

THE VOICES OF HISTORY

Veronica KAVASS

I DID NOT EXPECT TO FIND VERY MUCH IN COMMON with the veterans I interviewed for this book. They represent a time of unflinching patriotism and spiffy uniforms. They understood the importance of following orders and keeping secrets. From where I am standing, so much of this has changed today. We seem to uphold different values now—transparency of information, political correctness and comfortable, if not, sloppy attire. As a country, we are incredibly divided on every major issue. Picking sides can be a hassle, there is an increasing propensity to ignore the issues all together. Such behavior would have been unheard of during the Second World War.

I am a young woman with an endless penchant for stories. This was the main draw to this project: I knew it would be a story gold mine. As I listened to each veteran share his or her memories, I realized I had something in common with all of them, namely, a curiosity to see the world. Most of them were very young—*too young*—when they enlisted. Charles Hill enlisted in 1940 “at the ripe old age of 15” because it was “the only way for a country boy to see the world.” When all of his peers were impatiently waiting to get back home, John Jackson stuck around Europe after the war ended to study languages and international law. There are numerous accounts of veterans who looked at military enlistment as their only opportunity to travel. I know what it is like to be young and eager to see what’s beyond the cow fence. I also went overseas at the age of eighteen—I was

armed with a small guitar, a Spanish dictionary, and hiking boots. Of course, I saw the world through a very different filter.

After twenty interviews I began tracing patterns. There were a surprising number of plane crash survivors. Poor eyesight prohibiting entrance into the Navy or Air Force was another very common pattern. I heard echoes: “You aren’t scared of death when you are eighteen.” Along with, “Anyone who said they weren’t scared, was lying.” Nearly everyone I interviewed was proud to serve in the war. A majority considered our current war a complete mess. One thing I know about storytelling is that there is a tendency to leave out the parts we don’t understand. But when someone decides to come face-to-face with it while telling the story, it always enriches the narration. Like when Sumner Glimcher explained why he could no longer shoot his rifle after seeing his first dead American soldier. It is hard to admit to being a soldier who pretended to pull the trigger, but he did, and it made his story stronger.

While I found myself relating to many of the thoughts and emotions during our conversations, I struggled with certain issues when it came to editing their stories. For example, certain terms that are considered racial epithets today—such as referring to the Japanese as “Japs.” To this day it is natural for World War II veterans to use that term. And why not? Major American newspapers repeatedly put it in their headlines during the course of the war. Official awards

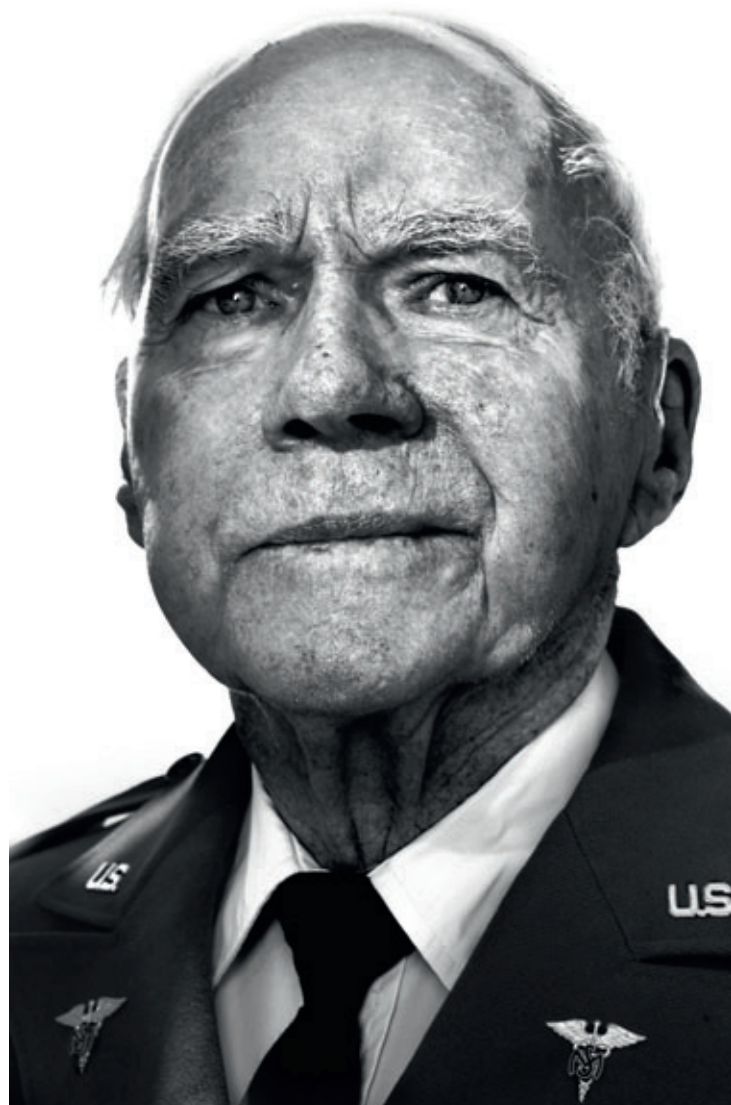
*“The ones that really sacrificed aren’t here to answer.
The rest of us have to speak for them.”*

— Milton HOLMEN

and commendations would state, “Congratulations for beating the Japs!” It was an acceptable term then. Now it isn’t. What is my duty in this? To maintain authenticity or change it out of respect? This was a pickle. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that I was too timid to ask the three Japanese-American veterans I interviewed what they thought of this conundrum.

The biggest challenge with this assignment was the race with time. These stories are slipping away and I didn’t really take that into account until I found myself chasing after them. We wanted to cover every aspect of World War II, but that wasn’t a simple process. I was given a list of the veterans Tom Sanders had photographed in the past four years. A number of them had already passed on and many others could no longer remember that far back. That’s why it was incredible to get a story from Edna Davis, one of the last three hundred WASP aviators left in the world. Or Harold Mason who was in the only topographic engineering company in the European Theater. Sanders even tracked down connecting stories between a POW survivor, Morton Gollins, and a soldier, Tom Gibbons, who was in the first squadron that liberated his camp, Stalag Luft VIIA. It was Gibbons, a natural raconteur, who ended his story with, “The most important thing to remember about this was: The true heroes are the ones who never came home.” In the pause that followed that statement, I could feel the resounding absence of all those stories.

— V.K., *New York City, NY*



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