

TONY GORRY

War Stories

*And it is of you the poet sings,
Speaking sweetly to his clear-voiced lyre.
At the beginning and at the end,
It is always of you.
—The Homeric Hymn to Apollo*

I was fourteen when I discovered my father's medals in a concealed drawer of an old chest. Amid a few papers and photographs were five black rectangular boxes stamped with gold letters: Purple Heart, Silver Star, Bronze Star, another Silver Star and finally, Distinguished Service Cross. Each held a medal attached to a colored ribbon. The Silver Stars gleamed against the black velvet interior of their boxes. The Purple Heart, enamel with gold trim, also shone. The Bronze Star and the Distinguished Service Cross, however, sat dully in their cases. I understood the meaning of the Purple Heart; my father had been wounded. The yellowed typewritten papers told me about the others. From them I learned for the first time of my father's "gallantry," "courage" and "extreme heroism." The citations laconically recounted incredible actions and seemingly impossible deeds for which he had been honored.

He had received the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest decoration that can be awarded to a member of the U.S. Army, for "extraordinary heroism" during fighting in eastern France in the months following the Normandy invasion. Even today, I marvel reading these terse accounts of his exploits, the first stories of my father's life at war. Although badly wounded, he had inflicted "severe casualties"

on the enemy. He had single-handedly captured more than thirty German soldiers. He had escaped from a German prison. On that day of discovery so long ago, excited by these accounts of my father's prowess and bravery, I gave but a quick look at the photographs. Most were snapshots showing him with other soldiers amid shattered buildings in ruined streets. One, which matched well my father of the citations, showed him standing alone by a tank. I passed over several larger prints that lay face down in the drawer. They later proved to be awful images of emaciated prisoners and jumbled corpses in an unidentified concentration camp. The stories, which I reread with growing excitement and pride, mattered most. My father was a War Hero.

I rushed to quiz him about his experiences, to marvel at his tales of valor and to ask why he had hidden his medals. "Son," he said, "put those back where you found them. The real heroes didn't come back. They're dead. I'm here with you and your mother. That's enough." So ended my first encounter with my father, the War Hero.

Almost seventy years ago, he had been cast into a maelstrom of violence and slaughter. Many of his comrades died; several times he was wounded; he killed; he survived having repeatedly distinguished himself as a brave and resourceful soldier. He could have come home cloaked in fame, but for the rest of his life, he deflected questions about combat experiences. Over fifty years, he offered only three brief glimpses into his life in battle, three very different "war stories."

The first: He had been in the initial wave of soldiers to land on the beaches of Normandy. Just in from the surf, the Germans had laid large rolls of barbed wire to impede the advance of the invaders. Raked by machine gun fire, soldiers wading out of the water had to crawl over this wire to gain a foothold on the beach. "If I hadn't been an officer," he said, "I'd be dead. I was moving men forward from the landing craft. The first threw themselves on the wire, clawing to get across. The machine guns got most of them. We crawled over their backs." With tears in his eyes, he said quietly, "All I went through with those men . . . I loved them."

The second: He had been wounded when German fire blew him out of a vehicle. He lay on the ground while the battle raged around him. "I carried a pistol in my vest," he said, "but my arm was pinned down, and I couldn't get to it. I was lucky. If I'd started shooting, the Germans would've killed me. When the fighting stopped, they found me and took me prisoner." Fragments of metal still embedded in his leg were a constant reminder of that day when his life hung so precariously in the balance.

The third: He had been in a barn in the German countryside where a hidden enemy soldier was trying to kill him. "I crept around some hay bales and got behind

him," he said. "I killed him. I turned his body over . . . he was your age." I was fifteen at the time. "That was the war," he concluded and walked slowly away.

He died leaving his medals and the echoes of these three stories to speak for him. For years, the deep meaning of these artifacts hovered on the far side of my understanding. There were, of course, books about the war, some written by participants in the battles. Movies offered increasingly intense immersions in simulations of war's chaos and carnage. The difficulties and frequent pain of homecoming were also widely discussed. But it wasn't until I listened to an ancient poet that I began to understand my father's war stories and what they mean for me today.

Shortly after his death, I took up the study of Ancient Greek. In translation, the spare elegance of the epics and tragedies had long appealed to me. How much better, I thought, to read the originals. I was right. Lately, I have been reading Homer, who across almost three millennia has much to say about mortality, honor, courage and fame that helps me understand my father, the war hero. Now I imagine him in the company of the great warriors who fought beneath the walls of Troy. Each of his citations, other than its mention of modern weapons and technology, reads like what Homer calls an *ἀριστεία*, a combat that reveals the prowess of a great warrior. For example, Homer says that Hector in battle was "furious as a high wind when it strikes . . . or like a lion that rounds in mighty joy on dogs and men . . . and when he charges, all give way." Achilles on the attack, he says, "flashed to right and left like a wild god, trampling the men he killed, and black earth ran with blood." Patroclus "hurls himself upon the Trojans three times, with wild yells in his throat. Each time he killed nine men. But on the fourth demonic, then the end of life loomed up for him." The language of my father's citations is less poetic, but in it, the actions of a great warrior are unmistakable.

His citation for the Distinguished Service Cross recounts how he "personally took command of a leaderless rifle platoon and led it against the enemy in the face of heavy machine gun, small arms, artillery and mortar fire. . . in the ensuing fight personally manned a machine gun mounted on a truck inflicting severe casualties on the enemy and pinning them down so that his greatly outnumbered patrol could withdraw to report the valuable information obtained. He then took a position in the lead vehicle of a tank column . . . and suffered a multiple fracture of one arm and severe concussion when his vehicle was knocked out by enemy fire. Refusing to be evacuated he proceeded by vehicle to locate four members of one of his mortar squads left behind in an exposed position when their platoon was forced to withdraw. He proceeded on foot when the driver of his truck was killed

and located the men. By pinning the enemy down with his sub-machine gun fire, he was able to safely lead his men out of danger.” Greatly outnumbered, my father went forth like a Homeric hero to engage the enemy. Even wounded, he repeatedly threw himself at them and at death. And in the end, he triumphed. Had he been at Troy, great fame, would certainly have been his. Instead in a half-hidden drawer, a few medals and some papers were the sole testaments to his prowess.

After ten years of war and ten more of a tortured voyage home, Odysseus arrives at Ithaca where Athena disguises him as a wretched beggar so he can safely reconnoiter the situation in his house so long occupied by his wife’s suitors. With her magic wand, Athena shrivels his skin, makes his hair fall out and dims his bright eyes. Odysseus becomes a hero secreted within an old man’s wrinkled hide. But when he has completed his reconnaissance, the goddess touches him with her golden wand to reveal the mighty father to his awestruck son. When my father returned from war, he had no need to get the lay of the land. He was warmly welcomed, yet he donned a disguise. No goddess remade his appearance. He clothed himself in reticence, hiding the hero he had been. From the day I found his medals, I wanted my father to reveal himself fully. But to the end of his life, no goddess extended a magic wand to cast his disguise aside. Over the years, whenever I tried to get him to talk about his wartime experiences, he would only repeat one of the stories he had told me over the years: his landing at Normandy and the deaths of the men he loved; his capture by the enemy; his killing of the German youth in the barn.

As I read Homer, slowly those stories as well came together with the poet’s. In the battle that surges back and forth before the walls of Troy and the sea, nothing is certain. A chance arrow, a misstep, a stumbling horse, each can bring sudden doom on even the bravest. Heroism may gain renown, but it affords no salvation, not even for godlike Achilles. My father’s war stories echo Homer’s: fate and the changing rhythm of battle, not moral worth or even fighting skill, determine the victors and the vanquished, who will live a while more and who will die.

And Homer is unsparing in his depiction of death. Spearheads split brains and disgorge their contents; teeth and eyes are dashed out, blood pours from mouths, nostrils and wounds. Even Homer’s heroes quake in the face of death’s enveloping black cloud. When Hector challenges the Greeks to send forth a champion to meet him in single combat, they huddle in silence and abject fear. Only when Ajax is chosen by lot to meet Hector’s challenge, when each of the other Greeks knows he will not be the one to die, does sickening dread leave them. Now fear settles instead on the Trojans when they see the huge Ajax advancing with his great spear. Not even Hector himself is spared the terror that has descended on his comrades.

His knees tremble and his heart thumps. But Homer allows no retreat; Hector has committed himself. He must put his life into the hands of fate.

Centuries later, my father, too, issued a challenge with gravely uncertain consequences when he crossed into enemy territory. Who would take it up? What would come to meet him? Was he crossing into death? Surely he was brave, but he had placed himself within the fluctuations of fortune, which Homer teaches, make victory less a matter of valor than of destiny. Like Hector, my father may have felt cold fear come upon him. Yet, despite wounds and a thumping heart, he moved steadfastly forward.

Yet in moments of great peril, the heroes of the *Iliad* may seemingly become indifferent to fear, pain and even the prospect of oblivion. Rachel Bespaloff identifies the agent of this transformation as a pervasive force, which “reveals itself in a kind of supreme leap, a murderous lightening stroke, in which calculation, chance and power, seem to fuse in a single element to defy man’s fate.” Before the battle, cowards may reveal themselves, but those who will emerge as the greatest warriors may not. Homer shows that the force that mixes heroism, madness and ferocity arises in the moment of trial. A warrior possessed by it can go berserk like Achilles who, having killed Hector, abuses his corpse for days until the gods intervene to bring him to his senses. Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who has counseled returning Vietnam veterans, would say that Achilles was in the grip of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Could it be that in combat, my father was not my father at all, but a being transformed by this force, a being outside any life I could know. If so, over the years, I saw few vestiges of the emotions that urged him forward in the face of death when he achieved his *ἀριστεία*.

Homer tells us as well that this force emerges only when wishful thinking, self-pity, self-deception and even the consoling prospect of immortality are put aside. The gods hold sway over the lives of the warriors, willfully manipulating them to satisfy their own whims and ambitions. Greater fighters may be thwarted; and lesser ones, protected. The intervention of the gods can reverse fate, granting life or delivering doom in an instant. Through Apollo’s intervention, Hector escapes death in his duel with Ajax, but later confronting Achilles, he is doomed by doings on Olympus. Zeus places icons of Achilles and Hector on his golden scales, and Hector’s sinks toward the gloom. Apollo abandons him, Athena betrays him, and Hector must face death alone. Despite his bitter betrayal by Athena, Hector turns with clear eyes to face Achilles and death. A Trojan ally, Sarpedon, looks at the perils of war with the same steady gaze. Now that a thousand shapes of death loom

that no man can escape, he says, we must steel ourselves to attack. I believe the same clarity of vision steadied my father when he so often faced the prospect of death.

Our fates are no longer balanced on Zeus's golden scales. Still, a host of lesser gods — biological, social, political, emotional — tug at us, some with an insidious grave intent. We may think Homer's gods vain, insensitive, manipulative and petty, but the gods of war who thrust my father into battle were no more fair, no more just than those Olympians. Had he not been an officer at Normandy, had he been able to reach his revolver, had the young German soldier crept behind him in the barn, my father would likely have died. He was like Homer's heroes who, despite their prayers and sacrifices, cannot deflect fate. The poet teaches, however, that in that awful moment, the hero can free himself from the grip of fear and meet bravely the lot the gods have assigned him.

But Homer also teaches a sad truth that echoes in my father's stories. Although those possessed by that force can become the greatest of heroes, they cannot save their beloved comrades from inexorable fate. Heartbroken and raging, Achilles cries inconsolably for Patroclus killed by Hector. Years after the sack of Troy, moved by song of a Phaeacian harper, Odysseus sheds molten tears for the Greeks fallen there. My father could never reconcile himself to the deaths of his comrades. His tears marked an inexpressible sorrow, which all his medals could not recompense.

In the last book of the *Iliad*, Homer describes the meeting of Priam, Hector's father, and Achilles, his killer. Priam is begging for the return of his son's. He humbles himself, lifting his lips to the hand of the fearsome warrior. Achilles is then stirred by aching and grief for his own father and for his lost, beloved Patroclus. Alone together, the two men shed tears. But shortly, Achilles draws Priam to his feet, saying: "We'll probe our wounds no more but let them rest, though grief lies heavy on us. Tears heal nothing, drying so stiff and cold. This is the way the gods ordained the destiny of men, to bear such burdens in our lives, while they feel no affliction." None of the heroes who survived Troy, except for old Nestor, boasts of his prowess once the battles are over. For my father, as for them, what would be for listeners a dramatic entertainment could only be a painful encounter with grief.

During the Vietnam War, when I was of draft age, I became wary of the hero in hiding. My father's medals, which had so excited me as a young boy and filled me with pride, began to threaten my self-respect. I feared that were I thrust into battle as he had been, I might well falter. Had he measured a standard that would prove too high for me to reach? My worst fear of combat was not that I would die, but that I would prove a coward. So for some years, there was no talk of medals, but with the waning of that war, my anxiety ebbed. A little more than a year ago,

however, my unease returned, ushered in by a doctor's report of an abnormality in my blood. The specialist who identified the problem as acute myeloblastic leukemia ran briskly through some numbers. The one that stood out was my chance of survival, 20 to 30 percent at best. I had been healthy and busy; now death loomed.

There was, however, little time to dwell on my prospects. Two days later, I entered the hospital to begin my first round of chemotherapy, which, including the time for my immune system to recover, kept me there for about a month. During my stay, I often thought about how my father had behaved in the face of death. And I read Homer, who has much to say about such confrontations. First I took up the *Iliad*, then inclined to the *Odyssey*, I suspect because it promised an ultimately successful homecoming. Since then, I have undergone much chemotherapy and two stem cell transplants, because leukemia, which for some months had seemed defeated, made a bitter return. Now I, too, am in the grip of fate. Each decision to choose or forego a treatment is fraught with uncertainty; even doctors seem unable or unwilling to argue for one or the other.

My father's time in combat was some sixty-five years ago; the battle for Troy, some thirty centuries earlier. Those times are not mine, and experiences in a hospital are only metaphorically like those of battle. Still, I have been bolstered by both my father and the poet in my confrontation with leukemia. Despite the intervening centuries, Homer seems quite contemporary in his charting of the interplay between the social and the existential that colors our inevitable meeting with death. Despite being god-like descendants of earlier, greater races of men, his heroes are highly attuned to the vulnerabilities of life, exquisitely aware of their fragile mortality. Death, that incurable bitterness, casts its shadow on them, even in their moments of glory, and while heroism may gain renown, it affords no salvation. Not even godlike Achilles, for all his might, will escape the darkness. And death cast its shadow on my father as it does now on me. We are like Homer's heroes who, despite their prayers and sacrifices, cannot deflect fate. In the end, we can only control how we meet the lot the gods assign us. When the capricious gods are calling deathward, like Hector, we must each stand alone. How, then, should we behave?

Homer's warriors seek κλέος, a renown in which something of them may live on. Hector, who had shamefully fled mighty Achilles, steadies himself to die "not ingloriously, but in some way memorable to later generations." We, too, want to be memorable in days to come. In our families, among our comrades, in our communities, aspects of our lives should reverberate after we are gone. The way in which we meet death in combat, in the hospital or elsewhere is part of that legacy.

So when “death is near, and black, not at a distance, not to be evaded,” we must steady ourselves, Homer’s tales and my father’s stories say that we cannot cower.

For the greatest Homeric heroes, the glory won at Troy was carried by story and song down through generations. Few of us today, however, are likely to achieve such greatness. Our fame, our κλέος, will live predominantly among those closest and dearest to us. My father, like so many others, was surely moved to fight by patriotism and a sense of justice. But I recall the tears in his eyes when he told me of the men who died at Normandy, the men he loved so much. If by his heroic actions in combat, he sought glory, I believe it was not in medals, but among his comrades, among those he had fought so long beside. Had he died, they would have remembered his actions in the face of death. His stories would have lived with them. But, fortunately I found his medals, and now after all those years, they live with me.

Had Odysseus fallen at Troy, his renown might have raised his son up among the Greeks. Glory, however, is rarely inherited today. My father’s exploits cast no favoring light on me. If I lose my battle with leukemia, having contested it bravely, my renown will reside in the memories of my family first and then my friends. My κλέος will not endure through generations, but perhaps long enough to be a comfort, a teaching or a gift to some. My father’s stories and Homer’s epics have proved all these for me. Set in the shadow of death, they are lessons of life.



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