

HALLOWED ICON

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Leland Davis

The scene: the cramped, bombardier's quarters on a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, seven miles high over Vegesak, Germany. The time: a day in March, 1943. The assignment: destroy a vital U-boat yard, ringed by multiple anti-aircraft batteries, manned by some of Germany's most accurate. As Lt. Jack Mathis, lead bombardier in a squadron of B-17's adjusted the cross hairs in his Norden bombsight, suddenly a round exploded inside the plane, shattering his arm, tearing into his abdomen and blowing him back toward the bomb bay. Now the lead bombardier is responsible for sighting on the target and being the first to release his bombs so that the other planes in his group can use this as a signal to toggle off their bombs at the same time. Knowing that the other planes were waiting for his cue, Lt. Malthis, according to his citation, "by sheer determination and will power, though mortally wounded, dragged himself back to his sight, released his bombs, then died at his post of duty." The bombs were dead on. In a quiet ceremony at an airfield in Texas on September 21, 1943, an army general presented the Congressional Medal of Honor to Mathis' mother. His was the first Medal of Honor awarded for action in the European theater in World War II.

It was with a growing sense of both reverence and awe that I pursued the story of this highest award our country can bestow. As I read the descriptions of the heroic acts of some of the soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who have received it I wasn't surprised to learn that at least two occupants of the White House -- Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson -- told recipients that they would rather have had the Medal than become President.

Conceived in the 1860's at the behest of Abraham Lincoln, and first presented in 1863, the Medal has a colorful and inspiring history, culminating in the standards applied today for awarding this most respected award. In their provisions for judging whether a man is entitled to the Medal of Honor, each of the armed services has set up regulations which permit no margin of error. The deed of the person must be proven by incontestable testimony of at least two eyewitnesses; it must be so outstanding that it clearly distinguished his gallantry from lesser forms of bravery and beyond the call of duty; it must have involved the risk of his life, and must be the type of deed, which if he had not done it, would not subject him to any justified criticism. The Medal is received strictly for those who act of their own accord, and out of complete selflessness. In his book, *The Medal of Honor*, Alan Mikaelein writes that "if the Medal today has an intangible and solemn halo around it it is partly due to those men who did not survive to wear it." During the Second World War, for the first time, more awards for the Medal of Honor were made to dead men than to the living. The same was true in Korea and Vietnam. Of all who have received the Medal since it was authorized only 147 were alive in 2002.

What kind of men were they who were worthy of this hallowed icon? Some of the recipients rose to prominence after they returned home. Douglas MacArthur, Jimmy Doolittle, Eddie Rickenbacker, Bob Kerry, Daniel Inouye, Audie Murphy. But the overwhelming majority were what we might call ordinary people, with no discernibly heroic character qualities until that moment came for the supreme act of courage. Let's look at the stories of some so honored.

It took inconceivable courage to participate in most any of the charges in the Civil War, but to do it as the flag bearer, to rush ahead of your comrades into a wall of fast-moving soft lead, and to do it again and again, took a very special kind of soldier. And remember the assignment was voluntary. The man who bore the colors was the most vulnerable in the regiment. He carried no weapon, fired no bullets. His mission was to give his comrades and indication of where the line stood, and whether they were advancing or retreating. All sets of eyes kept one eye on the flag and one on the enemy. And the enemy, of course, kept the flag bearer in their sights.

Bringing the flag bearer down, everyone knew, was the most effective way of dismantling an attack. Not only did the loss of a color bearer demoralize a regiment, it created confusion by leaving in question exactly where the point of the attack lay. The command "rally round the flag" was used not simply to inspire patriotism, but to prevent a rout. Leopold Karpeles served longer than most flag bearers were able to serve without receiving a crippling or mortal wound, and wrote in an 1863 letter, "I am aware that while I am providing a rallying point and courage for my comrades, I am also a prime target for the enemy. I vowed to accept that risk when I assumed this obligation which I consider a privilege and an honor. My dedication to my country's flag rests on my ardent belief in this noblest of causes, equality for all. If my future rests under this earth rather than upon it, I fear not."

For his actions on the second day of the Battle of the Wilderness, May 16, 1864, made possible by a bravery fueled only by his desire to see "equality for all," Karpeles was awarded the Medal of Honor.

The Battle of the Wilderness was fight like no other in the war. The terrain made precise maneuvers worthless. "A consistent line of battle on either side was impossible," one veteran remembered. The visibility was cut to a few yards by the thick underbrush and the morning fog and dense smoke from the muskets and forest fires. Swamps, bogs, creeks and ravines broke the land. The battle was described variously by fighting soldiers as "one no man saw or could see," "a battle of invisibles with invisibles," and in the words of one Confederate captive, no more than a fight between "howling mobs."

The 57th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry marched into the fray with Karpeles in the lead. Almost half of the 548 men of the 57th who went into the Wilderness either didn't come out or didn't come out whole.

At one point the right wing of the line crumbled under the Confederate guns, bringing about what Karpeles called a "general stampede" of the other regiments upon

the Volunteers from Massachusetts, who readily joined into the retreat. This is exactly the sort of situation the presence of a color bearer is supposed to prevent, which is what Karpeles tried to do. Climbing on a stump which had just been created by an incoming shell, Karpeles shouted to Lt. Col. Chandler, who had assumed command, "Col, the rebs are around us!" Far across the field, General Wadsworth, who was leading a division to reinforce the rapidly folding wing spotted Karpeles's colors, one soldier related later, floating proudly and defiantly amid the sulfurous smoke in the face of the advancing foe. He also witnessed Karpeles standing firmly, entreating the retreating men streaming by him to re-form and make a stand against the enemy. Karpeles' heroism had brought order out of chaos. Later, in the battle of North Anna he was struck by a bullet in the leg and fell to the ground. He recovered his position, and his flag, and charged again until the loss of blood made it impossible for him to go on.

After five months of convalescence during which time he fought to rejoin the fight, his doctors grudgingly allowed him to rejoin his regiment. Once there, however, his wound reopened and became aggravated, and he was once more sent to recuperate, in much worse condition than he was before. His service in uniform was over.

His Medal of Honor citation reads simply, "While color bearer, he rallied the retreating troupes and induced them to check the enemy advance..." The story of his heroism was pieced together from an incredibly detailed description contained in a book by Warren Wilkinson titled *Mother May You Never See the Sights I Have Seen: the 57 Massachusetts Veteran Volunteers of the Army of the Potomac, 1864-1865*.

We turn next to the story of Samuel Woodfill, a member of the A.E.F. in World War One, reported from sources such as three Cincinnati papers: the Commercial-Tribune, the Cincinnati Enquirer, the Kentucky Post and the Kentucky Times Star. "Maybe there are people who are born with silver spoons in their mouths, but I had no such luck. However did come near being born with a gun in my hands. And I've had one there almost ever since." Sam was exaggerating only slightly with those words from his memoirs. Marksmanship was his art, passion, and occupation.

As he brought his skill to perfection, the First World War broke out. This was the war to end all wars, many believed, and the beginning of riflery's obsolescence. "Whatever may have been my qualifications as a soldier," Woodfill remarked, "more than anything else I was just a woodsman and a hunter, and the time came when I was called upon to put my frontiersman's craft into service in a war of airplanes, poison gas, machine guns, and massed artillery."

Learning how to shoot in the forests of Kentucky by the age of seven, he had already become a marksman. By the age of ten he was terrifying the squirrels in the neighborhood coming home with not one but two armfuls of dead squirrels.

On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war against Germany. Sam had already joined the army having served in the Philippines and soon was granted a temporary commission as a second lieutenant. Shortly he was to demonstrate how wrong one of his

peers was who remarked that Sam's notorious skills with the rifle didn't have a chance against the machine gun. In April, 1918 he landed in France and was in a few months to take part in the Argonne offensive, Pershing's final push.

As Woodfill put it in his memoir, it was "forty days of rain and mud and death and general hell such as no American army had ever faced." At one point he took his men forward through a fog-shrouded wooded area to find the German line. Suddenly the fog lifted and three machine gun nests opened up simultaneously. Men began falling left and right. Woodfill felt that the only thing to do was find where that first machine gun was and get it. He later wrote, "I didn't believe in asking my men to do something I wouldn't do myself." Soon he was off alone with his rifle and made it to a shell hole and found the problem. From the right, firing was coming from an abandoned stable. From the left, it was coming from a church tower over 200 yards away. From dead ahead, it was pouring out of the natural cover of the forest. Woodfill couldn't see the gunner in the church tower, but he did see a window slit, and placed a bullet there. The firing stopped.

Examining the stable he noticed a clapboard had been removed. Again he fired into the place most likely to conceal a gunner, and again, the firing stopped. With threats on his flank gone, he rushed to a fresh shell hole, then another. As he "pancaked" on the ground, he noticed he was winded, gasping for air. His hole contained a patch of mustard gas, so he moved on quickly before he took a lethal lungful. He slithered off to the side, reaching a clump of thistle which concealed him. Crawling slowly forward through ditches and shellholes, his vision blurred and watery, he shot twenty Germans before falling back with what was left of his company, most of which was missing. His captain had been killed that day.

He slept that night in a soggy foxhole and woke up feeling ill from the effects of the mustard gas he has breathed the day before. After yet another damp night out in the open he was removed to the hospital where he spent ten weeks fighting off the effects of the gas.

Samuel Woodfill was awarded the Medal of Honor in France in 1919, and was mustered out at Ft. Thomas, Kentucky, in November, 1919.

Forgive me if digress for a moment and comment on how chapters in our history sometimes come to light quite by accident. One of the sources I examined as I followed the story of the Medal was John Pullen's book, *A Shower of Stars: the Medal of Honor and the Twentieth Maine*. Pullen is a noted Civil War historian and author who is my friend and former boss at the old N. W. Ayer & Son advertising agency in Philadelphia. Although John was a creative director on several major Ayer accounts, he often spent his weekends among piles of personal letters and memorabilia from the Civil War era, which became his first book. I was one of the writers under his supervision. Our offices were directly across from a park area, adjacent to Independence Hall.

One day there was an excavation at the park due to the rupture of some piping beneath the surface. As the digging progressed there gradually appeared the remains of

hundreds of skeletons, the publicity about which resulted in an extended study of the area. It was eventually revealed that this West Washington Square Park was originally an American prisoner of war camp, maintained by the British during the Revolutionary War, and the bones were those of American soldiers who had perished there. Soon there was an outcry to proclaim the site as a historic treasure and funds were made available from Washington to build a monument to The Unknown Soldier of the Revolutionary War. The assignment was given to the creative department at Ayer to come up with appropriate words for the monument. Of those submitted, and there were hundreds, the one that was chosen read: FREEDOM IS A LIGHT FOR WHICH MANY MEN HAVE DIED IN DARKNESS. The author was John Pullen. Due to the great success of *The Twentieth Maine*, John retired from Ayer and wrote more books about the Civil War.

It seems almost unreal, from today's perspective, that only 23 years passed between World Wars One and Two. And yet the character and scope of hostilities were so vastly different. Reading through the Medal of Honor citations, beyond being mesmerized by the heroic acts described, I was struck by the vast difference in the roles and responsibilities the combatants in the two wars. Here are Sam Woodfill, fighting in a ground war as an infantry rifleman, and Maynard Smith, a ball turret gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress firing at enemy fighter planes five miles above the earth. I guess I was particularly intrigued by Smith's citation because I was a B-17 gunner, flying 52 combat missions over Europe during World War Two, and experienced the same kind of flak and enemy fighters that he did. I could easily visualize the exact spot on the plane where his Medal of Honor deed took place, and I felt the shudder of the plane as anti-aircraft shells exploded close by. These were 20 pound shells, each set to explode at a certain altitude and spread about 1,500 shunks of shrapnel over a 20 yard radius. Even though Luftwaffe brought down more planes than the gunners on the ground, flak was more feared by bomber crews. Fighters you could shoot at. Flak you just had to take.

Let me give you a little background about the situation when Smith flew his first mission. In May, 1943, the casualty rate for air crews was 82 percent. From May to October, 1943, the pool of airmen was diminished by a third each month, for a total turnover of 200 percent. In actual numbers 6,300 men were killed or captured during that time.

Smith earned his Medal of Honor due to what happened when his plane was returning from a mission to bomb German submarine pens at St. Nazaire, France. The pilot had flown the plane into thick clouds to shake attacking German fighters. Somehow, disoriented in the clouds, the navigator in the lead plane made a tragically wrong turn. Although he thought he was coming up on the English shoreline he was actually descending on the heavily fortified German-occupied town of Brest, on the westernmost tip of France. They passed over at 2,000 feet and were unaware of the error until the guns opened fire. Smith watched one Fortress fall to earth, then another. The pilot struggled to get the plane out of range, then "took it to the deck" – just hundreds of feet above the ground, when the fighters came in at 6 o'clock. Smith was firing when he could, but the fighters had the advantage. By now they were over the English Channel. "I was watching tracers from a Jerry plane come puffing by our tail," recalled Smith, "when

suddenly there was this terrific explosion. *Whoomp!* just like that.” His intercom was dead, and his electrical controls were gone. There was no reason to stay in the immobilized turret, so he cranked the hand controls, opened the hatch, and climbed out. The enemy had scored a direct hit that ruptured the gasoline tanks which started a blazing fire. The entire midsection, the bomb bay and the radio room was ablaze, which cut Smith off from the men in the front section of the plane. The pilot, co-pilot, top turret gunner, bombardier and navigator were trapped, unable to reach the waist doors to bailout.

In the midsection, just as Smith climbed out of the ball turret, the radio-operator-gunner came running from his station, where the fire had started, and was at its worst. “He made a run for the left waist door and dove out. Dove right out,” Smith recalled. “He jumped high and failed to clear the horizontal stabilizer. He must broken into a dozen pieces.” The young man was never seen again. He had been on his 21st mission, just four missions short of a ticket home. (At that time 25 missions was required to complete a tour. By 1944 when I arrived number required had been raised to 50.)

Now Smith was alone in the compartment. He wrapped a sweater around his face and grabbed a fire extinguisher. The tail gunner joined him moments later, crawling and groaning and in no shape to help. Smith saw that he had been wounded in the back with a 20 millimeter shell fired by one of the German fighters. His lung was punctured and he was falling into shock. Smith rotated him on his side, wounded side down so the blood wouldn't drain into the one good lung, gave him first aid and a shot of morphine, then turned back to the fire.

He turned to the radio room where the blaze had burned a man-sized hole that was bad for the plane but handy for his immediate needs. He tossed out pieces of burning equipment and belts of 50-caliber shells, shielding his hands only with the sleeves of his flight uniform. Finding that his parachute hindered his movements he took it off and tossed it out, noticing that a bullet had ripped through it, making it probably useless if he bailed out.

The severely wounded tail gunner needed his attention briefly and then once again the fighters were back. Most of his ammunition was gone but he fired at them with what he had until they broke off. Up front the pilot couldn't understand why they were still in the air but concentrated on keeping the plane straight and level, avoiding any maneuver that might stretch the fragile fuselage to the breaking point.

Smith saw that they were approaching land, the pilot trying for the nearest airstrip. By now the fire extinguishers were used up and still the fire persisted, burning additional holes in the fuselage. He emptied all the water bottles he could get his hands on, then totally frustrated, he zipped open his fly, reached for the last thing he could think of to use, pissed on the flames, then beat on them with his hands and feet until his clothes began to smoke.

Smith fought the fire for 90 minutes as it ate through the plane. He finally put out

the last flickering flame as they touched down, hard. Moments later, the plane broke apart as if it had been straining to hold itself together and now sought only rest. "All I know," Smith said at one interview, "it was a miracle that the ship didn't break into in the air and I wish I could shake hands personally with the people who built her. They sure did a wonderful job, and we owe our lives to them."

Inside the plane the fire had melted the metal of the camera, radio, and gun mounts. The fire had gutted the entire radio and tail wheel sections. The control cables and the oxygen systems were shot to pieces. One of the propellers was shattered; the flaps had been raked by cannon shells and the left wing gas tank was destroyed. There were about 3,500 holes in the plane from projectiles of various caliber.

Smith was immediately recommended for an award by his pilot who wrote that when he first heard about the fire he thought that the mission would be his last deed alive. He claimed that Smith had "performed acts which by the will of God alone did not cost him his life, performed in complete self-sacrifice and the utmost efficiency, which were solely responsible for the return of the aircraft and the lives of everyone aboard." Thanks to the *Stars and Stripes* article by Andy Rooney, soon everyone had a chance to fall in love with the short, 130 pound sergeant whose most prominent feature was his bulging Adam's apple and who answered to the nickname of "Snuffy."

Smith's Medal of Honor ceremony was the first to take place in the European theater. On the day he was to receive his award, in order to publicize the significance of the event, seven generals, 25 Air Corps officers, technicians from two radio networks, General Ira C. Eaker, commander of the Eighth Air Force and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson were assembled for the occasion. And yet only a short time before it was to take place there had to be a frantic search to produce the hero to wear the Medal. Smith was discovered on KP duty where he had been assigned a week of punishment for arriving late at a briefing.

The award scene was witnessed by Andy Rooney who had first reported Sergeant Smith's heroic act. He had done quite a bit of work on Smith, and really wasn't surprised at the fact that the unlikely hero had landed himself on KP. "From the time he entered the Air Force," wrote Rooney, "he had been in some kind of trouble over one petty matter or another. 'Snuffy' was, in fact, known by the fourteen other inhabitants of his Nissen hut by an Army phrase for which there is no socially acceptable replacement. He was a real fuckup."

So here was just one more example of someone we might term an ordinary person, of no special distinction, except that in a moment of terror and crisis, performed an incredibly selfless act that saved the lives of six of his fellow airmen.

The war was fought in the air on many fronts. Probably the most famous fighter pilot in the South Pacific theater was Greg "Pappy" Boyington, better known as "Black Sheep One," the leader of a pack of misfit pilots known as the "Black Sheep." (Their story was dramatized several years ago in a television series where Robert Conrad played

“Pappy.”) They called him “Pappy” because in his early thirties he was at least 10 years older than most of the men under his command. His Medal of Honor citation reads as follows: “For extraordinary heroism and valiant devotion to duty as commanding officer of Marine Fighting Squadron 214 in action against enemy Japanese forces in the Central Solomons from 12 September, 1943 to 3 January, 1944. Consistently outnumbered throughout successive hazardous flights over heavily defended hostile territory, Major Boyington struck at the enemy with daring and courageous persistence, leading his squadron in combat with devastating results to Japanese shipping, shore installations and air forces. Resolute in his efforts to inflict crippling damage on the enemy, Major Boyington led a formation of 24 fighters over Kahili on 17 October and persistently circling the airdrome where 60 hostile aircraft were grounded, boldly challenged the Japanese to send up planes. (What the citation doesn't use, in the interests of propriety, is the language Boyington chose in issuing his challenge, like “Come on up and fight you yellow bastards.”) The citation continues, “A superb airman and determined fighter against overwhelming odds, Major Boyington personally destroyed 26 of the enemy planes shot down by his squadron, and by forceful leadership developed the combat readiness in his command which was a distinctive factor in the Allied aerial achievements in this vitally strategic area.”

What special quality in the character of men who earned the Medal of Honor caused such daring, such total disregard of personal safety, such willingness to risk mortal danger “above and beyond the call of duty?” None of us who learn of their acts can escape asking the inevitable question, “How would *I* have reacted in similar situations?” One of the torments I struggled with as a B-17 gunner involved how I would get my best friend, our ball turret gunner, out of his cocoon-like position should we be hit and were going down. Would I have the time before bailing out myself? Would I *take* the time? Luckily as shot up as we were on many missions I didn't have to answer that question.

Yes, it is both a humbling and an inspiring story indeed, the story of this hallowed icon, the Medal of Honor and of the extraordinary courage of the men who earned it.
