

## FORWARD

### COUSINS

When I was ten-years-old, I was poking around in an old chest of drawers in our basement where my father kept his hand tools. Dad often had me help him with projects so I knew all about the tools and to this day I still have the knowledge and skills he passed on to me.

I opened one drawer, which I guess I had never looked in before, and found a collection of papers, photos, booklets, old earphones, medals and a pistol - a German Luger. There were photos of planes, bombs and soldiers - very interesting things - but with no knowledge or context in which to really understand what I was looking at, I had no idea why they were saved. I did get the feeling, however, that perhaps I should not have been poking around in someone else's personal space. So, I closed the drawer and put it out of my mind. Or so I thought.

I was afraid to ask my dad about his private stuff, but I could not get it out of my mind! So, I asked my mom. She was always a very pleasant lady, a great mom. The piercing look she gave me and the stern, "don't go there," cured my curiosity.

My dad and I never talked much about his war experience but he did acknowledge that drawer was full of memories – just not necessarily good ones. Nonetheless, when the topic did come up in group settings, often including discussions of someone named 'Mike' and someone named 'Gibby', he became cold and distant, often walking away. I found that puzzling but once again my mom would look at me and her eyes would say, "don't go there."

As I got older, I grew less interested in the materials I had seen given everything else that was going on in my life. Time rushed on. I forgot about the 'drawer' of painful memories and my dad and I enjoyed our times together. He put up with my quirks, habits, beliefs, phobias and occasional misdeeds as I put up with his. As I grew intellectually, the sources of my own personality quirks became quite clear to me, but I could not imagine why my father was the way he was - introverted, claustrophobic, alcohol dependent (although fully functional and never abusive) and a bit of a loner and somewhat cold regarding building new loving relationships - but a great dad anyway.

One thing that always amused me was old army blanket he kept in his car. If it were not in his car, it was on his bed. It always came with a lecture. "You should always have a warm blanket nearby," he would say to me. "You never know!"

It got so worn my mom meticulously sewed that itchy army-green blanket into a soft outer case to protect it. Thus, the lectures and the amusement continued. But that is another story.

My dad passed in 1996 at the age of 79 from lung cancer having been a former very heavy smoker (as I found out later, another result of his wartime experience). For the last ten years or so of his life after mom died, he had moved in with my older brother, John. Dad was really defeated when mom died - she was his rock in more ways than I appreciated at the time.

After 1996, my brother and I moved on and around 2006 John retired from a long and inspiring career with the Police Force, moving from New York to North Carolina. While packing, he came across a lot of Dad's things in boxes in his attic and moved them into my attic for safe keeping so he did not have to take them with him. He also gave me the old blanket which still had remnants of the outer case my mom had so carefully installed. Thinking of my dad, it went in my car!

In 2010, it was time to start cleaning out my own attic. Opening my dad's boxes was like opening a time capsule. His careers, awards and recognitions came storming out. The black and white photo albums of me

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growing up, our summer vacations and generations of people I never knew were fascinating - old high neck dresses, knickers, old cars, horse and buggies - wow!

Then I opened 'THE BOX' - it took my breath away. There were the photos, booklets, medals, pistol I had seen fifty-four years before. I stared at the contents for a long time as distant memories came tumbling forward. I Shuffled through the items for a few minutes and then it hit me - there was a story somewhere in that box that I needed to know. I hoped it was not too late to find it. I wished my dad were still alive.



I laid out the contents of that box chronologically on the floor in front of me – and thus, began the quest. I would spend many long days and nights over the next four to five years researching what I had and filling in time gaps, connecting the dots. Much of what I eventually compiled was written by others who were with my father along the way. However, a lot of it I wrote myself as only I would know the details from conversations with my mom and my brother.

Corrections and additions were made over the years as I continued to follow loose ends and find other information. Now, with 1,600 illustrated pages in in 23 chapters, seven appendices and an epilog, I finally know the whole story. I understand my dad better today than I ever did when he was alive and I ache in never having been able to help him with his pain, which was finally so clear to me. Together, three young men - George, Mike and Gibby - inseparable friends - went off to war. Only one returned. Who would have known that story was in that box?

Sadly, discovering such stories posthumously is a common occurrence for children of veterans of WWII – or, for that matter, any war. There are few WWII veterans still living today and many of the stories of those who have passed, have passed with them. Thus, another quest began to look at other veterans in my family – my WWII veteran uncle Charlie, WWI veteran grandfather Pappy, my father’s best friends, Mike and Gibby. And while I was at it, my still living WWII veteran uncle Howie and my brother, John. With years of work, all of their stories have been compiled as well as those for veteran family members of a few good friends.

That work was a labor of love that started with a need to know. The more I produced, the clearer it became that these stories needed to be and deserved to be told or they would be lost forever. In each I discovered extraordinary, untold accomplishments that I never knew about the very people I was closest too.

One year before I opened ‘THE BOX’, I found out one of my cousins, Neil Edgar, would be deploying to Iraq. First, that shook me up – I truly love my cousins every bit as much as my dad loved his cousin, Gibby. Second, I never realized he had been building a military career since 1997! How did I not know that?

Well, for the same reason

- I did not know my father’s story, and
- That my grandfather had enlisted twice in WWII, and
- that my gentle uncle Charlie was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism by taking out a Nazi machine gun emplacement with only a knife when his platoon was pinned down with no ammunition, and
- that my brother was one of JFK’ body guards during the Berlin Crisis ...

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I was fully occupied with everything else going on in my life and I never stopped to ask. Coupling that with a veteran's typical response that what they did was no big deal, the stories remain in the boxes.

Neil and I began to communicate via email. The photos from Iraq arrived first and I prayed for his safety for two years. By 2011 he was home and I was well into compiling my father's story which was consuming a huge amount of my time. As we continued to stay in contact, Neil told me about a project he was working on to build a shadow box for our uncle Charlie's service medals and awards. Charlie passed away in 1994 and he too had a box of WWII memories, another untold story. Had Neil not told me about his project, I never would have known there was another story to be written. In early 2013, the compilation of uncle Charlie's story had begun. It was completed and presented to his daughter, my cousin, Robin, by the end of the year and what a story it was!

The completion of uncle Charlie's story motivated me to begin and complete work on our grandfather, Pappy's, story, Neil's father, uncle Howie's, story, and my father's best friends, Mike and Gibby's, stories.

During that time period, 2013, it hit me that there are two other untold stories of family veterans staring me in the face. My brother, John, and cousin, Neil. There was something special about my writing my brother's story which I began to compile in 2014. While his military career had been completed by the end of 1965, I could write it with him and present it to him while he was living. In early 2015, I did just that. We cried together. I will never forget that moment. Sadly, he passed away a few months later and I thank God for giving me the opportunity to present it to him when I did.

For Neil, it was 'veteran's story' underway in real time. At the end of his career, I would be overjoyed to secretly present him with his story, compiled and written as he was living it. Some research required but not a lot of speculation and poetic license on my part for this one – just a recording of the facts as they happened.

Eventually, my incessant questions made it clear to Neil I was up to something and, until the printing of this book, Neil was unaware of my final objective. He has often expressed his appreciation for my interest in his military career and now with this book he will finally see how much I have appreciated what he has accomplished. He will never have to say to his family and friends, "it was no big deal." They can read the book.

I have often thought about how I would have behaved if I were in my father's shoes during his darkest days. Could I have coped with it? Could I have survived at all? Could I have summoned the courage of my uncle Charlie in his finest moment? Would I have enlisted twice in WWI like my grandfather? Could I have ever achieved my brother's distinction as a member of the Elite Military Police Honor Guard that would be called on to protect a US President during the uncertainties of the cold war?

I do not know and I certainly have my doubts.

Neil has constantly amazed me by what he has stepped forward to take on and then accomplish – often as best-in-class. Watching it in real time, I still have my doubts as to what I might have achieved, or even attempted to achieve had I faced the same challenges. Nonetheless, this is for certain. I love him, I respect him and he is my hero.

This is his story.

With all sincerity,

Cousin Al