

Local Heroes—

Veteran's Day: Remembering the Past... Defining the Future

By Christopher Cussat

I originally intended to write an article about Veterans, Patriotism and Heroism and how these terms related to past wars, especially World War II. With the events of the last months and with the events that may transpire between the time I write this until you read it, everything I felt I needed to report has changed. In fact, the definitions of words like veteran, hero and war also seem to have changed as recent civilian deaths have exceeded military casualties during the last, homeland attack by a foreign nation: Pearl Harbor. Should not the victims of our new War from New York City's World Trade Center and The Pentagon also be counted among the ranks of veterans lost? Are the citizens turned soldiers, who overtook the hijackers and laid down their lives in order to save countless others by forcing a plane crash near Pittsburgh, any less heroic than those who fought battles and saved lives overseas? Is the ideology of Terrorism equally, if not more evil than the bloody history of Nazism or Communism? These are rhetorical questions that we will unfortunately answer in the ensuing months and years, as this dark force threatens our ideals of Freedom and Equality and challenges us Citizens to also stand up as Patriots and Soldiers.

This is not a new vocation for Americans, for it was our civilian founders and their families who exchanged hand-plows for rifles and challenged and defeated the most powerful nation in the world. President Bush reminds us that this is a different kind of war, as the FBI asks all citizens to be vigilant and alert in order to protect each other and our country. This period of our nation's history will redefine many of the terms we associate with war. My interviews with Veterans and the questions I intended to ask changed as well, as our country now faces a new era of patriotism, nationalism, heroism, casualty and war. In talking to many of them, their perceptions of these definitions were also much different than I expected.

George Glevanik of Irwin served as Master Sergeant and Flight Engineer during bombing raids over Germany during World War II. After a raid over Ham, Germany while crossing the English Channel, Allied ground forces accidentally hit his aircraft when shoot-

ing at German fighters directly above them. The engines caught fire and the bomb-bay doors were blown off. As Glevanik instructed the pilot to dive at full throttle to successfully put out the fires, a German fighter crept up underneath the aircraft and shot apart the plane's fuel system, stalling the engines. Since it was too late to bail out due to low altitude, Glevanik took matters into his own hands (literally!), and held the fuel line together. The engines re-ignited and the plane landed with Glevanik standing on the bomb-bay opening. The force of the landing knocked him under the plane as it



dragged him on the runway. In order to stop, the pilots steered off the runway and onto the grass. With three inches of clearance between him and the plane, Glevanik barely survived and saved the lives of the nine other airmen on board. Glevanik ran from the exploding bomber as German fighters flew low for one last attack on the base, strafing the ground with fire. Another soldier tackled Glevanik just before the rounds cut him in half. These acts of heroism are not uncommon during extreme times. One only needs to think about the New York City Firefighters and Police Officers who heroically went into the collapsing Towers and risked their lives to save others.

Glevanik, like other veterans with whom I spoke, does not consider himself a hero. "A hero is someone doing something he was meant to do," he said. "People, like those in New York City (i.e. civil servants), took an oath to serve and protect because that is what they were meant

to do. Being heroic is not something that you plan." In other words, one can even call it fate.

Bob McLaughlin, a World War II army veteran from West View, agrees. When asked for his definition of a "War Hero," McLaughlin said, "Anyone in the service is a hero." Although he was referring to the armed forces, I believe he would allow his definition to include all those in "service" to others. McLaughlin's comment on recent events is that the current War is something we "have to do." "We must defend our country against terrorism...it is the greatest evil," he said.

Another veteran from the area, who requests anonymity, landed on Utah Beach, Normandy during the D-Day invasion. His response to the idea of heroism is similar to the others. He said, "every person in the service is a hero." Then he added, "Heroism means nothing" while you are fighting a war. "You are in a horrible situation that you are just trying to get through. You don't sleep or eat and your life doesn't mean a thing." In other words, you just do what you need to do and try to survive. This veteran vividly remembers an experience when he and a fellow soldier went AWOL the night before they left for England. They snuck into New York City to call their parents. "That is also heroism to me," he said. Risking everything to talk to your Mother for possibly the last time."

I wanted to interview one more veteran, but he was unavailable for comment. My Great Uncle, Sergeant Michael Lonsetta was killed in action on April 17, 1945 in the Mediterranean. He was younger than I am now, and my Father only vaguely remembers his Uncle coming home on leave. My only connections to this stranger and relative are a brownning, tan photograph of him proudly smiling in uniform and a golden, Purple Heart, with its tattered ribbon; a consolation for one life. My Father allows me to hold onto these treasures because they mean something to me. They instill in me a sense of pride, sorrow and indescribable thanks. They remind me of a Freedom and Dignity that we, as a country, perhaps sometimes take for granted. I think the recent tragic events have given us a heightened sense of these ideals, and right now, and perhaps for a long time to come, we will appreciate them completely. ▲