

HELMSMAN ON DECK:

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War is not an unfamiliar part of our society and history. Names like Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea, Bosnia, and Kosovo conjure up memories of endless news footage, conflicting public opinions, and distress concerning the safety of our troops. No generation has gone without seeing at least one war, and it is startling easy for young children to understand at least the base meaning of what "war" is.

War is not glorious, like it is portrayed in literature or cinema. War is loneliness and death. It is seeing disturbing images, and having those images play constantly through your head, and never forgetting them. It is fighting to defend principles that allow people to disrespect your profession, and for ideals that you may not believe in.

Not all men come back heroes. Some soldiers get medals. Most come back with nothing but memories, and those memories more often than not stay locked in their head, where they should be shared with those who don't know what its like to be in the battlefield; to teach people what it's like to be in war.

World War II is the last major war with a great number of veterans still surviving. These older men are full of history and interesting stories to tell. Many of them are more than willing to share their stories, especially in this time of anti-military feelings and a tendency for people to forget the past. A great deal can be learned from the men who were mere boys when they left their homes to go to war, many of them answering the draft that was instituted to reinforce our nation's fighting forces.

One of these men is Paul Bisette, currently a resident of Pikeville, North Carolina. He is a retired employee of General Electric who enjoys fishing. Him and his wife Edna have seven children, six of them boys. Bisette is a member of the Living Waters Freewill Baptist Church located in Pikeville.

Following a brief history of World War II, I will tell Paul Bisette's story the best way I know how to; through his own words. I fear that reading this paper, however, will not do justice to the experience I had actually talking to him face to face.

World War II has been remembered as the most devastating war ever fought on foreign shores. Not only did many soldiers lose their life, but also nearly 15 million civilians died in Nazi concentration camps, including millions of Slavs and "asiatics", 200,000 Gypsies and members of various other groups (Paulsson, 1). Populations are not the only things that were destroyed. The landscape of Europe was left in shambles, ripped and torn like tilled land waiting for seed.

Political repercussions also still sound throughout the world. The Russian political situation after World War II led to the formation of the Communist Party, and led Russia as well as nearly France to adapt a Communist government. The post-war arms race led to the Cold War, and nearly a nuclear war with Russia and Cuba. The anti-Semitic Nazi party is also still strong in Germany, a political and militant organization founded by Adolf Hitler.

The conflict began on the coattails of the war's predecessor, World War I. Germany was forced to take the blame for starting this particular conflict, and their punishment was to pay \$32 billion in reparations (Revolution, 2). The payment of these reparations drove Germany into an economic depression, resulting in the anger and frustration of the German people.

Hitler seized the position of German Chancellor on January 30, 1930, beginning a rearmament program to build back Germany's army. He also encouraged the anti-Semitism beliefs that he had introduced in his book *Mein Kampf*, which he wrote in

prison after an earlier failed attempt at forcibly taking over the German government. He turned these beliefs into a political party, the Nazis. He blamed the German Jews for the economic problems that the nation was facing, and believed that the Arian race was supreme. Hitler's political ideology was one of genocide, where all people not of Arian descent were condemned to death in order to build a "more perfect world." His Nazi concentration camps saw the death of many people of varied races.

Hitler gave the German people a target for their anger, and rallied for German nationalism. The German people had a leader, and they were willing to follow him.

On March 7, 1936 Nazi troops marched into the Rhineland to retake it (Rise, 3). The Rhineland was a demilitarized zone near Germany, and from there Hitler began a reign of terror taking over country after country, capturing France and moving onto England, where he was barely defeated. He had tried to gain air superiority over Britain in 1940's Battle of Britain, but the resilience of the British people led the German Luftwaffe (air force) to defeat.

In that period, Hitler had made allies with Benito Mussolini in Italy, who was the head of a Fascist government. Emperor Hirohito of Japan also joined these two leaders. They called themselves the Axis Powers, and they all believed that their forms of government were supreme. It was the aim of the Axis Powers to take over, literally, the world. They were a modern day version of the medieval warlords.

America had attempted to avoid interfering in this war. Memories of lives lost in the original World War were still fresh in the minds of the American public. However, they did not completely isolate themselves from this conflict. They sold arms to the Allied Powers of England, France, and Russia, who were fighting to stop Hitler's

rampant take-over in Eastern Europe, but had sent no troops to fight. However, the Axis Power of Japan saw the United States as a threat, and ambushed the Hawaiian naval base of Pearl Harbor.

After this event, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a stirring speech encouraging Americans to fight back. The speech was not unlike Winston Churchill's speech delivered to Britain. The words "December 7, 1941. A day that will live in infamy," and "We will fight them on the beaches! We will fight them in the streets!" are of equal fame. America joined the Allied Powers in 1942, and remained a major force until the war ended. They participated in several campaigns, including the Pacific Theater of Operations and the D-Day invasion of the Beaches of Normandy.

The nation of Italy fell first. Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945 (Defeat of G., 5) after the fall of Berlin. Japan refused to surrender, their code of honor forbidding anything short of victory or suicide. It took two atomic bombs, dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to get Japan to surrender in August of the same year (Defeat of J., 2). With the surrender of Japan, the war was over.

When Paul Bisette was only eighteen years old, he was drafted into the U.S. Navy to serve during World War II. After completing basic training on the *USS Wyoming* in Norfolk, Virginia, Bisette caught the ship that he would serve on in Newport, Rhode Island.

Brown Shipbuilding Co. in Houston, Texas launched the *USS Dufhilo* on March 9, 1944 and it was commissioned on July 21 of the same year. Mrs. M.W. Dufhilo, the widow of a naval officer whom won both the Navy Cross and Distinguished Flying Cross, sponsored the ship. The commandant of the ship was Commander A.H. Nieau,

USNR.

- The *Dufhilo* was an escort ship; it escorted and protected larger ships. It fell under the "destroyer" level of size classification. It housed 130 men and never, in all of the action it saw, allowed one of the ships they escorted to go down (Dictionary, 1).

Paul Bisette served on the *Dufhilo* for four years. He was a Second Class Petty Officer. His position was helmsman, the man who pilots the ship. "My battle station was in the powder room," he remembers with an ironic smile. "That's the last place you want to be when your ship's being shot at."

I sat down with Mr. Bisette one Sunday afternoon to talk with him about his experiences on the ship, his thoughts about the military, and the conflict currently in Iraq.

I started the interview by asking what his most memorable experiences were serving on the *Dufhilo*. "I wasn't in any major battles," he said, "but I do remember one time we got a distress call from the *Indianapolis*. They were going down and needed help in rescuing the passengers."

The *Dufhilo* was one of the ships that responded. "I'll always remember this one young man who was naked and sun burnt from head to toe. All he had to keep him alive was a bag of peanuts, and he had taken some of his shipmates' life jackets and put them together into a raft.

"He had blisters all over his body, and just touching made them pop. One time he fell back on me when we were trying to move him, and those blisters popped all over me. He stayed on our ship for about three or four days, then we moved him to a hospital ship."

Bisette spent a great deal of time in China during his service years. The *Dufhilo*

docked in both Shanghai and Hong Kong. I asked him what it was like to be in a foreign country at such a young age. "It was a little scary," he said. "They encouraged us to take liberty [the term used then for leave] in groups because it was so easy to get into trouble. A lot of the boys would go to the cathouses [brothels], but I never did."

I asked Mr. Bissette if he interacted with the Chinese people on any other level than just recreational. "Some of them would do our maintenance work for food scraps." The slang words for these desperate workers were "coolies".

Bissette says that probably his most memorable experience during the war is when a typhoon hit Shanghai. "We pulled out of there at full speed, and there were waves as high as my house. The only way we could get by them was to hit them head-on."

Mr. Bissette explained to me that if they had turned around and tried to outrun the wave, they would have been capsized due to the waves crashing down on the side of the ship; the ship's own bulk would have taken it over. However, if the *Dufhilo* speared into the waves it made it easier to punch through them.

"I remember having to hold the ship steady while the waves were up above us and we were riding over them."

Paul Bissette's memories of after his service are just as memorable. "It took forever for me to get discharged," he says. In the nineteen-forties, the Navy used a point system to determine discharges. When you had accumulated enough points through active duty, you were allowed to go home if you desired, considering you had someone to take your place (an alternate). "I had enough points for a long time before they found me an alternate."

When Bissette finally was discharged, he almost didn't make it out of Hong Kong. "My ship didn't have a flag on it saying it was going home. But the ship beside it did. The only thing was that that ship wasn't leaving for a few days. I got on that one, and the next morning the *Dufhilo* had a flag on it to go home, and it was leaving sooner. So I got back on that one." The Navy uses different types of flags to indicate whether a ship is staying in port or leaving.

Once he got back stateside, however, he was not ready to go home yet. The news footage shown on the television of the soldiers returning home is the end product of a long process that Mr. Bissette explained to me.

"I was in quarantine in San Francisco, and they gave me seventy-five shots. Me and six other boys took the train out of there and I was in charge of their files. We lost one boy because at one of the train stops he wanted a drink of liquor. He stayed at the bar too long and the train left. I don't know if he ever got home or not."

Paul Bissette received his honorable discharge papers in South Carolina, where he took a bus back to his wife and home.

I thought that it would be good to get Mr. Bissette's perspective on the modern day military. When I asked his opinion of the military of today, he was unapologetically blunt. "I think it stinks."

He points out the military's lack of discipline as one downfall of our armed forces. "They're allowed to go anywhere and do anything," he says. "When I was in there [the Navy] you were only allowed two days a months leave, and you didn't even think about leaving the base without a pass.

"I used to think that everybody's child should have to do two years of active

duty.”

- Despite his personal feelings about the military's practices, he does not admonish those who join the armed forces. “It's a good career to consider,” he says, “because there are certain duties that you have to fulfill.” Bissette also shares the same opinion of million of Americans concerning Saddam Hussein.

“We should have taken care of him the first time.”

Bissette also believes that a draft will be called in our current fight with Iraq.

I asked Mr. Bissette if his experiences in the military changed him or matured him at all. “No, I was pretty grown-up before I was drafted.” I also inquired, mainly out of personal curiosity, if his marriage was a typical “draft marriage”, where the young couple marries so that they can live as man and wife for a time before the young man goes off to war. “No,” he says. “We were married for about five months before the draft was even called.”

The son of a man that Paul Bissette served with is now currently compiling research for a book about the *USS Dufhilo* and its involvement in the second World War. He recently contacted Mr. Bissette wanting to know all the information he could about the ship and its adventures.

“I told him all I could,” he said to me when informing me about it.

It is my personal opinion that if this book is ever written, it will be quite a read. Reading about war stories and seeing war films is one way to understand what it's like to serve your country. Watching news footage is a way to understand what it is like to have bullets flying by your head. But until you've actually talked to somebody who has been in the battlefield, it's hard to appreciate just what the military does.

I have, by conducting this interview, not only a newfound respect for our fighting forces but also a newfound appreciation for people much older than I.

I had never sat down and talked to somebody who had served in a war before. Hearing Paul Bisette's stories stirred in me visual imagery of dangerous environments. I could imagine being a teenager, far from home and missing my loved ones dearly, trying to learn how to adjust to a foreign country. Part of me would be curious about my new surroundings; part of me would be more than a small deal apprehensive. I would have never been able to live these experiences through the stories of my friends. They are my age and haven't had the experiences that someone like Mr. Bisette has.

I have always enjoyed listening to my grandmother and my papa tell stories about their youth, and how times were when they were growing up. Not until I interviewed Mr. Bisette, however, did I realize how important it was to preserve these histories and these stories. How many new soldiers and sailors would give anything to talk to someone like Paul Bisette and get some pointers on how to survive military life? How many historians would love to record his stories, so that history books would be more than cold, hard facts?

It is important to talk to older people, to get their wiser, more learned perspective on issues and hear their experiences. I think that if they have survived to be as old as they are, whether it is a few years or a few decades more than I, then their words must be worth listening to.

I have also taken with me how much of an impact military service has on your life. In no other profession does a man or a woman see so many sights and take back so many memories. In what other profession can you see victory, death, sadness, happiness,

anger, and love all in one place? Paul Bissette still remembers his military days over fifty years after his discharge.

I appreciate Mr. Bissette taking the time to give this interview. I have learned much from him and much from the experience. I encourage everyone, especially in this time of war and conflict, to go out and find a friend or a family member that has seen combat action in a major conflict. It will broaden your horizons and shed new light on some cloudy areas of public opinion.

Bibliography

I used these sources to supplement the interview given by Paul Bisette.

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"Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships: USS Dufhilo (DE-423)

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If you would like to read, and hear, more soldiers' stories, visit this link.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwtwo/dday_audio.shtml