

STEVE KISTULENTZ

The Closest We Have Ever Come

One afternoon, in the middle of that Cosby era of nothingness known as the 1980's, my father made his final devotion to the television. All his adult life, television had been his most intimate friend, from the Kennedy assassination to man on the moon, to the ABC movie of the week, to reruns of *Hogan's Heroes*. He chose what the family watched; my only job was to learn what I could about the mostly silent man as he stared at his favorite shows, the simple morality plays in black and white that retold the most mainstream version of World War II. We watched them all, the classic movies, John Wayne squinting and shouting his way through *The Longest Day*, the preposterous arrogance of *A Bridge Too Far*, George C. Scott in his parade gloss boots and mirror-finish helmet, even mediocrities like *Force 10 from Navarone*.

After he retired, he spent what would be his final months wasting away in a brown velvet Barcalounger, alternately distracted and enthralled by his newly installed cable. He'd been devoted to television for some time, watching the various iterations of World War II, especially the episodic retellings of *Combat!* The men of *Combat!* the series fought their way across the same parts of the French countryside where my father had been dropped in 1944. He often quoted a line from the first episode, Vic Morrow's Sgt. Saunders justifying the off-camera killing of a German infantry man by saying, "A tank looks down your throat, you do what you think is best. There was nothing else to do."

Whenever the events covered an infantry unit in France or Germany in the eleven months between D-Day and V-E Day, Dad would supplement the film with a short narration about his own service. They say that when you know you are about

to die, your life flashes in front of your eyes, but I know now that when the dying becomes months long and tedious, you watch it on television.

The only other thing he watched was the news.

The background narration to our family dinners was provided by Marvin Kalb in Saigon, Bert Quint at the Pentagon, Daniel Schorr in Washington, Eric Sevareid with a comment, the stentorian announcements of the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. We weren't allowed to talk, not my mother, not my sister who'd sewed a "War is not healthy for people and other living things" patch on her denim jacket. The rule was silence as we watched Dan Rather in an M-65 jacket, reporting alongside the men of the 1st Marines. It had always been this way, through Nixon's final days and through Whip Inflation Now and through, "My name is Jimmy Carter and I want to be your President." And in his final months, my father became obsessed with the minutiae of a shadowy deal where an American colonel sold Israeli anti-tank weapons to the Iranian government, then funneled the proceeds to anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua.

In that short a summary, the Iran-Contra affair reads like a preposterous, unpublishable spy novel. A 26-year-old aide took a chartered plane carrying millions in cash and travelers checks to El Salvador, handed the money over to a Contra rebel, and returned to DC in time to get hammered in Dewey Beach that weekend. A secretary with a high school diploma shredded some of the nation's secrets, carried others to her car stuffed into her panties, an offense for which full-bird Colonels have gone to prison. And so for a week, her panties were the subject of national news, having been apparently purchased by a Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel, her boss.

Pictures of the Colonel were themselves national news. He stood upright, right hand raised, taking the oath before he testified before a select committee of the United States Congress. The committee was tasked with investigating the illegal sales of arms by the U.S. government to anti-communist rebels fighting a vague and ineffective insurrection against the Sandinistas, the Marxist-inspired government that ruled Nicaragua.

The committee was chaired by Daniel Inouye, Democrat of Hawaii. He rarely invoked his status as a war hero, and truthfully, he did not need to, as he was missing an arm from the war; the empty sleeve stood as a potent reminder of his service, his sacrifice. In front of the television, I learned Senator Inouye was a law school classmate of my father's, a surprising bit of information, since I hadn't known that my father had gone to law school.

There was a lot I hadn't known. Information had always been, in this household, on a need-to-know basis. And frequently, in the eyes of my father, I had no need to know.

I came home from my sophomore year of college in the first week of May 1987. The hearings had just begun, but Dad was already embedded on the couch, gripped by the pressing question of the day, *What did the President know and when did he know it?* It felt surreal and familiar, the same questions from the Watergate hearings a decade and a half before, as the Select Committee chaired by Sam Ervin broadcast gavel-to-gavel coverage of Nixon's self-destruction.

Dad had been gripped by those hearings too; the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice was chaired then by an old infantry buddy, Bill Hungate of Missouri, and Dad took the seven-year-old me to watch a day of the hearings from the anterooms of the House Judiciary Committee. During a lunch recess, I sat in Chairman Peter Rodino's chair and banged the chairman's gavel, hitting the oak striking block so firmly that the print reporters covering the day all rushed into the room, to find that the sole person on the dais was.

My father was a man who had been a lifelong conservative, who ran for the school board in Lucerne County, Pennsylvania in 1956 as a Republican, in an era when Pennsylvania politics were machine operations dominated by the United Mine Workers. His brother Mike, a UMW member, faced a tough choice: vote for a Republican, or vote against his brother; he chose neither, instead running away to nearby Hazleton and its larger VFW bar, and by that simple choice, demonstrated that maybe Uncle Mike was the best politician in the family. Now, during each recess of the Iran-Contra hearings, Dad would turn to me and ask about the proceedings. Did I see what was happening here? Did I understand how *we*, that royal *we* that meant every American citizen, had lost our basic sense of moral clarity? With each passing afternoon, he grew increasingly distraught.

It wasn't until July, during the testimony of Admiral John Poindexter, President Reagan's National Security Advisor, that my father began to prosecute the case he'd been building in his head all summer. "You do understand what this is," he'd say, assuming I did but not waiting for an answer. "This is senior military officials directly contravening the law of the land."

I shrugged. I hadn't given it much, if any, thought. My friends plastered their cars with bumper stickers that offered pithy, of-the-moment endorsements of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, Admiral Poindexter, General Richard Secord, all the unindicted co-conspirators of this latest scandal. One said, *Nicaragua is*

Spanish for Afghanistan. When Colonel North raised his right hand to testify, a number of my classmates went out and got regulation haircuts, a modified high and tight that declared their fealty to the ideas of duty and country they saw celebrated in the Colonel's class A uniform, its impressive array of career fruit salad.

"What this is," Dad said on his way to retrieve a beer from the refrigerator, "is the closest we have ever come to a military coup in this country."

I didn't hear that sort of alarm anywhere else. This was all about freedom fighters, someone on the radio told me. I was commuting, 45 minutes a day, from a job as a gopher at one the Washington's oldest and largest law firms, where the elderly, bespoke-suited men I passed in the halls were the same elderly and bespoke-suited men I saw on the Sunday morning talk shows, talking about the Colonel and his arms for hostages schemes.

It was a great summer job, replete with free dinners and paid parking and a \$13 an hour paycheck, which meant that overtime was the kind of golden money that irresponsible 20-year-olds dream about. The clients were a who's who of famous miscreants, Ivan Boesky, Ted Bundy. I was just politically astute enough to notice that Boesky's criminal defense wouldn't pay paralegals any overtime, but Ted Bundy's death penalty appeal had seemingly endless pockets, even though the firm was handling it pro bono.

Was it the closest we'd ever come to a coup? Unlikely. I know now, at a remove of nearly thirty years, that what my father struggled for all his life was a chance to return to the kind of sharpened moral clarity he knew as a 22-year-old infantry sergeant. His entire young life had been the simple narrative of good versus evil, unions versus management, the common man against the tyrant, democracy against communism, the hard-working good man against the crooked oligarch who ran the local building and loan, a world defined by the binary oppositions of a world where everything made sense. How little had made sense to him since the war? Years of hope, days of rage, a nation coming apart at the seams, towns poisoned by industry, a President who left office in disgrace, the unindicted coconspirator that he was. Only the war had made sense. He called it *the last just cause*.

If you think that is simple and overly reductive and makes for a sad story, that is your right and privilege; to me, it is an illustration of how television shapes what we learn, how we learn, and ultimately, who we love and how we love them.

In those shared moments, lit by the cathode glow of an ungainly Magnavox console, I learned all I ever would about my father. Which is woefully little. But I

am grateful for the stories. How in the winter of 1944, he took a rabbit fur jacket off a dead German infantryman; how he deflated the tires of a headquarters company truck to pass under the only intact bridge on the Saar River later that spring. How he captured two German soldiers who were eavesdropping on Easter Sunday mass, April 1945, and how one of the Germans held a rosary in one hand and a .25 caliber Belgian Mauser pistol in the other. How I know now, at a distance of three intervening decades, that television for him was not just entertainment or distraction. It was a time machine, something that took him back to the only period in his life when things truly made sense, the days of physical training and close order drill and the unknowing bond of shared sacrifice, when the sides were clearly drawn, perhaps the last moments in his life where certain victory belonged to the righteous and just.

It gave him, in a word, peace.



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