

**Folded Wing Ceremony
306th Reunion
September 17, 2016**

How Do We Honor The Sacrifice

by Deborah Hopper Conant

Today we are honoring two groups of heroes. Those who have died fighting for our freedom and those who have survived and lived lives with the past ever present. Many who fight in battle claim they are not heroes, "The only heroes are those who've died", they explain. But I believe those who are fortunate enough to survive are heroes too, and they carry their bravery with them. If you spend time reading books published about WWII, war-time issues of The Stars and Strips Newspaper, or listening to our wonderful veterans recount tales from their experiences, it doesn't take long to recognize the true grit that makes these men heroes. Each position on a crew or squadron had its vulnerabilities, just ask any crew member of a B-17 who was left exposed and vulnerable in the skies over Europe.

Our Army Air Corps boys faced a new kind of battlefield, one up in the air. Facing harsh weather and freezing temperatures, oxygen deprivation, flack "that one could walk on", the Luftwaffe, POW camps, and sometimes hours stranded in life rafts, if fortunate enough to survive a ditch landing. The 306's own Arizona Harris received the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism, his citation read in part: "While on a combat mission over enemy-occupied Continental Europe, the airplane in which he was serving as top-turret gunner was badly damaged by enemy anti-aircraft fire and forced out of formation. A large force of enemy planes then concentrated their attacks on this lone airplane, finally driving it to a crash landing in the sea. Throughout the decent, and as the airplane disappeared beneath the waves, Sergeant Harris was seen to be still firing his guns at the enemy airplanes. The dogged determination to fight against all odds and sheer bravery displayed by Sergeant Harris upon this occasion uphold the highest traditions of the Armed Forces..." This is just one example among many of young men giving up their future, their dreams, and their lives, for a cause greater than themselves.

Then, there were those who fought and risked death, but through chance or grace were saved from the ultimate sacrifice. It might seem easy to tell ones wartime adventures confidently from the safety of an arm chair, hindsight is a wonderful thing, but it does not always evoke the risk faced. The reality is that each time our boys went out, they didn't know if they would return. The

mental and emotional toll was real, managing it required discipline and another kind of bravery. That is a lot to ask of anyone, and that too makes our survivors heroes.

Our boys in the air, on the ground and out at sea, left parts of themselves behind. Their innocence, security, and sometimes faith were lost, yet many came home stronger and more sure of themselves than before. My dear friend Philip Mundell told me last year when we were traveling in Europe together. "I learned from the war not to make small things into big obstacles." This said as we madly dashed to catch our next train in Paris, I was verging on panic that we would miss our train and Phil calmly said, "if plan A doesn't work then we'll try plan B". A simple solution you might think, but how many of us become overwhelmed by small things in life simply because we allow it? I have attempted to apply Phil's simple plan to many things that prove stressful or overwhelming. Being a ball turret gunner gave Phil a confidence in life that was indeed refreshing.

This is the story of another ball turret gunner who stayed calm and took matters into his own hands: The Stars and Stripes posted an article about Staff Sergeant Emery Hutchins, who received the Silver Star from General LeMay in 1943. Hutchins, a ball turret gunner, was with his crew on a mission. As they were being attacked by Germans, the door to his turret blew partially open jamming his guns. Well, Hutchins didn't want the Germans to solo out his plane because the ball turret wasn't working so he crawled into the plane and grabbed a hatchet then chopped the hinges off the ball turret door and kicked it free. Then he belted himself in and continued to fight the Germans. With wind whipping and temperatures 35 degrees below zero, the opened turret must have been the place of nightmares.

Stories like these show the caliber of men who won WWII. It took millions of individual actions to win the war, each individual action is a very personal thing and we tend to reduce them into neat, tidy pages in history books. Some men returned having accomplished feats greater than they had ever expected of themselves. I can tell you I have seen the caliber of men who are and were our Fathers. They taught us to work hard for the life we want, demonstrating what that looks like, they didn't just talk about it. They taught us to give back to the communities we come from and to care for those less fortunate. They taught us to put our trust, not in ourselves but in God who "knows the very number of hairs on our head". Still at the time, many of these men had questions, and doubt.

In his letters, my father wrote, "Some of my friends are having doubts about God, how could a good God allow so many evil things to occur. My understanding is God gives us volition, mans

own choices get him into a lot of trouble, and God allows us to learn from our choices. Perhaps that's the whole purpose in allowing us to choose, we have the opportunity to become better people from the lessons learned. We have the opportunity to be thankful for good and fight against evil, and yes there is reward and a cost".

So, how do we honor the heroes of the 306th, The Eighth Air Force, and all of the men and women who have served to preserve our freedom? We honor them by not forgetting, by keeping their history and stories alive so that the next generations don't make the same mistakes. This generation gave so much, they paid with their lives, hopes and dreams to assure ours. They paid a price beyond measure, it's a debt we cannot repay or forget.

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My North Star, Ray Hoppers Letters, DHC