

Fiona Clary

Why The Veteran is Important

He was shot down over Italy, hidden by locals, arrested by Nazis, and lived in a prisoner of war camp for a year. He lived to tell the tale. My great-grandfather was a veteran of the Second World War. The scarring effects of his years of service ripple through my family tree from my grandfather and his fourteen siblings, to my father, and beyond. But I never knew him. He died when my dad was eight, so he never got to know him either. My dad also pictures him as kind of a story that you just hear about but never get to see. All he has of him are the letters he wrote in the years before he died to the people who'd helped him survive. When I think of a veteran, I think of him.

He was only 21 years-old when he was drafted into the Air Force and sent on a bombing mission into the industrial center of Perugia, in central Italy when his plane was shot down in the hills outside the city. From the letters he wrote he shared, "I managed to be escorted by a Yugoslav partisan from one mountain across a small valley, up another mountain along a path to a very small village." He and the other servicemen spent their nights sneaking around the village and plotting their escape. One day he and the other soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes, were walking on a paved road because one of them was injured and could not walk through the hills. Suddenly a "fascisti" with grenades and a rifle stopped them. He wrote, "He accosted us with his weapons and took us prisoner. He put us in a two-wheel cart and had a farmer tie a bicycle on top of us." They were moved from prison to prison. "I was interrogated at least two times and threatened to be shot because of my clothing." Because he was dressed in civilian clothes he was assumed to be a spy. Spies didn't have the same rights as prisoners of war. During the night he would hear beautiful arias sung by the Italian prisoners resonating inside his tiny prison cell. Night after night they would sing the arias until one night the arias stopped.

My great-grandfather and the other Allied forces were taken to Germany by cattle car in irons, separated from all other prisoners, ending up at a Prisoner of War camp where there were SS guards. He went before a German military court and was charged with favoring the enemy. This charge was a result of the propaganda leaflets that were in their pockets at the time of their arrest. The majority of his time spent in the camp was in a solitary cell away from the rest of the camp. He was liberated from the Moosburg POW camp in 1945 by the Third Army, and the veteran was finally able to go home and meet his three-year-old daughter.

But he wasn't done with the war yet. Through the years he suffered from very bad PTSD and alcoholism. Although the effects of his experience never really left him, he wasn't bitter or regretful. His son, my grandfather, says that he was proud because he knew that he'd contributed to making our world a better place, continuing to serve in the American Air Force as a reserve, and provide for his family. He was known for being a kind and supportive member of his community. After a while he confronted his past and started to share his stories, connecting with multiple people he met during his time in the war.

I think about how today's veterans see things and go through things that they can never forget, but their willingness to suffer through it for their country is courageous and valiant.

We need people like my great-grandfather to fight for our country's rights and beliefs. We need these heroes who go through so much so that we are able to live a happy life in a war-free world. The veteran endures pain and hardship, even after their years of service. Where would our country be without them? My great-grandfather went through a lot for his country but he did it without complaining. Even when he was locked in a solitary cell for months at a time, he didn't give up. I wish that I had been able to meet this fearless man but I feel that I have, through all of his stories passed from generation to generation. He was a veteran and I am reminded of his strength and resilience every day. I imagine him looking up at his prison ceiling, listening to an aria, and finding hope in the beautiful song.