

THE FACES OF HISTORY

Thomas SANDERS



Randall HARRIS, Lieutenant, U.S. Army Rangers

THE FIRST WORLD WAR II VETERAN I PHOTOGRAPHED was Lt. Randall Harris. He showed me a six-inch scar on the bottom of his stomach. When I asked him how he'd gotten the large wound he told me this story. While stationed in Italy, his company's mission was to take the eastern half of the Sicilian town of Gela and form a perimeter. At the beginning of battle, his company commander triggered an S-mine and was killed instantly. S-mines are filled with steel balls which explode in a million directions when the mines are set off. Another S-mine exploded, and several of those steel balls hit Harris in his lower abdomen and legs. Randall took his canteen belt, tightened the strap around his wound and continued fighting.

That day he made it back to the aid station line at camp, and was waiting in a line of wounded soldiers. A medic was going through the line, to see who needed immediate attention, and when the medic came up to Randall, he was holding his intestines in with his hands. The medic tried to move Randall ahead of everyone, but he would not budge. "No one touches me, until all my men have been attended to," said Lt. Harris.

The year was 2006 when Randall told me his story. I was a twenty-one-year-old college senior at the time, stressing about my future as a photographer, my final exams, and the girl's phone number I was striving to get that weekend. When Randall was my age, his only goal was to live to the next day. I couldn't even fathom what that would feel like. Right then, I made a spontaneous

decision. I was going to photograph and document as many World War II vets as I possibly could.

I began traveling up and down the California coast seeking out veterans. At first I was only photographing a few men and women a day, and then I received a commission from Belmont Village Senior Living Communities to visit their twenty prestigious locations around the country and photograph all the veterans living in their residences. It was a dream come true.

Following each visit, Belmont Village would unveil a permanent gallery of the photographs I'd taken to honor the vets. Each vet was individually recognized at an opening reception and received a print of their portrait. The events were deeply moving and uplifting for both the vets and the family members and loved ones that came to support them. Veterans who I'd had to beg to be photographed, slowly began to open up. They started pulling WWII memorabilia out of tucked away places in their rooms, they called me on the phone to share their recollections of the war, they began to take pride in being part of this book. I met vets who normally walked with walkers or wheel chairs, but would shove their walkers aside, or get up from their wheel chairs and stand with dignity and honor when I took their pictures. I met vets who had Alzheimer's who struggled tenaciously to tell me even a little bit about their war experience.

I hope when people see my images of the World War II veterans and read their stories, they become more appreciative of all those who have served our

country and fought our wars. I hope when they are out in their communities and see a veteran or soldier, they go up to them, look them in their eyes, and tell them *thank you* for their sacrifices. It shouldn't matter if a soldier saw battle or not, if they were prepared to fight or fought. It shouldn't matter if they were in Germany, Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq. They have all made sacrifices for our safety and our future. As I heard from many of the vets, the soldier who does not return from war makes the ultimate sacrifice. My great uncle was in WWII and was torn in half by a mortar. I lost a great uncle, my grandpa lost a brother, my great grandma a son; and Bobby Sanders lost the chance of having a family, a career, and a full life.

Many of the veterans I photographed have passed away since we met. It is one of the most difficult parts of this project for me, but has also been a powerful reminder of why recording their images and memories is so urgently important. One day, very soon, they will not be here to tell their stories.

— T.S., *Los Angeles, CA*