

Reflections about life, service and sacrifice.

I was born in Quiet Dell, West Virginia, a small, rural community where my family owned a dairy farm. I grew up milking cows and delivering the milk to customers in town. When I became old enough for grade school, I attended a one-room school house that was about a mile walk from my house. A teacher at that school taught me the history of our great nation and about the freedom we have in America. That teacher's love for the United States of America had a tremendous impact on me, and I have never forgotten that lesson.

Another person that had an impact on my life was the man that hired me to drive a taxi during the early days of World War II. His company was in the small town of Fairmont, West Virginia, a few miles from my family's farm. Although I was too young to drive a taxi, he needed a driver and I needed a job, so we made it work.

When a serviceman was killed during the war, the War Department would notify the next of kin by Western Union telegram. The taxi company I worked for was contracted to deliver those telegrams and I was required to get a signature to confirm each delivery. In most cases, I handed the telegram to someone who was home alone. Many times, when the family member read that their loved one had been killed, they would immediately break down.

They would almost always have the same question, "Why my ... husband, son, brother, father?" No matter how many of those dreaded telegrams I delivered I never had an answer. I would just stand there on their front porch and do the best I could to comfort them on the worst day of their life.

That experience had a profound impact on me and gave me a greater appreciation for life and an understanding of the huge sacrifice some families would make to protect our freedom.

One family who had an impact on my life was the Brown family. They owned the farm down the road from my family and had a son named Leonard. Leonard and I became best friends and even walked to school together. When I was 11 and my father died, Leonard's father helped fill that void in my life.

When I enlisted in the Marine Corps, I tried talking Leonard into joining the Marines with me but he wanted to go into the Army Air Force. At that point we separated and never saw each other again because Leonard was killed in June 1945.

The story I was given about his death was that his plane had been shot down and his body was never recovered. He was declared Missing in Action (MIA). The Brown family had tragically lost a son and I lost my best friend. The fact that Leonard's body was not returned home made the loss even more unbearable. His death gave me a better appreciation of the sacrifice of the families I had delivered telegrams to as a young man in Fairmont.

I returned to Quiet Dell after the war and was fortunate to get a job with the Veterans Affairs Department (VA). The position, however, required me to move my family to New Mexico. In the late 1940's, we didn't have email, the internet or cell phones, so staying in touch with my family and friends back in West Virginia was difficult, and I lost track of the Brown family.

Seventy years later, in December 2015, due to a very strange twist of fate, I discovered the truth about Leonard's death. He was the nose turret gunner on a B-24 and during a bombing raid, an anti-aircraft shell exploded in front of his aircraft. Leonard was seriously wounded and the plane

was severely damaged. The pilot did manage to return to the base, land safely and get Leonard to the hospital. Unfortunately, he died five days later of his wounds and was buried in the military cemetery in the Philippines. In February 1949, Leonard was returned home to West Virginia and buried in the Fairmont cemetery with his family.

Nothing can totally ease the grief of the Brown family but I know being able to bury their son did provide some comfort. I know this because visiting the grave of my childhood friend for the first time did provide me some comfort. It was a very emotional experience for me but I was glad that Leonard had finally made it home.

My job at the VA gave me an opportunity to continue serving my country while assisting my fellow veterans and the families who had lost a loved one. The government provided many benefits for veterans, but the consideration and recognition of families that had lost a loved one to war was very inadequate.

For years, I expected that some type of national recognition, like a great memorial monument, would be built to recognize and pay respect to families that received one of those telegrams I dreaded delivering.

Starting in World War I, if a family had a member in the military, they would place a flag with a blue star in their window. It was not unusual to see flags with more than one blue star. People were proud they had someone in their family protecting our freedom and they wanted everyone to know they were a Blue Star family.

If their family member was killed while serving, they would remove the blue star and replace it with a gold star. No family wants to be a Gold Star family but sometimes that is the price we must pay for our freedom.

Over the years, it has become my passion to support the efforts to have a monument honoring Gold Star Mothers in West Virginia built. Eventually my passion transitioned to having the monument located in the Washington, D.C. area with the other monuments of honor and recognition.

A few years ago, I modified my thinking about the monument after an encounter with a father who had lost a son during the invasion of Iraq. I was speaking at an event for Gold Star Mothers and after I finished, the man came up to me and said, "Dads cry too.". What he said made me realize that the entire family suffers and grieves the loss of their loved ones.

My encounter with that Gold Star father is what sparked the idea of the Gold Star Families Memorial Monument. My goal and my passion, is to promote, create, and dedicate monuments throughout our country.

We can never totally repay veterans, and their families, for what they have done for our country. Dedicating a Gold Star Families Memorial Monument is an appropriate way to honor and pay tribute to the families of the men and women who have served our country and made the ultimate sacrifice protecting our freedom.