



The Littlest Flag You Ever Saw.

Written By Antaeus

Every Thursday, at eight in the morning, the veterans' group I belong to meets at our local Bob Evans Family Restaurant for breakfast. We sit in a separate dining area at a long table that seats about thirty people. That's a good thing, because military people being, well, "military people," we badger each other, heedless of our language. Besides that, we were near the kitchen, so the smell of cooked bacon, pancakes, and biscuits gave the room a homey feeling.

On this Thursday, I happened to sit across from John, a World War II veteran who fought at the Battle of The Bulge and helped to liberate France. At 104 years old, John is our oldest member. His body doesn't always do what he wants, but his mind is still sharp and clear. That's a problem for John as the memories of the battles his unit fought in and his fallen comrades still haunt him.

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One of the Marines at the table shouted, "Ah...ten...hut," and the buzz of thirty people talking at once immediately ceased. It was time to pledge our allegiance to our country, something we all look forward to. We all stood at attention, saluted the flag, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. We are thirty veterans who love America, speaking with one voice, reaffirming our commitment to our country.

From where I stood, I could see the rest of the restaurant. Some older folks stood up, removed their hats, and faced the flag. For the most part, the younger crowd went on eating their breakfast. One young man stood up and gave the middle finger to the flag. Mario, a six-foot-four hulk of a man, stood next to me. The man had served three tours in the Middle East and had seen most of his platoon wiped out by an improvised explosive device (IED). I heard him mumble, "Son of a Bitch." When we sat back down, the room again echoed with the hum of a dozen or more conversations. Mario started to leave.

"Where are you going, Mario?" I asked.

"I'm gonna pull both his fingers off and make him eat them," he said.

Right after I got Mario calmed down enough to sit back down, I looked across the table and noticed that John had tears running from his eyes. I became concerned that he was having a flashback. The old sergeant had participated in the liberation of France and had seen many of his comrades wounded and killed in action during the war. Consequently, he hardly ever spoke of his experiences fighting the Nazi troops.

I said, "Are you okay, John?"

"I'm okay, son," he said pensively.

John calls everyone "son" because, as he says, he is older than dirt. Then, he asked me a question I was not prepared for. He said, "Son, what do you see and think about when you salute the flag?"

No one had ever asked me that before, and I was surprised that the answer was at the forefront of my mind. "I see the symbol of American freedom," I said." Then I think about the people I knew who gave their lives to keep this country free."

He smiled and said, "You keep asking me to let you write my story, but I can't do it. The memories are too painful. But I want to tell you one today because it turned out all right. I want to tell everyone here what I see when I salute the flag."

One of the other members sitting nearby heard what John said and called for silence.

"John has something to say," he yelled out.

Everyone stopped talking amongst themselves and listened as John began to speak.

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"I was a Platoon Sargent in the infantry when we were kicking the Nazis ass out of France," he said. "We had to do it one small town at a time. The Nazis bastards were dug in, and it was one bloody battle after another. A lot of good men died liberating those towns, and many of them were my buddies.

Every French village had a Town Center where the French flag was flown. When the Nazis occupied the town, they would take down the French flag and burn it. Then they would hoist their flag to show that the village now belonged to the Nazis.

My men and I had a ritual we would perform every time we liberated a town. First, we would head to the town center. The townspeople usually filled the place, cheering us on as we shot the Nazi flag full of holes and took it down. Then we'd hand it off to the crowd, and they would defile it in various ways.

We had a jeep full of American flags, he said. We would take one of those flags, run it up the flagpole, and salute it. The French people would go wild in celebration. Every one of us soldiers looked forward to that ritual. We considered it our reward after a hard-won battle. Seeing our flag flying over a liberated town made all our hardships worthwhile.

On this occasion, we had just liberated a small village in the wine country," John said. "It was a hard-fought battle, with many casualties. Two of my men were severely wounded, so we put them on the jeep and sent them to headquarters. After that, we went to the town center and, as usual, put a bunch of bullet holes in the Nazi flag, then took it down. That's when we realized that we had sent the jeep carrying our flags away, and we had no American flag to put up.

The boys were all standing around, muddy and bloody, looking let down and worried. We were superstitious about our ritual and thought it was a bad omen for our next engagement.

Superstition is a funny thing, he said. It can make a man feel invincible or suck the fight right out of his bones. It didn't help that the townspeople knew about our ritual because the underground had spread the word. So, those poor folk were also standing around waiting for us to put up our flag. We had to tell them we didn't have one.

After the interpreter made the announcement, the townsfolk started talking among themselves. They were disappointed. That's when a young boy stepped out of the crowd and spoke to him. The poor lad looked malnourished and was dressed in rags. We found out later that he was a ten-year-old homeless orphan. The Nazis had executed his parents as resistance fighters, but the boy lived because he had run away and hidden. The Nazis told the townspeople that anyone who gave the boy food or shelter would also be shot. But they helped him anyway.

The boy said he had an American Flag his uncle in America had sent his parents and would run to his hiding place and get it. When the boy returned, he presented us with a small wooden box. Inside the box was the littlest flag you ever saw. It was all he had left of his parents, and it was his treasure, he told us through the interpreter.

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We took that flag and made holes in its edge with a bayonet. One of my guys cut up his shoelaces, and we tied the flag to the hoist rope. We gave the honor of raising that flag to the boy. He ran it up the flagpole slowly and reverently while we stood at attention and saluted. When it hit the top, we cheered, and the townspeople celebrated.

That little French boy was a hero in our eyes. He had survived being hunted by the Nazis. Without him, we would not have completed our ritual. The next day, the jeep was back, and we hung one of our flags instead of the little one. I gave the flag and the box back to the boy. He held it to his heart and smiled the biggest smile I'd ever seen. I touched his head, and there were tears in my eyes. Unfortunately, we had to move on to liberate the next town, but we left the boy with food and blankets before we did. After the war, I always wondered what happened to that child."

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John said, "I don't know what the rest of you see when you salute the flag. But I see that boy, dressed in rags, hoisting our flag over his liberated village. It makes me cry every time."

When John finished, the room was silent. Every veteran there was thinking about John's story and what our flag meant to them. I know because there was not a dry eye in the room.

After breakfast, as I stood to leave, John touched my arm and said there was more to the story. He asked if I wanted to hear it. How could I not?

John told me that, the week before, he and his son were in a restaurant eating dinner. A man carrying a young boy came to the table and said he noticed John's World War Two veteran hat. Then he asked John in what unit he had served. When John told him, the man handed the child to his wife and hugged John.

He told John that it was his unit that had freed his grandfather's village from Nazi occupation. Then he told John the story his grandfather had passed down to him.

His grandfather said that American soldiers freed his village from Nazi occupation when he was young. The soldiers didn't have an American flag to fly over his town, but he did. He gave his flag to them to fly over his village.

Years later, his grandfather immigrated to America, taking that flag with him. The man said his grandfather gave the flag to his father, who had recently passed it on to him. His son would get it when he was old enough to understand what it meant. Then, he showed John the picture of a small American flag encased in a wooden frame. It still had the rough-cut holes and the shoelaces attached. It was the same flag John had saluted all those years ago.

A tear slid down John's face when he said, "God has let me live long enough to meet the son of the son of the boy from so many years ago. So now I can go to my eternal rest knowing he did all right."

Authors Note:

In October 2023, John turned 105, and our congressman held a "Littlest Flag" ceremony. He was honored for his contribution to our country as all of us guests and Veterans Breakfast Club members looked on. There was a "Raising of the Flag" ceremony, and everyone there got to hear John's story.

John stood before our group the Thursday after the ceremony and told us he had something to say. "I don't deserve all this attention," he said. "All those brave young men I served with, who were killed or wounded in action, deserve it more. Why should I get all the attention when I'm still alive? Those boys paid the ultimate price to stop those damn Nazis. It's them that should be celebrated, not me."

Any person who served in the military will tell you that was survivors-guilt speaking. What a heavy burden John has carried all these years. No wonder he doesn't like to speak about what happened all those years ago.