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My Grandfather's Things

My grandfather never talked about the war. Not to me, anyway. I had seen the medals displayed on the wall in his house many times as a child—there was a heart-shaped one with George Washington's profile in it, a star-shaped one hanging from a red, white, and blue ribbon, and a round one depicting a woman holding half of a broken sword in each hand. As I got older, I came to recognize these as the Purple Heart, the Silver Star, and the World War II Victory Medal. Whenever I asked him how he'd gotten each of them, he always changed the subject or claimed he didn't have me.

It was only after his funeral in 2002 that he began to answer my questions. A few days later, my father, Richard Buckalew Jr., brought home a cardboard box containing a few of my grandfather's things. He set it down on the kitchen table as I was finishing my lunch, then he went to the refrigerator and started making a sandwich for himself. I stood up and rummaged through the box out of curiosity. There were two framed photos of my grandfather as a much younger man running in the Penn Relays; he was on the starters mark in one picture, and breaking through the tape at the finish line in the other. Beneath those, I found a stack of loose black and white photographs of a vibrant young couple in US Army uniforms—my late grandparents sixty years earlier. When I dug a little deeper into the box, I pulled out the familiar glass display case filled with the same war medals that I'd seen on his wall countless times before. I'd spent a long time wondering what the

war had been like for him, and why he had never told me about it, but all of that changed a moment later when I found the final item in the box: a simple yellow folder.

The folder contained only papers, which, naturally, appeared unremarkable until I sat down and read them. They contained all of the obvious signs of being composed on a typewriter—inconsistent typeface alignment, spelling errors not deleted, et cetera. As it turned out, they were the unstapled pages of a speech written by my grandfather about the war. I didn't know to whom the speech was addressed, or when it was typed, but it revealed to me a history that I thought I'd never know. As I sat there reading them, I felt like I was hearing the story firsthand, as though my grandfather was sitting at the table and telling it to me.

The speech was relatively short, and there were gaps in the story it told, to say the least—but by the time I had finished, my dad was just sitting down with his sandwich, and I asked if he could fill in some of them in for me. Integrating the words of my father and his father, I've pieced together what is probably the best and only version of the story I'll ever know.

It was D-Day. Second Lieutenant Richard Buckalew was a platoon leader in Company D (“Dog Company,” they called it), of the eighth regiment of the army's Fourth Infantry Division. It was his job to lead thirty to fifty men into battle, and it was his responsibility to bring them home alive. He stood in a small, rectangular landing boat with twenty-nine of his men—he was supposed to meet up with the rest on the beach.

The men had rehearsed the invasion time countless times on the southern shore of England, so they'd gone through all the motions before. In fact, Lt. Buckalew wasn't even sure that this time was going to be the real deal until the invasion fleet had set course for the Normandy coast.

The roofless landing boat gave the men a full view of the dark grey blanket of clouds above, littered with the black silhouettes of airplanes supporting the invasion. A constant hail of fifteen-inch shells soared over the men's heads as the ships of the fleet fired upon the beach. They rode through choppy waters toward a stretch of coastline codenamed Utah Beach.

The boat stopped in shallow water, the ramp at the bow lowered, and Lt. Buckalew jumped in. He and his men waded onto the beach. The first wave of troops had landed a few minutes earlier, and the battle was already raging. German artillery shells and mortars burst all around them, spraying sand and water everywhere. Machinegun fire tore through sand and water and flesh. Rain had exposed the land mines and bouncing betties scattered across the beach, so the men simply ran past them.

A soldier fell face first into the sand a short distance ahead of him. Lt. Buckalew ran to the him, grabbed him by the shoulder and, as he rolled him over to breath, the man's body came apart in his hands. He stared at the bloody cavity that had once been the man's chest; his face was unrecognizable. For Lt. Buckalew, this was the first casualty of the war. He left the dead man and pressed further onto the beach. He ran fast and didn't stop again until he reached the seawall, roughly one hundred yards from the water, where the troops would be safe enough to get their bearings.

Once there, First Lieutenant Sidney Montz—Dog Company’s executive officer—called out to him. He was crouching in a blast crater with a few other men. Lt. Buckalew hurried over and joined the group, which he quickly learned was being briefed on the situation by General Theodore Roosevelt Jr., the fifty-six year old son of the former president. He walked with a cane and had a heart condition, but he came ashore in the first wave and led the invasion on foot. As it turned out, the General informed them, the entire Division had landed in the wrong spot. The strong currents of the English Channel and the smoke from the naval bombardment had caused the boats to land roughly two thousand yards south of their destination.

Gen. Roosevelt was able to rally the troops and coordinate a swift attack on the German defenses; Lt. Buckalew’s platoon was one of many to punch through them and head inland. They went from house to house in the small coastal village of La Madeleine, kicking in doors and shooting anyone in a German uniform. Though outnumbered, the Germans were still a dangerous enemy because they were battle-hardened, and they were desperate, like cornered animals. After a few hours of weeding out the last few pockets of resistance, the beachhead was secure. Tanks, trucks, and thousands more troops began coming ashore in heavy landing craft.

My grandfather’s speech only discussed the events of D-Day, but it wasn’t the only thing in the yellow folder. There was also the crumpled, creased army citation he was given when he received the Silver Star, which was awarded for “gallantry in action,”

it said. The document itself was rife with spelling errors. When I pointed this out to my dad, he told me that army typists were notoriously poor—he himself had been in the army reserve for most of the 1970s, so he had learned this from experience.

The citation said nothing of the specific action for which he'd been awarded the medal other than that it happened near some place called Eroudeville on June ninth, three days after D-Day. To my surprise, my dad happened to know a lot about what happened that day. As it turned out, my grandfather had told him the story in recent years. So he told me what happened.

With the beach taken, the Fourth Infantry's next job was to drive north up the Cotentin Peninsula, toward the port of Cherbourg. Along the way, Dog Company moved through a small village called Eroudeville. The village was comprised of small stone-and-mortar houses surrounded by farmland and open fields. Intelligence reports suggested that the German army had abandoned the entire region as the Americans advanced—they all appeared to be falling back toward Cherbourg in preparation for the inevitable assault on the city—so Dog Company was sent there on foot, without tanks to support them.

As they neared the village, however, Lt. Montz was shot in the neck by a sniper. He dropped to the ground and clutched his throat. The men gave covering fire, shooting their rifles and machineguns wildly at the houses in the village, as medics evacuated

Montz. Suddenly, they were flanked, blindsided, by a company of elite German troops. Dog Company had walked into a trap.

Bullets streaked at them from multiple directions, and the company scattered and retreated through three hundred yards of soggy foothills and hedgerows. Lt. Buckalew jumped down into an irrigation ditch at the far side of a field beyond a hedge. He looked at the other men in the ditch with him and saw that they were all from his platoon. Dog Company's other platoons were nowhere to be seen, and Lt. Buckalew was the only officer there. As soon as he realized this, he knew that whatever happened next would be up to him. He ordered the radio operator to call for tank support.

It was quiet in the ditch for a moment, which meant no one was shooting at them anymore—as far as he knew, they might have eluded their pursuers. The silence was broken when a sergeant told him that two of his men were missing.

Having been a track runner in college, Lt. Buckalew was a faster sprinter than any of the men at his command. Rather than risk the life of anyone else, he decided to go out alone in search of the missing pair. He laid his rifle down on the ground; it was dead weight for a runner. He drew his Colt 45 from its holster, climbed out of the ditch, and ran across the field.

He found the first man not too far away. Dead.

The second man was farther away. Wounded, but able to walk. Lt. Buckalew helped the man to his feet and quickly led him back to the ditch.

As soon as he returned, a medic told him that there was still another wounded man out there. He climbed out of the ditch again, pistol still in hand. This time,

however, the medic led the way because he had seen where the wounded man was. Lt. Buckalew had to run a little slower this time to keep pace with the medic.

They soon found the man lying on the ground not far from Eroudeville. He was unable to stand because bullets had torn through his legs. Lt. Buckalew placed his pistol on the man's chest, and then reached under his arms while the medic reached under his knees, and together they hoisted him from the ground. He looked the wounded man in the eyes and said, "If I see any Germans, I'm dropping you and picking up the gun." Luckily for them both, he didn't see any Germans as they made their way back to the ditch. After a while, the tanks arrived and cleared Eroudeville of its German garrison. Lt. Montz and both of the wounded men had survived the battle.

After some time had passed, some of his men decided to nominate Lt. Buckalew for the Silver Star for saving those men's lives. This was unorthodox; typically, commanders nominated their subordinates for such awards, but this time the situation was reversed. It wasn't even until after the war that he actually received the thing.

There was nothing in the folder about Cherbourg. The only thing my dad knew about the place was that it was where my grandfather was shot for the first time. I went to the family computer in the adjacent room and searched the web for more information on the Battle of Cherbourg. The internet held a wealth of knowledge about the city and the fight for it. The most valuable source I found online was an official report written by US Army historians shortly after WWII. It detailed the movements and actions of every

unit in the Normandy campaign, which made it relatively easy to figure out what had happened then.

Cherbourg was the closest major port to Utah Beach, which meant that its capture was vital if the Americans were to keep supplying their troops in France. It had been a beautiful place before the war—a sprawling assembly of low-rise Georgian buildings looking out at the sea. The Germans had wrecked much of it, because piles of rubble were easier to defend than city blocks. They had also mined and booby-trapped the city so thoroughly that the garrison commander had been personally awarded the Knight's Cross by Hitler himself for “a feat unprecedented in the annals of coastal defense,” (quoting the US Army Official History).

Dog Company had been ordered to take the high ground to the east of the city, a sloping, green hill where the Germans had positioned their artillery. Lt. Buckalew led his men up the hill as bullets spewed forth at them from a machinegun nest at the hilltop. The German gunner fired wildly at the advancing infantry, but there were so many of them and they were so widely spaced, and the angle of the hill had made them appear smaller than they were. They were hard targets to hit.

Lt. Buckalew ran toward the gunner at full speed and shot him dead before he could even react. His men had kept a short distance behind him. With the gunner dead, they stormed the hilltop and killed or captured all the Germans there, destroying their artillery. Then Lt. Buckalew felt a sharp, hot pain in his leg. He looked down to see

blood on his pants. One of the machinegun bullets had torn through the side of his left thigh. He sat down on a pile of sandbags surrounding the machinegun nest and stared down the hill at the tanks and troops shooting their way into Cherbourg.

After taking the hill, and suffering more than a few casualties, Dog Company was relieved from duty. They had done their part in Normandy and had earned a respite. Lt. Buckalew, however, was shipped to a US Army hospital in England, where he was treated by a nurse named Theresa. The two of them dated until he was sent back into combat. Eventually, he was shot again, and sent back to the hospital in England, where Theresa had been waiting for him all the while.

Richard and Theresa Buckalew were married in England after the war. The two of them wasted no time becoming the happy couple I had seen in the photographs from the box. Their first marriage had been a simple one, my dad told me. It was a military ceremony performed on the base—both of them wore their uniforms for the occasion. When the two of them came home to the United States, they had a second marriage—a conventional one with a tuxedo and a wedding gown.

I still have many unanswered questions about my grandfather's service in the war, but I've come to understand why he was never in a hurry to talk about it. It was because the war was a horrific experience that contained only pain and death, sacrifice and loss. No brief moments of glory, however many, could ever outweigh that in his mind. But, in all that chaos and misery, my grandfather had managed to find something: love. I think

it's one of the things that helped him cope with the memories seared into his brain. No matter how much the war haunted him, he could always look at my grandmother's face and think to himself that she was worth it.