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Shoulder to Shoulder with History

Final Submission

Memory is a mystery. Computers have memory; Alzheimer's patients don't. We remember painful experiences; we forget our keys. Women remember anniversaries and birthdays and first dates; men remember great double-plays. Memories have context and meaning, and by them we formulate events into stories. Memories connect the dots of the past to draw a picture of who we are. Whether we admit it or not, we are products of the past, even the past beyond the immediate past: Plato, Jesus Christ, a distant ancestor. But memory is like indignation: it's selective. We remember some things but ignore others. Eric Severeid, a TV journalist from an earlier age said something like, "There will always be a generation gap because the older generation can remember the past, but youth can only see the present." Are we thus forever doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past because we can't remember history?

Talking with two college students after one of his lectures, sociologist and historian Rodney Stark discovered that they thought the Roman Empire ruled Southern California in the 1920s, didn't know in which century the Civil War occurred, had never heard of the Crusades, and guessed that D-Day might be a Roman Catholic holiday. Seriously! When he was reading a book on the War of 1812 in an airport on his Kindle, a young lawyer asked him what he was reading. When he told him, the lawyer asked him who fought in that war. Sigh! Stark is unafraid to address the sad state of history education. It speaks (screams?) for itself. Jay Leno sometimes took his *Tonight Show* to the streets and uncovered similar ignorance of common historical facts. My laughter was always mixed with pathos. Why do we have such a memory vacuum of important past events? Eric Severeid, can you help us? Our ignorance of history distorts the memories that create the story of who we are.

People most often remember dramatic, life-changing things that affect them personally, but my memories in part are filled with experiences gained vicariously. My Uncle Tom was a

radar navigator in WWII who flew B-29 bombing missions over Japan from the island of Guam. I also made the acquaintance later in life with James "Dink" Billingsby, a man who fought in Patton's famous Fourth Armored Division in WWII against Germany. He was a faithful member of my church, and I ministered to him and his wife as they aged. The experiences of these two men are a part of the world-altering drama of WWII. Perhaps a hundred years from now, 1939-1945 will dot the history books of our descendants, and the events of those years will be condensed into a chapter, several paragraphs, or just a passing mention by historians. Individuals like my uncle and Dink will hardly be a smudge on the pages of history, but it is the lives of such individuals that fill in the details of history. They are people who demand to be remembered.

In this age of celebrity worship fame seems to have become one of our highest aspirations, almost a national pastime. Can we be the next idol? Who will be the next survivor? Will my name be on the lips of every American tomorrow? We've always had our Horatio Alger myth of small man of no account rising to great heights, but do we remember the "ordinary" people who may have otherwise achieved remarkable things? Do we extol their virtues? Is there something about their lives worth remembering? Do we even know who they are? Which celebrities truly deserve the attention they receive?

My memories began at the dinner table growing up. I remember my grandmother sitting at one end of the table, next to me, on my right. I couldn't have been more than seven since she died in 1955. My grandfather sticks in my memory more than some of the others. He sat at the head of the table to my left, a steady fixture who led the prayer every night. He was always there for dinner. He was my one symbol of fatherly stability, holding the family together just by his presence and steadfastness: he worked for the same company for fifty-one years and three months. My father was mostly absent from my childhood. My parents along with me, my

brother, and sister lived on the second floor of my grandfather's house. Gradually, for reasons unknown to me at the time, I saw less and less of my father. Long before that, however, grandpa had become my substitute image of stable fatherhood. I wasn't surprised when my sister had our grandfather give her away at her wedding.

Except for the absence of my father, our meals were the picture of Norman Rockwell America. My brother, sister, and mother occupied the other side of the table, a dark mahogany stained wood with thin legs. We ate dinners every night together and everyone in the house attended. There was always food on the table. The dining room walls were nondescript, some shade of white if I remember, or perhaps a soft pastel, which my mom always preferred. Though I don't remember any pictures in the dining room, the rest of the house virtually sang with the colors of the award winning oil paintings created by my grandmother.

Behind me were the windows that looked out at our neighbor's driveway, the Baums, pronounced like the empty bomb shell hanging from a tree in their front yard. On the other side of the room was a dining room cabinet of the same mahogany stain as the table (I think the poker chips and cards were in there), and behind my grandmother was a cabinet with glass doors containing dishes and various other dining cups, saucers, and fancy glasses. This was before the large kitchen cabinets built into many of today's homes. We had a pantry, but most of the dishes were stored in these dining room cabinets. The table was always set with a white table cloth, the dishes were placed with silverware and glasses before each meal, and the meal, of course, was served family style with plates always passed from left to right. We were expected to eat a little of everything, even the spinach that I buried beneath everything else. I never remember eating it, but it always seemed to be gone by the end of the meal. My brother, sister, and I took turns with preparations and cleanup. One week set the table, one week clean off the table, and one week

help washing the dishes. Day in day out, week in week out, the pattern repeated itself. Far from boring, the rhythm of it felt right. It was predictable and without drama—mostly.

I don't know why I can't picture my Uncle Tom vividly here. I felt his presence every night; he sat next to me on my left. I received the food as he passed it, but I don't particularly remember his conversations. Was he so close that I didn't look over or up? Why do I think of my grandfather instead of Uncle Tom? Are uncles just an addendum to a child's life? I don't remember interacting with him in a meaningful way, but I remember that he was the one who took our dog to the vet every time he got hit by a car, at least three times. I remember his 1956 Chevrolet sitting in front of the house every night. Celebrating his eightieth birthday many years later I mentioned how much it meant to have him, at the very least, provide a male figure for me to look up to. Like my grandfather, perhaps, he was just present, steady, and hard-working. Little did I know growing up that I had rubbed shoulders, almost literally, with a slice of history that would later be memorialized in a History Channel special, "The Last Mission."

There was always a little bit of a barrier between me and my Uncle Tom . . . my mother. For some reason she never got along with him all that well. She and my Uncle Bill were the two youngest of five children and were close to each other. My Uncle Tom was the middle child, but I think it was more than age that separated them. Mom always made comments about his oddball behaviors, often not in a kind way. She always got annoyed, among other things, because he loved to take the circuitous route when going somewhere rather than the point A to point B short distance route; he liked the journey and the scenery. He had been a pilot and navigator so I always wondered if his instincts to find new roads hadn't kicked into gear at these times.

He was admitted to a psychiatric hospital numerous times in his life, and I always suspected that this reinforced her feelings that he was truly a bit odd. I never knew much about

his diagnoses. Was he just an unstable and fragile individual? Were there some lingering, unresolved effects from his war experiences? My mother didn't have much patience with anyone who said they were depressed. She had a "just get over it and get on with life" approach. A series of physical illnesses also plagued him and sent him searching for any number of strange, and largely ineffective, cures. Heart disease and back pain always seemed to require some new drug, physical therapy, or high doses of vitamins. His steady stream of needing some sort of medical care contrasted with my mom's stoic outlook only widened the distance between them. My mother had the good fortune of enjoying good health; no weird cures or constant parade of doctor's visits for her, thank you very much. She enjoyed her health straight up and unadorned. How odd that he outlived her! In a rare show of emotion he commented at my mother's funeral, "I'm the last one." Ernie, Doris, Bill, Peggy, all siblings gone except him. The sadness didn't overwhelm him, but his eyes told me all I needed to know about his feelings.

My family always thought I looked like him. My half-sister even commented several years ago how much I resembled him. There was a time I resented the comparisons, maybe because my mother had such an unfavorable view of him, I thought it reflected on how she thought of me. Now I look at his military picture as a young man and at mine and I have to agree that we look alike. As I see my hair graying and thinning, I hope I have as much hair as he did even at eighty-five. At six foot one, I am about two inches taller though my thin frame resembles what his used to be. I think I resented most the comparisons to what I perceived to be the quirks of his personality. The more I've thought about it and grown to be comfortable in my own skin, I think I could be a lot worse off than being like my Uncle Tom.

It's August 2005, fifty years removed from dinner on Norwood Avenue, and I sit with this man who has become dear to me to discuss his experiences during WWII. We're in the

living room of his senior high rise, a small but comfortable apartment. Displayed prominently on the wall hangs a picture of a B-29 bomber, what the Army Air Corps (the Air Force was not a separate branch of the military yet) called the "Super Fortress." The plane almost looked off balance; its prominent features a little odd for a flying machine. The oversized rudder almost won't let you look at anything else. The K emblazoned on it represented the 330th Bomber Group of which my uncle was a part. The plane was longer wingtip to wingtip than it was nose to rear: 141 feet across, 99 feet front to back. A closer look revealed this bee had a few stingers: gun turrets front and rear, top and bottom, protection from Japanese fighters. A gunner or scanner manned each turret, part of the ten man crew. The B-29 carried a payload of 20,000 pounds of bombs. They were big, lumbering war machines. I tried to imagine what it was like to fly the missions over Japan, into the teeth of enemy air space. Ninety-nine feet of space (a little over a third of a football field) had to squeeze in ten men, twelve 50-caliber machine guns, one 20-mm cannon, 20,000 pounds of bombs, radar equipment, a cockpit, bunks, and a navigation station. The seventeen-hour round trip from Guam to Japan necessitated that each crew flew a mission only every three or four days.

Uncle Tom began, "If you weren't young, you wouldn't be able to do that. I keep thinking, 'how the hell did we do it?'"

"I can see why you could only do that every three or four days." The closest I could come to comprehending the exhaustion was the twenty-two hours I spent traveling from Maryland to Missouri for college as a young man.

"When the mission was over, they gave us a shot of liquor, Ha! Just to relax us. Then we'd go to the barracks . . . and down we go!"

In my mind I went back to August 15, 1945, six days after the second atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki. It was B-29s that dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even after the atomic bombs, Japan stubbornly refused to surrender. "They'd jump off the cliffs rather than surrender," he observed. He was right. I remembered seeing "Suicide Cliffs" on Okinawa when I served there a little over two decades later. The Japanese officers threw themselves over these cliffs when the Americans took that island. The shame of losing was something they could not face. The conventional bombing runs had severely damaged Japan's industrial strength making it harder for them to produce munitions and war equipment. The Americans saw the need to continue putting pressure on them.

My uncle climbed on board for this night's run. The warm Pacific sea breeze necessitated only shirt sleeves, and the pressurized cabins—the first U. S. bomber to have them—meant that he wouldn't have to change. They could also fly without oxygen masks, a luxury not afforded to the crews of other aircraft. If this small luxury had provided a measure of comfort, they knew they still had to endure seventeen hours of flying, getting shot at by guns on the ground, pestered by Japanese fighters, and fulfilling the mission of delivering their payload of fire and destruction. This was no walk on the beach.

Entering the plane my uncle's seat as a radar bombardier placed him in front of the radar screen in the cockpit right behind the pilot. He would collaborate closely with the bombardier when they approached Japan. Radar was new technology. My uncle was intrigued enough to get trained in it after flight school—he was also a pilot though he never served in combat in this role. His radar training had brought him to Guam, an isolated island in the western Pacific. As the crew settled into their seats for takeoff the first obstacle to navigate was the five-hundred foot drop-off at the end of the Northeast runway. My uncle had a personal connection with that cliff.

"We lived in the barracks with another crew. I remember playing poker with the pilot from that crew one night. His name was Bauer." He paused. "I don't remember his first name."

"I guess you got to know a lot of different guys," I said. "Why was this guy so special?"

"His crew took off on a mission one night and they lost one engine." He said this very matter-of-factly, as if it weren't unusual.

"They could still fly with three engines, couldn't they?"

"Not far enough to get to Japan and back, so they had to turn around. They were flying in a heavy rain, in the dark. He overshot the runway and plunged down that 500-foot cliff."

Internally I winced. I could only imagine how that affected the other crews, not to mention my uncle who had played poker with him the night before.

"Everyone but the tail gunner was killed."

War could be like that, I thought. One day you know someone; the next day he's gone.

"A couple of years ago, the army finally went down that cliff and retrieved the bodies and buried them in Arlington Cemetery."

"How come they didn't do it sooner?"

"I'm not sure who initiated the operation, but we didn't have the equipment at the time to do it."

I think I was too stunned at the thought of all this to probe my uncle's feelings. He never spoke about his feelings all that much, like his father. They weren't cold and distant, just not real effusive. I never really knew if some of Uncle Tom's bottled up experiences from things like this were the cause of his bouts of depression later in life. They didn't use the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder back then. In any case he seemed passed all that as I interviewed him. Slowly the

man I knew only as my Uncle Tom emerged as someone who had experienced and accomplished things that many celebrities cannot claim.

His plane, K-31 or "City of Cedar Rapids," rumbled down the runway, lurched over the cliff, powered by four 2,200-horsepower Wright Double Cyclone engines, and headed skyward and north toward the land of the rising sun. Strapped in their seats for takeoff the men had about eight hours to kill, a normal workday for most people. Their real work would begin when the eight hours was up. But the time was not all relaxing. There were systems and equipment to check, navigational charts to assess, and plans to review. Outside the plane darkness cradled them in its protective arms: the less the enemy could see the better.

The hours passed. The quiet droned on with the constant hum of the plane's engines. Bunks in the midsection of the aircraft provided a modicum of comfort and rest for the long flight. Japan inched closer. Trigger fingers twitched. Closer to their target the long, quiet hours metastasized; the atmosphere inside the plane grew cancerous with anticipation. Radar picked up incoming free radicals whose only desire was to destroy. Japanese fighters were the radicals; their plane was the cell. It was like a moment before the opening kickoff or the first pitch. Gut-wrenching nerves and tight stomachs waited for just the right moment to begin the contest. Fear wrapped its cold, steely fingers around everyone's heart. Sometimes the fighters came; sometimes they didn't. But there was always the flak, ground fire that exploded all around them sending shrapnel in every direction, piercing glass and metal alike. This would turn out to be an unusual mission: every plane and every man returned safely though they had no idea about that at the time.

Flying through the flak and dodging the fighters was the first wave of the fight. My uncle busily sought to acquire targets though the darkness, the noise, and the turbulence. The plane

shuddered with the explosions. There was another danger up ahead. Heat from the first wave of bombs rose 25,000 feet into the air playing havoc with the pilot's ability to control his flight path. Planes could be knocked into other planes by the strong updrafts or even knocked under another plane before the bombs had been dropped. At night they couldn't always see one another. The darkness that cradled them in secrecy also deceived them.

"Getting tossed by one of those thermals, you practically felt like you were hit," he remembered.

"Like you were hit by enemy guns?" I assumed but asked anyway.

"Yes, yes! Fortunately, you could recover quickly."

Uncle Tom related how on one mission, because of those heat thermals, another plane, Sentimental Journey, got its giant tail rudder jammed into the bomb bay of his plane. The heat draft and the darkness colluded to create an incredibly dangerous situation, like two giant birds wrestling for the same air space. Somehow the pilots managed to separate the planes and still survive. The air was thick with the possibility of death, and thousands of feet above the enemy target sometimes even friends became dangerous. I think this gave me a whole new insight into the concept of "friendly fire." I guess there's a reason the Roman god of war was called "chaos."

As they closed in on Japan my uncle was communicating with his bombardier. With eyes fixed on the rotating electronic signal on his screen, he had to calculate the distance to the targets, the altitude of the aircraft, and the ground speed.

"We navigated to a fixed point, and I could see the target before anyone else," he remembered.

"Because of the radar technology?"

"Yes. I could see Japan a hundred miles away."

"A hundred miles?" I had no idea they prepared for the bombing that far out.

"When I looked at the screen, the water was all black but I could see the Japanese shoreline."

The intended targets were usually munitions factories and industries that supported Japan's war efforts. I never asked him about the fear of making an imprecise calculation. Did he ever think about the collateral damage? Might they have hit civilian targets? My uncle was a moral, religious man. If it bothered him, he kept it to himself. I don't know how he could have not thought about it. Many of the men, including my uncle, clung to their faith.

During one part of our conversation he said, "The officers," (my uncle was a second lieutenant) "traded some of their monthly liquor allotment to the Navy Sea Bees [naval construction engineers] for lumber to build a chapel." My uncle, like my grandfather, attended church regularly for as long as I could remember, but I never had heard him mention this. Whiskey played a big role for stressed out GIs, but trading it for lumber to build a chapel . . . ?

"I remember the chaplain would stand out by the runway for moral support whenever we took off and landed. That impressed me." War from this chaplain's viewpoint might provide another whole set of stories and insights, I thought. Wish I had known him. Uncle Tom certainly couldn't forget him.

The long hours they had spent reaching their mission was now punctuated by intense focus. No doubt the relatively short time of actually carrying out the mission stretched into what must have seemed like an eternity. My uncle and the bombardier were now engaged in a tightly choreographed dance that ended with, "Bombs away!" The bombs fell, the heat from the explosions rose, and fire scorched the earth. Once their deadly payload headed earthward, the mission was mostly complete. Now they still had to make it back to base safely, so they high-

tailed it for home. A wave of emotions must have washed over them: relief, weariness, elation, perhaps a quiet reflection on the destruction they could see out the windows. I wasn't there, so I can only guess. He never spoke about it much.

On the way home a radio message crackled over the airwaves: "Japan has surrendered." It was one of those moments people can never forget where they were when they heard the news. He commented on that when they began the mission.

"We knew after the atomic bombs that they were negotiating peace," he observed.

"But you guys had to go anyway?"

"They told us if you hear any radio contact from us, turn around and come back." He paused. "It didn't come."

"Until you were on the way home," I clarified.

"Yes. Fortunately we didn't have to invade Japan on the ground."

I've read numerous times that the number of lives that would have been lost if we had had to invade Japan would have been enormous. I think I read the figure at 500,000 more casualties. That seems almost an exaggeration to me. At the same time the Japanese military loathed the idea of surrendering. The fight to save their homeland from invaders would have been ferocious.

Uncle Tom was thousands of feet above the Pacific Ocean when he learned that he would not have to embark on another bombing run, ever. Almost fifty years later, the History Channel made a documentary about this "The Last Mission." The crew of these planes would learn only then just how dramatically their efforts had affected the course of the war.

I've thought a lot about my uncle. I had trouble seeing him as a piece of history, maybe because I just liked having my memory of an uncle. After I interviewed him, we went downstairs

to a rented hall in his apartment complex to celebrate his birthday. My aunt asked me to speak but it wasn't his military experience that I wanted to people to know about. Even though it had been my grandfather that I remembered at the head of the table, saying the blessing every night, and providing me with an image of stability, my uncle was still a welcome presence all that time. I mentioned how much I had appreciated having him as one of the male role models in my life during some formative years of my life. I happened to catch my mother's eye when I said this. She looked pensive. Afterward she said that she hadn't really thought about that before. I didn't know if I had just built a bridge between her and my uncle, but I felt good about giving her a reason to look at this "oddball brother" in a different way. Just by his presence I had been given a little stability when I really needed it. For me that would have been legacy enough: an uncle who was there when a young nephew needed him. His mark on history was an added bonus, not just for me but for many others.

My Man in Europe

Still it's August 2005, and I'm sitting at another dining room table. I am in West Paterson, New Jersey in the home of Dink Billingsby, a man who spent a whole year of his life in the line of German fire. I am about to learn that I am once again rubbing shoulders with living history. The house doesn't exude greatness. I'm not sure why I should have expected it. Did I think that a man who spent a whole year of his life on the front lines fighting for his country should have something more suitable to what he had contributed to his country? Was there a time when Dink got the recognition of what he had accomplished? In this neighborhood he just blends in; he's like everyone else, just one of the neighbors living in a modest home with the other working-class people in a middle class neighborhood.

We had talked briefly before this so I knew of his wartime service. My wife and I had been here before, up one of the longest and steepest hills I have ever encountered in a housing development. The only thing steeper was his driveway. His house was just below the top of the hill, second house from the top. We parked on the street with my wheels turned into the curb; I didn't trust my parking brake on that hill. Dink lived in a split-level, and walking into the foyer I noticed that the stairs led up to the main floor into a living room. A modest-sized kitchen directly in front of the stairs was big enough for a small breakfast table, and the dining area on its right adequately housed a dining table for six. The living room contained a sofa with several chairs and a television. Nothing shouted, "Extraordinary" or "Expensive" or even "Collector's Items." Several bedrooms to the left of the stairs exhibited the same comfortable atmosphere. I didn't think Norman Rockwell America, but from the wall paint to furniture to the color scheme of the entire house, it certainly bespoke middle-class comfort, not high-class extravagance. I liked it; I felt right at home.

They served spaghetti and meatballs. His wife, Bunny, loved to make tomato sauce. The influence of Italian food is strong in New Jersey, almost native to the area. We sat at the table, cozy and comfortable. There was no air of pretentiousness in the meal, the setting, or the conversation. We ate, laughed, and talked. If they had made special preparations because the minister and his wife were being entertained, I couldn't tell. There was no show of special utensils or plates or fancy napkins, really just the way I prefer it. That's who the Billingsby's were: comfortable, humble, hospitable, and warm. Bunny talked more than Dink, at least at this point.

Normally he wouldn't talk unless you talked to him. In his eighties when I knew him, he still had a good head of wavy, white hair though this sign of age on top of his head had not

dulled his mental clarity one bit. He hunched over a little but his eyes lit up when he smiled, and it didn't take a lot to get him to smile. He wasn't a "life-of-the-party" sort of guy though; you had to drag him into the party if you wanted him to participate. By this time he had been divorced with several children and remarried with another child and now retired from his job with the White Castle Restaurant chain.

Others described him as humble, quiet, unassuming, and persevering. I only saw his anger once. He was talking about an incident after one of the major battles in which he had seen action. He was on leave in France, and when a military policeman approached him and ordered him to zip up his jacket, Dink told him to get lost in no uncertain terms. I could still hear the resentment in his voice, and a trace of anger flashed in his eyes. He was still mad about it. I never probed as to why it made him so angry, but I think I knew. A soldier, one who'd been on the front lines as much as he had, could not tolerate being criticized for a minor uniform infraction. He was a combat veteran. The cop wasn't. That's all there was to it.

He had come a long way from his Tennessee farm boy upbringing. I could still hear the slight drawl, the twang characteristic of speech from below the Mason-Dixon Line. We think of a farm perhaps in idyllic terms, the quiet countryside unspoiled by cities and smog and crime. A much larger percentage of people lived on farms before WWII than after. The family farm was a staple of American living. Dink's family maintained strong Christian roots along with its farming heritage. I heard joy in the voice of his brother-in-law when Dink returned to the church of his upbringing much later in life. That's when I knew him. As someone nurtured in that faith, I could understand his elation after seeing the troubles Dink had faced in the war and a disrupted family life. It was a true homecoming.

We never talked about his family troubles. Even though I was Dink's minister, I never felt the need to re-hash family wounds. I knew he'd been divorced and had three children by that first marriage. I heard snippets about his first wife and their children. At his funeral none of them hung out any dirty laundry. That seemed only fitting. However, even if I were to assume the presence of such things, they doesn't cancel out Dink's contribution to history and for his country any more than his service atoned for the what sins he may have committed. As with most people I've come to know, I like to think that we can remember them for good things they have done. His military service was a good thing.

I had asked him several times to sit with me and tell me of his war experiences. Bunny always said it was a sure way to get him talking. For some people it might have come across as bragging. It wasn't. Even if he had bragged, I felt like he had a good reason to. He beamed with obvious pride when he said that he had served in the Fourth Armored Division in Europe under General George Patton. Patton! An explosion went off in my mind when he spoke that name. More than a name, Patton was myth, legend, heel, and hero. A movie in 1970, *Patton*, garnered seven Academy Awards, one of which was for best actor, George C. Scott. I remembered the movie, and his name drove our conversation to a whole new level. Dink wasn't just a war veteran. He had served under one of the most colorful, complex, and successful generals in American military history. Now I looked at Dink, this all too ordinary senior citizen, with a sense of astonishment and awe. Was I in the presence of a genuine celebrity?

The very name of George Patton in the wartime generation left a wake of wonder, amusement, and even scorn. He was a unique, complicated, and highly accomplished field commander. A Californian by birth, he had graduated first from the Virginia Military Institute and then West Point. In 1912 he participated in the Stockholm Olympics competing in the first

Modern Pentathlon. His military career took him to battles in WWI where he served under General John Pershing and to expeditions in Mexico against "Poncho" Villa. He advocated tank warfare early in his career and wrote extensively about it. Unflinching in battle, he exposed himself to gunfire in WWI and rode in an open jeep during the Battle of the Bulge in WWII to get close to and encourage the men on the front lines. Many people hated his brash manner, but most of those who served under him were proud to be a part of his fighting force. He had battled Germany's Rommel, the "desert fox," in Africa and had liberated Sicily as commander of the Seventh Army. After D-Day, General Eisenhower put him in charge of the Third Army in France. His mad dash across Europe became part of the warp and woof that helped write the legend of Patton.

To say that Patton was a bit eccentric understates the case. He raised profanity almost to an art form, and his speeches were peppered with graphic images that earned him the nickname "old blood and guts." At the same time he was an extremely religious man. More than many other things this paradox of holding his profane nature in tension with his religious beliefs made him an enigma. History still records a famous prayer at Christmas 1944 that he had sent to his troops. It was the time of the Battle of the Bulge, a turning point in the war. He was completely unashamed to pray to God while asking for victory over his enemies, and he carried out the war with aggression and fervor. In his mind war was fought for victory, nothing else.

The movie in 1970 portrayed him as ambitious and forthright to a fault, not too far off the mark as I can tell from a biography I had read. In combat he always wore a pair of pearl-handled revolvers. Once on a hunting expedition for wild boar, one particular boar got way too close to him and his horse, but he drew one of the revolvers and calmly shot the boar within yards of his mount. His revolvers, his eccentric manner, and his aggressive fighting maneuvers earned him an

epithet from none other than Adolph Hitler himself, who called him "that crazy cowboy." He was unabashed at demonstrating a sort of "mutually assured dislike" for his enemies. Andy Rooney, *60 Minutes* version of Oscar the Grouch, once commented on air how much he disliked George Patton. Patton's daughter carried on her father's legacy of mutual dislike when she wrote back, "Dear Mr. Rooney, my father wouldn't have liked you either." Yes, it was that George Patton who sprang to mind when Dink talked of serving in Europe.

Rather than an organized, chronological accounting of the war, Dink's recollections were more like a disjointed memoir of various incidents. He drove a half-track, a vehicle that was half truck and half tank. It had wheels on the front, tank tracks on the back, and provided support for the tanks by carrying a squad of infantrymen in the back. In Patton's Third Army, for some reason Dink was unaware of, Patton sent the Fourth Armored Division regularly into battle before all other divisions. It became "Patton's spearhead." They had gained quite a reputation.

"The German girls were warned not to even talk to us," Dink informed me. "They were told that the men of the Fourth Armored division were all bastards, and those that weren't killed their mothers just to get in the unit." I laughed. Was this just another part of the myth that was Patton? Like him, his men were elevated (or denigrated?) to the level of a legend with the reputation of evil personified.

Dink's Tenth Armored Infantry Battalion was in Patton's Fourth Armored division. He drove his men into a lot of the fighting. Most of the men were proud to have served under Patton. They were fighters who had raced across France and Germany, the first wave of men who freed Europe from the grip of the Nazis. His memory of every place was not perfect, and neither is my memory of every word he said as we spoke.

"I remember this one time we were pinned down on one side of a hill. Every time we tried to cross, the Germans forced us back." Dink said.

"Where was that?" I asked.

"I don't remember the town. I just remember the incident."

"What happened?"

"The Germans were dug into a town on the other side. We weren't there too long and we saw a jeep with two stars on it drive up."

"That would be a two-star general, right? But not Patton because he was a three-star."

"Right, it wasn't Patton. I don't remember who it was. We was surprised to see the stars on his jeep." A tinkle of bemusement sparkled in Dink's eyes.

"Why is that? Didn't they have those on the vehicles to identify themselves?" My eyebrows shot up.

"Yes. But once we entered battlefields they took them off. We didn't even have to salute officers there. They didn't want the Germans to know who the officers were."

"Ahhh! So it was pretty brash to ride around telegraphing you were a general."

He continued, "And then he got in the lead tank and proceeded to lead us right over that hill. It may not have been Patton, but that's the kind of guy that Patton liked." Funny, I thought, a real hero but Dink didn't even know his name.

Dink experienced numerous close calls with death, not surprising for a man who had spent a year on the front lines of Patton's spearhead. He had actively participated in every major battle from D-Day to VE Day, an impressive legacy. I never asked him, but it was remarkable how he survived when so many hadn't.

"I remember the first skirmish at Hedgerows [the first major battle]."

"Did you know how significant that battle would be?"

"No. We had no idea it would be considered the first major confrontation after the Normandy invasion. To us it was just a fight."

"What do you remember most about it?"

"All but two members of my squad [generally eight to fourteen soldiers] were killed in the first skirmish."

I squinted. "How did you manage that?"

"They had left me behind to guard the gasoline."

"Wow" was all I could think to respond.

"During the entire campaign all but seven of 245 in our company were wiped out. Only me and one other guy in my unit managed to come out of the war without injury and without being killed."

Now I was really intrigued. Talk about fate! I wondered, Why him? Why not someone else? What trick of fate fell to him that he was spared when so many others weren't? What if? Why not? How come? Aren't these the kinds of questions survivors ask themselves? And even if they do, is there an answer? Life is a mystery, I thought, like a jigsaw puzzle with a lot of pieces missing. He was here, in front of me, talking, still living. That's all we both knew. Or as my uncle had summed up the same mystery with a laugh, "Scary . . . but here we are."

I continued. "Dink, you mentioned earlier that you could have had at least three purple hearts, but you refused them. Why?"

"I was never really hurt that bad. I saw a lot of guys who deserved them much more than I did."

He described to me the bomb that exploded near him. He could see it coming. The blast gave him some internal injuries, and he later found out that the blast had pushed his appendix up close to his gall bladder, an abnormal placement. I guess if people can have it removed, I thought, a person can survive with it in the wrong place. He remembered one particular occasion when German planes bombed and strafed their compound while he was in the middle of brushing his teeth. I flashed back to a similar scene I remembered from the movie about Patton. A surprise attack by a single German plane sent an American camp into utter confusion, and as the plane strafed the buildings and roads with cannon fire, soldiers ran in every direction. In the movie Patton stood in a direct path of the plane's fire and unloaded his pistols at the plane as it flew by. As it flew off, Patton exclaimed, "If I were his commanding officer, I'd give that son of a bitch a medal." I don't know if Patton ever did that, but I could imagine Dink somewhere in that scene, running out of the barracks amid the confusion and explosions.

Another time I thought of as "The Potato Masher Incident." Americans called the German hand grenades "potato mashers" for their unusual shape. They had a cylindrical canister at the top of a wooden handle about a foot long. They contained powerful explosives, and the handle made them easy to toss. Dink was driving along with troops in the back of his vehicle when he spotted a "potato masher" flying out from behind a row of hedges as they approached a town. It struck the passenger side of his half-track just as Dink opened up the driver's side door and flung himself away from the blast. Several of the soldiers he was transporting died. Others were severely wounded. The few cuts and bruises he sustained could have earned him a purple heart. The medic who treated him suggested he should get one. He brushed off the request.

Nearing the end of the war the Fourth Armored Division had pushed so far through France and into Germany that they sometimes outran their supply lines. Villages and country farmhouses became places of refuge and rest. He told me about one occasion.

"When we entered some towns, we looked for places to sleep," he recalled.

"Was it safe to do that?" I wondered.

"As long as we knew where the Germans were, we could get some rest. The half-tracks weren't good for sleeping. They just weren't comfortable. In the back there was nothin' more than hard wooden benches."

"What was it like to enter towns? Were they usually quiet and deserted?" I tried to imagine the trepidation they felt when approaching an unknown town.

"The half-tracks always followed the tanks. Many times the locals had been displaced, scared off by the advancing troops. We was infantry support so I carried a thirteen-men squad. If there was snipers still in the town, they left the tanks alone 'cause it didn't do no good to shoot at them."

"So you felt pretty safe after the tanks passed through?"

"No. They shot at us after the tanks passed. We didn't have as much armor on the half-tracks."

"So you had to be alert all the time."

He continued. "I walked into this farmhouse once to find a place to rest. I was carrying a sub-machine gun. When I opened the door, there was a room full of Germans staring at me."

He must have seen my eyes widen.

"They surrendered."

"They surrendered?" I laughed.

"It was near the end of the war. I think they just wanted to live. They could'a killed me easily."

He had already explained that many of the regular German soldiers weren't fighting to save Nazism as much as to defend their homeland. They fought for survival, not for Nazi ideology. Dink said the SS troops were the really dangerous ones. They were tough, determined fighters. On several occasions they had donned American uniforms, and when they had infiltrated American camps, they opened fire. Things like this made it hard for some American troops to treat German prisoners fairly and humanely. Dink wasn't one of those. He accepted their surrender. I wondered what his commanding officer thought when he led a handful of German prisoners back single-handedly. Wouldn't it be fun to embellish the facts about this episode? Dink played by John Wayne? Naaaa, that wouldn't work. Besides, Dink was the real American icon.

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I left that day not feeling like any details needed embellishing. His deeds were on par with any hundred famous men without adding a single word. A year's worth of war had imprinted on Dink a lifetime of memories and marked his forehead with history. Yet he was just a "regular guy." No one would have recognized what he'd done when he walked through the local mall. There were no welcoming committees when he ate at local restaurants. No bells rang out to mark his comings and goings from his house. He was just Dink—family member, neighbor, friend, and co-worker. Had someone offered him fame and distinction, I think he would have refused. In his mind others were more deserving. In fact, he told his sister once that the men weren't trying to be heroes; they were just trying to survive. I'd like to think that the memory of what they accomplished will survive.

Men like Dink may not have the position and power to affect the course of history as others have. Dink had served with other ordinary men who changed the course of history. He helped free parts of Europe from one form of totalitarianism, and he had even participated in freeing one of Hitler's concentration camps. He was a great man of small social and political standing, but collectively with many other great men of the same ilk, he performed heroics that changed the face of history. He had mentioned that many of Patton's men resented Eisenhower because he prevented Patton from pushing all the way to Berlin which eventually fell into the hands of Josef Stalin. Berlin Wall? Iron Curtain? Might they, too, have been prevented?

Battles, like athletic events, have a lot of Monday-morning quarterbacks. I don't know Ike's reasons for limiting Patton's thrust, so I don't want to fall into the category of criticizing when I must admit my own limited understanding of the historical circumstances surrounding the end of the war. However, suffice it to say that decisions like these have important ramifications, and history is littered with decisions that affect the future. Will we learn enough from the past to prevent other totalitarian thugs from grabbing other countries by the throat? Dink's story ended with full military honors in his Tennessee homeland in 2006, but his story should be replayed across the pages of history many times over. Perhaps his name won't be recorded by historians, but his willingness to serve a greater cause provides us with a collective memory of greatness that must be remembered.

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My uncle was honored at his funeral in 2008 by representatives from several veterans groups. The service was conducted in the chapel where he had attended Catholic Mass faithfully until the end of his life. I felt a piece of history die with his and Dink's funeral. My uncle wrote a couple of pages about his experiences during the war. He made an interesting comment in it

about how he felt when he first went into the service, “At our young ages we were already heroes with a gold star hanging in the family window.” I had never thought about how much celebrity status they gained. He said that soldiers were proud to serve, and families were proud to send them off. All around the country strangers helped them. They gave them rides and paid for meals.

But being celebrated had its price. Battlefields were places of violence and death. Even the airspaces my uncle flew through were not exactly the “friendly skies.” And how soon would people forget what they had done? Peacetime has a way of dulling everyone’s memory. Maybe even many of those who fought wanted to forget, to get on with their lives, to raise their families and live their lives in peace. I know these two men weren’t looking for fame, but their service to freedom and democracy went far beyond the fame accorded to those today who wear fame as some sort of badge of honor, or even earn the epithet “famous for being famous.” Uncle Tom and Dink had accomplished things that highlight how ludicrous that sounds.

I once heard a famous entertainer describe a star as “just a ball of gas.” He fully understood the ephemeral and fleeting nature of stardom. Yet becoming a celebrity with fame and fortune has become almost a national obsession. Being a celebrity even has an incestuous logic about it: a celebrity is a famous person, and fame makes you a celebrity. Reasons for this coveted status may vary, but the obsession with being known and celebrated comes perhaps from some innate human desire to accomplish something useful or perhaps to satisfy a more selfish longing to be on the top of the pile, make the most money, and become a trend-setter whose name is on everyone’s mouth. History is nothing if it isn’t about people and events that shape the world we live in. How much better to remember the men and women who have truly risked their

lives! How much more profound to remember these two humble servants and the greater good that they created! How much more deserving of fame!

The past has a profound effect on us, and I've thought about the impact that my family medical history has had. My grandfather died from colon cancer. He was ninety-two so it wasn't like he hadn't lived a good, long life. So why then did my mother, knowing this, wait until she was seventy-eight to get her first colonoscopy? Heaven only knows, but this woman, who was told by doctors over the course of many years that she was healthy enough to live to be a hundred, died when she was eighty-three. Yes, from the same colon cancer that took her father. Eighty-three is a good, long life in most anyone's way of thinking, but to be aware of something that could have prolonged it even further but ignore it exemplifies what humanity often does with the past. Though she knew the family history, she ignored it. History is like that: it comes back around. We ignore it at our own peril.

History has a wider lens than our medical history or even our ancestry. Can history be more than just the sum of all those names, dates, places, and wars that pockmark the face of the past? Must we subject ourselves to the history that seems so far removed from our present day activities? Facts that seem to be no more than boring details from history class really do hold meaning for who we are and who we might become. Would it make a difference, for example, if you knew that many free blacks served on our ships during the War of 1812? Some ships had crews of nearly 50% African-Americans, and several ship captains logged how they had served bravely and with distinction. Might it make a difference to know the stories of my uncle and Dink to understand what they went through to prevent several totalitarian nations from conquering the world? I live in hope. Shakespeare had it right, "The past is prologue."

When the History Channel aired *The Last Mission*, details of what transpired revealed an unintended consequence of what my uncle had accomplished. While this group of B-29s were dropping their bombs, it happened that on the ground in Japan, a group of military men attempted to overthrow the emperor in order to continue the war. They wanted to fight on when the emperor of Japan was considering surrender. I remembered my uncle's words, "The Japanese would throw themselves over cliffs rather than surrender." But bombs dropped from this last mission knocked out lights and foiled the coup. Had those bombs not fallen and had those lights remained on, the war and the killing may have continued.

It made me wish I had known more about this man who sat next to me for the first twelve years of my life at dinner so many years ago. He was worth remembering for being more than an uncle. He's a man I won't soon forget. The simple act of remembering the past could make such a difference if we only took the time to look around and learn not only what ordinary people have done but to realize just how history is still with us, even shoulder to shoulder. Listening to the prologue of past events just might embolden a few otherwise ordinary folks to do something extraordinary, and probably without even knowing how extraordinary it might be. Seeing the humility of my Uncle Tom and Dink Billingsby, perhaps it doesn't matter if we are aware of it. Just who are the real American idols anyway?