

The War Story

(4243 words)

Spring, 1968

When my dad said he'd met Ezra Pound during the war, in a latrine, the strangeness of it didn't sink in. Why would it? I was ten years old and knew almost nothing about World War II, let alone what a latrine was. I did know of Ezra Pound, though, because my fourth-grade teacher had just done a poetry unit on something called Ezra Pound Couplets.

My dad was already over fifty then, when I first asked him to tell me something about the war.

"Did you ever kill anybody?" I asked.

"Hell, I don't know, son."

"How can you not know if you killed somebody?" I wondered how you could possibly miss something like that.

He never answered my question. It was filed away in that shoebox in the garage, the same one that held his silver lieutenant's bar and Purple Heart. So was the mention of Ezra Pound. I was too young to even wonder why a famous poet and my dad would have been using the same toilet during the war. My fourth-grade teacher had taught us that Ezra Pound Couplets featured "surprising intersections," but the surprise of this particular one wouldn't come clear for decades.

That night our attention shifted to the TV. The nightly news was becoming cluttered with the images and sounds of Vietnam. Helicopter whir, machine gun rattle, skinny brown children with blank stares. Of course a ten-year-old could feel the tension in the air. And it wasn't limited to the TV. When the Santa Ana winds blew, we could hear the wash of B-52s taking off from March Air Force Base just nine miles away, on their flights across the Pacific. Not that I had yet connected that sound to the images on the TV news.

At the dinner table, Mom heaved a sigh: "Dear God, they're dropping fire bombs on children!"

"Screw Vietnam!" Danny said. "I'll go to Canada."

"No swearing in *this* house," Mom intoned, as if *screw* was a swear word and swearing in other houses was permitted.

Dad was silent, then he spoke calmly.

"You're not going to Vietnam."

Something seemed odd to me about this statement. Earlier, Dad had been on Danny about his long hair and about not asking your country what it can do for you but what you can do for it. Danny was now out of high school, and his future gaped before him, including the possibility of being drafted.

"My son will not fight in a frivolous war."

Danny glanced at Mom, unsure how seriously to take this. It just wasn't the kind of thing you heard parents say at the time.

After that, some evenings I'd see Dad making phone calls and taking notes. Since he was on the city council, he knew our congressman personally. He was also friends with our family doctor, the one who'd delivered me. Then one night he was showing Danny a letter documenting his knee surgery from the year before, the doctor's signature at the bottom. He'd torn the cartilage in his left knee playing fullback that season.

During the following months, there was a kind of transformation in Dad. He continued to grumble about Danny's hair and the music he played. (He especially despised Country Joe's "Fish Cheer.") But he'd started speaking openly against the war. One neighbor called him a commie at a Memorial Day barbecue. He also intervened in a protest downtown, where the police were threatening student demonstrators with billy-clubs. That had even gotten his picture in the paper.

Danny's friends seemed disoriented when they'd visit, as if they no longer knew how to relate to Dad, a parent who understood their feelings about Vietnam being as anomalous as a gray-haired rock musician. It was as if my parents had descended from a spaceship, the only adults in the neighborhood willing to question the war.

Danny did eventually get called for a second medical exam. In anticipation of it, he'd found an application in *Rolling Stone Magazine* and become a legal minister in the Universal Life Church. So, he could claim conscientious objector status if necessary. But it wasn't necessary. Dad had kept his word. The congressman got another call, and Danny's medical records were sent out. In the end, he had to stay enrolled at City College and cancel some travel plans, but his life remained pretty much the same. Then one day a letter arrived that settled things formally: he'd been declared 4F.

Winter, 1998

Now, Danny's got two sons of his own and a psychology practice in West L.A. I've got a wife and daughter, too. We're all together again, enacting the same Christmas rituals we did thirty years ago. Except we appreciate them more now, with our greater awareness of life's temporal limits.

Dad was at dialysis again today, and we're discussing whether it had been a mistake to talk him into it. His own wish had been to "let nature take its course." But we played the grandchildren card. Now, we see him after the treatments and we're not so sure we did the right thing. His will to live seems to drain out with each dialysis session. It's Christmas Day, though, and he hasn't had one in some forty-eight hours, so vestiges of his old spunk are present, like the thin ring of sunshine around a solar eclipse. He's just had us play "My Way" twice in a row, singing along with that twinkle in his eye and getting most of the words right. He's drinking eggnog, pooh-poohing Mom's warnings about his blood sugar. I've just persuaded him to speak into my video camera, on a mission to capture a piece of him for posterity. In truth, it wasn't hard—he's still got a hammy side. I ask him about the war, whether he ever killed anyone, and after all these years he still won't say. But my wife Marianne detects something in his expression, a tiny crack in the wall of his life story.

"C'mon John, there's something you're leaving out."

And when she doesn't let up, he does surprise us with something else.

"OK, if you turn off that camera, I'll tell you a story. It's something I've been meaning to tell you all for a long time."

But I let the camera run and he doesn't seem to notice. Light shifts in the winter windows, chiaroscuro penumbras rising up behind us on the living room walls.

Spring, 1945

The stink of the latrine blended with the smoke of mess hall wood fires at the Disciplinary Training Center. It had been pouring for days there, north of Pisa, and rivulets of rain trickled beneath his boots, creating the sludge he had to walk through wherever he went, the brown muck that found its way into the tent, even into his sleeping bag. No matter what he tried, he couldn't clear it away completely. Yes, there had been mud wherever they'd bivouacked in Northern Italy that spring, but this mud was different. It was the brown of chocolate chips, the consistency of sticky pudding. It stuck to his shoes, even managed to find its way into his socks. He'd dreamt about it in a succession of nightmares, where it was engulfing him, up to the level of his neck, slowly pulling him under. He could taste it, bitter as ash, when he'd jerk awake coughing.

As he sat there in the covered latrine, the mud of the dirt floor formed little ridges and troughs that guided the rainwater. With so much time on his hands, he sat there staring at those rivulets like it was some sort of recreational activity, guessing which direction the water would run, which miniature confluences and watersheds would form or be washed away.

"These rills beneath our boots do etch surprising intersections."

Ezra Pound had spoken. The engine of American Modernist poetry was musing on the mud, too.

Both men, squatting forward on a rough bench with circular holes cut into it, kept their eyes before them and downward.

Dad knew nothing of Pound's poetry, or poetry at all for that matter. But he knew who Pound was – that he'd been arrested for broadcasting pro-Mussolini propaganda to U.S. service personnel on Italian radio.

Dad uttered a single, less poetic, word in response to the poet's symbolic observation.

"Traitor."

Pound spoke again.

"I, my young friend, am a soldier of culture."

And he elaborated what sounded to Dad like some sort of economic theory, which included the terms "European cultural heritage," "money-lenders," and "artistic moral obligation." Then my father spat into the mud at Ezra Pound's feet.

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One April afternoon five years earlier, Dad had surprised Mom in the kitchen of their downtown Cleveland apartment, bubbling out that he'd just enlisted in the army. Of his own free will. No draft had yet been instituted. The United States wasn't yet sure it wanted anything to do with the mess in Europe. They'd only been married a year, and there he was explaining what he knew of his future furlough opportunities at Fort Bragg.

"But why?" she asked. "What about our future?"

"Aw, Betty, we can't just sit by and let this Hitler tear through Europe. It's something I needed to do."

The truth is neither of them would ever be able to say why he'd done it. It may simply have been for the reason stated: to help stop Hitler. But I know now that life is rarely that straightforward, that there's usually a second and a third story in there as well. In Dad's case, what might those other stories have been? Restlessness? Patriotism? A need to prove something to himself? Perhaps his immigrant background driving him to validate his American worth? Who knows. I could privilege one over another for the sake of the story—but I'd rather let them all smudge together, like wet leaves on a branch.

Whatever the reason, in short order he'd found himself in boot camp and then in New Orleans for officers' training school. They'd gotten Mom an apartment there, too,

and she settled into life in the Crescent City, with the bedbugs and the chicory. But then Dad was crossing the Atlantic, to officers' intelligence school in Northern England. And then London during the Blitzkrieg. Years later, eating fish and chips, he'd shake his head and wax nostalgic about the stoic Brits cracking wise on their way to the air-raided shelters. Not to mention the RAF pilots shooting Stuka dive-bombers out of the sky for an entire night, protecting his troop ship off the North African coast, saving his life, along with those of a thousand other GIs. And then he was in Algiers and Tunis and beyond, pushing his platoon through mission after mission in the desert. That's how he'd made first lieutenant, that single silver bar the pride of his uniform. In his eyes, it outshone all the other decorations pinned there, including the Purple Heart, with its accompanying scar on the right side of his ribcage.

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Now—after five years of grit and pep talks to tired men and condolence letters and marches in the rain and shells exploding around them—here he was in the latrine with Ezra Pound, both prisoners at the DTC, which the U.S. Army had originally set up as a POW camp. He knew it well: he'd delivered German POWs here himself.

In his bunk, and everywhere else, he thought back on the order from Major McConnel, the order that had so completely scuttled his future plans.

"Lieutenant Cory: Mongiorgio Pass needs to be cleared. Your platoon will report for that detail tomorrow at 05:00 hours."

He knew Mongiorgio well. They'd already tried clearing it. It was treacherous, because you had to ford a rushing creek and then cross a ravine by way of a rope bridge that was in plain view of *gebirgsjäger*, the German mountain riflemen. In their last attempt at crossing it, his best corporal, Evers, had been hit by those snipers. He'd been right in the middle of the single-file line crossing the bridge. Bullets peppered him. As half the men on the bridge broke forward and half backward, the wooden slats rippled like a flying carpet, and Evers, perhaps already dead from the gunshot wounds, went

over the side into the swollen river at the bottom of the ravine. His body, coated in mud, wasn't recovered for five days. Of course, Dad had been the one, as always, who wrote the personal letter home, this time to Evers' wife back in Akron. Over the previous two years, he'd heard so much about her that he knew exactly how to put things. He knew her favorite flower was the daisy and that the secret ingredient in her mashed potatoes was mayo. He knew her first concern would be for the welfare of her children, and he promised to do all he could to expedite the GI services she'd be entitled to.

He also knew the same German snipers were still burrowed in up there at Mongiorgio, sticking it out until the very end – the Armistice everyone was talking about and expecting, perhaps within days.

"Sir, may I speak frankly?"

McConnel nodded.

"Hitler's dead. This thing is all but over. The champagne's on ice, sir, just like it was in the Cardinals' locker room during Game Six last year. I can't risk my men again, not at this late stage of the game."

"That's the order, Cory. Dismissed." And McConnel waited for him to salute and leave.

But Dad only needed a few seconds to mull the matter over, because he'd already mulled it to hell during the previous days. Sometimes in cold sweats. The truth is, he was done. His career as a soldier had ended when he saw Evers take those bullets on the bridge. That was his own final bridge, too, his final military act.

"I can't do it, sir. My men are depleted, especially after Evers. It's too much to ask at this point, when there's no strategic need, with our ace in there throwing the last few pitches of the game. Let the Jerries camp out up there until the fat lady sings. It's a matter of days, maybe hours until the Armistice. You know that. And I'll take this decision up the ladder if you insist. You know Colonel Rasmussen will see it my way."

And they both knew this might be true. It had been Rasmussen who'd pinned the Purple Heart onto Dad's lapel and who'd spoken to him so often of a career with the Army.

But Dad never got the chance to speak to Rasmussen. Instead, McConnel implemented his own punitive measures for willful insubordination. That night, Dad was driven north by jeep to the front, where he was forced to march in alone and camp for two nights in a position precisely halfway between the Axis and Allied lines. Though both sides knew the war was in its final days, the artillery units were still lobbing shells, if only for the sake of keeping up appearances.

Dad had had no choice that night. He dug a foxhole with his bare hands while in a prone position. It was foggy, which made the digging possible but also prevented him from seeing where the shells were coming from. He hunkered down in that hole, the artillery shells of both armies whistling overhead, some landing close enough to shower him with mud. Each ignition stabbed at his eyes, even when they were shut tight. The concussion of the detonations battered him against the sides of his hole. But the worst was the sound, even with his fingers plugging his ears. Both the German eighty-one millimeter mortars and his own army's seventy-five millimeter mountain guns, it didn't matter which. After each fusillade, a hush settled in, a hush that lasted until his hearing returned. The second night was just as bad.

In the end, he'd managed to keep alive until they signalled he could make a dash for it, but his nerves were rattled. And he'd never completely regain the hearing in his left ear. This exercise was McConnel's personal form of punishment. But such an improvised punishment did not replace the very formal court martial for insubordination that was to come. That had already been set in motion.

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Mom was waiting for him when he arrived at Cleveland Union Terminal in the fall of 1945. On the way back to their apartment, Dad drove five blocks out of the way to avoid the victory parade on Superior Avenue. It wasn't that he didn't feel deserving: the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart were sufficient evidence of his share of valor. Not to mention the engraved plaque his platoon had sent him after the court

martial: *Lieutenant Johnny Cory: Leader of Men*. It's just that he wanted to forget the whole thing for a while.

"War? What war?" is evidently what he said to Mom when she asked about it.

More than anything, in those months after returning home, Dad didn't want to have to talk war with people at all. And everyone, from the mailman to the bank teller, was talking war. He said the most bothersome were the men who took the deepest pride in their accomplishments, as if there'd been no pain, no fear, no loss, as if the experience had been one straight road without any curves or cross-streets. He knew the ones with their chests puffed out furthest were those who'd seen the least action, the ones who'd held desk jobs in London or Rome, the ones whose military accomplishments likely paled next to his own.

But he didn't talk about any of that, especially not with Betty's brothers, one of whom had also been decorated, having marched with Merrill's Marauders in Burma. A photo of him receiving a handshake from General Stillwell stood on Grandma's mantle next to a painted figurine of the Mother Mary. Mom's brothers had never liked Dad anyway. They were Italian. He was Lebanese. That was the whole story. It mattered little that their father had been a coal miner and Dad's a middle-class barber with two shops. So, once when Jimmy (Giacomo) had made a comment about "sand niggers," Dad had had no choice but to bloody his nose for him.

The uncles never uttered a word about Dad's war history. They didn't have to. It hung in the air like a foul fog halting conversational traffic, except that related to food, sports, or the weather. If it ever went beyond that, if innuendo reared its head, Mom's eyes would smolder, and her brothers would make nervous jokes about *malocchio*, the evil eye. This would chill the conversation, returning it to the rating of the ravioli or gnocchi before them. The uncles joked about the *malocchio*, but Mom's glare never lost its force.

It was around this time that Ezra Pound's trial appeared in the newspapers. Pound seemed oblivious as he denied that his radio broadcasts had been treasonous.

Angry at first, Dad ended up smiling to himself about their meeting in the latrine. And one of Pound's explanations for the broadcasts did reverberate.

"I have not spoken with regard to *this* war, but in protest against a system which creates one war after another."

That statement found a corner of refuge in Dad's heart, and perhaps in his image of Pound as well, whose actions now seemed more like those of a loose cannon than those of a traitor. And he wondered if maybe this was how the uncles thought of *him*.

Life continued after the war. Danny was born, Dad found work, Mom made extra money as a hairdresser, and the nameless minor successes and failures grew together in the form of everyday life. As a child, though, Danny kept getting sick. First it was one cold after another, then some months later he contracted a case of rheumatic fever that wouldn't slacken its grip, and the health of his heart became jeopardized. He managed to get through that, too, but at a follow-up appointment, the family doctor surprised them with a question.

"Have you ever considered moving to a warmer climate? Someplace warmer and drier would do this boy a world of good."

Yes, Johnny Cory had been through some hard changes, but there was one more change he intended to make, and now the timing seemed right. You see, Cory wasn't the actual family name. When Dad's father had arrived in New Orleans as a child, alone, one of those immigrant name surgeries had been performed. On his papers, three letters of the Maronite name Khoury had been altered. The *k* had been Anglicized to a *c*, while the *h* and the *u* were completely displaced, left to sojourn alone in search of a home somewhere outside the melting pot. But these letters hadn't been forgotten by my grandfather. In his final days, he'd let Dad know just how peacefully he would rest in his grave if somehow *Cory* could become *Khoury* once again.

"John, my son, promise me that one day you'll make the family name whole again."

So, on a spring day in 1949, Johnny Cory entered Cleveland City Hall and filled out the simple paperwork. When he left, he was John Khoury. Johnny Cory was no more. And there was a fringe benefit – Dad was one step further removed from his war record. The spelling change allowed for the lifting of a persistent background weight. The sandbags holding back a once-rising river could now be removed, and the waters that had threatened the family house could begin to recede. The front door could now be thrown wide open.

Without a government-guaranteed mortgage or the other benefits of the GI Bill, denied after the court martial, Dad had to work a little harder. But he was used to that. *When the going gets tough, the tough get going.* How many times had he used those words to spur on his platoon in North Africa and Italy? How many times would he intone them to my brother and me over the decades to come? So, John Khoury got going. One job led to another. There was a promotion. Less than a year later, when he requested it, the company offered him options for a new position out west. All he had to do was decide between the office in Phoenix, Arizona or their newest one in a small Southern California town called Riverside, where orange blossom redolence would come to fill their evening air. Where I would be born. Where Cleveland, Ohio would be forgotten more easily than anyone had ever imagined it could.

Then, one bright day, Dad steered the black and white, two-tone Dodge westward, and the family never looked back. Except that in the early sixties Mom took me on a few train trips back East, so the aunts could make sure I remembered what homemade raviolis tasted like. Dad, however, would never return to Cleveland again, not for family reunions, not for funerals.

Winter, 1998

When he finishes talking, Mom, my brother and I and our wives just sit there, the lights twinkling on the Christmas tree. The stuffing warming in the kitchen. The aroma of roast turkey filling the air.

Then we bombard him with questions, culminating in the most important one of all: “How the hell have you kept this secret all these years?”

He just shrugs, water welling in his eyes yet never developing into actual tears.

“I was ashamed.”

Again, there’s a lull before we protest with hugs and affirmation, assuring him that in the context of *our* times, *our* values, he’s more like a hero, a soldier of conscience who stood up to the overwhelming might of the American military machine. A man willing to pay the price for the sake of a higher law.

And then a tear does make its way onto his cheek, the first I’ve ever seen there.

“But this was 1945.”

I glance at Mom, her smile more mysterious than ever. Then we all spend the rest of the afternoon reflecting on our newfound family history. Puzzle pieces from the 1960s fall into place with moving recollections. Faces all around the room glisten with the tinsel.

Spring, 2000

Now he’s gone, and I’m thinking about John Khoury’s life, each step and misstep a new start, a chance to wrest away his little wedge of history from the hands of less considerate historians. I decide to try and order his military records, hoping to freeze at least one facet of his story into “fact,” hoping to find documentation of his trial at least. It turns out that in 1973, just a few years after he’d helped my brother avoid Vietnam, his official military personnel files were destroyed in a great conflagration at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, along with 16-18 million other records. No official trace of his military service remains. He never knew this.

The weight of that irony, that history, continues to reverberate, even if it’s required thirty years of perspective to understand. It spreads out in reflections and refractions, bouncing back to meet itself and other stories at surprising intersections, perhaps becoming lodged in the personalities of my own children and future grandchildren, in the legacies of what happened and what didn’t.