

## **A Day of Remembrance**

Late last fall I was bitten by the writing bug. I wrote and published a memoir — *The Necessity of a Place: Thirty Years at the Water's Edge*. I am still infected. Currently working on a second, *Growing Up All Over Again: Boyhood Memories*. I can't explain it. I'm under the spell.

I have just finished a chapter on the Memorial Day parade held in my little hometown of Breedsville, Michigan in the 1950s and 60s. This morning when I left the house for my writing destination — Starbucks — I put on my Normandy hat, the one I picked up on a trip to Omaha Beach three years ago. I like to write at Starbucks. I feel like Hemingway writing his novels in the coffee shops of Paris. I'm not even a poor man's Hemingway by any stretch. But a man can fantasize.

The hat got me thinking. The writing bug agreed. I needed to write something for this coming Monday.

So here it is.

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## **The Viking Cruise**

Viking offers a Paris to Normandy river cruise along the Seine. Barb's father Carl landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day — June 6, 1944. She needed to see what her father had walked into. We booked it.

We went with our friends Phil and Colleen Muldoon. Phil's father had also been part of the invasion. Like Barb he felt the pull of that place.

The cruise wound through the beautiful French countryside, stopping at small towns along the Seine — Vernon, Rouen where Joan of Arc was tried, convicted, and burned at the stake. Twenty-five years after her execution a retrial cleared her of all charges. A bit late for Joan. We also stopped at a castle Rommel had commandeered as his communications headquarters during the occupation. Walking through it you could still see the modifications the Germans had made to the old stone structure.

We visited Monet's gardens at Giverny. Overwhelmingly beautiful. Worth the detour.

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## **Omaha Beach**

The following day we were bussed to the D-Day Museum in Normandy. Walking through it was a chilling experience. Newsreel footage, headlines, photographs, artifacts — an immersive picture of what happened on that coastline in June of 1944 .and the events leading up to WW II. Not an easy thing to absorb.

Over the years I had tried to get Carl to talk about his landing experience. He would start and then break into tears. He simply couldn't speak of it. He told Barb once that he had been in the second wave. When the LST dropped them off and began backing away the water was just over his head. Loaded down with his full pack he said his only choice was to walk forward and hope the bottom rose to meet him. It did. Many others were not so fortunate — dropped in water too deep, pulled under by the weight of their gear before they ever reached the sand.

My own father rarely spoke of Korea in detail. But several years ago I found the letters he had written to his mother nearly every day he was deployed. Reading them gave me a visceral understanding of what he had gone through and insights into the man I never fully had growing up.

If you want the most accurate depiction of the Omaha Beach landing ever put on film watch the opening twenty-four minutes of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* before you visit. Be prepared. It is not easy viewing. But nothing worth understanding ever is.

After the museum we visited the memorial at the head of the burial grounds — a semicircular colonnade overlooking a reflecting pool, the chapel, and the graves beyond. When we arrived we found a massive floral wreath at the memorial donated by the University of Iowa women's basketball team. It stopped us cold.]



The reflection pool



The grave yard



The wreath from the University of Iowa Girls BB team

The cemetery and memorial grounds are property of the United States government — American soil on French land.

Standing at the edge of those grounds looking out you see 9,389 white marble crosses, perfectly placed, perfectly maintained. Immaculate. Beautiful in its own quiet way. But beneath each cross lies the ugliness that war brings to young men who deserved long lives.

This is what I saw when we visited. Stunning!

From the cemetery we walked down to the beach itself. What struck me first was the position of the German bunkers — sitting on bluffs two hundred yards from the waterline, looking straight down at the sand below. Our boys came ashore into that field of fire with almost nowhere to go. From this vantage point our boys had almost no chance. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.



A view of Omaha Beach



A memorial of the invasion

What surprised me was the beach activity. It is a public beach. People were swimming, playing with their dogs, cooking out on the sand that ran red with blood eighty years ago. I understand it intellectually. Life goes on. But standing there it didn't feel right. It still doesn't.

## 9/11

I never served in our country's military. I never experienced war on a personal basis. The closest I came was September 11, 2001.

My role with our company was working with investment bankers, brokers, and equity analysts. A large majority of them worked on Wall Street. Several worked in the World Trade Center. When the jets were flown into the Twin Towers, people I knew were in those buildings or working close by.

I did extensive work with Cantor Fitzgerald, whose offices were near the top of the North Tower. Two people I knew perished. A young woman who was a stock analyst with Fred Alger Management also died in the attack. Her firm's offices were on the 93rd floor.

Over the next few days I frantically reached out to everyone I could. In one case a woman I had worked with closely had been unreachable. She was fine. Then two weeks after the attack my phone rang. A broker from Cantor Fitzgerald. He had chosen that particular week to take a cruise with his girlfriend. He said — I imagine you never expected to hear from me. He was right. I hadn't. He was spared. 2,977 others were not.

Two years later I was in New York meeting with Standard and Poor's, whose offices sit directly across the street from where the Twin Towers stood. I walked over and visited the site. It was chilling. Heartbreaking. The enormous hole in the ground. Debris still visible. Photographs of the lost with messages and memorial wreaths covering the fence surrounding it.

It is something I will never forget

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## Monday

Why am I writing about Normandy on the Friday before Memorial Day?

Because Monday we remember the fallen from all of our wars. After standing on that beach, after reading my father's letters from Korea, after watching Carl break into tears every time someone asked him about June 6th — reflecting on my time at the 9/11 site, the holiday means something different to me than it once did.

The life we enjoy today — every ordinary day of it — was purchased by hundreds of thousands of young men and women across the wars of the last century. Some came home changed forever. Some didn't come home at all. All gave some. Some gave all.

Monday I will hold my own small vigil. Sitting in my swing under the arbor, looking at the flower garden I recently planted, thinking about Carl walking forward through water over his head with nowhere to go but ahead.

It's the least I can do.

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### **Memorial Day – Breedsville, Mi**

Breedsville was too small for Fourth of July fireworks or Christmas pageantry. Our holiday decoration consisted of two strings of lights strung across the wires of the blinking red light at the four corners. That was it.

Memorial Day was an entirely different story.

In the 1950s and 60s the war years were still fresh. World War I had ended less than forty years before. World War II and Korea less than twenty. Patriotism ran high in those days. Most everyone had family members or friends who served. Many returned from the conflicts, Many, died or were wounded fighting for the freedom we enjoy today. I think, sometimes take for granted. The men and women who had fought for this country were our neighbors. We knew them by name.

Memorial Day was a time to recognize them. To reflect. To say thank you in the only way a small town knew how — by showing up. Below is the only picture I could find of the parade. It's more circa 1980's but give a good idea of how big it was.



Memorial Day was a time to recognize, reflect, and thank our veterans. Memorial Day Parades were common in most small towns in SW Michigan. Ours had a parade that attracted hundreds. It was the year's highlight.

Preparations began days before. At the Breedsville Cemetery small flags were placed at the grave sites of veterans. One site would be selected for the formal ceremony. Along the parade route things were readied as well.

The route began just west of town and followed Main Street roughly a mile east to the cemetery. People from outside town would park along the road and set up lawn chairs beneath a beautiful stretch of old maple trees lining East Main — maybe a hundred yards of shade and canopy that made for prime viewing. Kids sat in Radio Flyer wagons or strollers. Families spread out on the grass. Locals living along the route would have friends and family over, cookouts to follow later in the afternoon.

Our house was just east of the tree line. We had a big lot. People could gather on the West side of our property setting up on the road side. We would gather in our front yard. Mom and Dad would invite friends who lived outside of town- Russ and Alice Brown, Chet and Lil Ryba, sometimes Aunt Ruth and Uncle Ed Kowieski and their kids drove up from South Haven. We all would watch, Dad would March.

At that time, we had four Mature Maples in front of the house. To the west 4 Box elder trees provided some shade. We ended up cutting them down due to the box elder bug problem. Still 50 years after being gone my brother gets an infestation each year in the house. They are resilient little bugs.

We were located on the North side of the street. The cemetery was  $\frac{1}{3}$  mile from the house. The parade would start around 2pm and be in full swing by the time it reached us.

One of the old maples had a large branch which extended out over the street. As a boy I could climb the tree, work my way out onto that limb, and lie flat to watch the parade pass directly beneath me, hidden by the new bloom of spring leaves. It was the finest parade viewing spot in Breedsville and I had it entirely to myself.

Downtown the sound of the band and drums at 2 pm was the signal to climb to my position.

The parade followed traditional form. Military flag bearers led the way. Behind them came the veterans — the younger men from World War II and Korea marching in uniform, carrying the M-1 rifles that would be used for the salute. Behind them rode the World War I veterans in convertibles. In their sixties and seventies, they had earned a ride.

The Bangor High School Band followed, having already performed at their own town's parade earlier in the day. Two parades were a lot to ask of young musicians but they delivered. Baton twirlers and a drum major led them. They played patriotic songs and when the music paused the drums kept the march cadence going down the street.

Behind the band came the Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, and Girl Scouts. Then the young kids on decorated bicycles. Then local emergency vehicles — fire trucks and police cars with lights going. A few antique automobiles, Model T vintage, there were still some around. And bringing up the rear the horsemen and women. We were farm country. There was no shortage of horses.

The parade would progress slowly from downtown passing homes most of which were flying Old Glory. As it passed, many folks would fall in behind walking to the cemetery for the grave side service. They would be careful to avoid the road apples left by the horses.

I would watch from my perch in the maple until the parade passed. Then I would climb down and race to the cemetery. I wanted to stake out a place at the grave site of the 21-gun salute. Us boys treasured the spent brass from the old M-1's and would scramble to get a few shells after the ceremony.

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Once the parade arrived the veterans would proceed to the designated grave site. The commanding officer would organize seven men with weapons for the twenty-one-gun salute. When I was small I expected to see twenty-one rifles. I had no idea how it actually worked. Ready. Aim. Fire. The seven-gun volley repeated three times. Twenty-one rounds total. The sound rolled out across the cemetery and into the surrounding fields.

After the salute came Taps. Played by the trumpeter from the high school band. In later years my good friend Buddy Kopp had that honor. There is no sound quite like Taps played outdoors on a warm May afternoon over a grave.

A wreath was placed at the headstone. A few words were spoken. I never heard them. I was already moving through the crowd looking for spent brass from the M-1s. We boys treasured those shells. I would collect a few and then run back downtown. There was work to do at Grandpa's store.

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It was tradition that each marcher received a ticket good for a small refreshment — ice cream or a bottle of pop. Both Walt's and Wade's would be packed with veterans and marchers coming in to claim their treat. No cash changed hands so even a young boy could help — take the ticket, fetch the pop or ice cream, move to the next one. I suspect the soldiers' tickets were also good for a beer at the tavern. Heaven knows they deserved it. That and much more.

Downtown buzzed for hours. For people who had moved away it was a homecoming — visiting grave sites, reconnecting with old friends. For me it sometimes meant a friend whose family had left town would be back for the day and we would have a few hours together before they drove home again.

Eventually things wound down. Cookouts and gatherings at various homes carried the day into evening.

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It was a holiday. It was celebrated. It was good. It was right.

The next day we would be returning to the country that was being rebuilt by the Greatest Generation and their children, us the Boomers. It truly was a special time in our Country's History

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To understand it better I encourage you to read Tom Brokaw's book "The Greatest Generation". It will give you the perspective I grew up with

The town has aged since those days. Felt the ravages of time. It is a shadow of what it was in the 1950s and 60s. But the Memorial Day parade tradition carries on. The ceremony still happens at the Breedsville Cemetery for the residents and for those resting there.

Some things endure. They should.

#### SIDE NOTE

I experienced a military tribute to my father when he passed. The local VFW was there, presented Mom with the specially folded American Flag, and played Taps. In the distance an old hound bayed at the sound of the bugle. It was chilling. We buried Dad, a Korean War veteran, on his 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. November 30, 1994. My birthday was the next day.