

"OLD SOLDIERS"

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Southwest Airlines Flight 1492 to Columbus sailed over the yellowing fields of central Ohio on the first morning of the summer of 1999. Touching ground, the day held the promise of a routine business trip, to include visiting an exhibition for aerospace materials experts in Dayton, and later a metals-finishing trade show in Cincinnati. At the Columbus airport I rented a car, and instead of travelling through the city, I ventured a bit north and then west on Interstate 270. On the way to Dayton I passed a sign announcing the exit for a place called Plain City, and thought that made it official. Yet before leaving Dayton later that same day, I would find myself sitting in the cockpit of the Boeing B-29 Superfortress which dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, Japan, bringing an end to World War II. Beside me would be a co-pilot from that bombing mission, Chicagoan Fred Olivi, visiting with some of his war veteran friends, who were clambering around inside this historic aircraft like schoolchildren exploring a new treehouse.

A month earlier, I'd gone to have breakfast on the Southwest Side of Chicago with about two dozen veterans who got together every two weeks. I'd come at the invitation of Les McKie, whom I first met in the mid-1980s through the old Canadian Club of Chicago. He's a former club president, married to a woman from Quebec name Cece, and had recently told me about his U.S. Army service in southeast Asia during World War II, as part of a group called Merrill's Marauders.

At breakfast Les and I had *chorizo* omelettes, while he and some of his fellow Marauders told me about their unit. In August, 1943, at Quebec City, the Allied leaders hatched a plan for soldiers to go behind enemy lines in Burma (now Myanmar) to help reopen what was called the Burma Road, for shipment of vital supplies from British-controlled India to Chinese troops fighting at home against the Japanese. A Presidential message calling volunteers to a "dangerous and hazardous mission" was broadcast to US troops, and almost 3,000 volunteered for a project about which they knew little else. Some of these courageous volunteers, under the command of Brigadier General Frank Merrill, were to become the first US ground forces to fight on the Asian continent in World War II. Initially called the 5307th Composite Unit, it eventually became known as Merrill's Marauders.

Many of these soldiers plodded through a thousand miles or more of dense and disease-ridden jungles, engaging with small arms the same crack Japanese military units which had earlier conquered Singapore and Malaya. The U.S. troops disrupted enemy communications and supply lines, and eventually helped capture the strategic Myitkyina Airfield in northern Burma, a major step toward reestablishing a key supply route. Les said the men on the ground did not envy the pilots of military planes they saw overhead, flying a dangerous route which would include clearing remote mountain regions. He said that despite their hardships in the jungle, the starving soldiers on foot were much better off than those pilots in "flying coffins", as his fellow soldiers called the planes.

Still, the men at breakfast spoke of their constant fear of ambush in the jungle, and their struggles against hunger, disease, and sweltering heat. In desperation, some famished troops ate oats meant for pack mules; they boiled the hard oats three separate times to make them somewhat palatable, then chewed like crazy. Others in the same unit later told me that, having no provisions at all, they took their chances with wild fruit, on which they'd had no instructions. The Marauders in the jungle all lost threatening amounts of weight, and many perished there.

Another veteran I met that morning was Fred Olivi, who helped fly a plane called the *Bockscar* when it travelled to drop the atomic bomb from 30,000 feet over Nagasaki, Japan, on August 9, 1945. He had been late getting to breakfast, arriving after giving an early-morning talk at a nearby high school. Previously, I had mentioned to Les my interest in getting World War II veterans to speak at my daughter's school. Les recommended Fred, who was writing a book about the Nagasaki bombing, and another member of the breakfast group, who had participated in the D-day invasion of France. Yes, they both said, they would be very pleased to speak.

Why did I want veterans to speak in the first place? One Memorial Day a few years earlier, my young daughter and I took a walk near the apartment of my mother-in-law in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood. On the opposite side of Pine Grove Avenue, walking north, was a man in uniform. Not ever having noticed his kind of uniform before, my daughter pointed and asked if this was a police man. "A soldier", I replied. "What's that?", she countered. The next week I went up to my daughter's Montessori school, and asked the woman in charge of the early grades did they not teach the children about the holidays and why then would my daughter not have recognized a soldier, nor even have known what one *was*? The woman said well sure we teach about the holidays and we could be doing more. Yes, it would be nice to have some veterans to come speak with the kids, but it's too bad we haven't been able to get any.

Could this have been a kind of verbal equivalent of what my mother might have called "a lick and a promise"?

Later I would come to learn that the school's director was a committed pacifist, and the veteran's talk never came about. We eventually removed our daughter from the school, for unrelated reasons, but years later I would be reminded of the never-realized veterans' talk. In the fall of 2008, my wife and I saw "This Happy Breed", an English film from 1944, promoted as being about civilian life in England between the first and second world wars. It turned out the film also provided a strong indictment of pacifism as a cause of the war then still being waged.

Even more unexpected that evening was crossing paths with the former school director and her partner, also a school employee, in the Gene Siskel Film Center lobby. It is not unusual for me to see these people at events, as we share similar interests, and on this occasion we had a long and lively conversation. While discussing the film we had all just seen, I made pointed comments about those people who wanted peace so badly that they ended us causing another world war. The comments went unchallenged and, after arriving home, I remembered the proffered veterans talk, and was glad that these women had seen this particular film, and perhaps been enlightened by it.

In the world of middle-aged, upper middle class people on the North Side of Chicago, I seldom encountered soldiers, or even any veterans from my own boomer generation. When thought of at all, especially in those years before 9/11, military service was something for other people, or earlier generations. Yet there are offsetting places, infrequently seen, where military service is commonplace and contemporary. One such place is the Menominee Indian reservation in Wisconsin, where I spent a few vacation hours later that same summer as my visit to Dayton. Within minutes of getting out of my car, a Menominee man approached to discuss his disapproval of American flags being flown with a picture of an Indian superimposed on the stars and stripes, saying it dishonored the country he'd defended. He then launched into the story of his own military service. A little later, while watching a local talent show, a Menominee woman began telling us about her family, including a son we were watching perform in a Chicago-style blues band. Without any encouragement, she

began talking of her two sons' military service in Vietnam, the story of how one came to be discharged from the Navy over conflicts stemming from anti-Indian prejudice, and the fact of her own Irish-American husband's military service. One of the few prominent structures in the tribal headquarters village of Keshena, Wisconsin is a war monument, listing the names of hundreds of Menominee who gave their lives fighting for the United States, going back even to the Civil War.

It is among some of the colonized peoples where military participation is greatest. Puerto Rico became a territory of the US in 1898, as a result of the Spanish-American War, and some Puerto Ricans joined military units in the years following. Puerto Ricans were not made US citizens until legislation was signed March 2, 1917. Five weeks later, the United States entered World War I as a combatant. According to Professor Ana Y Ramos-Zayas of Rutgers University, "Puerto Ricans have tried to escape a stigmatized citizenship by consistently demonstrating their deservingness and deploying a 'politics of worthiness' largely centered around involvement in the US military".

Back at breakfast, a couple of the World War II veterans had asked me how it felt to meet "heroes", with a wink and a nod and a small knowing chuckle at one another. They didn't seem to feel like heroes, just guys who had done what was expected and things eventually turned out well and now it's getting to look like history. One told me he'd been an infantry gunner in Italy but had never seen a single dead enemy body. "They told me I killed lots of men, and I know I did", he said, "but I never saw anything". He just shot

his gun like he was told. Later, noticing enemy soldiers wearing belt buckle insignias identifying them as Catholics, it occurred to this gunner that he'd probably killed a number of fellow Catholics himself. It seemed to be as close as he ever came to *feeling* his actions had an effect. This knowledge made him turn introspective, and eventually he felt obliged to ask a priest if he had sinned. The priest said he had not, that it was war, and not to worry about it.

Talking with veterans of this war, I've noticed that -- to the individuals -- the war happened mostly as a series of specific tasks. Recognition might come as the result of a snap decision made in the line of fire, of enduring an extraordinary ordeal, or of being selected for a high profile mission, like then-Lieutenant Fred Olivi was, at the age of 23. Most often, people just followed orders, or tried to survive, without access to larger plans or strategies. "Loose Lips Sink Ships". The best policy was to keep people uninformed except for what they absolutely *needed* to know. I read that even the famous Jimmy Doolittle, a 3-star General and the senior US military officer on Okinawa when the crew of the *Bockscar* landed there after the Nagasaki bombing, had not been briefed on the atomic mission until the *Bockscar's* commander, Major Charles Sweeney, told him about it afterwards, describing the crew's close call in the face of poor weather and hazardously low fuel supplies. Fred said he'd heard the same thing, and added that he understood that even General Douglas MacArthur, the top Allied commander in the Pacific, had been pretty much in the dark.

My wife, Sharon, has said her father, returning from service during World War II, considered himself *less* informed about the war than most civilians. In later years he didn't like to talk with his family about his military experiences, yet he was enthusiastic about watching documentary films to learn how the war had really been conducted.

Didn't he want to forget about the war? Well, yes and no. There was the big war on film which he wanted to see. Then there were the specific experiences, which had not perhaps measured up to popular fable. According to Sharon, her father considered his military service totally un-newsworthy, and seemingly painful to remember. He had not served on the front lines, nor in any famous unit like Merrill's Marauders. According to someone I happened to meet who had served in the Army with him, my father-in-law -- a future IRS agent -- had been so straightlaced he consistently refused even to have drinks after hours with his fellow soldiers. One evening, some buddies took him to an ice cream parlor in Missouri, near where they were stationed, and secretly arranged for the soda jerk to put liquor in his sundae. My father-in-law liked that sundae so much he innocently ordered another, and that's how he finally began to relax and enjoy himself a bit. For him the war coincided, uncomfortably I suspect, with growing up.

Recalling this story recently, my wife said it had to have been crème de menthe which graced those sundaes, a liqueur for which her father maintained a longstanding fondness until the end of his life.

As a young boy, I read about Civil War veterans whose life spans almost overlapped mine, and as an adult discovered that one actually had been alive when I was very young. A few years ago I met and shook the hand of a former *Life* magazine photographer who had himself shaken the hand of this veteran -- born in 1847 and himself having once been in the presence of Lincoln -- and who photographed the ancient veteran at his home in Duluth, Minnesota, a city I had visited when the man was still alive. The photographer, himself a World War II veteran named Art Shay, recalled in a monologue his own memories of the war, including the anticipation raised by the crinkling of parachute material. In wartime scarcity such material, it turns out, was sometimes used to make women`s underwear.

Also, I remember hearing about many living veterans of the Spanish-American war of 1898. To this day, I still hear my mother-in-law speak of *her* mother-in-law's account of seeing US soldiers parading that year, as a young girl perched on her father's shoulders. "Spain, Spain, Spain, you ought to be ashamed", her mother-in-law remembered hearing. The chant went like this-

*Spain, Spain Spain
You ought to be ashamed
For doing such a thing
As blowing up the Maine*

It might be followed up with a chorus of "There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"

In the 1980s I visited Florida and stayed with my friend Ron and his father, whose voice had been permanently changed after being gassed in the First World War. Ron's dad is gone now, as are all the other American doughboys who could remember first-hand what people had, quaintly now, called the "war to end wars".

In 1999 I was glad to have the chance to get to know these veterans of World War II before there was too much precious about them, while there were still many around and in condition to climb into airplanes and relive some of their experiences and remember many things clearly and without sentimentality. At the time I knew many people who were veterans of The War, as it was always called in my house growing up, and as my Generation Y daughter still refers to it. My late father was a World War II veteran and, until the summer of 2008, so were my dentists.

At the end of the last century, a young American woman raised in Papua New Guinea told me that most carved items made on New Guinea before the 1960s were becoming rare and worth thousands of dollars apiece. On the island during the war, a friend's father was given a carved wooden walking stick in exchange for a pack of cigarettes. When I saw the elderly veteran of Naval Intelligence using the stick I asked him about it, and he said he'd imagined the thing would have continued to gather dust in a closet, but that he was slowing down and, now after all these years, he needed it. There wasn't anything *precious* about it, just an old curiosity, a war *souvenir*, being put finally to some practical use.

I wanted to get to know these veterans better, to learn about their current lives, to hear about what the war really was to them, and to listen to lessons they may have learned about war and peace in the weeks and years and decades since December 7, 1941.

After war had broken out in Europe in September, 1939, had people expected the United States would be drawn into it? Certainly, the breakfast group men said, but the public saw the threat coming strictly from Germany. All the men I spoke with about this said the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had been a complete surprise. Could they point to any evidence which, in hindsight, might have tipped them off? Yes, they said. The massive worldwide purchasing of scrap metal by the Japanese should have been a clue Japan was preparing for a new war. Some of the men said the United States should have stopped selling scrap to Japan earlier than we did, and that the attack on Pearl Harbor had likely been precipitated by the decision to, eventually, discontinue sales to Japan of US scrap materials.

Was there, anywhere in the world in that spring of 1999, a country which could represent a similar threat to the United States at the beginning of the new century? Everyone I asked said there was one particular country which could pose the same kind of threat, and in each case the answer was the same. It was their old ally, China.

Could I climb up inside the plane whose bombing mission ended the war? Fred Olivi said sure I could but, you realize, only because he was there, he wanted me to know. I climbed up a stationary set of metal rungs into the belly of the plane, whose name came from Captain Fred Bock who had earlier commanded the *Bockscar*. On the atomic mission which bombed Nagasaki, Captain Bock flew a support plane called *The Great Artiste*, which carried scientific equipment, and another plane carried photographers who recorded the bombing. Fred Olivi said that if I'd been there in the old days I would have had no rungs and you literally had to pull yourself up into the plane. I sat for a while in the navigator's seat above the hatch, beside perhaps twenty round glass-covered gauges of various sizes. On the arrival of two young Air Force officers, one of Fred's friends announced "Oh, look, we got active *duty* guys!". The officers said they had ducked out of a training session at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, where the museum is located, to meet the man who helped end the war. They were welcomed inside and, using the camera of Fred's nephew, I took pictures of them with Fred, and I took pictures of some of the other veterans, too, and Fred's nephew Jim Olivi took pictures of everybody. It was odd about the name of the plane, some of them mused. Didn't it sound *German*?

Later I climbed into the cockpit with Fred, and he spoke of how he had stayed on active duty until 1947, then served in the Air Force Reserve before retiring in the 1970s. He also worked for 36 years as a civil engineer for the City of Chicago Department of Public Works. Charles Sweeney, pilot of the *Bockscar* on the Nagasaki mission, who was living at the time in Massachusetts, eventually achieved the rank of 2-star General,

while after all those years of active and reserve duty Fred had made only Lt. Colonel. That still seemed to matter to Fred. He remembered the big and small things of his military career, recalling how nimbly he used to move about the Bockscar's cockpit on many missions -- "a fun plane to fly", he said -- while also volunteering that his own movements had recently become ungainly, due to weight gain and arthritis.

Billed at the museum as the plane that ended World War II, the *Bockscar* -- when Fred said the plane's name it had "the" in front, though he acknowledged the official name as simply "*Bockscar*" -- is one of many attractions at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, a gleaming glass and metal monument to military aviation set in a large field on the outskirts of Dayton, less than a dozen miles from where Orville and Wilbur Wright designed and built the first airplanes. By coincidence, I'd popped in to see the *Bockscar* at the very same time Fred Olivi and members of the Chicago breakfast group were there. Fred had told me they were planning a trip, and urged me to visit, too, but Les McKie said the group would avoid convention periods like the day I would be in Dayton. In the end, the group had no worry about competing for hotel space; the men had been permitted to book quarters on the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base itself, and were treated as VIPs. Fred said he had flown the Bockscar after the War, and had been in the plane a number of times since it had been put on display in Dayton in 1962, but clearly this was the first time many of his friends had seen it.

Quietly, I considered what had happened, on a single day and in this small space. By the action there of one man, the lives of tens of thousands of people were quickly extinguished, and the endeavor proved the culmination of the efforts of thousands of anonymous people. I thought of how much more being in this place would have meant to Ralph Belcher, father of a high school friend. A short and modest man, born in Cabin Creek, West Virginia, Dr. Belcher had worked on the Manhattan Project, and was later a consultant to the government and director of the University of Maryland's nuclear research reactor.

In 1945 the B-29 bomber was a technological marvel and the largest military plane in the world. It featured a big innovation, the pressurized cabin, which meant crew members could move about unencumbered, not having to wear breathing apparatus at high altitudes. Another innovation was reversible propellers, which could reverse direction to slow down the aircraft's advance. When the *Bockscar* landed on Okinawa after dropping the atomic bomb, Fred Olivi told me, the plane was travelling at the breakneck speed of 150 mph. Beforehand, four attempts had been made to send an urgent radio message to flight controllers on Okinawa, to help them prepare for the plane's arrival. All four attempts were unsuccessful. "Without the reversible propellers, I wouldn't be here", Fred said softly, reckoning the B-29 surely would have crashed into other aircraft sitting on the runway full of fuel, and triggered a massive explosion.

The "nose" of the plane, fully visible 'from the cockpit, was completely glassed in, with clear panels creating a sort of glass half-moon. Inside the half moon, in front of and a little below the pilots' seats, was the place for the man who dropped the bomb. The interior of the plane had a slightly musty, though not disagreeable, smell. I asked Fred about that. He said it was exactly the same smell it had during The War. It was the same smell as when he and his twelve crew mates, of which only three were then still alive and none survives today, climbed into the plane which hours later would drop the single bomb, destroying much of a city known for its heavy industry and naval port.

After seeing Fred in Dayton I spoke with him a few times by phone, and he told of his eroding health. I sent him a note asking for copies of his book, but months went by and his phone was disconnected. My check for the books had been cashed, and his nephew Jim said Fred had had a stroke and was in a nursing home. Jim sent me the books and then, finally -- amazingly -- another set of books arrived from Fred himself, inscribed with the handwriting of a girl.

He died soon afterwards, on April 8, 2004, and I recently re-read his obituary from the *Chicago Tribune*, which quoted him from an earlier interview on the Nagasaki bombing :

"We saved Japanese lives as well as American. I took no pleasure in killing civilians. And after four years of fighting, it wasn't a matter of revenge for Pearl Harbor. It was a matter of getting them to stop. ... I do not apologize."

My own father, scheduled to go into China on a dangerous mission in the late summer of 1945, repeatedly said the atomic bombing of Japan saved his life. I had told Fred about this during our breakfast. Inside the *Bockscar*, there is talk of the countless others saved by the quick end to the war. Some of the breakfast group counted themselves among them. I did not ask him how he felt about helping kill all those people on the ground, and I posed with the smiling men for pictures. Momentarily I thought about posing, wondered if I should intrude on their pictures, and then wondering if such pictures might look unseemly to somebody, someday. Whatever someone might want to make of it, I decided it was perfectly appropriate and natural to celebrate with these aging veterans the end of the war and the saving of many lives including, in all likelihood, those of my own father, and of some of the other grandfathers who had breakfast together every second week on the Southwest Side of Chicago.

Time stops for no generation, not even the greatest ones, and the generation that fought World War II is now waning. For me this has been sad, as well as a bit disorienting, in the same way as the realization that there are now virtually no living people with memories of the Victorian world. We have lost the anchor of people who knew those slower and more earthbound times. Today, the most elderly women you are likely to meet came of age during the roaring twenties, though I suppose some raised in remote or traditional places were shielded from the era's modernity and speed.

There are no US military survivors from World War I, but I'd come to presume that the living elderly are of an age where they could have fought in the second World War.

This way of thinking is, of course, no longer tenable. For me it became clear in May of 2011, when I was seated at a luncheon with an older gentleman from Chicago: a man with snowy white hair, surely old enough to be my father. During lunch, he happened to mention having witnessed the first atomic bomb test blast, done in a remote part of New Mexico weeks before the atomic bombings of Japan. I asked if he'd worked on the Manhattan project, to which he chuckled, and said no. The test blast was so powerful that it was witnessed from well over a hundred miles away, but the surrounding area was pretty much empty desert wasteland. I had to wonder what someone from Chicago, unrelated to the project, would have been doing anywhere in the vicinity.

The old man explained. He'd been a thirteen year old boy, away at summer camp.