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Brothers in Arms

By William E. Paterson

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Members of the World War II generation are known for being more than a little reticent about sharing their experiences. They were reared in an era when doing one's duty - national, family or otherwise - was simply expected. "Make no complaints; expect no accolades" was the unspoken credo. While their reluctance to emote is not surprising, it has left a bit of a void in our understanding of their noble deeds, performed both on the battlefield and on the homefront.

Only in recent years have these stalwarts begun to receive their due appreciation. Why the belated fanfare? One could argue that the baby boomers finally recognized that the subject of World War II could be, well, marketable. Tom Brokaw's book, "The Greatest Generation," Steven Spielberg's film, "Saving Private Ryan," and Tom Hanks' HBO miniseries, "Band of Brothers" have given new perspective to the most globally significant war on record.

Now, as members of Generation X and beyond get their first real taste of world conflict in the wake of September 11, the efforts of those who literally saved the world more than fifty years ago are no longer irrelevant lessons in a tattered history book. At long last, we want to hear more of their stories. And, indeed, every member of this generation has one to tell.

Seven Lives for Seven Brothers

In the Italian-American community of Niagara Falls, New York, sending multiple sons into battle was a fact of life. But Vincenza DeBiase, a spirited mother of 11, went above and beyond the call of duty, watching as five of her seven sons were called to serve.

The Niagara Falls community persevered through life on the homefront with limited access to meat, shoes and gasoline - no easy task for the DeBiase family of thirteen. Vincenza and James DeBiase's oldest son, Jim, was married and not eligible for duty. He did, however, serve his community as an air raid warden. And though their youngest son, Don, was not yet of age to serve, he diligently followed his brother each night to turn off the neon air raid sign. Meanwhile, Frances, Eleanor, Evelyn and Grace were like so many daughters and sisters of the era, relied upon to stabilize the family, to help raise their younger siblings and even to put food on the table.

Brothers in Arms

With each draft notice that arrived, the pall over the DeBiase home darkened. Throughout World War II, Vincenza proudly flew a flag in her window displaying five stars, one for each son in uniform: John, Pat, Lou, Ben and Joe. Over a period of five years, she saw her sons wounded in every way that a person can be - from physical agony to indelible emotional scars. Nearly six decades later, even some members of their own family are about to share in their experiences for the first time.

Lieutenant John DeBiase - 1917–1985

Among the first citizens drafted in 1940, John was the rock of the DeBiase family. He was first stationed in the Pacific on the offshore islands of Hawaii, and later trained in armored artillery at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. In 1944, John was sent to France with the 3rd Army, where he served as a First Lieutenant under General Patton.

John, a gifted writer, frequently exchanged letters with the family back home. Each word he penned was carefully crafted to reassure his anxious parents and siblings that all was well. Fortunately, many of John's letters have survived. One of his typically upbeat notes contains a telling afterthought: "...which reminds me, it's a darn good thing I am here, what with all my younger brothers growing to six feet and more, I'll need every bit of strength I can accumulate to handle them. I hope I get home before Donald grows up or I'll have to take a back seat all the way around at home." The underlying message to his mother was, "Don't worry, we're all coming back."

John's inner strength was genuine. Rumor has it that he once saw an officer standing upright in clear view, making himself an easy target. He yelled to the man, "Get your ass down before you get it shot off!" That man was none other than General Patton.

But tragedy struck in 1944 when John fought in the Battle at Metz on German soil. A severe wound resulted in the amputation of half of his leg at Saarbrücken, in November of that year. In February 1945, he wrote several letters home that omitted details of the pain and fear he endured in that bloody, life-altering moment on a muddy German battlefield. Instead, John's letters spoke of wonderful hospital care, and the fact that he had, "everything I need and more." His accounts of moving around in his wheelchair contained not the slightest trace of bitterness or melancholy.

At that very moment, John's younger brother, Joe, was MIA. John wrote home an uncharacteristically frank letter saying, "I'm hoping and praying he's a prisoner, but I'm afraid he isn't. I guess we have to face that it was almost bound to happen to one of us - only I hoped it would have spared Joe, Louie and Pat." He would have switched fates with his brother in an instant. Back home, a distraught Vincenza canceled Christmas.

John was discharged in December 1945, receiving both the Silver Star and the Bronze Star. And, for leaving his leg on a French battlefield, he was awarded the Purple Heart.

Major Patrick DeBiase - 1919–present

Blessed with the DeBiase head for business, Pat graduated from Niagara University in 1942. But in September of that year, he was sent to the Quarter Master Depot in Indiana. It was there that he met his soul mate: Joyce Garrett.

Brothers in Arms

In November 1943, Pat was transferred to Camp Lee, Virginia where he expected to stay. So he and Joyce made plans to be married in April 1944. But war conditions changed, and a new assignment was pending. Further complicating matters, Pat was a staunch Catholic, while Joyce had been raised a Southern Baptist. At the time, the Catholic Church would not perform such marriages in church - although couples could be married by a priest in the sacristy. Like many young couples, Pat and Joyce hoped to wed before the uncertainties of war muddied their future. Luckily, they found a priest in Maryland who agreed to marry them, even though they were not members of his parish.

As if the situation weren't tenuous enough, Pat had no leave time and was due to report back to camp in three days. So, Joyce took the train from Louisville to Richmond where they exchanged vows. The nation's capital served as a brief honeymoon site, before Pat had to hurry back to Camp Lee. Two months later he received a wire signed by General Eisenhower to report to London by plane ASAP.

As an officer, Pat summoned all of his resources to locate his brothers during his many supply trips throughout Europe - a tough task given the tight secrecy during that period. Eventually, Pat met up with Joe in northern England just before he landed on Omaha Beach. He found Lou in southern

England before he left for France and the invasion of Marseilles. And he was able to catch up with John in Paris, just before he left for his ill-fated assignment in Metz, Germany.

Pat retired from the Officer Reserve in 1946, and received the Bronze Star for his Service of Supply activities during the Battle of the Bulge.

Corporal Benjamin DeBiase 1921–1997

Ben was drafted into the Army Corp. of Engineers in 1942. His experience would prove to be the least physically grueling of any member of the DeBiase family - but no less challenging. Ben arrived at basic training prepared to endure a service commitment as intense as those of his friends and brothers. But during his training in the mountains of Tennessee, Ben came down with a case of frostbite severe enough to earn him a medical discharge. He was sent home to his family without ever leaving U.S. soil.

Naturally, Ben considered himself extremely fortunate. But, while he was spared the danger of the war raging overseas, Ben was left to contemplate the question, "Why me?" that plagues many survivors. The experience clearly impacted the way Ben approached life from that day forward. He was determined to take advantage of his second chance and to make the most of his time.

To that end, Ben began working tirelessly at the age of 18 - in fact becoming something of a workaholic, putting in full time hours at his printing business right up until the week he passed away.

Staff Sergeant Louis DeBiase - 1924–1994

In 1943, Lou was drafted and assigned to go to Europe with the 7th Army. He served in the Quarter Master Corp., handling supplies in France and Germany. When he was drafted, his parents were positively distraught. Losing a fourth son to the war effort was simply more than they could bear. Lou's father, in particular, just couldn't understand why the country was taking another son from him.

Nonetheless, James dutifully delivered his son to report at Fort Niagara. Within days, a heart attack

Brothers in Arms

claimed the life of the DeBiase patriarch - ironically, the family's only casualty of war. To this day, his sons and daughters refer to the cause of death as a broken heart. All of the sons came home for the funeral, one of the few times all seven would be together. The fact that Lou never saw frontline action in the Army was overshadowed by the fact that his draft notice may have played a role in his father's passing. In 1946, Lou received an honorable discharge.

Army Private First Class Joseph DeBiase - 1925–present

The last DeBiase brother to go to war, Joe's experience was by far the most traumatic. He joined the 423rd Infantry Regiment, seeing duty in England, France and Belgium. The early days of Joe's tour were uneventful, as evidenced by a note he sent home in early 1944 saying that, "The worst is over."

But on December 14, 1944, that would all change. Joe, another soldier and their sergeant were sent to take a small farmhouse near the Siegfried Line for use as an observation post. Joe and his companions cautiously neared what appeared to be an abandoned building. All at once, a sniper lurking inside shot Joe in the left leg - though the enemy quickly met his maker with a grenade hurled by the sergeant. Joe's mates headed to Schonberg, Belgium to get help, expecting to return the next day. Meanwhile, Joe lay wounded, shivering and hungry.

Unfortunately, the following day came and went without the arrival of reinforcements. So Joe buried the dead German soldier in the hay, fearing retribution should he be found by the enemy. Joe knew that the delay signaled trouble, a premonition confirmed by the roar of jet engines and tanks on the morning

of December 16. As artillery shells peppered the farmhouse, Joe hid under a sofa and quietly prayed.

By December 19, Joe knew he'd soon be discovered by German troops, and decided to try his luck surrendering as a wounded soldier. So he gathered up his remaining strength, and set out on the rough, frigid road to Schonberg. Suddenly, an American jeep emerged from the woods. They had been trying to get to him for days, but had been in hiding due to the German onslaught.

The soldiers were under orders to surrender, but an unexpected shell saved them the trouble. The trailer overturned, and everyone onboard was injured, including Joe who was hit with shrapnel in his abdomen and leg. The enemy transported their new American prisoners to Schonberg. There, at a church hall, the dead and wounded poured in, creating what Joe recalls as "a scene of mass confusion and chaos."

On December 22, finally warm and free of shrapnel, Joe joined the exhausted walking wounded on a march to Prum. According to Joe, "We were loaded onto boxcars and taken to Linburg, Germany on Christmas Day, and then forced to walk three days to another train station." The journey continued until they reached Stalag 4–B on New Year's Eve. "We were freezing cold and had nothing to eat but putrid soup," says Joe. After two weeks of paralyzing hunger, Joe and 35 others were sent to Gorlitz in Silesia where they were indentured to repair railroads and labor in a blanket factory.

In February, Joe got what could be considered a break only under those unimaginable conditions - he was assigned to work in a bakery, shoveling sawdust into the oven fireboxes. Each day, he hid loaves of bread in his overcoat in order to feed his starving friends. Joe says, "I'd toss the bread into the

Brothers in Arms

iron-barred window when the guard wasn't looking. Then one day, a French baker snitched on me." Joe was severely beaten for his actions and relieved of his post. But not before he traded two loaves of bread to a German soldier for a P-38 pistol that would later come in quite handy.

By the end of February, Joe was shipped to a frigid camp at the Elbe River, where nearly everyone was suffering from dysentery. Here, Joe and others worked to repair bombed out railroads - until they were abruptly evacuated in late March.

Suddenly came a glimmer of hope. As one of the horses keeled over in the frigid snow, the starving Germans stopped to make a meal of the fallen animal. Joe and five companions recognized their opportunity. Joe says, "We were sent into the woods to gather wood to cook the horsemeat. We decided to make a break for it." Using Joe's bartered pistol, they stole a Studebaker truck and headed for the Czech border, where they eventually met the 1st Division, 3rd Army.

Weeks later, the war was over. But many of the prisoners left behind were never heard from again. Were it not for his daring escape, Joe likely would have suffered the same fate. However, he refuses to view his actions as heroic, insisting that his good fortune was a combination of "self-preservation, teamwork, street smarts and the goodwill of strangers."

Joe's ordeal earned him a Purple Heart - an honor for which he paid dearly. He also received European Medals of Honor and a Combat Infantry Badge.

From Boys to Men

Joe, John and Pat each landed on Omaha Beach at various times shortly after D-Day. All but Ben were involved in battles that saw friends and enemies alike draw their last breaths. In the end, one of Vincenza's sons would leave his leg in the European theatre - three others their innocence. Yet, each

of the DeBiase brothers understood that they could have lost so much more. Over the next fifty-plus years, the brothers rarely spoke of the war, to each other or to anyone else. To them, the experience is best left unremembered. For the rest of us, quite the contrary is true.

William E. Paterson is a business writer living in Niagara Falls.

Lifeless

By Carol Dee Meeks

Lifeless by Carol Dee Meeks

Lifeless

A human body without a soul,

and faith without works is dead, grows cold.

Our faith exhibits to all brothers
love and compassion needs of others.

Expedient, is the action verb.
Ingredient, in food as the herb.

Our faith exhibits to all brothers
love and compassion needs of others.

Perhaps those less fortunate that we
or those in bondage wanting to be free
escape our minds, we promise prayer
then turn and run, we leave them there.

Our faith exhibits to all brothers
love and compassion needs of others.

We can come alive, give God glory
and share with all those His magnificent story.

It'll help increase the quality of their life.
It'll help increase the quality of our life.

Then we won't become as the Dead Sea
without outlet, stagnate and dirty.

I am recently retired and love the new found time I have to pen my heart's desires. I hope to exalt my
Saviour with my writings.



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100% Effective Natural Hormone Treatment
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