

A Hero's Confession

By Noah Hicks

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I looked out the window and watched the old man teeter up to my front door. My breath caught as he almost missed the last step. It was a week away from Veteran's Day and my 5th grade teacher had tasked me with interviewing a veteran. I had decided to interview my neighbor's father Maury, who was 92 years old. As I opened my front door, I was hoping the interview wouldn't take long. Annoyed with another homework assignment, I expected him to answer my questions quickly and be done. I greeted him and felt the tight grip of his handshake as I gestured toward the couch for him to sit down.

As he sat down he placed a tattered leather case on the floor. It was dusty as if it hadn't been opened in years, making me wonder what was inside. Following a list of questions provided by my teacher, I started the interview by asking him what branch of the military he was in. He quietly responded with the Army. The forced questions altered the mood, I could see the confusion and frustration building within him. When I began to ask the next question he interrupted. He leaned towards me, put his hands on his knees and said, "Noah, how about I just tell you some stories."

Eagerly I said, "Sure that sounds like a good idea," and let him begin his storytelling. Suddenly I wasn't bored; the thought of listening to first hand war stories was exciting.

He started with the story of how he got into West Point, the U.S. Military academy. In fact Maury never expected to get into West Point in the first place. He explained, "I got in by chance." There were a small number of interview spots that didn't include Maury. But at the last

minute someone decided to drop their interview spot, giving Maury a chance to interview. *This small sliver of opportunity shaped the rest of his life.* Intrigued by his story I wanted to hear more. Originally hoping the interview with Maury would be over quickly, I now wished for it to last all night long. As he was telling me his stories, I was in awe. *I never knew this man had such an interesting life.* Everything he told me reeled me in even more. I had never been more intrigued.

As he finished another story, his case on the ground caught my attention. Wondering what was inside I asked, “What is inside your case?” He reached down, grabbed the case, and carefully withdrew a few smaller items.

He said, “These are my military medals and awards.” I stared intently as he opened the cases revealing the gleaming awards to me. After revealing each award he would tell the story of how he got it. Every story was fascinating because most military awards take some form of bravery and honor to earn.

As he made his way through the awards the last one caught my attention. He picked up the last award with his hand shaking and I noticed something was off. I looked him in the eyes and could tell that there was something different about this award. He looked uncomfortable, like he was holding something in as he told me, “It is the bronze star, the most impressive award I received during my military service.” The bronze star is the fourth highest ranking award a service member can receive for a heroic and meritorious deed performed in an armed conflict.

He started telling the story of how he was awarded the bronze star. I was eager to hear a heroic story as he seemed immensely proud, yet slightly uneasy. He explained that he was the commander of an ammunition dump (facility that stores ammunition and explosives) in Korea during the Korean War. “The ammo dump was flooding and we needed to get the ammunition to

higher ground,” he described. He decided to create a human chain to pass the bullets, rockets, and missiles to higher ground. Maury said, “There was a rushing river that was rising due to the dumping rain, and I needed one person to stand in the middle to pass ammo across.” When he asked for a volunteer everyone looked at each other, but no one stepped forward until the only African American soldier in the regiment valiantly stepped forward.

In order to get the ammo across he had to withstand the rushing current while passing the boxes across. Any missed step or lost footing would’ve caused him to get swept away in the flood and most likely drown. After two hours of standing in the river, all of the ammo was across, and the mission was complete. “After the war I was awarded the bronze star for saving the ammo dump,” Maury explained, “The bravery of that black man was critical to the success of the mission.”

I looked at Maury as he started to tear up. “That is the deepest regret of my whole life, I never gave the man any recognition because he was African American,” he explained “I could’ve said something, I could have given this man a commendation, but I didn’t.” What I thought would be Maury’s heroic story had now taken a significant turn. I was shocked and at a loss for words. *Why did he choose to tell me? When did he recognize his mistake?* His trust to tell me, of anyone, something that made him so vulnerable was puzzling. *To have carried that around for 65 years, having to live with it everyday, is one of the hardest things I have ever imagined.*

This happened in a time where prejudice and bigotry was common, but not right whatsoever. Yet now, Maury had realized the horrible injustice and held himself personally accountable for the mistake. He told me this story decades later with an aching feeling of regret. I was drowning in my thoughts and conflicting emotions. To him, his bronze star, theoretically

his most prestigious award, was a symbol of both pride in having carried out an important mission, yet shame knowing he didn't honor the man who was imperative to the mission's success.

A day or two later my mom and I were talking with Maury's son, our neighbor, about the veterans project. We briefly retold the story of the bronze star and Maury's biggest regret. I looked up at my neighbor to see him stammer, cock his head back, and exclaim, "What, he never told me or anyone in the family that story."