

## **MESS DUTY**

My greatest intimacy with my father occurred as I suffered through the litany of childhood illnesses of the 1950s. In my journeys to the domains of the chicken pox, the croup, measles, and the mumps, my father was always along for the ride. In the evenings, as I laid in my bed, he sat in the rocking chair in my room and told me the stories of his service on the PT Boats during World War II.

Speaking in a soft voice, running his fingers through his hair, he would recount the details of his assignments the Mediterranean and the South Pacific during the final year of the war.

Enlisting in the Navy after his graduation from high school in 1943, he was trained as a radioman and volunteered for one of the “special services.” He ended up as a crewman on the small, nimble boats that would achieve celebrity status later when a former PT Officer named John Kennedy was elected president in 1960.

My father's repertoire consisted of four or five stories. By the time I was six years old, I knew them by heart. Hearing them repeatedly, in the way I had heard fairy tales, I savored every detail of the telling. If a minor point was omitted in his narration, I would remind him of it immediately. The record would be promptly corrected.

The order in which the stories were told was as important as the content. The climax would always be the account of the river patrol, somewhere in Borneo during the waning days of the war in the Spring of 1945. That was the time his boat came under attack from a sniper positioned in a high tower at a bend in the river. The jungle was dense; navigation difficult.

My father saw action on that mission as he witnessed a crew mate fall, wounded in the thigh from hostile gunfire. As the PT boat shifted into reverse and struggled to find cover, the other sailors came to the aid of their injured mate. The bullets continued to fly as blood gushed from the leg of the wounded sailor. The blood was everywhere, much of it finding its way onto the clothing of the other sailors, including my father.

The story, at least as it was told to me then, had an upbeat ending. The wounded sailor's injuries were not fatal. A squad of PT boats returned to the tower the next day and destroyed it with heavy fire from their deck guns. The river was cleared of all enemy presence. Shortly thereafter the fighting in the Pacific ended and World War II was over.

The telling of the Navy stories ended by the time I was eight years old. The bond forged by those narrations had a tensile strength that I would realize only decades later. The emotional link with my father, established by way of the stories, became an anchor of stability as my mother's slide into depression accelerated with the birth of each new child in the family.

By the time I was ten I was the oldest of five and the only boy. By then I had become a sailor myself, after a fashion. My challenge was to navigate the choppy waters of family life made ever more turbulent by the hair-trigger temper of my father and the emotional absence of my mother.

As a teenager, my strongest connection with my father was through the medium of sports. Although he had never participated in organized athletics himself, he took an outsized interest in my athletic endeavors. The high school I attended had a championship tradition in cross country. Through hard work more than talent, I achieved varsity status in my junior year. My father never missed a race. He recorded not only my time in every race but my time at multiple checkpoints *within* every race.

Our conversations in those years were focused almost exclusively on the fortunes of the

Cardinal Dougherty High School running teams. There was cross country in the fall, indoor track in the winter and outdoor track covered the rest of the school year. There wasn't much talk about his Navy days. The war in Viet Nam was reaching its apex in the late Sixties. Nightly news broadcasts were bringing graphic footage from the front lines into the nation's living rooms. The Viet Nam experience was redefining everything about the American enterprise of war. Among many of my contemporaries, there was minimal patience or tolerance for anything to do with the military.

In 1969, I graduated from high school. That September, I left home to begin my studies for the priesthood. The seminary I entered was in southern Virginia. The idyllic setting of the school in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains was a world apart from Philadelphia. Home—and everything associated with it—felt very far away. The span of a generation would pass before my father and I resumed our dialogue about his service in the Navy.

June 6<sup>th</sup> of 1994 was the fiftieth anniversary of the Normandy Invasion. The milestone prompted a flood of media coverage. Included in the television and news articles were interviews with veterans who had participated in the mammoth endeavor which marked the beginning of the end of Nazi Germany. Tributes to the “Greatest Generation” were everywhere.

In late June of that year, I was driving my father home to Philadelphia after his weekend visit to Baltimore for our annual trip to see the Orioles play baseball. Our conversation, as always, was wide ranging and fast moving. The Sunday edition of the Baltimore Sun had featured an article on a Maryland veteran who had gone ashore with the first wave on that fateful day in 1944. We had both read the story over breakfast that morning. Citing the article, I steered the conversation to my father's time in the service.

My questions were general and open-ended. What was it like to graduate from high school in

the midst of the war? What went into his choice of the Navy? How had he been selected for training as a radioman? Did he have any idea where he would be sent? The answers he gave were free-flowing and expansive. We touched briefly on the stories that were firmly embedded in my memory from childhood. He confirmed all the details as I had remembered them.

The miles on I-95 melted away as we discussed my father's Navy career. We had just passed Wilmington when I asked the question that turned out to be the most important one of the day, although it hardly felt like that at the time.

“What's your strongest memory from your time overseas?” I asked. The question felt rhetorical as it came out of my mouth. The answer, I was certain, was already contained in one of the stories I knew by heart.

He paused, uncharacteristically.

“I guess it was that first night, when we arrived at the PT base on Corsica. The new units were assigned to mess duty.”

This was new. Never in any of the sick room stories was there anything about mess duty in Corsica. How could that compare with fast boats, Asian jungles, and sniper bullets?

“Mess duty?”

“The new sailors were assigned to serve the crews of the boats that were already operating,” he said.

“I never heard you mention that detail before,” I said. “What made it memorable?”

“Well, there was nothing special about spooning mashed potatoes onto the plates of those guys,” he said. “I was just wearing an apron and doing what I was told to do.”

He paused. I noticed that he was looking out the passenger window. The silence took on an edge; it seemed to be throbbing.

“Did you new guys talk to the seasoned PT crew?” I asked, just to break the silence.

“No,” he said. “They talked among themselves, but not to us.” Another long pause ensued.

“They were going back out that night on another patrol.”

He was still looking out the side window.

We were moving at seventy-miles per hour on the interstate but it felt like we were moving slower than a snail through a swamp.

“So, did anything unusual happen during the meal?” I needed to claw away at the silence, with any tool I could find. “It was the rookies serving up a meal to the veteran ballplayers, eh?” I said. My intent was to lighten up the atmosphere, grown suddenly dense and heavy as wet sand.

“That's what I thought, too,” he said. “We finished serving, got our food, and then reported to our barracks to unpack our gear and settle in.”

The silence filled up the car again with the immediacy of hydrogen from a tank going into a child's birthday balloon.

Instinct told me to sit with it this time so I did, allowing the hum of the tires on the road to absorb my senses and carry me with it as we moved closer to the Pennsylvania line.

“In the morning,” he finally said, “we reported for mess duty again—breakfast.”

“What happened then?” I asked.

“That's when we found out that their boat had strafed by a German plane, sometime around midnight. The plane stayed on them, they were in open water, nowhere to hide.” He paused and seemed to settle himself before continuing. “Some of the bullets hit the engine house. The PT boat was shot to hell. All hands were lost.”

In the silence that followed these words, I found myself taking refuge like someone who

scrambles into the mouth of a strange cave, just to get out of the storm.

“I could remember some of their faces from the night before,” he said. “I can still remember them today.”

His gaze continued out the side window.

“On our first night in Corsica, those guys were eating their last meal, the meal we served them. Then they went out on patrol. Their boat caught it and every one of them was killed.”

My grip on the steering wheel was so tight that my fingers began to hurt. The car's air conditioner was cranked up to high, but my face was sweating. My breath was shallow and rapid. My molars were clamped down on the inside of my cheeks.

“From that day on,” he continued, “until the war was over, I was scared to death. I found out in my first twenty-four hours on the base that this was no game. The PT crew that went out that night didn't come back. I knew right then that one day I might go out and not come back either.”

We were crossing a bridge. Below us, to the right, was the Philadelphia Navy Yard. The decommissioned battleships and destroyers sat in their long gray stillness, crowded together like cattle in a holding pen. Vessels that once carried men and weapons into battle on the open ocean now rested in stale, quiet water. Overhead passed a steady flow of urban traffic all through the day and night.

If those ships could talk, I said to myself. If those ships could talk, they would speak to me in my father's voice and would tell me things like he's telling me now.

I took a deep breath.

I had always considered my father to be among the least introspective of men. Never had he given any indication of a reflective spirit or philosophical turn of mind. Conversations with him would often become frustrating for me because his mind seemed to skitter from one topic to another, like a bird hopping from branch to branch in a tall tree.

By this point, we were moving along the edge of South Philadelphia and I could see Veterans Stadium. The parking lot was full.

“The Phillies are home this weekend,” I said.

“Yeah,” said my father. “They're playing San Francisco.”

“Is it too much to hope that they could reach the Series two years in a row?” I asked.

“Well, they just don't have the pitching they had last year,” he said. “You've got to have the pitching, especially in the bullpen.”

“Amen to that,” I said. “Let's get the game on the radio and see how the game's going. They're probably in the third or fourth inning by now.”

In a moment, the patter of the announcers filled the car. In the background we could hear the large, vocal crowd roar its approval as John Kruk, the Phillies first baseman was announced as the batter.

“That guy Kruk looks like an out of shape truck driver but he can really get some wood on the ball,” my father said, “plays a pretty decent first base, too. He always makes me laugh whenever I see him come up to bat.”

“We've got to get down to the Vet for a game this year, Dad,” I said. “I want to see the Phillies play. The Orioles are fine, but the American League feels like a different religion.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “But you do have a nice new stadium down there in Baltimore.”

“Yeah,” I said, “yeah it's a great place to watch a game, but it's not the Phillies.”

The baseball conversation carried itself for the remaining forty-five minutes of the drive to my parents' home in Northeast Philadelphia, but my mind was racing with the fury of an overheated engine. My mouth was giving voice to baseball chatter which needed no input from my brain. Images were flitting through my head, chasing each other in circles. What kept repeating itself was the image

my father's face as a young man from those photographs of him in his Navy uniform. He wasn't yet nineteen years old.

My imagination was assembling a jumble of fragments well lodged in memory. George J. Stahley, newly minted radioman third class, United States Navy, is on his first assignment. He is in theater at a PT base in the Mediterranean on the island of Corsica. He draws mess duty within hours of his arrival.

Everything is new. Everything is an adventure. The success at Normandy earlier that year means that Hitler and the Nazis are on the run. It's just so great that he and his crewmates arrived before those Germans surrendered and it was all over. Even serving food to the combat veterans is a thrill; just being that much closer to the action. Wouldn't want to miss an opportunity like this.

Then he wakes up the next morning. The young man learns that the war is a long way from over. And with that realization comes the inescapable awareness that Americans are still dying. This is the real thing; this is war. And now he is in the place where the dying happens. Life got very serious very quickly for the young man who had graduated from North Catholic High School in Philadelphia just fifteen months before.

The skyline of downtown Philadelphia filled the horizon as we continued to tool northward on I-95. The radio broadcast of the Phillies game absorbed our hearing. I held the steering wheel and felt the car carry us forward, my father and me.

How much there is that I just don't know, I thought. How much there is about others that I'll never know—especially those I *thought* I knew so well. And with that awareness came a rush like a sudden, sharp wind. Inexplicably, it came with a sense of peace. The world and my own life felt like wondrous things. It was a feeling of expansive wonder, spreading endlessly through me like the night sky on a clear summer night when you are in a place far away from any city. The darkness on those



nights is like a lush, blue-black velvet and the stars are like pinprick holes giving hints of a limitless, welcoming light on the other side of that cushion of sky. And that darkness was inside of me, too, with just enough of that fragile light from those minute holes to keep me going in the direction in which I needed to go. And the darkness was soft and peaceful; it was alright. What seemed most important was to adjust your seeing, so you could proceed. And that's where the peace was—the accepted darkness.

The car continued to clip away the miles as the ballgame told its story on the radio and I-95 cut it's broad path between the old city neighborhoods scrolling by on our left and the Delaware River off to the right. It was a busy river, carrying some freight ships southward on their way to the sea. The ships were huge and solid, like floating cliffs.

“Get off at the next exit,” my father said suddenly, “there's a place I know on Aramingo Avenue that makes great hoagies.”

“You got it, Dad,” I said. “It's been forever since I've had a real hoagie. You just can't get them anywhere but Philly.”

“The Phillies are going to blow this game,” he said. “Just you wait and see. The bullpen won't hold this lead, damn it, you can't win without a decent bullpen. What do you want on your hoagie? They have cheesesteaks, too.”

San Francisco loaded the bases and the Phillies were about to make another pitching change.

“Damn bullpen,” my father said.