

# THE PASSING CAPTAINS

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Fifty Decembers have passed... many of them memorable and as in every one's life many things transpired in those periods. Keepsakes of those cold months have faded like a newly dipped paintbrush rubbed backwards to the first month. However, it is that first December standing out as the dominant period when my life's emotions crested.

Tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick...this was the merest sound daring to penetrate the solid wall of silence dominating the neighborhood where I was raised. Nothing tainted the sky; not a speck of light, not the tiniest reflection from the ocean of neon bulbs over the city only blocks away.

Despair and nostalgia slowed me from pressing the doorbell, as I walked onto the mat astride my Mama's front step. Standing before the closed door I conceded it was fitting the grandfather clock my brother sent years ago from Germany seemed to run in reverse. After an eternity away, I returned home this December seeking to resurrect my youth. Four years had past since last I was here.

"Dios mio, you are here! Hold me before I drop, no lo creo, I cannot believe it is you." Mama squeezed me with all the strength her heart possessed and shed tears depressed within her for several years. "Hijo, you look so marvelous, like a dream...you make a wonderful Captain with all your ribbons and medals."

For moments I could say nothing but in the end I said, " Mama, I am only a Sergeant but whatever I am does not count. Only that I am here is important."

The hearts of men come, perhaps rather more often than those of women, to steep places down which the least touch will cause them to hurl themselves.

I flopped on a chair, held Mama as close as I could and sensed her sobbing against my ribbons and in her chest was a vigorous pounding. At the moment all the war things were forgotten and I whimpered like a baby. I had returned home and only the clock's weird ticking and our wailing disturbed our reverie.

As fate decreed, life leveled off a few months after some of us returned from our wars and others from their own pursuits. As time went on the euphoria passed with the appropriate celebrations and the predictable hangovers. Shortly the days once again aligned themselves into old routines and in many cases newer forms of them. We were entering an era where new Captains were coming forth. Not the Captains familiar to me, with the medals, ribbons and the silver bars as Mama had misjudged on the night of my return but rather a new breed I thought as Captains of a new forward movement.

In my telling of events of that long past December and other forty nine ones following I use the title "Captain" generically, I classify my comrades of that era strong hearted, visionary and courageous, whether they carried the rifle as I did or not. In my perception we were all Captains, even if some wore metallic rankings, others wore cloth stripes while most wore only their common uniform and what their soul and heart brought

from their naive adolescent years. Additionally some in time rose to such high rankings it is difficult to believe all this really occurred when viewed from my perspective after the passage of so many decades.

Once the national war time adrenaline, which had shot so high, returned to normal the race was on to do things we never dreamed possible. The country sped in all directions with such intensity that hardly any one was left behind. And the drivers of these movements were the same Captains who had driven the war to a tremendous victory; it was incredible that many had risen from such humble beginnings.

And now my Captains became engrossed mainly in one thing, to get back step by step, the parts of their life lost or destroyed, by friend or foe, and pay themselves for everything they had dared and endured. As there was a Captain in every town and home, they became a portent. Politicians feared or wondered at them, planners and new businessmen served them and themselves through them. For they were the new country, the relentless spirit built in those horrible days when so many battles were on, never really knowing who was winning, one side or the other; they were that spirit that forgets nothing, but maintains itself amid all disasters, and necessities. For they were perhaps the most concrete expression of our country's instinctive survival in spite of its own perversity and ignorance.

Never in my wildest dream, especially during the "foxhole" days did I envision amounting to anything more than what my forefathers had been. There was honor in their labor, but that is what it was "labor" and I together with millions of others anticipated we would return to only that. What else could we expect? Many as in my case had never completed high school. And the entire country was swamped with guys like me with the military stars still in our eyes never thinking all this would end one day and the day approached faster than any of us imagined.

But subtly, while each of us had been about our "war business," this enterprise itself planted a seed within us which was to render a greater service to the country and in a special way to our families far exceeding the just-past melodrama of the turmoiled world.

As each of us strived to once again return to normal affairs we slowly realized whatever we tried, even whatever aspirations entered our heads appeared too mundane, too far beneath the tremendousness of what we had been through.

This is not to say every one was of the same sentiment. A great number were able to return to the exact position and place they had left, almost as if they had merely taken off for a long week end and whatever tools they used in their labors had barely cooled from the heat of their hands. Looking back over this more than fifty years, I would estimate about half the men returning, came to the spot they had left. Thousands of them married the girls they kissed goodbye when they boarded the gangplanks and in some cases lived out their lives in the house where they were raised and was possibly next door to where the girl kissed at the gangplank lived.

These contented returnees were Captains, in their own quiet way. Over the years when we ruminated together we conceded life was such that the "quiet little man" frequently carried not only his own load but often the load of some one above him. We

deemed successful a mortar barrage, not only for the gunner's accuracy, but due in great part to the guy who trudged beside him for miles overloaded almost to exhaustion with the ammunition. This was as true in civilian life as it was in the military.

In life there rarely is a momentous gain without some corresponding return payment. Often at moments it seems the payment exceeds the gain. But this is an untruth; a crutch for the failure of those unwilling to exert their all in search of some gain. These were not genuine Captains; not the Captains I speak of...those who refused to make this payment. However, in the main most of the men remained Captains.

I remained as close to my own buddies as if we had never left the foxholes. I was amazed at how well they did. In most cases they succeeded mightily in whatever they had attempted. Many were entrepreneurs; others advanced up in the professions, medicine, education, finance and other endeavors. A few wrote books, others managed corporations and some even became endeared politicians. Not all materially enriched themselves or moved in prominent circles but once again in their own quiet way like the ammunition carrier, they achieved some measure of accomplishment.

In time the country fleetingly called us "the greatest generation" and for a while a certain celebrity status was rendered. Books were written, movies were filmed, and television embraced the entire enterprise as if they had been asleep while all this was happening. Nearly every community went on a monument building binge, wanting to be first to grand stand with showy monuments and soon nearly every park in the country had its own W.W.II veterans' homage.

A natural phenomena; likes attract and the Captains met from time to time in their own groups, separate, but intrinsically joined as cells are in the totality of a body. Each told and retold his story. The details differed, but the profundity of the experience was all the same. That is why they were Captains.

"One infantryman would recount, "hell, I was a scout deep in the jungle in the Pacific. We were there already for ten days and it had never quit raining. Everything was soaked and all I saw was my second scout. 'You and I are the only two humans in this whole world, we could just disappear and no one would ever know what happened to us. What the hell are we doing here? Where is the Army and where are the Generals?'"

There was no end to the incredible events, " I was a paratrooper and my buddy was impaled on a tree stump on a night jump. The trunk ran through his entire body, from his nuts to his neck. The medics had to cut him in half to remove him."

Another said, "I was a submariner when we went into Tokyo bay, we sank a big ship. Our other sub was lost, my kid brother was a torpedo man on it."

Another sobbed when he related, "I was first sergeant of the company that scaled the cliffs on Utah Beach, We had ninety men in the outfit. Only twenty made it. One who did not make it was my brother, he was a squad leader."

"The plane was on fire, half the fuselage gone, I leaped, never jumped a chute before. I was a prisoner for the rest of the war. I lasted on potatoes and whatever leaves we could scavenge. I cannot tell you how cold it was, even today I have not warmed."

The telling went on and on every year at the reunions, over his drinks individual Captains' eyes would moisten when stories like these were murmured:

'The overloaded lead men dropped off the ramp on D day and never came up. The first man clearing land mines blew up and I was next, the Indian imprisoned for three years working the coal mines of Mongolia and hungering for the greasy meat of the rats abiding there. 'The ultimate exterminators'" he joshed, "'we cleaned those tunnels of all its rats'; the tank driver who lost two arms when the tank burned out." Over the decades of telling they built an encyclopedia not believed by most who were not Captains.

But the interests of Americans are fleeting. The moment the super bowl ends next year's teams are already in debate. And so as the shadows of age crept toward the Captains their status and positions were also already in question.

A man's pilgrimage through this world is never a smooth trip, no matter the road he chooses. It is a roller coaster ride, a joining of ups, downs, jerks and sudden starts. One can never foretell if the car will stop while the ride is on the high or tumble down derailed, uncontrolled. The years and their affairs subtly ebb so slyly; we are often asleep hardly ever waking up to them.

The years passed and the generation matured. The world rotated in its slow ordinary way and we counted on gravity and fate to maintain our own balance, but even so I still saw my comrades flourishing, for in my heart they remained invincible.

But just as mighty oaks one day must fall and the cliffs of Gibraltar must in the end crumble into the sea, so did the Captains' destinies abate. They were aging and night was creeping upon them.

It is money that moves people's sentiments and consciousness. Even if there had been sadness with the absence of the Captains, the very nature of the war and its requirements had set for those at home a tone of living never before seen. However, even amid all this splendor, some Captains never became involved in all this mishmash. Their hearts were left somewhere amongst the explosions.

But the money, like the adrenaline, could not persist forever as a consequence of the war. Nevertheless, within several decades affluency had stabilized and most people, except the Captains forgot the war and its characters. The monuments so enthusiastically built stood rusting and fading, collecting dust. Not too harshly, imperceptibly, but steadily the Captains lost their gloss.

Great rivers like the Amazon, the Nile, the Rhine and others have for centuries hidden their places of birth, even today experts are unable to agree where each begin. Did they start in some obscure spring, in some underground flow from a mountain lake or from a collection of insignificant rivulets joined in some hidden dale? No one can say for sure.

Under like circumstances the erosion of the reverence to the aging Captains began. No significant politician or other personage openly took contrary positions concerning them but a doubtful aura, a questionable attitude was sensed permeating

our society; invading the country. Again no one could say for sure where all these begin, like the mysterious sources of the rivers.

The Captains had years ago shown their courage, their staying power and their resolve. But nothing can ever stop or even slow the spinning of time's hourly hands. So it was taking its toll on the Captains. Those who attained higher status were first to realize their down turning. They had further to fall. The rest, who in their own way had also succeeded but might not have reached notoriety, likewise faded but since they suffered only a short fall somehow they acquiesced in a milder manner.

Day by day they abandoned their civilian duties, their businesses, their government positions, their jobs with the inevitable skimpy golden parachutes and whatever else had occupied them since the days of their youthful Captaincies. Many of the most hardy hung on longer than they should and even if "the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak". But in the end the coming of each new moon clearly signaled their time was nearing its low point on that uncertain roller coaster that they had mounted so many decades ago.

Once they were looked up to. Folks sought them out, to talk of how things were then and to seek advice. Children yearned to hear of the Great War. To their families they were champions. Their sons and daughters embraced them with great gusto not just courteous hugs. The grandchildren always rushed to find "grandpa". Aside from all this, there were their buddies and the reunions and other gatherings. They came in the early years by the hundreds, anxious to meet at the "hospitality rooms" and to tell of their grown families and other personal things. They came to talk of little Jimmy and how he was now a cardiac surgeon. They elated to talk of the successes of the offsprings, as if that was an armor against the attack of age confronting them.

However, when one or two drinks were consumed there was a fading in their delivery. Behind the bravado of how well things were going was a dimness. Hardly a word was said about them. The Captains. Each year the talks appeared darker. The hint of future ventures and plans and projected visits appeared but only as cover-ups for the way life was treating them now.

At the homes they had bought with so much sacrifice, when functions were held more often than not they were politely seated at far ends or even in corners, so as not to embarrass affluent guests with their farts and their belches; or not to brag too much of their climb of Mount Suribachi to visitors unknown to the Captain. It was a mere step from the attic where the "crazy aunt" had been hidden in the old days. What a blow to the Captain who had stormed the beach at Normandy. In whispers, it was even talked of confiscating his driver's license. His grandson newly licensed would come every three or four days, maybe.

And what of the remaining Captains? What do they say?

Recently I stood curbside during an emotional patriotic parade. The Marine band, splendid in their uniforms played the Marine Hymn as the unfurled Flag gloriously waved in a gentle breeze. I asked another aged Captain, older than I, what he felt about all this and about his service in the Corps, which I knew had been a horrendous experience for him. He wiped a tear from his eye and responded, "in spite of the hypocrisy in our

current society, I've had a marvelous life. But my one shining moment in all this, one that no one can ever take away, were my years in the service. I am so proud of having served and even knowing how terrifying it all was, I would do it again if I could."

And now regularly one of the old paratroopers passes on. In the beginning his burial was a patriotic revelation, all who heard of him came. Some traveled even across the country to hear the nostalgically familiar sounding of taps. Every one shed tears. Often there was not enough room in the churches. One could hear the rattling of the Catholic rosary beads. It brought tears to the Captains who memorialized these rattlings from their times on the C47 planes and the landing barges, decades ago.

But now, at these demises we are hard pressed to beg someone to come to these burials and blow some bugle and to ceremonially fold our flag and to render some words about one of the disappearing Captains. This task should be getting easier, for it won't be long before it will not have to be done. Fifteen hundred every day. The Captains.