

Reflections on a Veteran

My best friend is graduating this weekend at the age of 18. I am so close to her that I feel like the two years separating us are only on paper, and do not really exist. It is almost impossible for me to imagine that nearly 65 years ago, young men her age, and even younger were preparing to land on far off islands to fight a war that had inspired them so much that they left their families and educations behind. One such person was Cpl. Jim Kelly of the 5th Marine Division who, among other things, was present for every moment of the Iwo Jima battle.

As I interviewed Mr. Kelly, I could barely open my mouth to ask the next question because I was so taken aback. I have known him for many years as a kind and humorous man who belonged to the Marine Corps League in our town. It struck me that this man quietly walked among us, enjoying a relatively simple life, yet he had such an incredible story.

He told me many things – some shocking, some funny, some heartbreaking ... and some haunting. He recounted all of this in a very relaxed and accepting way, but he seemed angered and disillusioned at the lack of appreciation and awareness that my generation has for those who have served our country. He believes we are disconnected from what he and his fellow servicemen went through because it this history – his history – is taught as an impersonal and distant event. I understood what Mr. Kelly meant because anything I ever learned about Iwo Jima in school was from a brief description at the end of a World War II chapter in my history book. It was merely information to memorize temporarily in order to score well on the next test. There is a completely different side of the story – the reality – that isn't written in a textbook.

I believe this troubles Mr. Kelly because we are the young people for whom he was fighting, for our freedom to attend school and to receive a quality education, which is the key to achieving any dream a person can imagine.

WWII veterans are now 85 to 90 years old, and they will not be around forever. They have endless stories to share with us that will teach my generation the kind of lessons that can never be printed in a history book. The owners of these invaluable lessons are all around us. All they need is someone to truly listen to their wisdom, appreciate their dedication, and exhibit the qualities they fought to uphold so many years ago.

“Think what we built for you,” Mr. Kelly said, “and don't take it for granted.”

In a couple of years, it will be me who will be graduating at the age of 18. I will begin life anew, independent in a world filled with possibilities, filled with dreams that I have the freedom to realize because of the selfless service of men like Mr. Kelly. I will begin this new life with a dedication to uphold honor and justice, and a determination to make the world a better place for future generations. By following the example set by these veterans, I will have the inspiration to work toward great things, perhaps things great enough for a high-school student to want to interview me when I am 90 years old.

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