

## IS THERE A VETERAN IN THE HOUSE?

By Chris Sanders

Do you have a special soldier in your family whose picture is reverently displayed on the living room wall? It could be great-grandpa, grandpa, dad, brother, or uncle peering down at you. Or if not a picture on a wall, perhaps a prized picture in a photo album—nevertheless they are not forgotten. Did you see the November tribute to our local soldiers? While riding through Bloomsburg recently, I happened to glance up and was pleasantly surprised to see pictures of area service men, with their names and a small bio, hanging, flag-like, from each light pole up and down Main Street, probably, I surmised, in honor of November 11<sup>th</sup>, Veterans Day. I thought what a great idea!

Although we do celebrate Veterans Day with parades, flags and speeches, do we TRULY understand the sacrifices behind it? I would like to pause and reflect a moment, if you don't mind, on the day set aside for our soldiers everywhere.

As a lover of history, I occasionally like to re-read certain books and refresh my memory. One book which I recently read again was on WWII (which coincidentally I was reading when I espied the display of the Bloomsburg vets!). I got to thinking about all the WWII vets who are fast dying out. They are listed in the obituaries with a little American flag beside their name and perhaps a brief description of where they served. I hesitate and look at them and wonder what kind of tales they could tell. "Respect" is what I think of these brave ones that have now passed on to their maker.

Why do I go through the ritual of reading a book on WWII you ask when there are so many more "good" books to read out there (how about a good mystery!)? Because my father-in-law, Gerald H. Sanders (affectionately called "Harry" by my mother-in-law, for the "H" part of his name) was one of those vets in the far Pacific. He married his high school sweetheart in July 1943 and enlisted 18 November 1943.

I can see his picture on the wall from my chair—he with his Marine uniform on and my mother-in-law, four months pregnant with my husband, leaning her head against Harry's. A picture taken in one of those booths—the "selfie" of the 40's. It's WWII 1943. Their faces are not smiling or laughing. They show the stress and strain of a young couple, eighteen and nineteen, living on Parris Island Marine Base, in Beaufort, South Carolina with the expectation of "Harry" being deployed any moment. This was war and this was real.

Harry WAS deployed about eight months after my husband, Richard's (AKA Dickey) birth in July 1944, and my mother-in-law, Sunny, with baby in tow had to go back to Baltimore to live with her father (her mother passed away in December of 1944 at age 40). How my mother-in-law endured all this trauma (not to mention that my husband almost died at five months old due

to double pneumonia), I'll never know. We have to remember the sacrifices of the families at the home front as well as the soldiers in the field. War is hard on everyone.

Gerald (or Harry) was shipped to the Pacific. He arrived as part of the "replacement draft" at Okinawa on May 27, 1945, where one of the most horrific battles of the war was fought beginning April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945. The soldiers dubbed this, "April Fool's Day." It took until April 22, 1945 for the Japanese resistance to end. The replacement draft, my husband explained (I am not good at military lingo or strategy), is soldiers sent in to relieve other soldiers who have battle fatigue, are wounded or dead. Gerald's next stop soon after was Guadalcanal, where another equally horrific island battle had previously taken place. It was their job to continue to fight and fighting they did. My father-in-law relays pulling many a dead or dying soldier off the field. In between all these terrible battles, the world was suddenly shocked by the news that President Roosevelt had died of a sudden stroke on April 12, 1945, and Harry Truman was sworn in as president only hours later.

Unbeknownst to the world, the U.S. had a secret weapon—the atomic bomb—and after repeated attempts to get Japan to surrender, the decision was made to utilize this destructive weapon. "The Bomb" was dropped on Hiroshima, August 6, 1945 and a second one dropped on Nagasaki, August 9, 1945. Japan, now convinced it was all over, surrendered August 10, 1945. According to Gerald, the Japanese were "kicking our butts, and if the bomb hadn't been dropped, he and a lot of other "boys" wouldn't have been here to tell their story.

Gerald made it back. He was 21—but a man. He was gone over a year. His son (my husband) did not even know him. He screamed when his dad tried to pick him up. My husband (about three years old), stood behind his mother twisting her dress, would not let his dad get near her. You would never know the overweight jovial man of later years sitting in his recliner was ever IN a war—a BAD war. Gerald was proud to be a Marine—a First Marine at that, but, he rarely if ever talked about it. His one concession to being in the war was a small sticker stating "Okinawa" adhered to his back car window. He did say, however, the closest he ever came to being killed was the heel of his boot was shot off. His son would take his Dad's souvenirs—telescope, kimono—to "show and tell" at school, and eventually lost them somewhere along the way, but I'm not sure he really got the connection between these relics and his Dad's experience. One "souvenir," however, that Gerald had for the rest of his life was a heart tattoo with the name "Sunny" across the middle. When we teased him about it, he would smile and quip, "I was drunk." He must have known what he was doing though—they were married for 53 years!

I myself occasionally wondered about Gerald's war years, but was afraid to ask, thinking it was a taboo subject. Getting brave however, as I realized time was quickly passing by for my father-in-law, I gingerly broached the subject when visiting their house. He didn't seem to be shocked or care. He said, "Wait a minute. I'll show you something." Walking upstairs he quickly came back with an aged letter in his hand. "Read this." It was a letter dated 1945 from the wife of his best friend thanking him for letting her know the circumstances of her husband's death. Gerald

relayed the story: “The fighting commenced on Guadalcanal and his best buddy got shot. Dragging him to safety, his buddy asked Gerald for a cigarette. Gerald lit the cigarette and handed it to him. “Fix my feet,” his buddy said. Gerald laughed, looking at this buddy’s feet. “There isn’t anything wrong with your feet,” and when Gerald looked back at his buddy, his buddy had died in his arms.” My mother-in-law still has the letter.

WOW. How sad. My father-in-law kept this story inside all these years. Is that why you would see him quietly sitting in his chair, or on the front porch, or in the back yard, all alone, with a faraway look in his eye? Is this why he didn’t let “little things” bother him or take things seriously, or had a quiet wisdom about him?

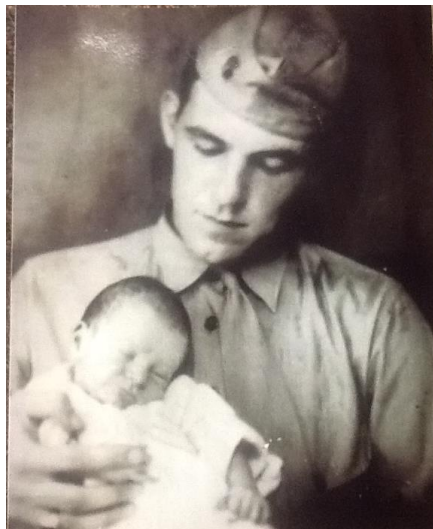
My daughter relays the story about the time they were little and visiting their grandparents, looking at old photos and happened upon one of “Granddad” (Gerald) in his Marine uniform. She asked, “Were you a soldier. “Yes,” was the reply. “Did you kill people?” She said Granddad got quiet for the longest time and had the strangest look on his face before answering. “Yes, I guess I did.” My daughter never forgot that moment and cries every time she speaks of it.

I wanted to talk to Gerald more about the war but was always afraid to ask. Now, I know all the right questions to ask—but it’s too late. He passed away in 1996. I did send for his service records and received them. In its cold “official” way, they detailed Gerald’s movement during the war from beginning to end, from San Diego, to Pearl Harbor, Guam, Saipan, Okinawa, Guadalcanal, China. I had to smile when the only “blot” on his record was on December 3, 1945. It states: “Awarded two weeks restriction by co. at O.H. for 1. Violation of curfew 2. Striking a civilian 3. Disorderly 4. Obscene language.” Knowing my feisty Irish father-in-law from West Virginia, I’m surprised that is the ONLY “bad” thing on his record!

Records are great but nothing can take the place of one’s own words. I look at his picture on the wall at age 19 in his Marine uniform and the picture of him on the table in his later years at age 70, sitting on our front porch, cute little smile on his face, cigarette in hand, and can only feel love and respect. He was honorably discharged 4 April 1946. The “Greatest Generation.” He could have come back a shattered man, but he didn’t. He worked at a job, raised a family and kept the faith. Faith he didn’t talk about much, but he had a cross hanging over his bed. Perhaps it was those tin C-Ration cans he hung on a string in front of his fox hole every night “just in case”, or the prayers of his little West Virginia Irish Catholic mother that kept him safe. HE said it was the thought of coming home to his son that kept him alive!

This son, who would not let his dad pick him up upon returning home from the war, now has his father’s dog tag on his key chain. His dad is not far from his thoughts or memory. He says he wants his grandson, Christian, to get his dad’s dog tag. Gerald Harry would be proud. I look at the dog tag and cannot fathom where that dog tag has gone and what that dog tag has been through... I am humbled.

So even though Veterans Day has passed, remember the vets not just on VETERANS DAY, but EVERY day. THEY are the reason we enjoy the freedoms we have, without a doubt. Just pick up your history book! And as a genealogist, see if your vet (young or old) will share his experience. He may have been waiting all his life for someone to ask!



*Gerald "Harry" Sanders and son Richard*