

11-16-12 Veterans and Values

Despite the fact that I find myself turning into my mother in so many ways, as is so often the case, I am mostly my father's daughter. He was the one who explained how things worked, told stories and took us for walks. I credit him for my love of nature, learning and sense of curiosity. His values, which I imagine were further strengthened by his war experience, became my values. He was both tender and tough! Both parents were stoic, had been through so much, having grown up during the Great Depression and then raising a family (eventually of eight!) while traveling around as a military family. They did what had to be done and they didn't complain about it.

My father was ordinarily the talker but not when it came to the war. A modest man, he did not bring up the fact that he fought in World War II and in the Korean War. As children, we wanted to know more and we would ask such blunt questions as, "Did you kill anyone?" He would answer, "Oh, mainly our job was to drop bombs on places like railroads to stop the enemy troops from traveling; not places where there were people."

There was more to it than that, of course, and he dealt with it in his own way. That was in the past and now he was raising a family and he used his Airforce learned skill of piloting to provide for us. He flew a beautiful little Beechcraft for a private company for decades! It wasn't until I was a young adult that I learned more about his war experience. That knowledge was provided by others who felt they owed their lives to my father. Some families would annually send cards, gifts and greetings to my parents with expressions of life-saving gratitude to my father.

Then I discovered an old comic book with a one page story of an air battle in 1945. One block even had his name! "As the crippled ship left the target area, another B-24 (piloted by LT. Edward Vincent Drinan) dropped back to help. For over an hour, the bombers fought side by side, with *Pistol Packin' Mama* bearing the brunt of the Nazi attack." (My father's plane was named *Heavenly Body*). Every once in a while I'd look at that comic with pride. Little did I know how much was not told in those six colorful story blocks.

On Veterans Day, I take out that comic, some old photos and think about what those vets accomplished for the whole world and how the heck they managed the freezing temperatures in those planes with a nothing more than a leather jacket and cap. This year, when I opened my mother's hope chest to revisit some memories, I rediscovered a letter written two years after my father's 1996 passing. The man who flew with my Dad writes the story of that unforgettable day in 1945 as though it had happened the day before. I can't help but smile when I get to the part where he comments on my father's values: "As you know, Ed was a stickler for adhering to the letter of all regulations."

That comment was in reference to LT. Drinan checking in by radio with the rest of the crew, as to whether or not they were all in favor of going back to protect and assist a wounded

plane. He had added, “If we agree to leave the protection of the group, we could be shot down or face a court martial for leaving the formation.” The writer then goes into great detail as to the close flying formation, the skill of the pilots and gunners. He even describes one whose marksmanship had been observed during this hour long battle, and who courageously maintained his position, pointing at approaching planes, even when he ran out of ammunition. When the German planes saw his pointing gun, “they peeled off”. Fifteen German planes were shot down during that horrific hour.

The plane they protected was able to abandon their sinking ship just as they approached friendly territory of Yugoslavia. My father’s crew, all miraculously unharmed, was able return to their base. Later, he received the Silver Star as the crew commander and each member of his crew received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

The former crew member and life-long devotee goes on to say that when he talks to his grandchildren about this story , he wants them and Ed Drinan’s family “to know what a tremendous pilot and great crew commander he was, for certainly the great respect we all had for Ed made us feel invincible.”

I can’t live up to those standards but little did I know as a child that they would guide me in my life and in my career. Adhere to the regulations but also help others. Value the reasoning and value life.

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