



Father's Day

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I am writing this article on Father's Day. But you will probably not read it in print until much later, so a belated Happy Father's Day. You don't really need just one day to say thanks anyway. Almost everyone has a story to tell about their fathers – unless those personal memories were never realized because of the loss of that parent. But even in those tragic cases... someone in that family has memories to share.

I have met a lot of fathers in over four decades in intercollegiate athletics. Proud fathers of sons and daughters who were being recruited to continue their education. Some were inquisitive, some protective, some anxious but all genuine. Those parents had been part of so many games long before that campus visit – pee wee games, youth sports, church leagues, AAU tournaments, high school athletic events... you name it. And, I might add, through all kinds of weather too. Picking kids up at games... taking them to practices... sitting on the sidelines in a cold, wet rain... adjusting schedules that might include a 5:00 AM swim practice before sending their child off to school. I always tell student-athletes, you never know how much your parents love you, until you become one.

But in addition to the sports activities, the ultimate gift of a father (or a mother) is much deeper... and much more significant. What did you learn from them – their example, their work habits, their approach to others, their ethics? These gifts, those life lessons, will last much longer than how to approach a tee shot.

I reflected back to my own father as most do on this day. Not once did we ever play catch, or toss a football or shoot baskets together. It wasn't that he wasn't athletic, let's just say, he was busy. He was a widower with three young children to raise and they needed food to eat, a place to sleep, and those bills... somebody had to pay those bills. Catch... going to athletic events... explaining the fine mechanics of hitting a baseball. Nope that wasn't going to happen... and to be honest, my younger sister wasn't too enthralled about that activity either as she kept missing my throws. But life is not all sports.

He wasn't a rich man. He knew hard physical labor, early hours and six-day work weeks. Sunday was a day to thank God. He didn't have a "white collar" job. He never wore a tie to work -- ever. His last year in school was the sixth grade. It was the depression and his "athleticism" was needed in order to work and bring home money. He worked hard, very hard but never complained or felt sorry for himself. That was a good lesson for me. Some

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people feel they are entitled to things, and then there are those who think you have to work for them. He was definitely the latter. And even though life may not be fair, or all that work may not realize great riches, you would be a better person for that effort. Certainly, there are other ways to measure riches... maybe your father or mother taught you that too?

When he died, there was no estate to distribute, no property divestment. You see, he had already passed on his inheritance many, many years earlier. But it wasn't in the form of money. It was of a greater value... and much more useful. There were three "tangible" items after the funeral that I received – an American flag given after the honor guard had fired their weapons in a final salute, a small Saint Joseph plaque holding the baby Jesus (which I think he had possessed since I was born) and a small brown 5-inch by 3-inch New Testament that has traveled more consequential miles than I ever will in my lifetime. Inside that book it reads: "The White House, Washington" and it has a personal stamped note from President Franklin Roosevelt. It is addressed to "the members of the Army." Every soldier got one in their particular faith. In the back of the book, it asked a question: "Do you know your Chaplin?" It was signed by the Chief Chaplain and it instructed that the missive "should initiate and promote a warm friendship between you and your Chaplain." I have often reflected on what was being communicated to those young men by that suggestion. These were "boys" of nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years of age. I know this for sure, at that age no one was "strongly suggesting" that I visit a Chaplain. Even though they probably had thoughts about what might be ahead, the "people in charge" were nudging them to reconcile that some would not return – ever. Many had never seen combat until that Higgins landing craft door opened that day. They needed men to keep them together... to lead them... to face that fear (and the enemy). Can you believe that type of book being passed out

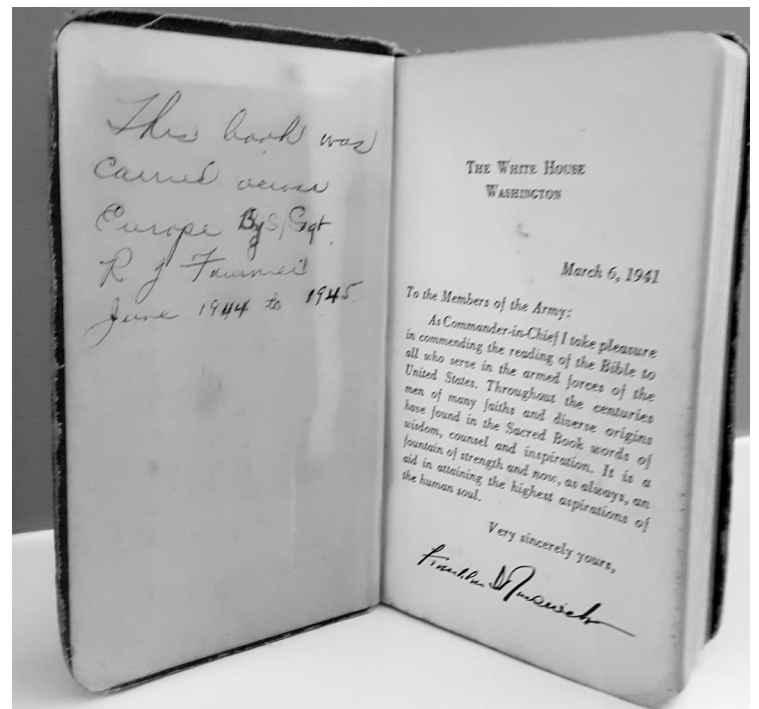


today...being printed and paid for by taxpayers? A different time indeed.

On the inside of the book pocket, is my father's hand-written note: "This Book was carried across Europe by Sergeant R.J. Fournier, June 1944 until 1945". It fit perfectly inside a GI pocket. That particular GI was part of the Fifth Army, 83rd Division, 324th field infantry that landed on Omaha Beach.

That "road trip" took them through five major battles: Normandy, Northern France, the Rhineland, the Ardennes and Central Europe – five battle stars. And just a few points along the way such as: St. Malo, Carentan Bridge, Dinard, Moselle and the Hurtgen Forrest (which folks know today as the Battle of the Bulge). Quite a journey -- fighting for people he never knew and others he would never meet...not to mention for those in America and for those who would not return. He saw flags lowered, he saw some raised and some laid across coffins.

He was honorably discharged after three years and seventeen days in the Army of which one year and eight months was spent on foreign soil. During all that time, those men never got a furlough home or connected via skype. Because of a military hierarchy system, and being a single man, he was one of the last to leave. He boarded a troop transport ship in Holland and arrived in New York City without a parade or fanfare and caught a train to Boston and then back to Lowell, Massachusetts, our hometown. At that point my Aunt told a story that I think summed up his "style". After arriving on a cold, wet Saturday evening he flagged down a cab outside the Lowell Train Station. It is alleged, he found a cab but the cabbie said "he was about to go 'off duty' and besides, you soldier boys don't tip very well." At that point my father told the cabbie that he had just kicked a lot of ass in Europe and one more in America would not be a problem. I guess you could



describe that as "genuine". There is no record if a cab fare was charged or a tip provided...but he got home. So many he knew didn't.

I once asked my Dad many years after my Mother had died why he still wore his wedding ring. I was in college and still had a lot to learn...I just didn't know it. This man of a sixth-grade education, who had fought and witnessed injustice, hatred and death up close and had seen the cost of freedom, he told me without hesitation, "well, your Mother put that ring on my finger, it will be up to her to take it off." Happy Father's Day!