

The Declaration of Independents



ELECTION DAY IS NOVEMBER 4—DON'T FORGET TO VOTE. VETERANS DAY IS NOVEMBER 11—DON'T FORGET TO REMEMBER.

The Unsung Veterans

by Elaine Luddy Klonicki

I was born in 1957, just 12 years after World War II ended. Like most baby boomers, as a youngster I was interested only in things that were new and hip. Bell bottoms, Levi jeans, Carole King records. I'm the youngest of eight children, so my parents were older when I was born. Middle-age parents with old-fashioned ideas were sometimes hard to bear. By the time I was old enough to be aware of world events, the cultural revolution of the late '60s was going on. One brother had served in the Air Force in Korea; another was in the Army in Vietnam. To me, World War II was ancient history. My father was a brilliant but quiet

Until it was too late.

Several years ago, while helping my mother pack for a move to an independent-living residence, we found his love letters. Over 50 of them, by the time we were finished.

Romantic, engaging, and inspiring, they revealed a side of him we had not known. They were filled with words of encouragement for my mother, telling her to keep her chin up during troubled times. Perhaps they were also the words he needed to hear?

Embedded in the letters were also bits of history, details about his naval officers' training and the progression of the war. Reading them, I felt such a mixture of emotions.

Grief for the lost opportunity to

almost every waking moment for months so he could join the war as soon as possible? Or that, as a young ensign, his best buddy was Wellington T. Mara, later the long-time owner of the New York Giants. He never mentioned Key West or Miami, where he was stationed, or blackouts, or rationing, or war bonds.

We never heard about The Sylph, the Navy yacht on which he trained for a few days despite seasickness fears. I wonder if he knew that the antics on the TV series *McHale's Navy* were derived from Ernest Borgnine's real-life experience as a first-class gunner's mate aboard The Sylph? Dad didn't tell us anything



Motor torpedo PT Boat. Photo by United States Navy, Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Ralph Radford.

man. He was a good dad. Like most men of his generation, he spent the majority of his time working hard in order to pay the bills and put food on the table. He wasn't much for talking and, like a typical teenager, I wasn't that interested in his life anyway.

know the real man, to hear his stories in person, to ask questions. But profound joy in the physical permanence of the letters, his beautiful handwriting, his struggles, his undying love for my mother.

Why didn't he tell us that he'd been a "90-day wonder" who trained

about the gyroscopes he studied at the Brooklyn Navy Yard for four months, training he never got to use because of an apparent Navy snafu. And although we'd watched the movie *PT-109* together, he never once mentioned that he headed the section base that repaired PT boats.

I guess, to him none of it seemed worth the telling. It was just his life. All that had been long ago, when he was a much younger man doing his duty during wartime. I'm sure he didn't consider himself to be extraordinary, or to have lived through extraordinary times.

I've spent the last two years transcribing the letters and reconstructing the story of my parents' early life together. My mother is 89 now, but she has an amazing memory, especially for that time period. Unlike Dad, she's a born storyteller. I was able to verify much of what she told me via the Internet. I even located a copy of a *Collier's* magazine from March 28, 1942, which featured the men of the Prairie State.

Together, Mom and I went through bins of mementos, newspaper clippings, and photos. We found Dad's Navy yearbook, *The Sideboy*, and a dance card from the ship's farewell ball the night before his graduation and my parents' engagement luncheon. No longer ancient history to me, this was living history, my history.

My dad was never awarded any medals, but I know he was a hero. They all were. The men who died, the men who lived, the women who went to work, the ones who waited at home and rolled bandages for the Red Cross, the WACs and the Doughnut Dollies.

Suddenly we're the middle-agers, and many would argue that we're still self-involved. But I think we know that the greatest generation is leaving us, and before long it will be too late to thank them for their sacrifice and tell them how fortunate we are to have known them. ■

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Robert E. Lee and the Spirit of Conciliation

by Barry Yelton

As the country agonizes about the contentious political season, war in the Middle East, and the rise of hostile powers around the world, the current political situation threatens to divide our country even more deeply than it was during the Vietnam era. We as a people need guidance. Our nation's Civil War provides many lessons about conciliation and the results of failing to reconcile. Possibly the greatest single positive example from that war was the life of Robert E. Lee.

For most Americans today, if they think of Lee at all, he was someone they read about in high school history. Perhaps they saw a portrait of him astride his horse, Traveler. To most, he is a figure from an ancient and hopelessly retrograde culture who could not possibly have any relevance in the new millennium.

History itself seems mostly irrelevant to the vast majority today. "Why should we dwell on the past, when it is dead and gone? This is the Twenty First Century!" I would submit that history has exquisite relevance for this and any other generation. The people who passed before us, with their combination of heroism and butchery, triumphs and foibles, were, after all, made of the same stuff as you and I. Cultures have changed, as have attitudes, but the human animal in most ways has not. We have the same desires, hopes, and aspirations, and we all still have our prejudices, as much as we may protest to the contrary.

Lee was indeed a product of his time and his culture, a man who tolerated human slavery even as he personally deplored it. He led an army that was the instrument of a racist and repressive society that, though one which held itself to be civilized and indeed enlightened. While he did hold such a post, and certainly held it with incredible energy, creativity, and

resolve, at the same time he was by all accounts kind-hearted, humble, and sincerely religious.

He was a man who subsumed his own selfish desires and ambitions to do his duty as he saw it. As war became imminent, he actually turned down the honor of leading the Union Army, which had all the advantages necessary for success, because he was a Southerner and could not lift his arm against his own. Instead he chose to cast his lot with his countrymen and kin in a dangerous and desperate struggle. Given his considerable abilities, it is highly probable that had Lee accepted the command of the Union Army, the war would have been shortened by two years or more, and that Lee would occupy a place in history alongside Washington and Lincoln. Lee was no fool; he knew this very well. Still he chose what he believed to be his duty over self-promotion.

His actions after the Civil War demonstrated a very rare strength of character. After the South's humiliating and devastating defeat, many of his subordinates and various firebrands wanted him to call out bands of diehards to fight a vengeful guerilla war in the mountains and backwoods of the South. He most certainly could have done that, but he refused. It would have divided the country to this day, in a way which would make what happened in Northern Ireland look like a Sunday School picnic.

Instead he urged his former soldiers to put aside hatreds and return to their farms and shops, and to rebuild the society, which had been destroyed, to put behind them the bloody and bitter struggle. He was a voice of conciliation and forgiveness. He neither said nor did anything to encourage the voices of discord. He put his Christian faith into practice under the most difficult of circumstances.

Lee was a man who respected heritage, and he was of a noble lineage with family ties to George Washington. But he never attempted

to cash in on his name, which was venerated almost as deity in the South. One insurance company offered him \$50,000 per year (a king's ransom in 1865) to be its President. When he protested that he knew nothing about the insurance business, he was informed that he did not



Robert E. Lee. Reproduction property of Luc Gravel.

need to—they just wanted to use his name. To this, he quietly replied that his name was not for sale.

He also did not become bitter and lash out verbally at his former foes. Instead, he took the helm of the nearly defunct Washington College in Virginia and spent his last years training the young to deal with the realities of the new United States of America, building what today is Washington and Lee University.

If he were alive today, I believe Lee would have a very different message from many of our contemporaries who like to wave the Confederate battle flag. Many of these “neo-Confederates” talk a lot about heritage and pride. However, the messages on both sides of Confederate flag debates are divisive, and often sown with arrogance and

resentment. It is safe to assume that he would encourage the races to be done with hatred, and to move on in harmony; to cease and desist from the continual one-upsmanship that pervades our social and political life today. To give more and demand less.

This is the key for Americans today. Our commercial and capitalist society, with all its advantages, still encourages self-interest and greed at the expense of compassion and generosity. Our competitiveness tends to stifle the higher impulses to conciliation, which many consider a sign of weakness. In fact, it takes far greater strength to conciliate than to confront, to forgive than to hate. It is easy to show hatred and lack of compassion, but it takes strength to reach out.

I believe we should learn from our past, take the best from history and from its

protagonists, and use it to move humanity beyond the petty hatreds of race, class, or religion. Having studied the life of General Lee, I believe there is very much about him which is truly exemplary, a pattern for modern man.

It is patently criminal that in our effort toward political correctness, we have virtually expunged his name from public school history books. Having said that, I can hear the naysayers' chorus now: “He should have fought a defensive war ... he had slaves ... he alone was responsible for losing the war ... he should have done this and he should have done that,” etc.

Intentional, malicious criticism of Lee is becoming sport among some so-called scholars, as they sit on their

duffs in their comfortable Monday morning quarterbacking chairs, ensconced securely within their tenures. The vast majority of them could not lead a group in silent prayer, much less lead a rag tag army to immortality on the battlefield, as did Lee.

Spare me the jealous character assassination. The truth is that Lee was one of the best military commanders our country ever produced. More importantly, after the tragic and untimely death of Lincoln, and after the war was over, he may have done more to promote harmony in this country than anyone of that era.

We owe a supreme debt to him for that, not insipid criticism 135 years after the fact. Heroes are in short supply, so we need to revere the greatest and learn from them, not excoriate them for their failures. Lee was far nobler than I, and he would have said to ignore the carping critics and move on with the work at hand. He would have said to build bridges, not entrenchments. He would have said to put duty above self. Now there is truly a lesson for today. ■



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A Stop on the Journey

by Celia Hayes

In September of 1985, my daughter and I were traveling through Europe during my time in the Air Force. On our way from Greece to Spain we skirted Munich and the suburbs, following the map on page 44 of my Hallwag Euro Guide, a telephone book-sized atlas of maps to all of Europe west of Russia.

There it was ... there was the town, a nice little cluster of houses and duplexes. I kind of wondered what they called their local sports team. Perhaps they borrowed the name of

the next hamlet over. Or they could have just gotten used to it.

A tidy, organized country, Germany; everything beautifully groomed, trimmed, and the scraps swept away ... except for this. Especially this.

I didn't need a sign for the place when the fence line and the guard towers suddenly appeared, along the left-hand side of the road. Goddamn, it looked like a movie set. It looked like all the pictures I had ever seen. This was the place all right. I parked in a nearly deserted graveled parking area. The fog was beginning to burn off, but it lent the place sense of being stifled, of sound being muffled.

"What is this place?" my daughter asked, looking around dubiously.

"It's called Dachau. It was a special kind of prison camp, sweetie. The Nazis ... you remember who the Nazis were? They put their enemies in camps like this, and treated them horribly."

"Enemies? Like Indiana Jones?"

"Made-up story, sweetie. But yes, they rounded up all sorts of people; mostly people who disagreed with them, or people they wanted to blame things on."

How could I explain it to someone five years old, someone who had the Greco-Roman pantheon mixed up with concepts gathered from attendance at general Protestant services? "Like the Jews, and the Jehovah's Witnesses." She looked a little baffled. "People who went to different services," I explained. "They also rounded up the Gypsies ... you know, the people who used to come around selling fruit, and fixing chairs and things? And people who didn't agree with them politically, like Communists...." I drew another blank. But it was important that she see this, to know what happens when people hate, how it can poison a person, how it can poison a country. I took her hand, and we walked towards a long building at the end of the compound.

"You'll be starting school when we get to Spain," I said, as we climbed a couple of steps. "And sometime, and at some point, someone will start being hateful to someone else, calling them names because of where their family comes from, or what

color their skin is, or how they worship. That first someone will want you to hate that other person. But you must not, not even if that first person is a friend, or you want them to like you, or even if you are afraid they might turn everyone else against you. What they want you to do is wicked and wrong, and you must not do it. A place like this is what could happen if you went along."

Inside our footsteps fell on the wooden floor with the peculiar hollowness typical of temporary buildings. A sign recommended that children under the age of 14 not be taken into the exhibit rooms; I paid for us both and ignored the look of disapproval. The exhibits were fairly mild, as it turned out, mostly old black and white photos. We walked out into watery sunshine, and across to the remaining barracks building. It had the same hollow, temporary feel to it as the main building. It was a reconstruction, as the originals had been bulldozed or burned down at the end of the war, apparently—I could not imagine anyone wanting to preserve them as they were, not even for historical purposes.



Photo of gate at Dachau, October 2004.

A small wrought-iron gate stood over the single-lane roadway, where another compound had adjoined the first. "It always looked larger in pictures," I said aloud. A sign said "Arbeit macht frei," which means "labor liberates." I suppose so, if you are working people to death. I never thought of Himmler as having a sense of humor.

A narrow gravel path led to a small grove of trees, well planted with flowering shrubs, and another small building with the flimsy temporary feel of the other two; the crematorium. The pretty landscaping seemed rather an obscenity. This was a

terrible place, where terrible things had happened for years. Even if I had known nothing about Dachau, it seemed to me that I should have been able to feel the horror still lingering.

The inside of the crematorium was lined with dedications and memorials; curiously, only one memorial listed actual names. They were four women's names, all of whom were enlisted women of the British forces executed at Dachau in 1944. All were radio operators or couriers working with the Resistance, picked for their bilingual abilities, and trained in weapons and Morse code before being dropped into Occupied Europe. I imagined the hot courage of adrenaline and action, of fighting in uniform back to back with your buddies, all of you armed to the teeth, and with nothing but the sketchy protection of the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention in case of capture. And then there was the cold courage, of sitting in the belly of an aircraft, about to drop alone into the dark to spend months on the run, never knowing who or what would betray you; perhaps your only weapon a stiletto knife and your only protection your wits and the ability to slide underneath suspicion; and the only guarantee if you were captured was of being shot as a spy, probably after interrogation and torture. And yet they volunteered anyway.

Elaine Plewman, Madeleine Damerment, Noor Inayat Khan, and Yolanda Beekman.

I still remember them. ■

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