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An Undecorated Marine

My father spoke little about Guadalcanal and not a word about combat.

A kid from Brooklyn, he enlisted in the Marines, received training at Quantico, and was sent to Guadalcanal in 1942. His stories of the place, as I recall, were sketchy. One was of paying a local boy to shimmy up a tree to get coconuts. In another, a Japanese plane came in and my father, taking to his heels, tripped on a burrow or tree root and broke his ankle—the only injury he suffered in the war. The inglory of this mishap didn't seem to concern my father as he related it. He also lost a stripe after brawling with another Marine who insulted his religion, and this too he reported with a minimum of narrative, neither vaunting his toughness nor lamenting his demotion, as if such drama had lost its point. These events lay in the past, after all, worlds away from the life he was building diligently for himself and his family, with the help of the GI Bill, in a pleasant suburb 20 miles to the east of Bensonhurst.

My father, or Sarge as my mother liked to call him, could easily have spun tales of exploits in the jungles of Guadalcanal and passed them off on the captive audience of his family. He did no such thing. He never even mentioned that Guadalcanal marked the turning point of the war in the Pacific; to do so would have meant surveying the war from the Olympus of history, a pretension foreign to him. (His bookshelf contained no works of history, military or otherwise, but one or two collections by the GI's cartoonist, Bill Mauldin.) A few years after returning to civilian life my father joined the Army Reserves to supplement his modest income,

and was training as a cook, no less, when the Korean War broke out on his sixth anniversary. He attributed his good fortune in not being sent into combat a second time to the efforts of his commander, Gen. Julius Ochs Adler, on behalf of his men.

General Manager of the *New York Times* in civilian life and recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross and the Croix de guerre among other decorations, Gen. Adler stood in a category of one for my father both because he kept his troops out of Korea (for so my father thought) and because he was, like my father, a Jew. All in all, my father was a kind of committed anti-hero who honored the achievements of others but did not consider himself notable and certainly did not believe in self-glorification. He believed in work. You are not on this earth to author stories about yourself but to construct a good life by the sweat of your brow. The truth is that for one like my father, who was too intent on the prosaic task of providing for his loved ones to depict himself as a hero (or a victim), constructing his own legend by telling war stories would have been unthinkable. Decency forbade it.

A sense of decency did not deter innumerable impostors from claiming that they served in elite units in Vietnam or suffered trauma there, thus qualifying for monthly compensation. Scores of these counterfeiters are unmasked in detail in B. G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley's investigation, *Stolen Valor* (1998). However, it is not just the thieves' takings that gall the authors but the damage done to our culture by the sum of their fabrications. As Burkett and Whitley show, false tales of combat in Vietnam echoed across the United States, were canonized by journalists in New York and directors in Hollywood, and went into the making of public opinion and perhaps even policy, as if in a grotesque parody of the art of building from the ground up to which my father dedicated his life. I had written critically of the Rambo

stereotype and the inordinate expansion of the concept of trauma introduced into American psychiatry in response to the Vietnam War, but not until I belatedly discovered *Stolen Valor* did I realize the extent of the traffic in other tokens and mementos of Vietnam—including what the authors refer to as a flea market in Purple Hearts.

As it happens, Burkett suffered an injury in Vietnam somewhat like my father's. One night, with his camp under mortar fire, he raced to his unit's assembly point on a hilltop without realizing that a flight of steps up the slope was under construction. "Just as a flare brilliantly lit the whole scene, in full sight of my platoon, I tripped over the jumble of planks and went crashing down the hill, ripping a chunk of flesh out of my knee."

"'Looks like you can get a Purple Heart for this one, sir,'" said the medic.

"The medic technically spoke the truth," notes Burkett in retrospect. "I had suffered a 'wound under fire' that required medical attention. We all knew men who received Purple Hearts for very minor wounds." It appears Burkett was not in fact given a Purple Heart, and he later remarks that those injured in accidents are ineligible, as a rule. And yet the criteria for the Purple Heart do not state that the wound or injury must be inflicted by the enemy, only that it "must be the result of direct or indirect enemy action," wording that appears to allow for Burkett's injury as well as my father's, which put him out of action for weeks.

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Because my father was not given to narration, I was unable able to form much of an image of his months in Guadalcanal. Only after his death did I discover John Hersey's superb

account of the Marines at Guadalcanal, *Into the Valley*, first published in the year of the events described: 1942. Having sailed to Guadalcanal aboard a ship that was soon thereafter sunk as a result of a kamikaze attack, Hersey, a journalist for *Time*, joined a company of Marines around the same time as my father. Presumably the company was much like my father's own.

The Marines landed at Guadalcanal with the mission of securing the area around Henderson Field near Lunga Point. "But now for almost two months, through ferocious attack after attack by the relentless Japanese, by land, by sea, and by air, the landing force had had to fight on." It was in this context that Hersey's unit undertook an operation to clear the Matanikau river valley of snipers. In the event, engulfed by the fog of war, company H walked right into a sniper's nest.

It is much to the credit of *Time* that in the middle of a world war it chronicled this operation gone awry. Readers were better served with the truth, as bitter as it was, than with the honey of propaganda. Reflecting on these events a half century later, Hersey suggested that clarity of vision and an aversion to fanaticism had much to do with America's ultimate achievement of victory in World War II. As he wrote with men like my father in mind,

> If you ask how a nation could win a war whose soldiers would opt for apple pie rather than a chance for heroic death, I would be inclined to answer that this is one of the main reasons why our side won. There was a lifesaving skepticism and irony embedded in the confused courage of men bred to free choice.

A golden expression of irony was the GI term “snafu,” the acronym for “situation normal, all fucked up.” The trap in which company H found itself as it advanced into the valley of the Matanikau, which was also the valley of the shadow of death, was a snafu in its own right.

Soldiers like my father had a sense of irony, fought well, and prevailed. Given the arguably critical importance of irony, and given that it distinguishes us from those possessed and blinded by some single Idea, would it not be appropriate to allow for a Purple Heart earned under ironic circumstances?

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In the 2000’s, when my father visited a VA hospital to have a prescription renewed, he learned from a clerk looking over his file that his broken ankle might actually have qualified for a Purple Heart. When he told me this I had a queasy feeling, not only because “might” was a bad omen but because I doubted that his informant was going to follow up, and even if he did, the military bureaucracy would not lightly reverse a decision that had stood for 65 years. I knew my father too well to suppose that with the passage of time a Purple Heart had lost its meaning for him, that it had become a trinket. But what was he to do? The technology he was most at home with was the desk phone, and he had never been one to seek an honor or plead his own cause anyway. In all likelihood, he had come to believe himself unworthy of a Purple Heart after lacking one for so long: how then was he to pursue his case? In this one instance, a man who threw himself into everything he did, could not really do anything. I decided to launch a letter-writing campaign on his behalf.

On the theory that helping constituents is what elected representatives do best, I wrote my father's senators and congressman as well as my own, reporting what he had been told, asking their assistance, and emphasizing that he hadn't much time left. I received polite replies, all of which I relayed to my father, but nothing happened. Consigned to oblivion, his case was dead and so it remained. Possibly it was too ambiguous to begin with; possibly a clerical notation made in the turmoil of battle had hardened over the decades into a ruling. Nor did my father or anyone else have new documentation to add to a case that had been closed for the better part of a century. In effect, he was caught in one more snafu, this one permanent.

Soon enough the responses to my pleas dried up, though I continued to receive mailings now and then from a senator's office. When a local ex-Marine learned through a third party of my fruitless efforts, he offered me his Purple Heart to give my father—an instance of the true kindness of strangers. Never, though, would my father have accepted as his own a medal that belonged to another.

After the prospect of a Purple Heart evaporated like the cruel mirage it probably always was, my father never said, "I didn't really care anyway," after the fox in the fable. He simply let the matter drop. He accepted the medal's failure to materialize as he accepted all else: a man who believed that he was here not to turn the world upside down but to live well in the world as it was given to him. Medal or no, his bond with the Marines remained, as much a part of him as the intensity of his own nature which led him to the Marines in the first place. As I learned from an acquaintance, one Presidents' Day when the pianist of the Sacramento Philharmonic boomed out the Marine Corps hymn, my elderly father rose to his feet "with his cane by his side."

When my father mentioned one day that a certain doctor was a Marine, I knew he felt well cared for. The doctor proved to be his last. When he died at the age of 92, my father's ashes were scattered in San Francisco Bay, at the gate of the Pacific, in accordance with his wishes. In the end this native of Brooklyn returned to the Marines' highway, the sea.

Sometimes I think if my efforts had been successful and my father had been awarded his Purple Heart in his last years, it would have been his proudest possession: something silently held dear because it's too important to boast of. Though not a naïve man, he had no idea that there really is a market in Purple Hearts—that you can buy one on Amazon for $58.95 plus shipping, or, with a bit of initiative, get Purple Heart license plates to advertise your merit to the world. The reduction of the Purple Heart—a medal designed by none other than George Washington—to the level of scalped tickets or a pirated Rolex would have struck my father as a desecration. For him a Purple Heart was not something you obtain but something you receive, and if he had been awarded one at long last, I imagine he would have accepted it with deep gratitude and no implication of justice delayed. But this I know: over and beyond its meaning as a military decoration, a Purple Heart would have spoken eloquently to my father of his son's admiration and love.

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