

Days To Remember

So, I never heard directly from my uncles and aunts, nor my mother and father what they thought about historically significant days or events in their lives. Partly because I think they thought I was not interested. They were probably correct when I was young.

I didn't ask about the Depression or World War II (events near and during my mother and father's lifetimes).

I was told and confirmed in a matter-of-fact confirmation from my father that he was asked to leave his parent's home when he was 14; that he had contempt for his father; that his father kept a ledger showing what he spent on each child; and that my grandfather died in a farming accident before I was born. So, from everything I've read from sources other than directly from my parents, the Depression was a very difficult time, and in the Panhandle of Texas (and southwest Oklahoma) the Dust Bowl was tragic and very difficult for residents. I have spoken to my Dad about one story where he would run down jackrabbits and use rocks to harvest the rabbits for food – he confirmed in his usual factual confirmation this to be true but offered no details or spoke of how hungry he was or anything else about those times. I assume the memories were much stronger than the simple awe of a young boy about the act of running down a rabbit – it was survival for him and I was simply interested in the act of securing a meal – without any interest in the underlying conditions – as children are want to do!!

I came across, by accident, that my father was exempt from WWII draft two different times for two different reasons. He was first exempted because he had young children and later, when the draft came again, he was exempted because he worked on the Air Force base (then an Army Air Corps base) and he was the only electrician left. My father's brothers, I'm not sure about – I think two or three

served, but we were not that close when I became interested, and it would have been very forward for me to ask them. My two uncles on my mom's side served in the Merchant Marine and Navy.

As for myself and my cousins, I know that Johnny (Retired Air Force E-9) and Jerry (Retired Navy E-7) served. They are my "double cousins" where their mother is my mother's sister, and their father is my father's brother – thus cousins from both parents. Robert (my brother) was in the National Guard, Donald (my brother) was in the Air Force and Marie (my sister) served in the Air Force.

All of this is a preamble to events in my lifetime. In the 1960s the US became engaged in Vietnam where a struggle between communism and democracy was occurring. You should probably read some sources other than this paper to get details if you like. In the US there was considerable disagreement about the war that raged on from about 1966 on through 1975. What I want to impress on you is the day I joined the Army as being significant in my life. On January 26, 1971 I joined the Army. Now everyone who has ever joined the Armed Forces will later say they joined based on all the classic and substantial reasons, such as patriotism, honor, etc. I joined because I couldn't find a job! Now, that is not to say I didn't have any of the patriotic feelings and such, but truth be told, I couldn't find a job! I stayed in the Army for 20 years for all the classic reasons though.

As my time in the Army was ending, Iraq invaded Kuwait. I was scheduled to go on what they call terminal leave (where you go on leave [vacation] and just never return) the day after Thanksgiving, 1990. Two days before then, the Army issued what they call a "stop loss" order, effective the day AFTER I go on leave, meaning anyone scheduled to separate on Saturday or later, were involuntarily retained on active duty until otherwise determined. Technically, I was not under the stop loss order, but I volunteered to stay if the

Army needed me. They did not and I went on terminal leave as planned.

I spent 20 years in the Army, serving during two periods where the National Defense Service Ribbon was awarded (when I enlisted some people had Korea and Vietnam time and had 2 NDSM awards but when I received the second award it was rare). Another rare situation is that I never spent a day in a combat zone. How can someone spend 20 years in an organization made for war and never participate?? I feel ashamed about that often, especially when I'm in the presence of "real" heroes who did serve in combat (often multiple tours).

I started this missive with three specific events in mind. The Depression; December 7, 1941, and September 11, 2001.

I simply can't imagine what it was like to be out in the world on your own at 14. Struggling for food along with hundreds of others, chasing jackrabbits down for food. Finally finding something to cling to (my mother and his children), only to find at 20 something that the world was engaged in another great tragedy. I don't wonder why my father was a quiet man who didn't say much.

Pearl Harbor and the aftermath of the attack was catastrophic to my parent's generation in many ways, including my Dad being exempt from the draft while others his age were drafted or volunteered and served in the military. All sorts of good and useful reasons as to why he did not serve are prevalent and applicable. None of them remove the hurt or potential shame he must have felt. I know, because I have the same feelings. No matter how rational not being called or being exempted for good reason applies. A person of my father's character, and which he instilled in me, simply can't accept equivalency, there just isn't any.

And finally, as the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks approaches in a couple of days, I find myself with an overwhelming

need to put down on paper for my grandchildren to discover long after I'm gone what I felt like on that day and in the time after.

On that day, I had traveled to St Paul, Minnesota to present a training class to a group of programmers who worked for a company that had bought the software to process group annuity policies from the company I worked for. I was a Business Analyst for my employer who happened to have experience giving presentations whereas the programmers who actually managed the group business could not stand in front of a group and speak.

I was tasked with presenting material that I only knew the basics of. Anyway, my boss and I had flown in the day before and were on our way to their business when we were coincidentally diverted due to a fire. We were unable to get to the business and eventually returned to the hotel. Eventually we contacted the business and were told to stay at the hotel until they notified us. We happened to be watching the news on TV when the first plane striking the World Trade Center was shown. Like everyone else, we didn't realize until the second plane struck that we had been attacked.

As happened on Dec 7, we didn't know what would happen next; whether there were more attacks to come; how would we get home; all sorts of thoughts going through our minds. Eventually we determined that the training would be postponed; that we could take the "local" rental car to Kansas City; and that the world did keep turning.

I know what it's like to "know" about something that happened in someone else's lifetime and think, that must have been difficult to live through.

I also know that living through a national tragedy like the Depression, Pearl Harbor, and 9/11 is something I will never be able to describe in a way that conveys all the emotion that remembering that day brings.

It is sometimes a cliché that “you had to be there” but there is a lot of baggage to that phrase.