

1st Prize Winner 16-18 age group

Grandpa's Guadalcanal

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The earliest memory I have of my grandfather is the two of us sitting by the campfire on the fourth of July in the early '90s. Before lunch, we placed our sweaty, sticky palms together in a moment of silence to honor all those who served and continue to serve. I sat next to Grandpa, who took my tiny hand in his weathered one and squeezed it tight during the moment of silence. I was about to turn seven and had just mastered the art of making s'mores. I offered a big gooey s'more to Grandpa, chocolate and marshmallow oozing over the sides.

"Thank you," he said. "But you have this one. Can you make me one without chocolate?"

"Sure! Extra toasty?" I asked.

"Extra extra toasty," he replied.

I would learn about his aversion to chocolate later in life when we visited the Solomon Islands to support Grandpa's dream of seeing the battle monument to Guadalcanal.

It was early August of 2017. Our plane arrived at Henderson International Airport. The journey to Skyline Ridge was short enough, but by the time we got there, Grandpa was hesitant to get out of the car.

"I don't want to talk to those media people," he explained.

"If they come over, I'll let them know you aren't up for any interviews, okay?" I offered.

He gave a curt nod and I helped him into his wheelchair. Despite being in the high 70's, I wrapped a light blanket around Grandpa's legs, the blanket's eagle, globe, and anchor stoically draping his knees. Quickly, a young woman with a microphone approached.

"No thank you," I called out, a bit harshly. "He isn't up for any interviews."

“I understand,” she said. “My name is Eliza. I’m not a reporter, but an intern with the Department of Defense. I’m here to record America’s veterans telling their stories so that my generation and future generations can learn from them,” she explained.

“We’re not---” I began, but Grandpa interrupted me.

“I’m interested,” he said firmly. “I don’t want photos or movies...just my story. Can you agree to that?” he asked, energetically.

“I am here to support you telling your story however you need to,” she replied.

“That’s good, then,” he said. “I’m ready.”

I eyed the intern-not-reporter and gave her my most reproachful do-not-mess-this-up look. She gave me a warm smile and put her hand on my shoulder.

“Would it be okay if your grandson joined us?” she asked Grandpa.

“Do you want to? I’m a helluva storyteller!” he grinned.

“Of course,” I answered. After all, how bad could it be? And thus began his story.

“I didn’t grow up hating the Japanese. But I was told to hate them so I did. They were preparing to invade Australia and were poised to be pretty successful. The Allies had next to no weapons left, and civilians—” he turned to me.

“Your grandmother—she took up arms in factories, working 14 to-16-hour days to feed the industrial might of America so that folks like us fighting in bloody swamps downrange had the weapons and ammo to make it out of there alive,” he paused. “But, many didn’t. I don’t think Grandma ever got over that. War plays tricks on your mind. Tricks that stick, you know? It’s folks like Grandma who helped win this war,” he said.

“Sir,” Eliza redirected the conversation. “Where did you fight and what was your purpose there?”

“I was a combat medic with the Seventh Marine Regiment under the 1st Marine Division. We activated in time for war, but the Guadalcanal campaign was the first time we conducted combat operations as a division. We were simply there to stop the Japanese from advancing. I got lucky. We had a lot of veterans in the Seventh. Boys who knew how to fight. At that time, everything between Japan and Australia had fallen, and, on September 15, we landed at Lunga Beach. The Higgins-built landing craft forced us to pass everything by hand off the craft. We lined up on the beach. All was quiet. Then the air raids started.”

Eliza passed Grandpa some water, which he sipped in silence.

“I remember being alone in my foxhole, scared to death. It sounded like the ground was calling my name over and over. Like it wanted to smother me up in one gulp to still my shaking. I bent my tin-covered head over and wrapped my fingers around my ears and through my hair. When I thought about passing out, I’d pinch my ear and pull my hair. Pinch. Pull. Pinch. Pull. Just to stay present.”

“What were your rations like?” Eliza asked. “I heard the Japanese cut off supply lines.”

“We were there for months without food. We had rice, but it was full of maggots. Some of the boys could stomach it, and others swelled up purple in two days’ time and there was nothing this medic could do. We’d boil rice, then scrape off the maggots that rose to the top. But rice and maggots look pretty similar, especially when you’re malnourished. That, and we had Hershey chocolate bars. I never want to see another piece of chocolate in my life,” he added.

Eliza softened. “Do you think there any lessons you learned in war that are still relevant today?” she asked.

“Plenty,” Grandpa answered. “You’re recording this, right? I don’t want you to mince my words. These young people and the folks in Washington need to listen.”

“I’m recording,” Eliza said.

“Good. Before I die, I’d like scholars to review what they think is the turning point of World War II. Midway is a mighty battle, but we shifted the strategic initiative when no one thought it was possible. We had a strong defense, we knew the figurative and literal costs of war, and our battle was an all-American operative. Let me explain what I mean,” he said.

“Now, Midway was important. It gave the Allies time and space to plan the Solomon Islands Campaign, which could have been delayed had Midway not been a U.S. victory. Even after Midway, the Japanese Navy entered Solomons with a much greater fighting force compared to the Allies in the Pacific, and Japan was on the strategic offense, battle after battle. They destroyed our naval fleet at Savo Island, conducted daily air raids against Henderson Field, landed troops in view of U.S. forces, and repeatedly assaulted our air, land, and sea assets. But we played a strong defense that depleted their fighting force.”

“This leads me to my next point: we knew the cost of war. War is expensive. It costs personnel, equipment, and time to win. Because our defense was so strong, Japan kept spending personnel, equipment, and time it didn’t have. It threw money and assets at the problem, and by believing they could win, they depleted their own resources. All we had to do was play strong defense. And did we ever!” he exclaimed.

“Now comes the best part,” he smiled. “You know why we won? Because every red-blooded American joined the fight. During this campaign, the U.S. industrial and economic complex produced seven capital ships, to include two aircraft carriers, 62 destroyers, and 18 submarines, replacing more than double its losses in naval vessels and combat power. During the

six months at Guadalcanal, Japan lost more than 1,200 experienced pilots and aircrew members, 683 aircraft, 38 naval vessels, and more than 20,000 Army troops. The enemy's offensive capability in the South Pacific was left in ruins, and it was incapable of rebuilding. And—this is what I tell your Grandma—we won because of the U.S. industrial and economic might to replace battleships, carriers, destroyers, and submarines. Make no mistake about who won this war—America. All of us. And, if we want to win war in the future, we best be quick to learn how to come together as one nation again,” he finished.

“Thank you for sharing your story, Sir. I know it will help my generation better understand what happened here,” Eliza said to Grandpa before turning to me. “And how would your life be different if Americans had not fought and died here?” she asked.

I hesitated before answering.

“The Battle for Guadalcanal was the true turning point of WWII. The six-month continuous air bombardment, multiple naval battles, and ground combat ashore ensured that supply routes to Australia and New Zealand remained open, preserving a future New Guinea attack and protecting the U.S. western flank. I also think that fighting a multi-domain operation gave the U.S. a strategic advantage, and this three-prong approach from air, land, and sea set the stage for future amphibious operations in North Africa, Southern France, and Sicily. This battle also gave the Allies the ability to drive back the Japanese from future Pacific victories. Over the next two and a half years after Guadalcanal, U.S. forces would capture the Gilbert Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Mariana Islands, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, pushing Japan further and further away. They were able to do that because of the men who fought and died here.”

“But what is the purpose of war if we cannot preserve what we won in peace? What great men like my grandpa did downrange, and what my grandma did in the factory, preserved peace

well into my future. Our former adversary is a close friend and we are committed to each other's success and defense in promoting freedom throughout the Pacific region. Winning this war directly contributed to the U.S. rise to be the world power it still is today. It ensured our economy was vibrant and that our middle class was able to reach economic prosperity, setting the foundation for future generations—for my generation. I don't want to speculate what would have happened to America if our veterans and war heroes didn't fight here." I gesture to the somber, but beautiful monument before me.

"If all that is asked of me is to remember the fallen, advocate for the veteran, and educate America's future fighting force to instill in them the same values of democracy and prosperity, I am grateful to dedicate my life to doing just that," I said. "And I'm grateful for the opportunity to gather at old battlegrounds in front of pristine monuments to share crucial conversations passed from one generation to the next. Thank you for asking me to stay, Grandpa," I added.

"My grandson is a combat medic, too," Grandpa tells Eliza, once again taking my hand in his weathered one. "You should see the kits these kids have!" he laughs. "Don't get me started on MREs! Now that's some gourmet stuff," he added.

"As long as there isn't any chocolate?" I asked.

As long as there isn't any chocolate," he smiled.

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