

New Nonfiction from Thomas Donovan: “After the War”



Marines Walk Over Hills, Guadalcanal, 10 January 1943

There was a heavy snowfall that February night in 1946. A six-year-old boy watched from his bedroom window as the big snowflakes slowly covered everything. The intrusive sounds of my Uncle Ray’s raspy cough and talking to himself sounded louder than usual.

When World War II ended, my father’s brother Ray, after serving 27 years in the Marine Corps, retired as a Master Gunnery Sergeant and came to live with us. Ray saw action on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Midway, and the Philippines. Hidden in his dresser drawer was a box of combat medals including several Purple Hearts, none of which he ever talked about.

Three weeks of every month Ray walked around the apartment like he had a ramrod up his back. Never talkative or loud, always clean-shaven and neatly dressed. But the arrival of his monthly pension check was the start of a tough four days for the family. Ray kept just enough of that check to finance his monthly four-day bender. Surrounded by enough beer and cheap whisky, he stayed almost legless for those four days. Eating very little, he just sat at the kitchen table, drinking around the clock.

Usually a somber and quiet man, during the daylight hours our drunken uncle suddenly became a talkative, funny and entertaining guy. At night, not so much. Ray raved, sang and talked all night to his buddies who lost their lives on those South Pacific islands. Nights like that always seemed longer than usual. The mornings always smelled of stale beer and spilled whiskey. The family tried to somehow adjust.

Along came that pristine snowy night in February '46 when the snowflakes fell

like in one of those snow globes that people shake. That night Ray crossed over some mental bridge into a land where things were not what they seemed. At 2 AM he barged into Mom and Pop's bedroom. Loudly he insisted they both needed to get up and come into his room where he had this guy Martin Block in the dresser drawer.

Dad worked three jobs; Mom worked one. They got little enough sleep, so I was surprised to see them follow Ray down the hallway to his bedroom.

Being six years old and by no means at the top of my class, I still knew a few things. One was that this guy Martin Block was a radio personality who hosted a music show on WNEW called "Make Believe Ballroom." I was also pretty sure this Block guy wasn't anywhere to be found in my uncle's bedroom, let alone a dresser drawer. I crept into the hallway where I could watch.

The voices grew louder and took on a harder tone. My hands began to sweat. Ray shook the dresser, yanked open drawers and pulled clothes out. He shouted, "Damn it, Block, they're here. Where the hell are you?"

Pop turned to leave. Attempting to stop him, Ray slipped and knocked Mom down. Seeing she was OK, Pop flew into a rage. He slammed Ray against the wall and threw him on the bed. "That's it. I'm finished with you. First thing in the morning, I want you the hell out of here."

Ray tried to get back up on his feet and slipped down on the bed, "You want me

out of here, I'll leave right now."

"Good, and take your cheap whisky with you." With that my father led Mom to their bedroom and closed the door.

Ray, using the dresser for support, slowly pulled himself to his feet. Still cursing Martin Block, he staggered over to his closet and pulled out a ratty old suitcase. He crammed in whatever he could grab. Struggling out of his undershirt, Ray stood there naked from the waist up.

His misshapen body was covered with scars. There were long lacerations, incisions, and signs of wounds that had been crudely stitched up. Having never seen him shirtless, I suddenly realized the price he paid for those Purple Hearts.

Ray slipped into a fresh undershirt and took a clean-pressed khaki Marine Corps shirt from the closet. After some trouble locating the armholes, he finally got it buttoned and tucked in. He pulled on an old coat and placed his Marine Corps hat on his head. Straightening up, he looked at himself in the mirror, and saluted.

When he shuffled down the hallway I stepped into view. Barely upright, Ray leaned against the wall. "Uncle Ray, don't go," I pleaded. "Wait until tomorrow. It's snowing hard out there."

"Sorry kid. Not staying where I'm not wanted." He stumbled out the apartment door into the cold. Bare fingers pulled the coat collar around his neck in the blowing snow.

From my bedroom window, I watched Ray leaving tracks through the deep drifts. He stopped and turned, as out of nowhere in the deserted street someone came running up behind him.

Falling snow made it hard to see. The two figures grappled, and the man ripped the suitcase from Ray's hand. Then he put his arm around Ray's shoulders and steered him back towards the apartment.

That's when I spotted the dark grey pajama cuffs sticking out from the bottom of my father's coat as he led his brother back through the snow. Mom was waiting by the front door as Pop led Ray into his bedroom.

My father never cried – never. But the snow must have left some dampness on his face as Mom reached up with her ever-present Kleenex and wiped away the moisture. Pop stammered as he tried to tell her not to worry. He would do something about Ray; he'd take care of it. Mom cupped both her hands on his face. "It's OK, Frank. Come to bed."

Still at my bedroom window, I watched those large, soft snowflakes slowly fill up the tracks on the sidewalk. Soon they'd be no sign that anything had ever happened out there. It'd all be gone. Except for the memories – those memories remain.