

Reveille

Today is moving day on the Eisenhower unit, a hospital ward in Wilmore, Kentucky for demented U.S. military veterans. Some of these men are war heroes and others achieved remarkable success in civilian life. All served our country honorably.

I believe my father is a hero. For years, Alzheimer's disease has ruthlessly attacked his brain. Now he is one of those veterans preparing to take the one hundred step march from a traditional hospital ward to one specifically designed for dementia care. The Eisenhower troop will soon lumber through the halls of Thomson Hood Veterans Center.

Something tragic yet wonderful is transpiring within that fortress of grace. A generation of American heroes, a regiment of old soldiers, is fading away while it battles one last enemy. Dementia is a relentless and wicked foe, plundering precious memories and ravaging loving hearts. Alongside these warriors are angels of God's grace, walking with them through the horrors of the struggle.

Today is my first day as an official hospital volunteer. Until this morning, I was a sporadic visitor. Riding the elevator to the second floor, I think back to the day that led me to where I am this morning. That day, August 15, God opened my eyes to edifying truths as I listened to a sermon taken from the book of Jeremiah—the weeping prophet of ancient Israel.

We honor our fallen heroes with granite statues and marble memorials. I honor those still standing at Thomson Hood with an account of their final campaign. The account must include the companions who comfort them in the midst of the conflict.

Come with me and learn about the heroes garrisoned at Thomson Hood. You will find a heartwarming gathering of the best America has to offer. These heroes are soldiers and sailors, nurses and cooks, families and friends—all with a lesson to teach. They will teach us how God's grace and God's love rises above the evil of dementia.

August 15th

I woke this morning with a troubled feeling. Today was my father's birthday. I should spend the day with dad, considering he was turning 76 and there might not be another birthday to celebrate. Some days he recognizes me and other days he looks vacantly through me. Lately, I have not understood what he says, and this is a sign his dementia is getting worse.

Dad stutters uncontrollably; sometimes sentences begin with a rapid staccato string of unintelligible syllables. I reply to his attempts at conversation by making up responses: a solemn and knowing "you're right about that," or a firm "I don't think so dad," or a shrug of the shoulders followed by "I don't really know." His tone of voice, and decades of experience, helps me guess at an answer. Dad appears satisfied with my charade.

There are times I can't bring myself to visit dad. It's heartbreaking to see him suffer with the terrible effects of Alzheimer's disease. I soothe my troubled conscience by rationalizing if I did visit, shortly after I'm gone dad will be asleep and forget I've been there. Or I have my own life to live and he would want me to play golf instead. Or I should be with someone who can talk with me and instead give them the benefit of my valuable time.

The dependable excuses don't work today. If I decide not to see dad, no one else will be there. I am his only child and mom is suffering from chronic, severe depression. Dad's friends, and most of his family, passed away years ago. He'll spend the day wandering in the daze of dementia, along with his other comrades in the Eisenhower unit,

dependent on a nurse to help him eat, walk, sleep, and relieve himself. I get myself out of bed and ready to go.

Driving from Louisville to Wilmore, Kentucky takes about an hour and a half. Fifteen more minutes if I stop at Kroger's and pick up boxes of Little Debbie cakes: Honey Buns, Oatmeal Cakes, Banana Twins, Zebra Cakes, Strawberry Rolls, and Fudge Rounds. The guys on the unit love the cakes and the nurses use them to camouflage pills that won't go down any other way. Today I also get a pint of Hagen-Daaz strawberry ice cream for dad. Years ago, I watched dad eat an entire half gallon of ice cream after a hard day's work on a hot summer day.

It's a beautiful day in Kentucky and the temperature is unseasonably cool. The route to Wilmore is Interstate 64, US 60, Man of War Boulevard, and then a right turn on US 68, or Harrodsburg Road. Harrodsburg Road weaves past the Kroger's where I shop for the Little Debbie cakes and ice cream, and then transforms into a scenic two lane country road.

Harrodsburg Road is labeled a "Kentucky Scenic Byway." I drive past lush, green fields where muscular horses graze and lazily slap at flies with their tails. There are estates called Ramsey Farms, Almahurst Stud, and Barkley Woods. I pass sprawling Southland Christian Church and a few miles later tiny spic-and-span Grace Gospel Word Church. There are magnificent homes, with matching barns, on the horse farms. Next to these mansions are middle-class brick houses with manicured lawns and flower beds. Later I see modest wood frame homes and vegetable gardens where the corn is getting high.

Like the houses along Harrodsburg Road, there's a diversity of soldiers stationed in the Eisenhower unit with dad. Clay exchanged his U.S. Marine dress blues for the blue uniform of the U.S. Postal Service. Marion built homes after mending wounded soldiers as a medic in World War II. Prentess, an Air Force veteran now living in the shadow of Pick's disease, became a master cabinetmaker and holder of three patents for intricate wood carving machinery. There's a judge, FBI agent, and a psychiatrist. All these veterans, and many others, now are cared for at Thomson Hood Veterans Center by the faithful folks living in some of these homes.

I'm ten minutes from the hospital when I reach the golf course on the right. The red brick clubhouse has a white steeple and is one hundred fifty years old. Lining the links is a timeworn stone fence. I imagine soldiers from the civil war crouched behind the fence, waiting for the next charge of the enemy.

Drawing near the hospital, the American flag appears, waving over the Kentucky state flag. To the left of the hospital is a fully restored U.S. Army battle tank. The hospital is a youthful three-story brick building. In front of the main entrance are colorful flower beds, cedar gazeboes and benches, and a concrete path suitable for wheelchairs. On this bright Sunday afternoon there are several veterans in wheel chairs around the flower bed areas. Most of the veterans are surrounded by families. Children are playing beside seated veterans.

I dread going to the Eisenhower unit. Will dad recognize me today?

Lugging my two bags of Little Debbie cakes and strawberry ice cream, I sign in and stick on an adhesive paper visitor badge. The hospital is decorated with contemporary furniture and kept meticulously clean, and there are many red, white, and

blue “God Bless America” posters hanging from the ceiling and the walls. Walking down the sealed hardwood floor hall, I pass the multipurpose room and then enter a spacious recreation area. There is a big screen television, checker tables, pool tables, couches, chairs, tables, vending machines, and a huge glass window looking out onto an outside lounging area. Several veterans in wheelchairs are either watching television or napping, I can’t be sure.

Around the corner from the recreation room I enter the elevator and go to the second floor. I use the time to steel myself for what I may find in the unit. Today I ask God to make me a blessing to my father, give me strength to deal with his condition, and permit dad to experience some joy on his birthday.

It’s about noon as I leave the elevator and face the imposing white wooden gate, with secret combination, that guards the Eisenhower unit. The gate is three and a half feet high, and I can barely sight Paul’s head as he sits in his wheelchair about two feet behind the gate. Paul is usually around the gate, and the nurses say he wants to see people come and go. He resembles Chet Huntley, the newscaster from the sixties who teamed with David Brinkley on NBC. Paul looks sadly at me when I open the gate, and I’m certain he knows this is the way to the outside world and freedom. Fortunately I rode the elevator up with Clarissa, a unit housekeeper, and she presses the right combination on the lock that allows the gate to sweep open. I step around Paul and enter the world of dementia.

The room on the other side of the gate doubles as a dining room and recreation area. There are seven large dark-grained wood tables. I count twenty guys in

wheelchairs and recliners. One vet in a wheelchair has a pink and green afghan around his shoulder, and a matching bonnet on his bald head.

Some of the guys are slumped over sleeping, some are staring into space, and one is making a commotion. I suddenly hear, “No, No, No, NOOOO!” I spot a veteran, dressed in underwear, fighting against the soft restraints in his recliner. There are several nurses around him and they soon wheel him into the area where the nurses’ station, offices, restrooms, and personal resident rooms are located. I’m relieved the situation is under control and I search for dad.

Melissa, a nurse on the unit, recognizes me and cheerfully says, “Your dad is looking very handsome today.” She eased my anxiety, and I turn in the direction she’s pointing. A short, stooped-over man with white hair is standing there, leaning on a chair for support. I suddenly realize it’s my father.

Dad was a solid rock of a man. He worked as a laborer all his life in front of a scorching hot industrial furnace. Now he’s hunched over so much I have to nearly get on my hands and knees to gaze up at his face. “How are you doing today dad,” I tentatively ask. There is no expression, no evidence he knows who I am.

I reach for his hand and hold it in mine. There is a glimmer of life and he forms an almost toothless grin. Dad has four teeth left, two yellow stained teeth on the top and two on the bottom, and each are located at the far corners of his mouth. Melissa volunteers to help us to a corner spot at the table next to the food cart. Dad takes short halting steps. I have one arm and Melissa the other. We carefully steer dad into a heavily padded chair.

Behind me is an elderly man with a blue plastic helmet. Dangling on a cord around his neck is a pair of reading glasses. This veteran is contented, and his eyes are

barely open. There is an aura of serenity and peace about him. A middle aged couple sits down next to him. They engage Helmet and Reading glasses in a one-sided conversation.

Getting more comfortable with dad, I notice a strange noise. After a few seconds I recognize: “Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey.” Every “Hey” is truncated and evenly pitched. The fellow muttering the sounds is stationed at the table directly behind us. He is in his late sixties or early seventies and wearing a grey polo shirt. Hey-Hey has a flawless complexion and perfectly groomed short grey hair. He’s staring at a pair of leather sandals in front of him on the table.

A young, petite brunette in a blue medical smock approaches us with dad’s lunch tray from the meal cart set up in the dining room. Most of the nursing aides are now engaged in setting up trays for the residents using food stored buffet style in a mobile serving unit. The brunette’s name is Sam, and she is a PA or Patient Assistant. Sam thinks she will be a full-fledged NASR soon; Nurse’s Aide State Register.

Sam delivered a scrumptious Sunday lunch. The food at Thomson Hood is consistently excellent. Today’s fare includes roasted turkey, dressing, gravy, sweet potatoes, green beans, fried apples, bread with butter, fruit salad with marshmallows, chocolate cake and icing, pink fruit punch, orange fruit punch, apple juice, and milk. The turkey is lean and tender, and the dressing has a crusty brown top. The fried apples and sweet potatoes are juicy and fresh. The aroma from the plate reminds me of Thanksgivings in mom’s kitchen.

Dad has snuck off to sleep and is not interested in me or eating. I place one of the white, pink and blue bib-towels around his neck. These towels catch all the inevitable

drippings from the resident's meals. There are plenty of extra bib-towels for cleaning up faces and hands afterwards. I chop the food into bite sized pieces.

Melissa leads a short, frail gentleman out from the back area of the unit, beyond the nurses' station. He has on a faded tee shirt and pair of shorts and looks like he was roused from an afternoon nap. A lady walks through the open gate with a little girl, maybe seven or eight years old.

The veteran with Melissa exclaims merrily, "GOOBER, GOOBER!" Bending down, he and the girl joyfully embrace each other. He is laughing, the little girl is giggling, and the lady grins at both. After hugs and more cries of "GOOBER," he turns his attention to the lady and gives her the same treatment. You won't hear a sound happier than the one coming from that veteran. One second he is a delicate old man, and the next he is laughing and hugging his precious girls. Later they march towards the resident rooms for a private lunchtime visit. Another fellow comes from the back and pitifully asks in a muffled voice, "Goober?" He must crave a similar experience, but his Goober is nowhere to be found.

A tall young lady with dark hair and a uniform drops by for a chat. Jennifer is a NASR and wants to wish dad a happy birthday. She tells me dad enjoyed a special birthday bath this morning in the roomy, wheelchair-capable bathing machine. Also an extra twenty minutes for a Jacuzzi style soaking. Dad is usually an evening bather, but he received an extra bath on this special day. Jennifer says dad breakfasted with a few jelly doughnuts. I know he savors doughnuts, especially the jelly kind. Jennifer smiles and winks at dad. Now awake, dad's disposition brightens and he grins at the wink.

While holding dad's hand, Jennifer says, "My grandmother had Alzheimer's disease, and she passed away when I was fifteen years old. That's one reason I became a geriatric nurse, and the other reason is my mother did the same thing for many years."

I notice dad has grabbed the chocolate cake with vanilla frosting and he stuffs it in his gaping mouth while his eyes are closed. It's his birthday, so he can have dessert before the entrée if he wants. Dad eats the cake then licks his fingers clean after using them to smear frosting off the dessert plate. I take the plate from his grasp and stare at his hands before I clean them with an extra bib-towel.

My father's hands used to be coarse with calluses from years of grueling labor, both from his job and chores around the house. They might smell of grease or gasoline. He was most content working on a project like pouring concrete for a new sidewalk, changing the brake shoes in his old Chevy Nova, or rebuilding the engine of a 1950's era Morris Oxford auto. After years of tinkering on that old Morris, he drove it only two or three hundred miles. But dad was proud the day the engine sputtered to life. Today his hands feel silky and smooth, and slightly cool. I hold his hands often now. I never held them until he came to the hospital.

Suddenly I hear a loud exclamation from across the room, "Hell no, I won't go, HELL NO!" The last two words are shouted out in a voice loud enough to startle me. A veteran with short cropped black hair and bright, flashing eyes is flushed red with anger. He is in a wheelchair and looks younger than the average resident. There are several nurses standing around him and they look at each other helplessly as Hell-no continues to yell. They leave him alone and he eventually calms down.

The staff will let a rant go on for a minute or two. They agree with the subject of the rant and it usually subsides. The veteran forgets what he was angry about and becomes calm. If this doesn't work, the staff will redirect the veteran—divert his attention elsewhere.

Hey-Hey can be heard now that Hell-no is quiet. There are two hand claps in the sequence interspersed with seventeen "Hey's." Sam brings Hey-Hey a lunch tray and he is momentarily distracted. Soon he starts again, squeezing a few "Hey's" in around gulps of turkey and dressing. The clapping stops while he eats.

Melissa escorts a veteran with a muscular linebacker type of build to the chair next to dad. He's younger than the other veterans in the unit, perhaps mid-fifties. Dad's lunchtime neighbor has short cropped grey hair, not quite crew cut length, white shorts, white short-sleeved polo shirt and black suspenders. The shirt has a "2002 American Veterans Convention" patch on the chest. This hulk of a man could bench press three hundred pounds. Melissa is maybe five foot two, and the veteran towered over Melissa as she led him by the hand to our table. Linebacker sits ramrod straight and occasionally his hands tremble.

I return to dad and his shredded lunch. Abruptly, Linebacker unleashes a loud and eerie whelp. Afterwards he returns to silence and cycles of hand shaking. I talk to Brandi, a unit NASR, about Linebacker. She was tackled by Linebacker when he rushed the entry gate. Brandi chuckles as she tells the story and then says, "He's a good man and we love him."

I heard this comment from the nurses about my father, and all the other men. When I brought dad to the unit, the admitting nurse said, "We love these guys the same

way we love our own families.” At the time, I thought it was a considerate thing to say to a son committing his father permanently to a hospital. During the three years since, however, I repeatedly witnessed evidence of the love the staff has for the veterans. I’ve seen it in things like a hug, a kiss on the cheek, and a back rub.

Mary, another NASR, asks Linebacker, “Hello baby. Just get up? Ready for some lunch darlin’?” It’s an admirable effort by Mary to get a reaction from Linebacker, but he continues the cycle of silent sitting and shaking. Mary tells me Linebacker’s name is Prentess. The mammoth Prentess eats sparsely from the tray Mary placed in front of him. He resumes staring blankly ahead. How does he maintain his weight eating so little and so slowly?

Finally, I spoon most of lunch into dad’s mouth. He’s drowsy and sleeps while he chews. When I touch the spoon to his lips, and he opens up, there is still food remaining from the last bite. Although I’m feeding him, he wants to grab a green bean and fragment of buttered bread with his fingers. I let him eat the way he wants to eat.

After the final tidbit of turkey, I retrieve the ice cream and tear off the plastic cover under the cardboard top. Dad sits up straighter. Does he recognize the ice cream container? The ice cream has been sitting out and is creamy. I give dad a glob and hear a faint “Uuumm.”

When I tarry getting another spoonful ready, I’m surprised by an understandable “Time for the next one!” from dad. His eyes are closed and he’s holding his mouth open in the same way a baby bird does when momma bird brings a worm to the nest. His request for another bite contains the first words I’ve understood today.

During my last visit, I listened to over an hour's worth of talk from dad and it was all incoherent gibberish. When I got up to retrieve my backpack and leave, I clearly heard behind me, "Where are you going? Dewayne, you're not leaving yet are you?" Dad then went to sleep and didn't say another word.

After dad finishes, I lean back and survey the room. Nurses and NASR's are patiently leading men to the lunch tables. Each is holding a hand and talking to the veteran in a friendly and reassuring manner

Hey-hey finishes lunch and says, "It's an easy place. Gotta look for half of the other stuff" and calls out a name I don't understand. He turns to a phantom and advises, "That's what you have to use it for! Right down that-a-way," and waves at the other side of the room. Brandi tells me his name is K.K.

Hearing his nickname, K.K points his finger at me, grins, and then says with a mischievous laugh, "K.K. Crown—meanest man in town."

A grizzled old veteran at the end of our table scratches his eyebrows with gusto, and proceeds to lick the spoon after the scratching. Next he digs into his nose for a few seconds with the spoon, followed by a thorough licking. Back to the eyebrows–lick–nose–lick–eyebrows–lick, and so on for several minutes. Finally, he lays the spoon down on the table and stares intently at the empty tray. Spoon-scratcher reconsiders the spoon and takes it up again for the eyebrow and nose scratching circuit. I learn Spoon-scratcher is simply "Jack" and he's sitting next to his buddy "Jack Man." Jack Man is one of the last guys to get his meal and is diving in with both hands.

Plastic helmet and glasses stands behind us with the assistance of the lady and her husband. I rise and introduce dad and myself. The man is the woman's father. They collect Jim and walk towards the residential section of the unit.

A veteran with a severe hump at the top of his back, and wearing wire framed glasses, strides purposefully into the lunch room. Nattily dressed, he reminds me of a college professor out of an old Hollywood movie. Professor takes a nurse aside and petitions to have his meal in the television room adjacent to the dining room. Several inches of his height is lost due to the bend in his back caused by the hump. During previous visits, Professor hid paper cups of vanilla ice cream behind plants and chairs on the unit. He always returned to retrieve the treat. Maybe he's letting the ice cream soften.

From the middle of the dining area comes a request for a newspaper. A nurse asks what section and I can't understand the response. She addresses a veteran in a red sweater, glasses, and neatly parted hair reading a newspaper. I saw this resident pushing a wheelchair when I came in. Since he had no obvious dementia symptoms, I thought he was a visitor.

Lunch is drawing to a close, and the African-American lady who brought the food in the metallic meal cart is taking a break. Her nametag says "Kim" and "Food Services." I call to her, "Kim that was a great meal. My father's birthday is today, and you served him several of his favorites, especially the fried apples."

"We take a lot of pride in preparing and serving the food. We love the veterans and want to give them the best," she answers while cleaning the cart. Kim smiles at dad.

The resident across from me says, “Well, it’s a big mistake is all I can tell you.” I ask if he is talking about the food. He disgustedly nods his head. There is not a crumb left on his lunch plates.

“Not too bad. You cleaned all your plates.”

“Yes.”

“Were you in the army?”

“Yep.”

“Bet it was better than army food.”

“You are right about that,” he laughs at the end of our conversation. A nurse nearby tells me his name is Charlie. Army Charlie can have a humorous conversation. Was he really in the Army?

An announcement is made over the unit public address system stating the hospital church service will start at 2 pm, about fifteen minutes from now. Dad might enjoy the service if there are hymns and music. I guide him to a wheelchair for a spin around the hospital. His walking pace is slow and it’s easier to transport him off the unit in a wheelchair.

Melissa helps me place dad in a wheelchair and as we near the white wooden gate, a nurse reporting for the next shift clicks the numbers on the combination lock and opens the gate. I’m having second thoughts about going to the service. Dad may disrupt the sermon. I’ve spent an hour here already and fed him turkey and ice cream. Still, I’m curious about the details of a Sunday afternoon hospital church service. Standing in the elevator going from the second floor to the first floor, I decide to attend the service with

dad. This seemingly unimportant decision will change the way I think about dad, all the other veterans, and myself.

August 15 was an enlightening day for me so far, and the best lesson is ahead. I will return to the unit for only a brief time today, long enough to bring dad back to the people who adopted him into their family. Dad was blessed on his birthday. Jennifer, Mary, Sam, Melissa, and Brandi made sure of that before I arrived today. The jelly doughnuts, a luxurious morning soak, and loving tender care are dad's gifts. My own gift will soon arrive in the form of a profound sermon from Chaplain Gabe.