

INTRODUCTION

Hampton SIDES

IT WAS THE GREAT ORAL HISTORIAN STUDS TERKEL WHO CALLED IT “THE GOOD WAR.” That was just a figure of speech, of course. All war is emphatically, horrifically bad—World War II especially. There was nothing “good” about it.

Yet there was something about the men and women who fought in it, something about the times in which they lived and the grace and fortitude with which they plunged themselves into service. Never before or since have Americans rallied so forcefully around a single cause. The colossal challenge of defeating Hitler on one side of the planet, and Tojo on the other, summoned qualities the nation never knew it had.

The men and women of World War II were many things—selfless, determined, humble, heroic—but they weren’t immortal. Every day we lose a few more of the Greatest Generation. Every day we grow closer to a time when their stories will no longer be accompanied by a human pulse.

That sad fact has given urgency and passion to the fine book you hold in your hands. The men and women so lovingly captured here still have the spirit, the memories, the scars. They are living testimony. Their craggy faces hold great narratives of wisdom and pain. Their wistful expressions, their bittersweet smiles, speak volumes. For every line and liver-spot, for every hard-earned wrinkle, there is a story to tell. Their eyes—dimmed by age, clouded by cataracts—have seen things we can only imagine.

Whenever I think about the magnitude of the sacrifices made in World War II, I feel a kind of dull and awesome incomprehension. How could they have done and suffered so much—while complaining so little? I spent three extraordinary years interviewing veterans for *Ghost Soldiers*, a book about the 1945 Army Ranger rescue of five hundred Bataan Death March survivors. I went to their reunions, I traveled with them to the Philippines, I lingered with them in military cemeteries, where the long rows of white crucifixes went on and on, warping in the heat waves. The war was always playing in their heads—like ambient noise. They had slaved and starved. They’d seen friends tortured. They had buried legions of their comrades. They still woke up in the night,

sweaty and scared, tormented by visions. Yet by and large, they wouldn't talk about it. They tended their memories in silence.

I became particularly fond of a Bataan veteran named Bert Bank, who lived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. One afternoon when I was visiting him at his home, he decided to drive me over to Dreamland BBQ—Tuscaloosa's legendary pithouse. Riding with Bert proved one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. He was an absolutely atrocious driver. He kept turning into traffic, clipping curbs, tailgating, swerving. It took me awhile to figure out the problem: Bert was blind.

When he was a prisoner-of-war in the Philippines, vitamin deficiencies had robbed him of his sight. Over the decades, he'd regained some of his vision but he was still legally blind. Bert didn't want me to know this. It was a matter of pride and stoicism. He insisted on driving us. He had memorized the streets of Tuscaloosa; the route to Dreamland was hard-wired in his brain.

Somehow we got there in one piece—and the BBQ was magnificent. Afterward, though, I grabbed his keys and said: "Bert, I'm driving us home."

Bert passed away a few years ago. But his story illustrates something profound about so many of these veterans: Their resolve, their modesty, their quiet pride, their self-reliance, their refusal to complain. They don't think they did anything extraordinary. They don't want special treatment. They don't want to stand out at all.

Luckily for us, Thomas Sanders and Veronica Kavass had different ideas. They understood that these men and women do, and *should*, stand out—now more than ever. In creating this beautiful book, Sanders and Kavass have helped fulfill the most important responsibility a society bears toward those who served the nation in war: to pay homage.

Savor these powerful images and words, and take them as your cue. Seek out veterans close to you, talk to them, hear their stories. Understand what they accomplished. And appreciate the fact that history is living right in front of you.

— H.S., *Santa Fe, NM*