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IDEAS

There was something special about the Greatest Generation

My dad fought in World War II. He is gone now. And so is the world he inhabited.

By **Stephen O'Connor** Updated November 9, 2025, 3:00 a.m.



The Iwo Jima US Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington, Va. SAMUEL CORUM/GETTY

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“Like dolmens round my childhood, the old people,” the Irish poet John Montague wrote. Those prehistoric tombs are part of the Irish landscape — familiar and yet mysterious, vestiges of another, shadowy age. I remember my parents’ generation in a similar way. They carried with them something of “the old world.”

In my case, both parents were raised by Irish immigrants who were born in the 19th century in that old world. They understood poverty; they had lived it. And they understood sacrifice as both a religious and a civic duty. Whenever I or one of my siblings complained about a chore, my father was likely to say, “Well, it has to be done, so offer it up as a sacrifice.”

Like a dolmen round my childhood, Bobby Lambert was my father’s best friend and a Lowell High School football teammate of Jack Kerouac’s when Kerouac [scored the winning touchdown](#) in the Lowell vs. Lawrence Thanksgiving Day game of 1938.

Bobby and my father, Jim O’Connor, were much alike. Neither one drank, smoked, or swore. Both attended Mass every Sunday, and both got down on their knees every night to pray. The two men were veterans of the big one — Bobby’s football scholarship to Holy Cross was cut short by the war. He was sent to Europe with the 405th fighter squadron, while Jim was shipped to the Pacific with the 861st army unit, serving as part of the Allied occupation of Japan under General Douglas A. MacArthur.

Bobby and Jim and their friendship survived the war. After my father died in 1987, I continued to talk to Bobby, maybe to stay in touch vicariously with my father, but also because Bobby was a good soul. He used to reminisce about the old days, which for him were the 1930s, walking home from football practice with Kerouac. Bobby described him as “a sweet kid ... shy.” Those are the days that [Kerouac describes so vividly in the novel “Maggie Cassidy.”](#)

I spoke with Bobby shortly before he died in 2016 at the age of 94. “Jim is gone. My brothers Johnny and Arthur are gone, and my sister Marion, who flew warplanes from the factories to the bases where they were needed. Quite a gal. One by one, all the old

gang have passed on.” His sigh turned into a resigned laugh, and he said, “I’m the last of the Mohicans.”

That generation, often called the Greatest Generation, has largely vanished, and so has the world they inhabited. My father, all of his friends, and all of my uncles and aunts lived through the years of the Depression and the Second World War. As I grow older, I realize the extent to which I was shaped by their attitudes and their stories. There were days as a youngster when, for whatever reason, I wanted to stay out of school. The fake sore throat never worked. My father would come in and sit on the bed and say, “Come on, champ. Give it the old college try.” To stay in bed without a legitimate malady would have been to admit a weakness that was unbecoming in front of someone who had endured so much and who never shrank from work.

Sometimes, the principles that he lived by made my father seem harsh or unyielding. I worked summers doing drywall with him and Steve Quinlan, a former combat paratrooper with a Chesterfield cigarette permanently smoldering at his lips. One day a man sauntered onto the site where we were working, a tradesman or contractor of some kind. He started to talk to Jim. My father always bantered and joked with everyone, but he completely ignored this person. I was shocked. Finally, the man turned around and walked out. I said, “Dad! That was embarrassing! Why didn’t you answer the guy?”

His response was direct and simple: “He walked out on his wife and kids. He’s a bum.”

Like another dolmen round my childhood: Jack Flood, who sent his mother letters from overseas every week. He fought in North Africa and Italy and was on the beach on D-Day. After the movie “Saving Private Ryan” came out, I said, “Jack, the first twenty-five minutes depicts the storming of the beaches on D-Day. Have you seen it?”

He replied: “No, I didn’t see it, and I’m not going to. That’s one day I don’t want to remember.” The war ended for Jack when he was wounded for the third time. In his 80s, I found him in his backyard cranking a chain winch to rip up a tree stump and thought, “God, he must have been a sight to behold as a young man. Tough as nails.”

Then there was my uncle Bill Nangle, a Navy vet who went to Mass daily and, like my father, never drank. I asked him once, “Bill, you never drank at all?” He thought about it and said, “Well, I did drink once.”

“When was that?”

“V-J Day.”

For people who had lived hard lives, that generation certainly laughed a lot. They loved to swap stories and put on skits at family parties. There was a certain innocence or simplicity about them, despite their experience. One old man told me, “We were poor, but we didn’t know we were poor because everyone was poor.”

The ghosts begin to crowd around us as we grow older. I hear the voices of this vanished generation in memory, and I’m glad that I do. I think particularly of the veterans at this time of year, like the old man I spoke with who told me he was always sad at Christmas. His brother was killed on Christmas Eve “at the Bulge.”

I think of Bobby’s brother Johnny. When I returned from working in France, he spread out my map of Western Europe on our kitchen table and retraced his paths of war. He pointed to one town and, shaking his head, said, “That was a dirty place.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We lost a lot of guys there.”

The United States is still home to a lot of brave men and women. My nephew Patrick O’Connor and his wife, Natalie, both completed three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. She retired from the National Guard as a major. And there are still many who deal with the wounds, visible and invisible, of war, be it Korea, Vietnam, or the Middle East. We find great representatives of every generation and witness great sacrifice. But when I hear the old songs my father used to sing, “On the Street Where You Live” or “I’ll Be Seeing You,” or when I watch old movies like “The Best Years of Our Lives” (1946) or “Some Came

Running” (1958), I miss the men and women I knew growing up. I miss the Greatest Generation.

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