gratitude and joy, further signs an Old Soldier can not only come to terms with those painful memories, but also learn to heal from them.

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