

Their Stories

A 14-year-old boy asked his grandpa, “What did you do during the war?” The answer was just the beginning.

By Nicholas Rider
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My name is Nicholas Rider. I’m 14 and last year I published my first book. How’s that? you ask. Well, it started with my grandfather.

Grandpa was a veteran of World War II, and maybe because I loved building model airplanes, I always used to ask him about what he’d done in the war. He was pretty modest about it. “Not a whole lot,” he said. Enlisted at the age of 17, went through boot camp in San Diego (“Wouldn’t want to go through that again,” he said, “but I wouldn’t have traded it for anything.”). He attended radio and radar school and was enroute to Tsingtao, China, when he became sick with jungle rot while crossing the Pacific. He ended up in Guam for six months and came home at the end of the war. “My biggest thrill was sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge and knowing I was back in the good ol’ USA.”

I looked through pictures of him goofing around with his buddies, all of them in their fatigues. It seemed like they weren’t much older than me. Suddenly the war wasn’t something that happened long ago, left for the history books. It became very real to me. *There must be other guys who have war stories to tell*, I thought.

Veterans Day was coming up so I took my autograph album and hung out in front of the supermarket, thinking maybe I’d get a few signatures (my mom insisted on coming too). When I introduced myself to a couple men who looked like vets—some wore hats or a patch—I was surprised by how much they wanted to talk. And they weren’t just talking about World War II. They’d fought in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq.

“Mom,” I said, inspired, “I’m going to make a book of their stories.” She agreed to become my secretary, chauffeur and sometimes agent.

Mom drove me to retirement communities, nursing homes, homes of friends of friends. Everywhere I went I talked to veterans. To those I couldn’t visit I sent a questionnaire: “What did you do during the war?” One had been a POW in Germany, another was on a destroyer in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, one soldier celebrated his 27th birthday in a foxhole during the invasion of Normandy.

Of all the stories I heard, one of the most vivid came from a Marine describing landing on the beach at Iwo Jima: “We saw landing craft being blown up, bodies and metal flying everywhere, the sea turning red. Rifle shells were hitting the side of the craft and we stayed hunkered there, waiting for the boat to hit the beach. There was so much crossfire

no way anyone could move. Shells, bullets, shrapnel, everything flying; so much metal in the air I don't know how anyone survived.”

Many of the vets told me they'd made it only by the grace of God, and now I understood what they meant. They didn't glorify war or brag about what they did. “I do not like war,” wrote a World War II and Korea vet. “I do not like the killing and maiming of good men and women. Although for the life of me, I do not know of any other way to keep our country safe when talking does not do it.”

Overall I have handwritten more than 700 letters to the 118 veterans in my book. I've been on talk shows, and people have written articles about me, but I remind everybody that the book is really for the men and women who shared their often difficult and painful memories with me. They've become my friends, sending me books, letters and CDs of big band music (I now count myself a big Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller fan). I've called the book *America's True Heroes* (Island Time Publishing, 2006), because that's what they are. Their stories inspire me.

Not long ago that soldier who spent his birthday in a Normandy foxhole died. He was in his late eighties. But one of the last things his daughter did for him was give him a copy of my book, showing him his page with pride. “It was my birthday present to him,” she wrote to me. One of many birthdays that, by the grace of God, he was able to see.

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