

One Last Salute

Written by Margaret Evans



I spent the week before Father's Day in Woodland, CA, helping my husband bury his father.

Born in 1918, Lt. Col. Edward Evans, US Army, Retired, was a charter member of the Greatest Generation, a 3-war combat veteran whose gentle countenance didn't begin to hint at the heroic, rough-and-tumble life he'd lived. By the time I met Ed, he was 80 years old – a sweet, sentimental man with a twinkle in his eye and a stealth humor that snuck up on you. He adored his wife Lee, who passed away soon after our daughter was born. In Lee's absence, Ed doted on Amelia —"Little One" to him – though, unfortunately, we only made it out west to see him once a year.

My in-laws are all westerners – tough, stoic people descended from hard rock miners. They are infinitely sensible, unfailingly practical, and have always been a bit fascinated (or maybe bemused?) by my flamboyant southern-ness. Fifteen years ago, Jeff brought his Alabama-bred girlfriend home for Thanksgiving with his parents, aunts, uncles and cousins – "Hey, y'all!" said I – and despite my extreme otherness, they treated me like family from the get-go. Ed treated me like a daughter – and always with the genuine chivalry that is the mark of his generation, and regrettably fading with it – and I never doubted his love for me. My husband – an only child who came to Ed and Lee in their middle years – was the joy of his life.

My own dad was in the Army briefly, but I didn't grow up in military culture. So, despite the fact that I now live in one of America's great military towns, my father-in-law's funeral was the first I'd ever attended where the deceased received full military honors. It was something to behold. The small graveside service on Monument Hill was somber and beautiful, punctuated by a three-round volley and the playing of Taps. The gunshots startled my daughter and the haunting hornsong made us both cry. I don't think it had hit Amelia, 'til then, that Grandpa was really gone. (There's nothing quite like Taps to drive that point home.) When the flag-draped coffin was in place, ready to be lowered into the ground, a couple of the uniformed pallbearers carefully and methodically folded the flag into a small triangle. Then one of them – one with a chest full of medals – presented that flag to my husband, saying, "On behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Army, and a grateful nation, we present you with this flag in

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honor of your father's service."

Or something like that. I'm not sure I'm remembering the words just right. All I know is that my heart stopped. Watching my husband receive that flag was possibly the most solemn moment of my life. I'm pretty sure it was Jeff's. Though a couple of prayers were offered by family members, it wasn't a particularly religious service – my husband is not religious and neither was his dad. But the service was undeniably, unforgettably sacred. As I watched the military honors unfold, a verse from John kept running through my head: *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

My father-in-law made his entire career – his entire life – about that greater love. In not one, not two, but three major conflicts, he willingly laid down his life for his comrades and countrymen. The fact that it was never actually taken from him – that despite many dangers and even injuries, Ed continued to stand while so many of his brothers fell – well, he was just damn lucky, I guess.

Ed's nephew Curt read us the highlights of his Army record – including two purple hearts and two medals for valor – and his younger brother Jim regaled us with stories of a more personal nature. Then Jeff spoke – a eulogy he'd been working on for days – and I heard sniffles throughout our little group... the stiff upper lips of my western kin were falling like dominoes. He spoke of a man who "looked people in the eye," who "never complained," who "planted his feet on the ground every day, and just did what needed to be done." It was a wonderful eulogy, and I was proud of Jeff for getting through it. Ed would have loved it. But he'd have loved anything his son had to say. He was easy like that. And humble. In fact, I had a hard time reconciling all these tales of wartime heroics with the modest, unassuming man I came to know in his later years.

Much has been written about men like this, strong, enduring men who bore the Great Depression, served their country with unimaginable courage – and without complaint or vainglory – then went on to live lives of quiet, cheerful gratitude. Tom Brokaw named them the Greatest Generation, and the name stuck because it fits. Much has changed in this country since these men were its leaders and role models – for both better *and* worse – but I think most of us would agree that they don't make 'em like this anymore. Not only are these men mostly gone by now, but theirs is quite literally a dying breed. Their very mindset, demeanor and value system are disappearing with them. And in many ways, that's a shame.

On our way home from California after the funeral, my little family – part of the *new* breed – had to spend the night in the Atlanta airport, due to a combination of bad weather and plane malfunction. After a long day in the air, it was a most unwelcome development. For a while, I lay

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across two uncomfortable chairs, covered in Jeff's windbreaker with a stack of his shirts as a pillow, listening to obnoxious beeping noises and the droning voice of some CNN talking head. I wondered if they would ever dim the garish florescent lighting – it was already 3 am, so I had my doubts – and marveled (gratefully) that my child was somehow managing to sleep in this horrid atmosphere. I had been reading Dan Brown's new (not very good) book, "Inferno," and decided that Dante's ninth circle of hell had nothing on this place. Finally, feeling sorry for myself –and impossibly put upon – I gave up and decided to take a walk.

As I wandered, zombie-like, toward the ladies room, exhausted and bleary-eyed, I saw my fellow passengers – some huddled in groups, talking softly, others stretched out on the floor, or curled up in chairs, covered in jackets, desperately trying to sleep as the awful lights glared and the TVs blared. My heart went out to them. None of them wanted to be here. Each of them had a special destination – a vacation they were missing, or an important appointment, or maybe just that best destination of all, home. We were all in this together. It wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't such a big deal, either.

I thought about Ed... about his life as a young boy during the Depression. Though he never talked about it – that wasn't his style – I'm sure there were times when he didn't have enough to eat. When he didn't have clean clothes or shoes that fit. And here I was using a pile of nice, new shirts as a pillow . . . in an airport terminal surrounded by restaurants that would open in a few hours . . . waiting on a plane to take me where ever I wanted to go. Sleeping in a chair under bright lights wasn't much fun, but it certainly beat fighting Japanese in the dark jungles of Okinawa.

I returned to my makeshift "bed" with a new perspective and a new puddle of tears in my eyes. I not only loved my father-in-law, I admired him. I hope to honor him by being more like him.

I have a very long way to go.

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