

J. Duke

Of all the people in my life; the one person that has inspired me the most is...

To me, he was only Papa, the old man who watched me grow up and taught me to whistle, but to others he was Captain John Morgan Duke, Jr. of the United States Navy. His death did not affect me at first. Only eleven at the time, I did not realize I would never see him again or that he would never come to my high school graduation or wedding. Nor would I ever hear the whine of "Oh Susanna" as his lips and hands cradled his beloved harmonica or watch him shuffle to the 1940 tunes as they blared from "The Lawrence Welk Show", which he always managed to find on our television. In April 2003, the entire Duke family boarded airplanes to fly to Washington D.C., where my grandfather would be buried and honored at Arlington National Cemetery.

After we arrived, we each shared our memories of my grandfather's career over dinner. He had graduated from the Naval Academy in 1941 and immediately reported aboard the battleship, USS Idaho. Most of his wartime service was spent in the North Atlantic, and he loved to reminisce about experiences he shared with his shipmates, many of whom became lifelong friends. After the war ended, my grandfather resumed his education, earning a master's degree in naval architecture and marine engineering from M.I.T. He would spend the rest of his thirty-year naval career designing and repairing naval vessels, ultimately being selected as Supervisor of Shipbuilding in Quincy, Massachusetts. After a long evening of stories, my family retired to our beds, groggy from the full day's activities.

The morning of the funeral was like a dream. As we approached the cemetery, the Marine Corps War Memorial rose from the pavement. Larger than life, it proclaimed to the world a soldier's passion for freedom and victory. The bend in the road promptly gave way to Arlington National Cemetery, burial grounds for the nation's bravest and most venerated men. Thousands of small white tombstones marched in precision among the beautiful cherry blossoms.

Although my mind has blurred much of my granddad's funeral service, I will always remember the half-mile walk we took behind my grandfather's casket as the horses slowly pulled his caisson to the grave, the stillness of the crisp April air as a trumpeter played the lonely strains of "Taps", and the roar of the guns as they paid tribute to the thirty years my grandfather sacrificed for the country he loved. Something that day touched me. I was proud to have known this honorable man. No longer merely the man who embraced life with a twinkle in his eye, my grandfather was a larger-than-life hero. He taught me more that day than some have taught me in a year. Believing one should live with purpose, my grandfather welcomed hard work and difficult problems. His life was all about integrity and honor and the impact one individual can have on a nation. That day, my granddad became an inspiration to me forever.