

I apologize that it has taken me so long to write these stories down. The motivation to do so is present, but they are difficult to recount at times. Especially when anyone who knew my grandpa knows how gentle & honest & open-armed was. But oral histories don't exist necessarily to be pretty or easily palatable; they exist because, for whatever reason, they are too pertinent to forget.

Grandpa didn't tell most of these stories until later in his life. His brother Harvey had persuaded him later in their lives that he should have gotten more disability revenue for the injuries that he had sustained in WW2. Harvey was successful in his persuasion, and grandpa became curious enough to approach the proper personnel at the VA, who determined that he needed to recount his stories to someone at the VA who could determine the depth & extent of the experience; both physical & psychological. This process, of finally talking about these stories, opened up a wellspring for him, and he began to relay them to family sparingly. He still did not talk about his experiences a lot, but they at least started to flow at that point. I remember my Grandma Houston, who must have been married to him for approximately 40 -50 years at that point, told my mother that she was hearing these stories for the first time. She had never known until then, for example, that he had gone into the war at 6'1", weighing in the 190's and full of muscle, who had graduated high school being awarded scholarships for his football skills. But a handful of years later, came out of the war weighing somewhere in the 120's, a half naked waif whose teeth were already decaying in that short period of time due to no physical care while he was held hostage. The prisoners had been given no way to clean themselves or brush their teeth. He told me later that while 'a guest of the German army', as he put it, the daily food consisted of a cup's worth of turnip soup for breakfast with a hunk of bread and a cup of turnip soup for lunch. Grandpa told of the men having one pie tin, eating their soup out of it, and then passing it on for the next prisoner to eat out of. Some of the men would portion their bread so that they had some with the afternoon soup, as they did not have the luxury of receiving bread for their last 'meal' of the day, which was in the afternoon. Once in awhile there may be a bit a meat in the soup; apparently meat from horses who had died in whatever village that they were in. I never heard of him receiving water.

What I knew as a child was really the skeleton of his story; that he had been honored a purple heart, been a prisoner of the Nazi's in France for 5 months after parachuting into Normandy with the 101st Airborne. He lived through that time with a broken femur, which had snapped on the impact of hitting the ground. A good deal of what my family knew came out the summer that he was passing. For whatever reason, he apprapro to nothing, would just start telling a story. We would be sitting around like any other time, and he would relay a memory to a group of his close family; wife, kids, and grandkids. I get the impression that it was some of the more bizarre and less historically relative stories that were told in the end of his life. Stories that were more about how strange and cruel Nazi's were, and less about technicalities such as precision and timing of parachuting out of an airplane.

Retrospectively, I think that he downplayed his physical disability at times later in life when I knew him. He told me once that the doctors in the hospital in England where he was directly after France had told him that he could never have a job in which he had to walk. We were quiet a few seconds, and I said; "But they must have been wrong, you must have gotten better; you walked a beat as a policeman, walked a route as a mailman, and moved around quite a bit as a traveling repairman of vacuum cleaners when you worked with your brother Robb." He said to that; "No, I didn't get better. I was just always in pain."

He really relished talking about the planes and the parachuting aspect of his time in the service. To train while still stationed in the US, they would practice getting everything ready and actually jump while attached to a zip line of sorts that was not far off the ground. He was always interested in learning, and telling of this trade was particularly easy for him. Grandpa had gone into the air force, since he had a particular interest in flying. But directly before he went into the service, for one year after high school he and a friend moved to Buffalo and worked there to save money for what would lie ahead in their young lives. He earned his pilot's license there and would fly people between Buffalo and Canada. At this point, he had not enough money to pay to earn his flying hours, so he would find people who needed rides and they would pay him to fly them where they needed to go while he racked up hours toward his pilot's license. Grandpa had told me that he and his friend were thinking of moving to Canada in this time, and to fight WW2 on the Canadian side. But then America became involved in the war and they went south and he joined up in the country of his birth.

There is an interesting story of his early time in the air force; which was that he went to his superiors and told them that he wanted to be a pilot. He said that he had experience and that he could carry out the job of a pilot. Consequentially, they told him that someone couldn't be a pilot without having a college degree. But after he left their office, they looked in his file, saw his IQ score, and called him back into the office to tell him that they would make an exception for him due to his natural intelligence. He still would have to take a written test, and if he got none wrong he would be able to be a pilot in the air force. Apparently, he got one question wrong, and therefore would remain a paratrooper. My mother told me that 50 years later he was still able to recall what that specific question was.

Of course one of the more well known jumps that his air force division completed was toward the end of the war in Normandy. Before the jump in Normandy, from the time the army told the men in the 101st of the task that they were about to perform, the paratrooper's mail was intersected by their superiors. From the time that they knew what was going to happen, they had no contact with the outside world until after the jump. He remembered sitting in the plane while flying over France waiting to arrive over Normandy. The one thing he said about those moments prior to the jump was, in a jocular tone that his comrades "were cool as cucumbers. I don't know what was the matter with us." They were impeccably trained and prepared, but unbeknownst to the paratroopers, the pilots hadn't told the soldiers how low the planes were actually flying. They were flying much lower than expected in order to stay below enemy fire. So when the men jumped and opened up their parachutes as they had been taught to do, they were much lower than they thought that they were. Grandpa ended up in a tree hanging with his parachute caught. He only told me the summer that he passed away that he cut his parachute of his own free will "because the Nazi's were cutting the throats of everyone that was in the same situation". After he hit the ground he found himself on the beach of Normandy with his femur snapped. As he lay incapacitated on the sand, he said he saw his comrades running by him on the beach. They were pained that they could not help him, but they ran on. Grandpa said that they had been trained for that specific situation; of seeing their comrades in pain and needing assistance, but still running and forging on. The soldiers would see people that they were close to whom they would naturally want to help, but that they had to think of the cause; that carrying an injured man would slow them down. Consequentially, Grandpa was left to fend for himself. After this, he made his way inland; and told me that he crawled around by pulling himself along by his arms, sometimes eating bugs as he dragged himself along through the French countryside. After approximately a week, he heard voices in the near vicinity; German. And they were upon him, had found him,

were suddenly pointing their guns at him and speaking excitedly in a language he could not understand. As he lay on the ground not knowing if they would shoot, they spoke amongst themselves as if they were deciphering whether they would kill him immediately or not.

(Diane: I don't understand this part but it's what I've heard and that is that at this point Grandpa pulled out of his bag Hershey's kisses and held them up to the soldier's, and they didn't shoot him, and took the chocolate instead. Actually, I only remember hearing that one particular detail from Grandma, so it should be taken with a grain of salt) Regardless, soon after that moment Allie planes flew overhead. The German soldiers became alarmed and one of them quickly put a strap under grandpa's armpits & strapped him to his back. They ran to hopeful safety across a field and the result was that Grandpa's attachment to the Nazi's back resulted in his broken leg bouncing and jostling with every step. He passed out from the pain.

He woke up later in a barn, and for the next few months of his life he stopped and traveled, again and again, within Nazi jurisdiction. In that time he traveled from Normandy to Rennes, at which point the war was over and he was liberated. After being captured, the Nazi's and their prisoners would ride the railroad, and intermittently would stop and stay along the way wherever they landed. Grandma told me more recently that when he was traveling, that they were 'going to someplace like where Harvey was.' Which means, of course, a more formal camp; a barracks in which to set down and to stop moving. Grandpa stated that they kept stopping because Allie planes were aiming their fire at the railroads, trying to destroy one of their avenues of progression within the war. So they would ride the railroad a bit, then stop, then travel again until the end of the war.

He told me stories of the time he was traveling; once he was alone in a barn for days with his broken leg while he watched a mother cat give birth to kittens while the war raged on outside of the walls of the building.

Another time when he was stopped and planted in a barn, he had been offered Morphine by the Nazi's; and had not taken it. He stated to me that he would rather have a broken leg and be in his right mind than be drugged while in the care of Nazi's.

Once while in one of many barns along that trek, a man came inside who was German. The German man spoke to grandpa in proficient English, wondering what was physically wrong with him and asked for details on his leg. Grandpa asked him why he was helping him if he was German, and furthermore where did he learn to speak English so well? The man responded "I am a doctor first and I studied at NYU." I don't know the details of what that doctor did for my grandpa, but I know that he did what he could and then he walked out never to be seen again with no names being exchanged. Grandpa told me many years after that occurrence (in the late 80's -early 90's) that he wished he could see that man and thank him.

I remember Grandpa telling stories of wasting time with British men while they were waiting to move on again, and they taught him to play cribbage. He relayed that some of the British guys had somehow, rigged up a radio in secret with their time so that it worked. They then used it to listen to what was going on in the war, and then baited some Nazi's coyly with the information they knew.

I think Grandpa did not tell of a lot that happened there in the 'camp', but he did tell of an overarching situation. This was that his clothes would keep disappearing, slowly and one piece at a time. He said that he knew it was the Nazi officers who were overseeing his 'barracks'. This happened to such an extent that when grandpa was liberated in Rennes, he had only a white t-

shirt on and nothing else. When, I heard this story there was not much emotional or philosophical elaboration on why this happened. It seemed obvious that the tactic was meant to convey a reminder of who was in control and of course that the prisoners were meant to feel vulnerable. All this time, Grandpa had a pocket sized bible under his arm; hidden in his armpit the whole time. So even though, he came out of the war with barely any clothes to speak of, he had a symbol of his faith secured under his arm. Grandma Houston still has that bible in her hope chest at her house on the lake. Grandpa told me that the first time that he looked into the mirror after he was liberated, that he did not recognize himself; long beard and a skeleton of what he had been.

Not a lot more of his time there was told in Grandpa's life. Once, though, a few weeks before he passed he told a room of his family members another story. From my memory it was Grandma, Taylor, Mom, Don, Charlie and myself, and it was another time that a story came out appropriate to nothing. But it goes such that, Grandpa told the Nazi's that he was thirsty, that he'd like a glass of water. To that, a German woman naked from the waist down was ordered to stand over him, and slowly lower herself over his face until she urinated on his face in answer to his request for water while Nazi's laughed at the situation.

Liberation

Grandpa was liberated in Rennes, France. My mother has told me that Grandpa was in a hospital in England for a bit directly after the end of the war, and that her father told her stories of his brother Robb finding him in the hospital in England.

My Great Grandma Houston, back in Upstate New York, had apparently gotten more than 1 MIA letter at the same time concerning her sons. I have heard this from my grandpa, grandma, and mother, although I cannot don't know now who/if there were any other brother's missing at that time. Harvey and Warren certainly, but who else of the brothers, I'm not sure. Grandpa Houston told me that this was the worst thing to him about the war; that his mother had to wonder if he was dead. My grandma Houston (Marion) was young and working at the newspaper at that time. She had become smitten with Grandpa earlier, as she was a friend of Martha's and they had all gone ice skating on the Chemung River together a few Christmas's earlier right before Grandpa was about to go overseas. Anyway, it was grandma's job to put the notices of the service members in the paper, and one day she got the notice of Grandpa and she had to just post it and keep working. Eventually, though both Fanny and Marion were lucky enough to see five Houston brothers come home alive.

Post War --hospitals

After England, Grandpa went to a hospital in Massachusetts for two years after WW2. When I was a teenager, I asked him if it was because of his leg, and he responded, no it was more because it had made him feel like he was worth very little. It took him two years to be ready to go out into the world, and really be able to live in civilian life go again. He could have seen family and friends in that time, but he was not ready. It is strange to me as an adult to learn that he had such a hard time, because he always seemed so steady and calm. Yet, I've learned only in the past few months that he was affected into the rest of his life by those years. The extent to which I saw him affected by his war experiences as a child was that he had a hard time after hearing fireworks at the lake; I remember hearing adults speaking about how it gave him nightmares afterward. More recently-- in the past year, Grandma Houston told me that after the war when they were newly married, he had gotten a job at a factory. She said it was a job that

made more money than most others which were available at the time, but that he didn't last a week there due to the sound of the machines, and after he left the job he was "laid up for weeks."

He persevered, though, and his brother Robb was managing a Vacuum cleaner business. Robb hired Grandpa to travel around and repair the vacuum cleaners. He worked always a few jobs on 85% less disability than he was supposed to have had all of his working life. I think I have not mentioned that when Harvey coerced Grandpa to investigate his case this was disclosed. The outcome, after the therapy and tests, was that he should have been getting 100% disability his whole adult life instead of 15%, but there had been some type of paperwork mistake. Regardless, he did receive a lump sum of money in 'back pay' at that time. I know that when Grandpa graduated from high school, he had gotten a scholarship to Ithaca College funded on his football playing. He also was making money and sending it home to his parents on a regular basis to keep aside for him for posterity's sake after the war. As times were really financially tight, his parents had to spend the money to survive during the war. When my grandpa came home he had a broken femur that had never been set (he limped the rest of his life) so his scholarship was not valid anymore, and the money that he had made in the war was gone, for the good of the cause. I know that he had wanted to go to college and become a teacher, but for some reason that never came to fruition. Grandma said that on the G.I. bill, he bought a house for the two of them, and they began to raise a family, and the rest from there is history.

One last story that I remember from his time after the war is of Grandpa visiting with the parents of one of his best friends who had not made it home. The visit was difficult as the friend's mother was sad but cordial, but his father was obviously chilly to Grandpa. Grandpa said that the feeling from the father was "Why did you make it back, and not my son?" It made him feel horrible, because he felt at times the same way; grief from losing people, guilt at having lived, and relief from having come out of the other side of a horrific experience all at the same time.

Other Houston brothers

The stories of my grandpa's brothers are more from other parts of my family, mom and don. My mother remembers being at Uncle Erwin's house while grandpa and grandma, Erwin & his wife Marha were visiting together. Mom remembers Erwin giving her a box of his photos that were from the war to look through, in hopes of keeping her occupied while the couples socialized in the other room. Mom later asked her dad, why Uncle Erwin had so many photos of the war. He responded that it had been his job; that he had been an aerial photographer during the war. From how I understand it, when planes went down they would photograph the men going down to make a record of the event and whatever valuable details a photograph could give upon later viewing of it. I was told Erwin had actually been photographing right next to his brother Harvey's plane when it went down, and took photos of the plane and the men going down, knowing that his brother was one of them.

All I know of Bill is that he was a medic.

The stories of Robb that I know come from my mother and Walt, his son. My mother has an interesting memory of a discussion with her dad concerning Uncle Robb when she was a child. You may have to ask her to expand on the story, but somehow Grandpa told mom that Robb had ways of "knowing where everyone was at all times during the war." This was obviously insinuating that he had intelligence connections. He thought that this was how Robb found Grandpa so quickly after he was liberated, apparently at his bedside in England days after liberation.

Then the only other thing which I've heard about Robb was from Walt, was that he was in the Battle of the Bulge. These are just the things which I've heard and I'm not exactly sure how they fit together.

Jennifer Stratton, March 2012