



## **REFLECTIONS ABOUT LIFE AND SERVICE ABOVE SELF**

As an 18 year old farm boy waiting to go to war to protect the freedom I had learned about in grade school, from a teacher who loved her country, my life and values were impacted by an experience I had as a driver of a taxi in the small community of Fairmont, West Virginia.

During my youth I had a boyhood friend by the name of Leonard Brown. We were near the same age. I wanted him to join the Marines with me, but he elected to go to the Army Air Force. While over seas his plane disappeared and no trace of it was ever found. His family waited 7 long years with hope, all the while he was declared missing in action, before they finally received official word that he had been lost. No trace of Leonard or his aircraft was ever found.

World War II was being fought in Europe and the Pacific and there were many young men and a few women serving in the Armed Forces. Casualties were very heavy and since cemeteries had not been established on foreign soil, the remains were shipped back home. The next of kin was notified by telegram from the War Department through the Western Union Office of the loss of their loved one. When the telegram reached the Western Union Office usually late in the day, the Taxi Cab Company was called to have a driver deliver the telegram.

I was one of those taxi drivers selected to deliver those telegrams. We were required to get a signature to confirm the delivery. Often the person would open the telegram before they would sign for it and upon learning that their loved one had been killed they would immediately break down. Often they were alone and as a young person with no experience in such matters I would also be immediately affected. These experiences gave me a greater appreciation for life and an understanding of a difference in death in the normal world as expected in life, and those lost fighting for their country in a foreign land. The next of kin would almost always have the question, "Why my Husband, or why my Dad, or why my Son or Brother?" Questions that were unanswerable.

After the war, I was fortunate to be employed by the Veterans Administration, an opportunity that enabled me to continue to serve my fellow veterans and the families who had lost a loved one. The Congress provided many benefits for those

veterans returning home, but the consideration and recognition of the families of those lost to war was very inadequate.

For years I expected that some national recognition, like a great Memorial Monument would be erected to recognize and pay respect to the families who lost a member of their family to war. During the war, if the family had a member in the Armed Forces, they would place a blue flag in their window to let others know. If the service member was killed, they would display a gold flag which told the community they had lost a loved one. From that, the identity and name of Gold Star Mother became the symbol that someone had given their life for freedom.

Over the years it became my passion to have a National Memorial Monument honoring the Gold Star Mothers in West Virginia. Eventually my passion transitioned to have the Memorial Monument located in the DC area with the other monuments of honor and recognition. After an experience of encountering a Dad who had lost a son in the invasion of Iraq, and who was the only surviving parent but with other sons and daughters, said to me, "Dads cry also"; I realized that the entire family and extended families also suffers and grieves the loss of their loved ones. From that experience, the concept of a Memorial Monument to honor the sacrifices of families changed to a "Gold Star Family Memorial Monument" to show the story of the loved one's homeland, having a family, going to war, losing their life and the whole family grieving the loss. This story is depicted in the Gold Star Families Memorial Monument.

Now the passion to have Gold Star Families honored and proper tribute paid to them for their sacrifice of one of their loved ones has become a reality. To the many individuals who made the Memorial Monument for Gold Star Families in the Donel Kinnard State Veterans Cemetery at Institute, West Virginia, their commitment and dedication will always be appreciated by all those who understand the great sacrifices made by those who gave the full measure, life itself, for our freedom. All Gold Star families are honored by this memorial.

One of the goals of this foundation is to encourage the erection of the Gold Star Family Memorial Monument in many other States and locations such as veterans cemeteries, Court House lawns, memorial parks, museum grounds, or locations in cities where the public can observe them and realize the sacrifices made by families who gave one of their own for the freedom of America, and to give many in foreign countries a freedom they had never known. Plans and dimensions for the Memorial are available through the foundation without cost.

## *THE MEDAL OF HONOR – WALL OF MEMORY*

In most States in America, there is not a listing of all the Medal of Honor Recipients credited to that State. Most recognitions honoring a Recipient are of one individual from their community. Not all from that State are honored in one place, giving those interested the opportunity to know of the heroes from their midst. The Foundation has a program that pays tribute to and honors those Recipients from the surrounding area and their home community.

The goal of the foundation is to honor the Recipients of the State to which the Medal of Honor is credited by creating a Medal of Honor Wall of Memory in each Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, VA Nursing Facilities and State Nursing Facilities in that particular State, to honor the Medal of Honor Recipients from the area served by the individual facility. Those Recipients would be shown by the war in which they earned the Medal of Honor, and the city or community from which the Recipient called home. The Wall of Memory would serve as an educational tool for the veterans and families visiting the facility and could be used by schools as an educational tool to teach the youth about their hometown heroes. In West Virginia two such walls have been established. They are located in the VA Medical Center, Clarksburg and the WV State Veterans Nursing Facility in Clarksburg. There is a plan to place a Medal of Honor Wall of Memory in the other three VA Medical Centers and the State Veterans Home. There is a DVD of the existing Medal of Honor Wall of Memory available through the foundation for viewing by those interested. The goal of the foundation is to be in a position to assist in some of the costs of placing the Medal of Honor Wall of Memory in appropriate facilities. It is important that the sacrifices of those who gave to keep us a free people never be forgotten.

*Hershel Woody Williams, Medal of Honor Recipient-Iwo Jima*