

A SPECIAL BASEBALL CAP

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Every growing boy needs someone who is not a parent who understands what it is like just to be a kid. Someone who doesn't correct you at every turn or set high expectations. Someone who is an adult friend.

Uncle Bill was that guy for me. We lived in Kansas. He lived clear out in California, but he would always make it back to Kansas for our large family reunions. I didn't need his attention all the time. I just wanted to hang around him and listen. He seemed to naturally understand my 10-year-old self.

Bill had been a Marine in World War II. I remember him at a reunion talking with his five brothers around a pickup. He shared stories about his time on Iwo Jima. He showed his brothers a steel helmet with a sharp crease down the top and laughed about how that had "rung his bell pretty good." I didn't know about Iwo Jima then. I just knew that his brothers were enthralled by his story. I remember he came over to play catch with me after the storytelling.

For my 18th birthday, my parents treated me to my first commercial airplane ride. I chose to go see Uncle Bill at his home in the San Francisco Bay area. He treated me to my first deep sea fishing experience by booking me on a fishing charter. I left Sausalito at dawn with a group of about 20 men and sailed under the Golden Gate, the most gorgeous sight this small-town Kansas kid had ever seen. After we traveled about 3 miles off shore to begin fishing, the boat began moving relentlessly up and down on the Pacific swells . . . and I threw up every hour and fifteen minutes all day long. When we got back to shore the captain told Uncle

Bill about my rough day. Bill laughed all the way back to his house. I had been initiated to California.

The next time I flew to the Bay Area I was an Army captain leaving for my tour in Vietnam. I left my wife and two-year old son in Chicago, and cried silently on the plane all the way to Travis Air Force Base. Uncle Bill and Aunt Veva, the girl he married right after the war, met me there and took me to dinner before I was to board the flight to Nam. I was still upset and ate only about half of the large steak they bought me. I didn't have to talk much. They understood how I was feeling. I might not have gotten on that next flight had they not been there to sit with me until time to board.

Uncle Bill was the first one I called when I returned from my tour and landed at San Francisco Airport. His younger daughter, my cousin, answered. Bill was out, but he soon called me back and had me paged at the airport before I headed back to Chicago to reunite with my wife and son. Again, he didn't have to say much. He simply welcomed me home and understood as only those who have been to war can.

Years later, I was designated the surrogate dad to attend the graduation of my younger brother's son, Sam, from Marine Boot Camp. My brother had been disabled with Multiple Sclerosis and could not go much to his regret. Since Uncle Bill was a Marine, I called and asked him to join me at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego for the occasion. He was then in his mid-70s and initially begged off. I chided him that I thought Marines always stuck together and that he needed to come. He finally agreed.

I met him at the San Diego airport and we immediately drove onto the base. Bill observed that the place had not changed much. I looked at him surprised and

remarked that I hadn't realized he had also trained at the Recruit Depot. He began the story of leaving home at age 17, fifty-seven years earlier, and having to get his widowed mother's special permission to enlist. There were nine kids in the family and their dad had been killed in a car accident when Bill was 13. Older brothers, my dad included, worked to provide for the family. It actually helped to have one less mouth to feed.

So off Bill went alone on the train from Kansas City to San Diego, a teenager destined to grow up way too soon. Right after graduation from boot camp Bill was on his way to Iwo Jima after a quick trip home. He was engaged in combat at age 18 for the entire battle of Iwo Jima, landing in the third wave to hit the beach on February 19, 1945 and staying until the end of the battle on March 26, 1945. That battle was notorious for its brutality. The Marines suffered a third of the casualties they incurred for the entire war on that tiny island in the Pacific and more awards for valor were awarded than for any other single battle.

We happened on the base museum as we drove through the Recruit Depot that afternoon before the boot camp graduation that was scheduled the next day. I suggested we spend some time there. We soon came upon an Iwo Jima display. Bill looked at it quietly. He pointed out a photo of John Basilone, a Marine Corps Sergeant, who had received the Medal of Honor for earlier action on Guadalcanal and who Bill knew. He said he saw Basilone killed in action on Iwo Jima in the early part of the battle.

About that time a man emerged from an office near the display and asked if Bill was an Iwo veteran. When Bill acknowledged that he was the man invited Bill into his office for a visit. They disappeared, so I went down to the museum gift shop and decided to buy Uncle Bill a baseball cap that announced that he was a veteran of Iwo Jima. I didn't expect him to wear it, but I wanted him to have it.

When I returned upstairs Bill was leaving the office with the man who had invited him in for a conversation. He had tears welling in his eyes.

I gave him some time to compose himself then gave him the baseball cap and urged him to wear it. He initially begged off and commented that he never really wanted to tell people about that time in his life. But he finally relented and put on the cap as we left the museum to walk around the base in the late afternoon sun. In a truly astounding display of honor and admiration, every Marine we encountered during our walk, regardless of rank, saluted Bill and asked to shake his hand.

He was overwhelmed and frankly puzzled. He had never really talked about the experience and was haunted by the things he had witnessed and some of what he had done. As we walked quietly, I could see that he was deeply processing the honor he was now experiencing, something he had never sought or expected.

We went to dinner that night at a nice San Diego seaside restaurant, had too many martinis, and he started telling stories. While my experience in Vietnam was nothing like Bill's experience as a teenager during the most horrific battle ever fought by U.S. Marines, he seemed to sense that I at least had some sense of what it was like to experience war. So he told the "real" story. It was not the one he had told his brothers around the pickup at the family reunion years earlier when he could laugh about the bullet crease down the top of his helmet.

He told the stories of leaving home at 17, being alone at boot camp, visiting home once more before shipping out for some additional training in Hawaii before landing in a hell named Iwo Jima. He told about how terrifying it was to lay on the beach for several hours with so much enemy fire raining down on them from Mt. Suribachi that they knew they couldn't stay on the beach, and they also knew it

was likely certain death to go over the top. So, being Marines, they naturally went over the top and attacked.

He told stories of having to use flame throwers to oust the Japanese soldiers from tunnels and caves and how they shot the burning enemy soldiers as they emerged from hiding. He told stories of being so exhausted that he went to sleep in a shell hole holding a pistol on his chest only to wake in a start to find two dead Japanese soldiers on the rim of the shell hole and two rounds missing from his pistol, but he had no memory of shooting them.

He told stories of putting his famous steel helmet on backwards so that he could see under the raised back edge of the helmet to shoot over an earthen berm and how a bullet had creased the top of his helmet. He wanted to be clear that he had not been running away from battle as might have been assumed since the bullet hit the helmet from the rear. But he admitted he was knocked a little crazy by the impact and had to be sent to the medics in the rear for a couple of days before returning to battle.

He told stories of coming home to Kansas after the war and trying to go to junior college only to find that he couldn't sit in a classroom because a car would pass, backfire or make a loud noise that caused him to try to dive under his school desk. He told how he decided to leave school, marry Veva, the pretty red-head down the street from his house, and move to California to work in his new brother-in-law's grocery store.

He told stories of how he was confined to bed for three years after he and Veva got to California because he experienced such a severe case of rheumatoid arthritis that he would constantly wake up in painful cold sweats, sleep only 2-3 hours at a time while his new, young wife nursed him. He told stories of how he forced himself to

get out of bed and go to work part time stocking grocery shelves while pushing himself around on a grocery cart with one good leg, and how he was finally able to return to full-time work by taking way too many aspirin daily, still only sleeping 4-5 hours a night.

Bill admitted that he ended up just plain angry about his time in the service. He said that he had never told the stories he shared with me over drinks and dinner to anyone else. He was loath to revisit the horrors he had experienced and ashamed of some of the things he had done. He said these were the awful memories that you could only share with people who had experienced war. There was simply no basis for empathy or understanding. And you certainly could not share the stories with a wife or daughters. They were just too awful and revealed a side of you that you couldn't be sure people could understand and, more importantly, forgive.

I was honored that he felt confident in sharing those stories with me. I think he felt I had some basis for understanding even though my war experience was not even in the same realm of reality. I treasured the trust he had put in me.

The next day, Bill and I went to the base to observe the recruits' graduation from basic training, the day they would finally become Marines. When we arrived, the newly minted Marines were assembled on the parade field before a reviewing stand. I saw the commanding general standing with some of his staff members waiting for the ceremony to begin. Bill was wearing the ball cap I had gotten him. The general noticed Bill's cap as we got close to that group of dignitaries. He, too, saluted the former Marine corporal, an Iwo veteran, and immediately invited Uncle Bill to join him on the reviewing stand.

Bill stood next to the general while I sat a few rows behind filming them and my nephew Sam's graduation parade. Bill was overcome as the new, young Marines

passed in review before him, undoubtedly a memory of what he had experienced fifty-seven years earlier when he graduated from boot camp as one of the young Marines parading before the commanding general with all the pride that comes from “measuring up” and becoming “one of the proud, the few.”

Sam went on to serve during the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. I served during the Vietnam era. Bill served during WWII. Three generations from the same family, each serving during a different war. And the story keeps building as the experiences are shared from generation to generation.

I visited Uncle Bill several times after our trip to San Diego as he grew older. He had become successful in the grocery business, owning a couple of his own stores. He retired to Idaho where his daughters lived. He lived out a good life as he emerged into the role of family patriarch.

When he came back to Kansas for his last family reunion, I asked our Congressman if he could find Bill’s military record and find out what medals and awards he had earned. Bill shunned those decorations just as he avoided the memories of that time. I had the medals framed along with an American flag which had been flown over the Capitol by the Congressman in Bill’s honor. At the reunion, I presented them to Bill before the assembled family members. He was finally ready to accept them.

It was remarkable to see him in the living room later that day with all the youngest generation of our family sitting on the floor before him listening to stories of military service and of the “old days” of him growing up with their grandparents, the family members of the Greatest Generation.

I had the honor of giving the eulogy at Uncle Bill’s memorial service. I told the story of how, over too many drinks in a San Diego restaurant, we shared his stories

of his time in the hell of Iwo Jima. After the service, several of Bill's contemporaries and friends commented that they had witnessed a change in Bill after his trip to San Diego and had wondered why. He began wearing his Iwo Jima veteran ball cap regularly and frequently engaged in conversation with other veterans of WWII who saw the cap and approached him. He became like the man who had approached him from an office near the Iwo Jima display at the museum, a compassionate listener and fellow storyteller.

There's a catharsis that happens when you can start telling your story and forgiving yourself for what you had to do in the service of your country. It is possible to recover your humanity. It is possible to find peace in your soul. Getting soldiers to open up can be hard. Sometimes it just takes a sign that others care. For one old Marine all it took was a special baseball cap.