

A Gathering of Heroes



There is a saying that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. While Americans today may think they know the history of World War II, there are many among us who've carried the real history of that great conflict deep within their very souls. They are the veterans, young men and women when they took up the task to ultimately save our world, now sixty years older and facing the end of their days. Their voices give life to the horror and humanity that so many know only through the texts they read in school, or the dramas played out in film.

"I think about a lot of things, but I don't talk to a lot of people about it. My kids know very little about it, because I haven't talked about it," says veteran Dave Bell. "When we came home from the service, we wanted to forget about it," echoes Jerry Hunsberg. Bell, Hunsberg and thousands of others like them are heroes, often unsung in the most classic sense, simply because they chose not to share their stories, until now.

But now, as the heroes are lost to us at an average of one thousand every day, the reunions become important, and the more the stories are told, the more the tears flow. Recently a group of World War II veterans from Indiana decided to take the emotional step of visiting the new memorial to their incredible sacrifice, located in Washington DC. The journey started as a promise by Dave Caswell to escort his veteran friend Gerald Dukes to the memorial, and ultimately grew to two busloads of veterans and family members. Most are in their 80's, the oldest 103. Four who planned to go were unable, stricken by illness at the last minute. While many were slowed

by age and infirmity, their spirits drove them. Their will was great, but it was not an easy undertaking.

"It's what a lot of young people don't understand, this emotion that's involved in this reunion and the love that's involved is so strong because it was forged under these incredible situations," Mayland Crosson tries to explain. Dave Bell concurs. "Originally when I started coming, the wives thought we were nuts. If you haven't been in a situation like we were, in fox holes and snow and muck and the closeness... Even today I feel closer to some of these fellows than my own brother. There's something intangible, but it's there and I guess it always will be."

While the veterans themselves may have held their stories inside for decades, their family members have longed to know and understand the events that shaped them. Jerry Hunsberg empathizes. "I think a lot of the younger ones want to know more about it, and we're letting it out more." Paul Chandler and Ray Ratliff are just two of the younger men on the trip yearning to understand. "Well, my father was a veteran in the Pacific during WWII, and he has never said very much about it. And you know I want to find out more about it," Chandler muses. Ratliff shares a picture of his father. "That's my dad, 9th Armored Division. He was also in the Battle of the Bulge. He didn't want me to worry, but he was at the front."

And so, in the unusually hot summer of 2005, they loaded onto the buses, some as acquaintances, some having never met before, to fulfill the promise. "I don't think that I did anything so much for them," Dave Caswell says of the undertaking. "Certainly not nearly what they did for me, for all of us. And it's a matter of what's right and what's wrong. It's right for them to see it. So we did it."



The twelve hour trip might seem long, but it is filled with stories spanning years and two theaters on opposite sides of the globe. For the Kidwell siblings, the journey is as much a family event as the war itself became. Five of the seven Kidwell children served, three brothers and two sisters. Four of the veterans make this trek together. The fifth, a brother, couldn't break free from work to come along. And yet, only in the last few years have any of the Kidwells opened up about their war experiences. Bill in

Africa and eventually on the beaches of Normandy. Bob and John, fighting in the Pacific at the battles of Iwo Jima and Guam. The sisters were both WAVEs.

The first official stop on the tour is Arlington National Cemetery. The monuments and the memories impress; many of the veterans and their family members have never been to the nation's capital. Even while they wait in lines like so many other tourists, the stories continue to flow. "I was in the Navy amphibian. We hauled people to the beach. I remember the first wave they took in. There was a red flag on the boat, people wounded. That was on Iwo Jima in 1945," recalls John Marshall. Robert Fullenwider is now in his 90's. "It made us stronger. Couldn't help but make it stronger. We did a whole lot with less than they have now. My unit was armed with WWI rifles. That's what we went to war with." Dale Findley's story ends with a sentiment that surfaces as a running theme: home. "I was in the eighth air force in England in B32 missions over Germany and came home married Margie and we've been married 53 years."

Now veterans who have spent decades leaving their experiences in the past so that they could live out their promised futures arrive at the place that honors their sacrifice and service. It is June 7th, the 61st anniversary of D-Day. The National World War II Memorial is ensconced between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Some are moved to tears as they approach. "Makes me feel like they didn't forget you," one says. The memorial is a daunting and powerful acknowledgement, a physical reminder that honors the 16 million who served; pays tribute to the millions more who toiled in defense plants on the home front; and it reveres the more than 400,000 who died. The Kidwells feel the message.



"I think we needed something like this to remind us what we went through in WWII. And I think it's a wonderful thing. I think it is a beautiful memorial. I think everyone would be proud of it," says June. Brother Bob agrees. "It is very awesome. It just makes your heart pound to see something like this and know it is dedicated to those men and women who did not come back. We are just survivors. They are the heroes who didn't come back and this is for them and that's how I feel about it."

The veterans are welcomed, and honored, by members of the Indiana congressional delegation, including Julia Carson, Mike Pence and Dan Burton. They then discover the monument's Freedom Wall: 400,000 Bronze Stars in honor of the dead. Fifty-six granite pillars represent the unity of all the states and territories. The Hoosier veterans lay a wreath at the Indiana marker. They are moved by the experience in ways they didn't expect. "I don't feel like I really deserve it. It's... I didn't do anything that other people haven't done and lost their lives doing," Bob Conwell quietly weeps. "It was overwhelming. I didn't know what to expect, and I wish my husband was with me," laments June Kidwell.

The trip has left its mark on those driven to make it and to make their memories come alive on the journey. Mildred Kidwell is grateful. "I think it's a wonderful. It's a wonderful trip. Whoever thought of that or managed it to think it's a great thing." Bill Kidwell is left looking forward, even as he looks back. "It makes you more humble, knowing that you went through that worst of thing and you did that for your country and the love you have for your country. You just hope everyone will step up and do the same thing at a time when it is needed."