One Each

Brian Abel Ragen

I have saved the cardboard box for twenty years because I know it would have made my father laugh. When he talked about the army, one of the things he recalled most often was that everything you got came labeled "One Each." The toothbrush, the bayonet, the poncho, the rifle, everything was "one each," as if the Quartermaster Corps worried that if left to his own devices some solider might stock up on gas masks or politely decline to carry an entrenching tool. Every GI would receive one and only one of almost every piece of equipment the government issued. And when the V.A. sent a flag to cover the coffin, the box it came in said "one each," too.

We didn't use the flag, or have a military funeral. My father had lost touch with the veterans' groups, though their magazines still came to the house now and then. The years he spent in uniform seemed like part of another life, more distant even than the mythic childhood in Oskaloosa, Iowa. As relics of that time long ago, only a few objects remained. He sometimes let my brother and me play with an old metal box marked "Gillette." It was full of ribbons and badges. I still have some of them: gold and silver lieutenant's bars, now almost too tarnished tell apart, a marksman's badge with "Pistol" and "Rifle-A" clasps, the ribbons of four decorations. When I was small, and "Combat" was my favorite TV show, it was important to me that my dad had been in the war. Even at sixteen—when "Combat" had been succeeded by less glorious versions of war on television—I would have liked to see the flag placed on the coffin. I would have liked it all—the firing squad for the salute, the color guard, the bugler playing "Taps"—but adding a martial ceremony to the funeral mass would probably have taxed my mother beyond even her heroic endurance. (She died six weeks later, and my father's funeral was the last time she left the house before her final trip to the hospital; it seemed as if the only thing they had agreed on was dying young, between my driver's license and my high

school diploma.) Besides, my father's sisters, who arranged the funeral wanted to forget the war, like every other sort of unpleasantness.

He was drafted in 1941, just as he was finishing law school. His cohort of conscripts were supposed to be in for just twelve months—not counting "White Christmas," "Good-bye, Dear, I'll be Back in a Year" was the song from the 40's my father mentioned most often—but after Pearl Harbor he was in for the duration. For reasons of its own, the army assigned him to the Signal Corps. I have the insignia he wore in his collar: a torch and crossed signal flags, not the infantry's crossed rifles or the Engineers' castle. For a time he served as encryption/decryption officer for General Eisenhower in North Africa, but we heard little about that. I remember a few stories about the Casablanca conference—nothing about Roosevelt; lots about Winston Churchill's prodigious drinking. He told my brother something about deciphering cables the General received from Kay Sommersby, but that was a part of the story my father never shared with me. I was almost old enough to be a good audience for scandal when he died, so I just missed the chance to hear it.

We heard only a few war stories, and the closer my father got to the front, the less he talked about it. He had a lot to say about boot camp, where he had shared a hut with a group of Disney cartoonists. They staged an elaborate farewell service to honor the hut when they were all shipped out. He talked about a commanding officer who was not just crazy in the expected military way, but certifiably insane. But that was all in training. A curtain seemed to drop when he entered the European Theater, although he did try to entertain us with a moment of false glory from late in the war: he ran into a German battalion on a mountain road, and, much to his relief, found they were desperate to surrender before anyone else shot at them. He was able to march them triumphantly back to HQ, one man guarding a column of Nazis with a single revolver. He never told us about the bloody parts of war, even though he saw them.

It may be just as well he didn't tell us more about combat. After we had seen a confusing sequence in a war movie involving a wire stretched across a mountain road, he mentioned that in Italy both sides had strung wire across roads traveled by the enemy in order to decapitate drivers. I soon tried the same device in our driveway, using with a length of clothesline in default of piano wire. The enemy cyclist was traveling at quite a satisfactory speed when he hit the line. It was the only time I ever did my big brother a really satisfactory injury—one not serious enough to spoil the joy of conquest, but bad enough to leave a rope burn on his neck for days afterward as a sign of my victory. The memory of that triumph has given me great joy over the years, so much so that I have never been able to feel guilty about it, as I know I should, or even thankful that I avoided committing fratricide. My father's story itself was not a grim one: he recalled the steel pole he had had fixed to the front of his jeep to cut the wires, not stringing them up himself.

There were grimmer stories, but no one was a fit audience for them. I knew they were there under the surface. My father had evidently tried to share them with my mother at some point when they still trusted each other with information that might later be used against them. During their worst fights she would taunt him with hints about something—something about threatening a captured German with a luger, making him beg for his life. But that story died with my parents, and I don't like to imagine what the details were.

I didn't hear the stories he might have been proud of, either. From earliest childhood I knew my father had an important medal, the Bronze Star. It was in the same drawer as the Gillette box, but we would not have thought of playing with it. The old-fashioned script on the case made it seem too sacred for that. But I never knew what the medal was for, and he never seemed willing to tell the story. His obituary mentioned the Bronze Star, and some of his friends told us that that was the first time they had heard of it. I didn't learn how he had earned it until I found the citation in his effects.

In April and May of 1945, First Lieutenant Harry J. Ragen was in command of a construction platoon, and his job was to keep the command posts of the advancing divisions in communication with IV Corps. The citation says he worked day and night to get the phone lines laid. He made personal surveys of all the routes his men worked over, and those surveys were often made on roads under enemy observation and strafed by enemy planes. One day near Bergamo, Lieutenant Ragen and his driver were overtaken by a column of enemy armored vehicles. In "the ensuing action," the driver was wounded by small arms fire, and Lieutenant Ragen narrowly missed being hit himself. "With complete disregard for his own safety, First Lieutenant Ragen carried his driver to a position of comparative safety." After applying what first aid he could, he carried the enlisted man to a main road and found him a medic from a 1st Armored Division column. In spite of what the citation calls "these difficulties," he returned to his company with a complete report on the civilian phone circuits in the area. The citation makes it clear that the report "was a definite aid in bringing IV Corps into speedy communication with its subordinate units, at the time of its final move." It does not mention whether the driver Lieutenant Ragen carried to safety lived or died.

The medal is beside me on the desk as I write. It is a beautiful object in itself. The decoration is a simple star of bronze with a smaller star in its center, and on the back, where no one can see it, is a circle with the words, "HEROIC OR MERITORIOUS ACHIEVEMENT": I hope carrying the wounded man to safety counted as both. The ribbon is red edged in white, with a narrow blue stripe, also edged in white, down the middle. Besides the medal itself, there two ribbon bars for everyday uniforms, and a miniature enamel version of the bar for the button-hole of a civilian suit. Since I found his "Ruptured Duck"—that was what they called the Eagle issued, one each, to discharged veterans—among his tie-tacks and cuff-links, and not in the Gillette box, I think he probably put it in his lapel for a few weeks in 1946. I'm sure he never wore the Bronze Star emblem once he was out of uniform. The case also contains two spare

ribbons, provided, I suppose, in case the original should become soiled, but the ribbon from which the star hangs is still crisp and fresh—I wonder if he ever wore it after the day it was pinned to his chest. I have a photograph of that day—of Major General Willis Crittenberger bestowing the decoration on him. My father, wearing a helmet, stands stiffly at attention while a smiling, elderly man with stars on his shoulders and what I imagine is a West Point ring on his hand, pins the medal to his shirt. The picture remained in a cardboard frame in the bottom of a drawer for 40 years, but I have had it framed recently, and it hangs on the wall now, next to a picture of my father the year he died, a man of 56 with a deeply lined face.

During the war, the Army developed an odd calculus to determine how much damage had been done to each soldier. In a simpler time they might have stuck to clearer categories: dead, blind, crippled, mad. But the same institution that saw to it that each of the millions would get one, and only one, of a hundred pieces of equipment, also figured the damage by the numbers. By calculations as arcane as the ones that yield IQ scores, they determined disability to a percentage. My father bore no obvious wounds—he said he had been at one point be given the choice of a Purple Heart or a star added to another medal—but they still found the quotient of damage. I don't have the exact figure, but I believe my father was labeled 30% disabled. The VA sent him a check each month as some kind of recompense. I don't know for sure what injury was being compensated, but I assumed it was his ruined digestion. For as long as I could remember, he always had a blue bottle of Mylanta close at hand. During the last years of his life the VA took over supplying the antacid, though for some reason they would only issue it in tiny bottles about three inches high. He brought whole cases of them home after every visit to the VA Hospital: even the government saw there was no way to limit that ration to one each.

My father not a happy man, and we were not a happy family. Often I was relieved to find him passed out, dead drunk, when I came home from school, because at least that meant he wouldn't be on the rampage for a while. Over the years those of us

who are not blessed with the gift of denial have tried several ways to explain why his life—why our life—went so wrong. Maybe it was the early death of his own father (he remembered a youngish man sitting at a kitchen table trying to stave off pernicious anemia by drinking glass after glass of a hideous concoction of orange juice and raw beef liver run through a blender). Maybe it was the way his mother and sisters spoiled him once he became the Man of the Family at 12 or 13 (that was my mother's version). Maybe it was the cold, Protestant, Republican woman he married (that was my aunts' version). Maybe it was just the bourbon (that was the general consensus). My own favorite way of explaining it all has been to blame the war, to think that all would have been well, that my father would have been Hugh Beaumont's double, if only whatever happened in North Africa and Italy had not happened, if only he had been left to live a normal, civil life.

This explanation may be my own form of denial. (It cannot have been the war alone: the kindest man I ever met suffered far worse in the Pacific than my father did in Italy.) But it is still what I cling to: I do not want to blame my father—whom I blame for so much—so I lay the responsibility at the feet of Hitler and Mussolini. Like another boy who stumbled on the ruins of his father, I clutch at the idea that at least the old man was a hero: "He was brave! He was in the War! He was in Colonel Sartoris Cav'ry." It may be a foolish consolation—the bravery long ago did not make a good father—but at least I have the evidence that the story I tell myself is not, like Sarty Snopes's belief, an illusion. The picture, the medal, the yellowed sheets that tell the story over General Crittenberger's signature, all say that it is true: He was brave. He was in the War. He was in the United States Army Signal Corps.

All that is left of many of our public tragedies is a name on a stone somewhere, and the last act of public memory is a young man in uniform bowing before a woman in black, presenting her with a triangle of brightly-colored muslin and the thanks of a grateful nation. Neither of those offerings is a trivial thing. For public tragedies ramify

into many private ones, and some of the consolation we take for those grows out of the public recognition of our shared disaster. I have kept the box because it would have made my father laugh. But I keep the flag because it helps me think that my father's unhappy life was not just his failure, not just our bad luck. The unhappiness was part of the price paid for something, maybe even for something that was worth it.

Brian Abel Ragen, Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, can be contacted at inquiries@brianableragen.net.