



Darby Patterson

A hero who fought in two wars

Something happened to my father when he was in distant lands, fighting in two wars.

I never knew him well and have only a sketchy outline of his history, but everything seemed to begin and end in France on the beaches of Normandy and, again, somewhere in Korea.

As a child, it's easy and natural to regard one's parents as perennial adults. It's not till much later that it's possible to recognize there was a time when parents were young, frightened, uncertain — unfinished.

I realized just last week that my dad was only 19 years old when he was swept off to Europe to fight in the infantry. He came back in 1945 and was called again in 1950 to Korea. He had only a few short years with his very young family, coupled with an intense experience on battlefields far from the cottonfields of Oklahoma where he was born.

He came back from Korea changed, my mother told me — as an explanation of why he never returned to our family. I didn't know about his war record, but he was always a hero in my memory. In fact, I made him larger than life — one of the dangers of keeping parent and child apart.

It was 22 years later when I found him tucked away in a tiny Arkansas town at the foot of the Ozarks. And those unreal visions of a prince were shattered. It seemed my mother had been right. He was drunk the entire day I spent there. The only thing in his refrigerator was a quart of gin and part of a leftover hamburger. It was my turn to flee.

We stayed in touch, however, and years later I returned. He'd stopped making his nightly visits to the bar at the local American Legion and, for one lucky week, I met the hero.

He was much smaller than I had remembered him. In my mind, he'd been a tall man with broad shoulders and a shock of black wavy hair. I remembered his bright blue eyes always smiling.

Sitting there in the living room, a cigarette hanging from his lips, hound dogs at his feet — he was not the father I'd created. His shoulders had rounded and his hair had turned white. But the eyes — my eyes — were still that laughing deep blue.

He settled into his tattered easy chair and placed a rectangular velvet box on his lap. He opened it slowly, almost reluctantly. Inside were medals — a Purple Heart and a Distinguished Service Cross were among the collection. There were service ribbons and pins and a torn black and white photograph of a war buddy.

He talked to me a little about Normandy — he'd been on the first landing. I asked about his medals — I wanted to know him through the stories behind the memories in the box. But he was, a full 38 years later, unable to relive those moments for me. He muttered something about it "being in the past, no sense dredging all that up."

However, I could see it wasn't in the past and that he'd carried those memories with him throughout his troubled life.

There were visions he could never shake. Feelings that had been unbearable.

On that visit I met my father for the first — and last — time. He was a watchmaker, a wheeler-dealer, a trader, a soldier. I found him a man full of laughter, anchored down by sorrow.

Since then, I've known other men whose lives were transfigured on a battlefield. Some, such as the late B.T. Collins, turned trauma into altruistic service. Others — like my father — remained captives of the past, trying in vain to escape the visions.

When he died, I was sorry I had not known him before the wars robbed him of his youth. But then I realized I had. In those three years between the wars, he was the tall, dark, powerful man who danced in my childhood dreams.

And, later, as he tenderly touched the medals in the velvet box, I could see that he was also a hero. A man, like so many others who served and survived the battles but nonetheless, gave his life for his country.

Darby Patterson is The Union's regional editor. Her views are not necessarily those of the newspaper.