

A WAR STORY

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Budget paper with Steve Strauss and Gibby Carey

(Theme: What you want isn't necessarily what you get.)

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“War is Hell!” That’s how General William Tecumseh Sherman saw it, and he was on the winning side in the American Civil War—a war which has arguably had more influence on our national character than the American Revolution. On the losing side, General Robert E. Lee said, as he looked over the bloody battlefield of Fredericksburg, “It is well war is so terrible -- or we should grow too fond of it.” If all mankind, even the generals, denounce war, why can’t we just get rid of it forever and live in peace? Why? Because we can’t abolish history. The history of the world is a history of war, not of peace. Peace is merely a temporary lull in the fighting; it has never been a lasting human condition. And during those temporary lulls we call Peace, we go on preparing to fight the next war. Pacifists argue that peace would finally prevail, if only men would stop fighting. Their argument would make sense, if men were always rational, but the causes of war are never rational, and men have always fought against each other, whether as tribes or as nations. Nothing really changes except the names of the enemies and the deadliness of the weapons. Think what would happen if all the men of good will ever stopped defending themselves: men of ill will would rule over us. And what would happen if women ruled the world? They would still need armies of men to defend them, and the fighting would go on just as before. Let’s face it: we may say we hate war, but if, at any moment of history, we are not ready to fight the next war for what we believe in, we are doomed to lose that war, which would be worse than not fighting it at all.

I came to this sober conclusion in studying my own family history, which has been at war in every generation I know anything about. My great-great-grandfather was born in Georgia in 1775, just as the American Revolution was starting. He was too young to fight in that war, but when the War of 1812 erupted, he was called to serve in it, and did so long enough to win bounty land in Mississippi when it was over. My great-grandfather was born in Mississippi in 1830, and he was old enough to fight on the losing side in the Civil War, but lucky enough to survive it. My grandfather, born in Mississippi in 1861, was only an infant during the Civil War and so managed to escape military service. But my father, born in Mississippi a generation later, in 1895, grew up in time to join the American army as it entered the First World War. He had by then taken the family westward to Oklahoma, where I was born in 1927, just in time to serve in the Second World War. My own war story begins with the sad fact that six generations of my immediate family have served in five wars; however, it starts with the happy fact that none of us have been killed in those wars. It's also a happy fact that none of my sons or grandsons has had to serve in any of the wars that have erupted in various parts of the world since they were born. They haven't had to, because we have a volunteer army now, not a draft, and none of them were forced to enlist. Americans have been fighting as hard as ever, in Korea, in Vietnam, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and some are still fighting. But we fight wars today with fewer men in uniform and without the need for conscription. That means we have become more efficient in fighting wars, not that we have stopped fighting them. None of the men in six generations of my family have been killed in a war, but there has been a war in every generation, and lots of men have gone on fighting and dying in them

I happened to be one of the lucky ones, but not by my own choice. I wanted to be one of the fighters, when I enlisted in the US Navy in 1945, just as the Second World War was

coming to a bloody end, and my war story might have ended there. But I was disappointed: I was born too late. A close friend of mine, born a few months earlier, was one of the unlucky ones. He never came back. He was drafted into the army just in time to storm the beaches of Normandy on D-day with thousands of other American soldiers, and he was killed before he was 19, one of the millions of casualties in a war we had to win. If we hadn't won it, we might be speaking German today, because Adolph Hitler was out to rule the world, and he came perilously close to it. I outlived my friend, due entirely to an accident of birth. I was as eager as he was to go off to war and fight for my country. I wanted to graduate from high school and enlist in the American military, and in those heady days of youth, I felt ready to conquer the world. I was so eager I didn't wait for the draft to take me; I signed up for the Navy fresh out of high school, and waited, day after interminable day, for the mailman to deliver a letter from the government ordering me to duty.

When the message finally came, in July of 1945, I was elated, sure the great adventure of my life was about to begin. I drove from the middle of Oklahoma to the middle of Texas to report for service in the military ranks for as long as they might need me. I didn't want the war to end before I got into it; I wanted to fight for my country in Europe or the Pacific, but by the time I enlisted, the news had already come in on the radio—that was how we got the news in those days—that since April the war with Germany was over. The war with Japan was still raging, however. Japan had hit us with a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, before we were ready to fight, and Americans were thirsty for revenge. By mid-1945, we were gaining on the Japanese island by island, but no one thought the war would be over soon. As a boy, with war news coming in every day, I had constructed balsa wood models of fighting planes--Army Lightnings and Thunderbolts, Navy Cougars and Grumman dive bombers—and my fondest

dream when I joined the Navy Air Corps in 1945 was that I would learn to fly a fighter plane, so that one day I would know how to take off from the decks of an American aircraft carrier, shoot like a rocket over the ocean, and bring down a Japanese kamikaze in flames. What the war meant to me was a moment of glorious victory for America and of crushing defeat for our enemies. That's how I saw it when I signed up to be a cadet in the Naval Air Corps. It took me a while to see how wrongly I pictured war.

It was the prospect of heroic combat that had started my adrenaline flowing. I dreamed not only of taking off from the deck of an aircraft carrier, but of engaging in aerial dogfights high in the clouds against enemy aircraft. I didn't care whether the enemy was German or Japanese. What I did not imagine was a bloody conflict that might end in my death, rather than theirs, or in their victory, rather than ours. I thought of war as a struggle of mind and will more than of flesh and blood, and I took it for granted we would win and I would survive. That was before the Navy took me in and started training me for battle.

Then something happened that changed the whole course of the war for me. I received my orders in July of 1945, and in August of that year American planes dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities and the enemy surrendered. The war was suddenly over. Only a month after I enlisted, there was, in fact, no longer any war to go to. The news that came in over the radio now was that the Japanese had surrendered and the war had ended. The Navy was suddenly forced to cancel its plans for fighting that war, and there was nothing left for it to do but start preparing for the next war. I wondered what the Navy would do with me when there was no longer a war to fight, and the answer came quickly: it sent me to college. The admirals in Washington must have decided that a useful alternative to battle would be a college education,

since it would prepare men to man a desk as well as a plane, and the Navy could go on just as efficiently in peace as it had in war. My duty now, as an Apprentice Seaman in the Navy, was to go to college rather than go to war. That wasn't what I had dreamed of when I signed up for the Navy, but it turned out to be a happy solution, since my first tour of Navy duty would eventually result in an academic career. In a total of three and a half years of Navy service, I never saw the sea, but the Navy did start me on a course toward my lifework, which, as I didn't know then, was going to be college teaching.

So my war story begins when I reported for active duty in the Navy in Oklahoma in the summer of 1945, and was sent immediately to North Texas Agricultural College (now the much larger Arlington State University). My first tour of duty was to go to class in a blue monkey suit and white sailor cap, while the Navy was still making up its mind what else it would do with me now that the war was over. NTAC, as we called it, consisted of a few drab yellow brick buildings on the edge of a small town, between Dallas and Fort Worth, (home to the Texas Rangers baseball team today) but it was better than it looked. My teachers were not educated farmers, as the name North Texas Agricultural College might suggest, but highly competent teachers of Physics, Mathematics, English, and Current Affairs, the basic subjects the Navy required us to take. I liked all the courses, and would have been glad to go on studying at NTAC, but after one semester I was shipped a few miles east to Dallas for two more semesters on the campus of the much larger, more respectable Southern Methodist University, where I lived with my Navy messmates in Atkins Hall (which we quickly dubbed the USS Atkins). We were in training to be sailors, so we were taught to think of our building as a ship: the floors were "decks," the walls were "bulkheads," the ceiling was the "overhead," and the bathrooms were "heads." The drinking fountain, owing to the ancient Navy practice of providing a

barrel of drinking water aboard ship, was called “the scuttlebutt.” We went to classes—now happily coeducational—in uniform, and in those patriotic days, going to class in uniform made you the envy of college boys and the idol of college coeds, not as now a ripe target for a protest march. The courses were more demanding and the competition was fiercer at SMU than it had been at NTAC, and I had to learn a lot about engineering, the required curriculum for Navy V-5 cadets, taking courses such as Descriptive and Analytic Geometry, Chemistry and Physics. But the Navy allowed us to take a few elective subjects, and that was where I started learning about English Literature, which would eventually become my major. Being a college freshman in a Navy uniform wasn’t such a bad life, but it had nothing to do with what I had signed up for, which was going to war.

The war wasn’t forgotten, but it was behind us. The next war was still to be fought, so after a year and a half of college, the Navy would finally send us to pre-flight training, to begin shaping us up as pilots who would be ready to wage the next war, in the Pacific or the Atlantic or in whatever ocean separated us from whatever enemy might suddenly rise up against us. That was when I saw with relief that at last I was going to learn what I signed up for, how to pilot a plane, a spine-tingling experience for sure, but the time for it hadn’t come quite yet. I first had to learn how to follow orders, a valuable kind of training in itself. I think at a certain point in his life every young man should be forced simply and unquestioningly to follow orders. It shapes character in the formative stage better than anything else. I would never go off to war, but I did eventually enter a profession in which you had to earn the approval of your elders before you could become one of them. That’s one thing the Navy taught me well, never to question orders from my superiors. If they said march, you marched. If they said sit still, you sat still. You did exactly what they asked and they told you exactly how to do it. Today, unquestioning obedience

to a higher authority strikes many young people as a form of slavery, but I saw it as a necessary form of discipline, and it saved me from being forced to choose a profession before I knew enough to make the right choice.

By then I had discovered that going to college was exhilarating, and I willingly submitted to a bewildering variety of courses foisted on me without any choice. I didn't know at that time what I wanted to do with my life, but I knew I liked studying, and I was given a free opportunity to find out what I liked to study best. By the end of a year and a half of college which the Navy forced upon me, I had begun to see where my strongest interests lay. The process was one of elimination more than of conscious selection. I liked studying math and science well enough, but I liked studying English and German even more, and I especially liked having to write essays on literature. As a mere college freshman at SMU, I was assigned to write a research paper on a subject of my choice in the vast field of English literature. I had been a reader all my life, but my reading list was long on boys' books and short on genuine literature. However, I liked a challenge, and so I boldly and foolishly chose to write an extended essay on T.S. Eliot's mind-boggling poem, *The Waste Land*. It was a long way over my head, but I chose it because the textbook we were using in my English class said that no two critics had been able to agree on what Eliot's poem meant, though they all agreed that it was a masterpiece. I thought if I could write something about it that would be acceptable to my teacher, a kindly spinster named Sue Stimson, totally lacking in sex appeal but enthusiastic about poetry, she might see that I shared her enthusiasm for poetry, even if I barely understood Eliot's radical experiment with poetic form and content. It was an act of sheer audacity on my part, but it was my first piece of literary criticism, and it started me on my career. I am sure I was trying to seem more sophisticated than I really was, but all I can say is that it worked. Miss Stimson gave me an A for my very first

venture into literary criticism. She probably admired my courage, and didn't understand the poem any better than I did. It was a turning point in my life, since it told me that taking on a challenge beyond my grasp was better than sticking to the tried and true. I might have made an easier choice, say Tennyson rather than Eliot, but then I would have ended up in Victorian rather than Modern Poetry, and I know I never would have been happy there. So simply following orders from the Navy to get ready to fight a war had led me unknowingly toward what would become my life's vocation, studying and writing about Modern Literature.

Then the Navy did finally do something more concrete and practical with me than sending me to college: it taught me to fly an airplane. There I had to meet a challenge of a very different kind, as much physical as mental, for getting ready to fly meant to undergo the most rigorous exercise routine I have ever undertaken. I had been subjected to stiff workouts from the day I reported for duty, but now it became a deadly serious matter, so as to be in perfect physical shape for learning to fly a fighter plane. For this ordeal, the Navy sent me a few miles west of the peaceful campus of SMU in Dallas, to a Naval Air Station at Grand Prairie, Texas, fairly near NTAC, my first Navy station, on the road to Fort Worth, where it had set up a pre-flight school for only one crucial purpose: to give its naval air cadets the acid test. The acid test was to fly solo in a training plane and land it as if on the deck of an aircraft carrier at sea. Failing to pass this test meant "washing out" of the V-5 program and being sent to boot camp as a common sailor. That would have been sheer ignominy, and I regarded my new challenge as a choice of life or death. In just eight lessons, each lasting only an hour, I had to learn how to fly a plane all by myself. Since the alternative would have been humiliating; I had no choice. At 18 going on 19, I was forced to grow up. The Navy suddenly treated me as an adult, totally responsible for my actions, whether for better or worse. My flight instructor was a young Navy pilot, only a

few years older than me, and the equipment was primitive: a Stearman biplane, a propeller driven two-seater with open cockpits, not much different from the original Kitty Hawk biplane invented by the Wright Brothers. No wonder it was nicknamed the Yellow Peril. Since I had originally committed myself to train as a pilot on an aircraft carrier some day, the Navy quite reasonably wanted to find out whether I could actually fly a plane all by myself, before investing thousands of dollars in making me a fully qualified pilot. At this make-or-break stage of Navy flight training, lots of brave young men unwillingly washed out of the program, and never had to undergo the rigors of real flight training. The attrition rate in Navy Pre-flight was said to be over 50 per cent, and the Navy made sure we knew it. I was determined to qualify to go ahead and become a naval pilot, entitled to wear an officer's uniform with wings on it. I knew that if I made it, the next step would be the regular Navy Flight School at Ottumwa, Iowa, which seemed as remote as heaven to me at the time. I got to that heaven, all right, but it didn't last long, because in the fall of 1946, after a month in the heart of the Iowa Corn Belt, enduring more tough classes in meteorology, Morse code, and celestial navigation, I was given the choice of an honorable discharge from the Navy and I jumped at it.

That was not, however, before the Navy had secured its investment in me. By then, though, it was late 1946, and the threat of war seemed long past. I had learned all the lessons I wanted to learn in uniform. I had endured eight hours of flight instruction on the Texas prairie, hundreds of miles from any ocean. I had taken off and landed by myself on what was undoubtedly the flattest piece of land between the Gulf of Mexico and the North Pole, and I had done so exactly as the Navy instructor had taught me, as if I were landing on the deck of an aircraft carrier bucking ocean waves, with only a tailhook to stop me from skidding into the water. That was the final trick you were taught in Navy Pre-Flight: you had to stall the plane

and land it softly, as though coming down on the flight deck of a carrier at sea. My instructor showed me how to land that old Yellow Peril tail first, so that it would catch the imaginary cable stretched across the deck of the carrier, and stop me from skidding off the end of the deck into the ocean. If the tail of your plane touched down before the wheels did, you had made a perfect Navy landing. Happily, I passed the acid test, but only after defying death many times during my eight hours of instruction. I sat for eight hours in an open cockpit, in my aviator cap with the earphones plugged in, held down by my seatbelt and nothing else, right behind my instructor, who was seated in the front cockpit and barked instructions by means of a tiny intercom connection that was barely audible. He put me through all the paces necessary to make a perfect landing, Navy style. I learned first how to throttle up to the crucial groundspeed and take off, by pulling back on the joystick, how to mount the plane to cruising altitude, how to stall it out by lifting the nose of the plane slightly with the elevators, how to loop the loop by raising the nose and keeping it raised until it had flown full circle, how to kick the rudder to make it go left or right, how to bank the plane and fly it upside down, hanging by my seatbelt from the open cockpit, even how to do the fanciest maneuver of all, called the “falling leaf,” in which you banked the plane left, then banked it right, sinking down slowly over Grand Prairie, Texas, between Dallas and Fort Worth. I didn’t dare look down, but I did learn how to land, slowing the plane by cutting the engine and raising the flaps, drifting slowly down to the field, then stalling the plane ever so gently, nose up, hitting the tarmac tail first, making a perfect Navy landing.

That’s how I did it, once and only once, a long time ago, in the summer of 1946, and I was lucky enough to survive intact. I look back on it as my personal coming of age. I can see, with the benefit of 66 years of hindsight, that by the simple act of flying solo in a training plane, I did actually fight and win a war. It was a war with myself. I had mastered the worst of all

fears, the fear of death, and had come out alive. What the Navy finally taught me, when it made me fly solo in a training plane over the Texas prairie, as if I were in a fighting plane taking off and landing on an aircraft carrier, was how to overcome the fear of death. That's my personal war story. It wasn't what I expected when I signed up to go off to war, but what I learned from it was one of the most valuable lessons of my life. Overcoming the fear of death: that must be what war means, to anyone lucky enough to survive it.