

A generation of heroes is passing on

By William C. Kashatus

The ceremony has become sadly familiar to me over the last 10 years: a 21-gun salute followed by the playing of taps, veterans saluting a flag-draped coffin, and the presentation of the Stars and Stripes to yet another widow.

This poignant rite of passage is reenacted in ceremonies across the nation by members of a generation that gave so much and asked so little in return. They were the generation that came of age with the Great Depression and their values were forged by the experience of World War II. They were the greatest generation this country has ever produced, and their deaths are becoming all too frequent these days.

Last week, I said good-bye to my 80-year-old uncle, Domenico "Dick" Femino. He didn't want a eulogy. He didn't believe that one was necessary, so none was delivered. But I still can't seem to say good-bye without sharing my respect for him with others.

Twenty years ago, when I was attending Brown University, I spent many weekends visiting my uncle and his lovely wife, Helen, in Middletown, where they lived. Since he owned and operated his own carpentry business, many hours were spent in the shop, or delivering furniture to various places on Aquidneck Island. Always eager to hear about his experience in the Navy, those discussions often became a tutorial in World War II history, specifically the Pacific Theater where he served.

My aunt was surprised to hear him talk about the war. Like so many WWII veterans, Uncle Dick, for so many years, chose not to discuss his wartime experience. It was too traumatic, too uncomfortable, too painful to share with others. At the same time, that experience defined his life.



Chief Domenico Femino

Dick Femino joined the United States Navy on June 7, 1942, in Providence, where he was born and raised. Just 20 years old, he took great pride in the fact that he was a "Pearl Harbor Avenger." Like many other young men across the nation, he enlisted six months to the day of the Japanese attack, the swearing-in ceremony taking place at the precise time of the bombing.

In July 1944, Femino was made supervisor of carpenters in the hull department of the aircraft carrier USS Randolph. Commissioned in October of that same year, the Randolph was one of 32 Essex-class carriers that would support the Marines in their sweep of the Japanese-held islands in the Pacific. Just four months later, on Feb. 10, 1945, the Randolph, under the command of Capt. Felix Baker, sailed off to war to take part in the first fighter strike against the Japanese homeland. No other large aircraft carrier crew had ever moved so swiftly through the training period as did the 3,021 men who served on the Randolph — another fact in which my uncle took great pride.

Joining the famed Task Force 58 at Ulithi in the Western Carolines, the Randolph, over the next two weeks,



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launched her first combat strike against an air installation in Tokyo and provided combat fighter sweeps for the ground forces landing on Iwo Jima before returning to Ulithi for replenishment.

On March 11 at 8:07 p.m., as weary sailors shuffled onto the hangar deck to relax and enjoy the movie, "A Song to Remember," a Kamikaze pilot slipped his twin-engine bomber past radar and crashed into the Randolph, tearing a massive hole in the flight deck. A column of flame shot into the air and hot ammunition began to detonate. Planes burned like torches, while wounded, bleeding men lay on the hangar deck.

As shipmates risked their life for other shipmates, the sultry but arrogant voice of Tokyo Rose — Japan's lady broadcaster — came across the Randolph's radio: "Thought you were nice and safe at Ulithi, didn't you?" The caustic remark only emboldened the crew, whose casualties included 26 killed, three missing and 105 wounded.

Among the wounded was my uncle, who was posted on the deck at

the time of the crash and witnessed the bloody mayhem that followed. In the explosion, a fellow sailor standing beside him was instantly killed yet, miraculously, my uncle survived, sustaining two broken feet and a badly sprained back. Still, he somehow managed to assist in the evacuation of the wounded to sick bay.

Awarded the Purple Heart for his bravery, Femino would go on to become a chief petty officer and serve his country for 28 more years. He retired from the Navy in September 1974, 15 months after the USS Randolph was decommissioned.

Settling in Middletown, he opened his own business, "Distinctive Woodcraft by Femino," and quickly became one of the most colorful residents of the community. An active member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Lions Club, the Disabled American Veterans, Senior Island Chorus and the Forever Young Club, he entertained customers and friends with his humorous - if not suggestive - remarks.

His woodwork was as professional and impeccable as his service record and can still be seen today in restoration work he completed for the mansions on Bellevue Avenue, the various signs for establishments on Aquidneck Island and the gold-leafed pineapple that sits atop the Middletown Town Hall. All of these gifts he proudly delivered to his customers in his white van bearing a license plate with a Purple Heart and the year "1945."

In countless discussions over the years, however, I came to understand that my uncle, as well as so many members of his generation, left us with something much greater than the fruit of their labor. They left us with a precious legacy, namely the freedom that we, as Americans, continue to enjoy today.

That freedom was forged by a generation which believed in duty, honor, service to others, love of family and country. It is a generation that can never be repaid, but rather honored for the personal and collective sacrifice they made more than half a century ago on the battlefields of Europe and the islands of the Pacific.

So, it is with a heavy heart, a tearful farewell, and a tremendous admiration that I say "Thank you" to a sailor and his generation that taught me what it means to be an American. May you rest in peace.