

Posted by Bob Abate rpa63@bestweb.net on Monday, June 10th 2013:

Over the years I've had the opportunity to meet and interview many World War Two Combat Veterans. One of these valient men in particular comes to mind as Father's Day nears - Ray H_____ (last name omitted for family's privacy).

Ray joined the Navy in 1941 and was a UDT (Underwater Demolition Team) Frogman, seeing extensive action at Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The following is excerpted from our 2000 interview:

" ... I was born in the South Bronx and learned to swim in the Bronx River and at Rockaway. My Dad would dump me in the water and I would do the dog paddle. Actually, when you went into UDT, they didn't want you to be a good swimmer because the overhand stroke made you too much of a target. We used the breaststroke with the sidekick or the sidestroke with the scissor kick.

I lost my Dad when I was nine years old. I have a picture of him in his World War One uniform. I kept thinking about my Dad all through the war. I wished he were alive so I could tell him about my experiences because he never had a chance to tell me about his. Except some of the funny things.

He was in the Cavalry in Texas. He and his buddy - Smitty - were drunk one night and got their horses drunk. They had these big hats filled with beer. When they came back to camp, they all got locked up - the two guys and their horses. Yeah, I can just see the four of them - the two of them on drunken horses. Then they shipped over to France and their horses got killed. Every time I see BLAZING SADDLES, I think of my father and Smitty with two drunken horses.

I ran away to go to sea when I was 13. I said I was 16. First, you had to go to the Coast Guard and apply for seaman papers. So I was arrested as a wayward minor and went before Judge Panke. I'll never forget his name. He sat there with a big Buster Brown bow tie and he made me promise to stay home until I was

old enough to join the Navy. That was my ambition. I stayed in school and the government started the United States Maritime Training Center. I was accepted and graduated in four months. Then we went to Florida for additional training.

The morning of December 7th, I was at the Veterans Hospital in Bay Pines, Florida visiting my uncle, a World War One Army vet. We were having lunch and someone ran in and said the Japs had attacked Pearl Harbor. I didn't even know what the hell Pearl Harbor was. Orders on the radio were for all military personnel to return to base. I said, "I'm not military, I'm semi-military." My uncle started to cry. I said goodbye and that was the last time I ever saw him. He died while I was in the service.

Back at the base, they told us we could stay in school or go into the Navy. So I chose the Navy. I was seventeen. On January 3rd 1942, I was sent to Newport, Rhode Island for training. From there I was assigned to the USS Libra. I was too darn young to understand what was going on. It didn't get to me until we got to Pearl Harbor in March '42. When I saw the devastation, that's when it got to me. I was shocked that they would do that to us. And then we went to sea and the war started for real.

I saw a poem on my ship's bulletin board and I copied it down and kept it all through the war. I still have it today. It was my favorite poem. I didn't know my Dad very well, he died when I was nine years old. But if he were alive, I think he would have written something just like this to me ... "

DAD TO SON

I WISH I HAD THE POWER TO WRITE
THE THOUGHTS DEEP IN MY HEART TONIGHT
AS I SIT WATCHING THAT SMALL STAR
AND WONDERING HOW AND WHERE YOU ARE.

YOU KNOW, SON, IT'S A FUNNY THING
HOW CLOSE A WAR CAN ALWAYS BRING
A FAMILY, THAT FOR YEARS, WITH PRIDE
HAS KEPT EMOTION DEEP INSIDE.

I'M SORRY THAT WHEN YOU WERE SMALL
I LET RESERVE BUILD UP A WALL
I TOLD YOU REAL MEN NEVER CRIED
SO IT WAS MOMS WHO ALWAYS DRIED
YOUR TEARS, AND SMOOTHED HURTS AWAY
AND SENT YOU ROMPING BACK TO PLAY.

NOW SUDDENLY I FIND MY SON
A FULL-GROWN MAN WITH CHILDHOOD DONE.
TONIGHT YOU'RE FAR ACROSS THE SEA
WAGING WAR FOR MEN LIKE ME.

WELL, SOMEHOW, PRIDE AND WHAT IS RIGHT
JUST DO NOT SEEM TO COUNT TONIGHT.
I FIND MY EYES WILL NOT STAY DRY.
I FIND THST SOMETIMES MEN DO CRY.
AND IF WE STOOD HERE FACE-TO-FACE
I'M SURE I'D FIND THAT MEN EMBRACE.

SON, ALL DADS ARE A FUNNY LOT
AND IF I'VE FAILED YOU IN SOME SPOT
IT'S NOT BECAUSE I LOVE YOU LESS
IT'S JUST THIS CUSSSED MANLINESS.

BUT IF I HAD THE POWER TO WRITE
THE THOUGHTS DEEP IN MY SOUL TONIGHT
THE WORDS WOULD RING OUT CLEAR AND
TRUE -
I LOVE YOU, SON - I'M PROUD OF YOU.

Ray died in 2001, the year after this interview.