

Service: Veteran Stories of Hunger and War

Episode 7 – “Dad, I Can’t Talk About It” – Part 1

www.ServicePodcast.org

Transcript

Music: [Music: Upbeat, rhythmic, instrumental melody.]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Welcome to a special two-part episode of Service: Stories of Hunger and War, a production from iHeartRadio and me, your host, food writer and veteran family member Jacqueline Raposo.

George Hardy: As Churchill said, "Never has so much been owed by so many to so few." And so I decided in '43 I wanted to fly.

William Walker: I directed to take the G.I. Bill. I was gonna go to college, and I was gonna set the world on fire.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): This season on Service, we've been following World War II veterans as they traverse land and sea, finding sustenance and feeding others along the way.

Pat D'Ambrosio: Thanksgiving, I was on KP. The Sergeant says, "Let's do something special."

Harold Bud Long: "GI cigarette! Gum!" Little kids like that! "Cigarette, papa!"

Jacqueline Raposo (host): With fewer than 400,000 veterans of this era left, making space for these conversations is more important now than ever.

John Bistrica: I was gonna go to one school...

Jacqueline Raposo (host): That's D-Day Army veteran John Bistrica.

John Bistrica: ...And the history teacher, he didn't want to hear about it. That hurt me pretty bad.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Every single one of us owes a huge debt of gratitude to these Greatest Generation veterans. So let's slow down and explore a little of the history behind why some of them have or have not talked about their service until recently. And then, we'll hear from younger veterans and volunteers creating communities that keep conversations rolling.

Sound Effects: [Bright flute music starts, leading into a historical radio clip from the CBC show Welcome Home:]

Historical Audio Clip: "Everybody's standing up now. The boys are on the way. Can you hear the music from the band? Here they come! Welcome home!"

Jacqueline Raposo (host): This is a 1945 clip from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation show, 'Welcome home'.

Historical Audio Clip: "Here they come, folks! This is a marvelous thing! Listen to those people yell. Gosh, I can't help yelling, myself! Hooray!"

Jacqueline Raposo (host): We've dubbed World War II, "the last good war". There were clear good guys - the Allies - and bad guys - the Axis. Triumphant, we haven't had a World War since. Returning veterans like New York Yankees catcher Yogi Berra, actor Jimmy Stewart, and director Mel Brooks contributed to a cheery post-war tinsel town. The newly minted G.I. Bill helped millions embrace their future at colleges and in starter homes, and the economy flourished. Soon followed a record number of marriages and the notorious baby boom.

Sound Effects: [Record scratch stops triumphant tune]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): But then, there were the lesser spoken of realities.

Music: [Old style, romantic, longing melody]

Historical Audio Clip: [Bob Hope:] It will seem odd when at some given hour the shooting stops and everything changes again. It will be odd to drive down an unknown road without that little knot of fear in your stomach. Odd not to listen with animal like alertness for the meaning of

every distant sound. Odd to have your spirit released from a perpetual weight that has compounded the fear and death and dirt and anguish we won..."

Sound Effects: [Historical clip plays faded in the background of the following:]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): That's Bob Hope, reading a letter from beloved war journalist, Ernie Pyle, known for capturing frontline humanity in an almost folk style before he was killed by Japanese machine gunfire less than five months before World War II ended. This "last good war" was also the deadliest in human history, causing seven times more casualties than U.S. troops would later meet in the horrors of Vietnam. These veterans came home to start new businesses and raise a prosperous generation. But they also had to digest and make sense of what they had faced while deployed. Our Air Corps veteran, Harold Bud Long, returned to upstate New York with memories of breaking down concentration camp gates...

Harold Bud Long: We had K-rations with us. We started breaking open and then the medics come and said, "No, no, no, no! You'll kill 'em!" If they ate too much at once, their stomachs would swell up. "Give them a bit at a time."

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Coast Guard veteran Frank Devita remembers so many details of Omaha Beach on D-Day. From their having overfed the troops that morning...

Sound Effects: [The sound of rough waves builds and underscores:]

Frank Devita: About 2:00, we started feeding them: eggs, sausage, pancakes, ice cream -- everything that you could think of. It was the worst thing we could have done. We overfed them.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): ...To his last thoughts before sleeping that night:

Frank Devita: I sat down on the cold deck and I said to myself, "What the hell just happened here? And why am I alive?"

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Interviewing Frank in his quiet New Jersey home, it seemed like he must have told these stories over and over during the years to keep them so vibrant at 94. I asked him point blank if he had.

Frank Devita: For 70 years, I couldn't talk about what I'm telling you. I couldn't talk about it at that time. I didn't want to bring the war home to my family. I suffered through it. Why should they have to suffer through it? My dad, he was in the Army in the First War. He would ask me questions. I said, "Dad, I can't talk about it."

Music: [The low, ominous strumming of guitars comes in and underscores the following:]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): My grandfather, Pat D'Ambrosio, rarely talked about his time serving in the War either. I surmised his silence was mostly out of gratitude and a humble guilt for his not having seen combat. Repeating this question to other veterans, we start to understand why one would feel so indebted to such fellows.

Lawson Ichiro Sakai: Killing a human being is not a natural thing. The human body, you don't consider it like an animal or an object. But we had to think that way.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Lawson Ichiro Sakai survived months of heavy combat as one of the Army's 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the Nisei Japanese American troops infamous both for their honorable service records and catastrophic casualty count.

Lawson Ichiro Sakai: Some men broke down in the heat of battle, bodies flying all over. You had to put it out of your mind because if you think about it, your mind can't handle that.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): In prior wars, huge regiments of men would fight together in short bursts of small arms skirmishes. There was camaraderie and then there was rest. World War II veterans faced a new kind of warfare. With the introduction of better planes and huge field weapons, smaller units could now be dispersed for weeks at a time. They'd "fight the enemy" cut off from support systems like food and medical attention, and sometimes not be given even 48 hours to rest before being thrust back into battle. As such, where it had been presumed that mental breakdowns during combat were caused by unrelated mental weakness, hospitals soon

filled with those suffering from "battle fatigue." It wasn't until 1980 - 35 years after the end of this war and after these veterans had quieted so to support their children through Vietnam - that "battle fatigue" was renamed with the diagnostic term we recognize today:

Music: [Mournful and soulful clarinet melody underscores the following:]

Lawson Ichiro Sakai: That's what PTSD is all about. When we were discharged in 1945, the military told us, "You're a civilian now, take off your uniform, and just get out of here." There was no mention of your mental status. Particularly us, being in the infantry, everyone was filled with PTSD.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): We're now societally aware of the dangers of PTSD not being taken seriously by medical professionals or communities. But post-war, newspapers were just as likely to joke about what they called "war neuroses" as they were to report on the lives of disabled veterans. Controversial syndicated columnist Henry McLemore once jested, "If I am late for dinner, I can blame it on battle fatigue".

Sound Effects: [Office atmosphere and soft laughter]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): This casual dismissal is one of the reasons why our most affected veterans often stay quiet.

Frank Devita: You could talk to 1,000 veterans who were in combat and they'll tell you, "I never talked about the war."

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Did you talk about your experiences with your family?

Lawson Ichiro Sakai: No! Of course not! I just tried to block out everything. The things that happened in combat: just unspeakable, unthinkable, unprintable. Those things you shouldn't be mentioning to anybody else.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): PTSD rates for World War II combat veterans have proved comparable to those who returned from Vietnam. Yet, treatment has come far too late in the game for many. What did most of those veterans do in the meantime?

Lawson Ichiro Sakai: The only cure that we could manufacture for ourselves was to drink alcohol. And you drank until you passed out. At least you had some relief while you're unconscious.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Slower in development than the successful 1944 GI Bill was the development of rehabilitation centers for those suffering from battle fatigue or alcoholism. In 1941, Alcoholics Anonymous had 2,000 members. By 1946, one report shows that number had jumped to 750,000. Today, 1.2 million members meet nationwide. Community and conversation have proved invaluable tools for long-term healing. Getting the conversation started is often the challenge. For Frank, the anniversary of D-Day and our renewed attention to these veterans led to an invitation to speak on a national stage.

Music: [A slow, rhythmic piano melody underscores the following:]

Frank Devita: It took me seventy years, and only because of Tom Brokaw. He opened the floodgates for me.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Is it helping you to talk about it?

Frank Devita: Now it does, yeah.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): In what way?

Frank Devita: I had a monkey on my shoulder. Now the monkey's off the shoulder. Once I started talking, then I wanted to talk about the war because I wanted to bring some of these kids into what I went through.

Music: [Piano melody begins to move slightly faster and louder:]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): When we come back, we'll hear how a unique community war memorial brought veterans and their families together, shifting the conversation entirely. You're listening to Service: Stories of Hunger & War from iHeartRadio. Stay with us.

Music: [Upbeat, folk guitar line underscores the following:]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): You're listening to Service: Stories of Hunger & War from iHeartRadio. I'm Jacqueline Raposo. If it's hard for us to start conversations with our veterans, it's a bit surreal to listen as they laugh through some of the most intense moments. In his episode, Harold Bud Long flies us from D-Day through Central Europe with his buddy Dewey by his side. Here he is again, reflecting on just how wild that ride was.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): [In interview recording] How do you get a sense of humor about all of this? 'Cause you tell these crazy stories but you tell them, you know, laughing.

Harold Bud Long: A year or two after Dewey come home and got married, we'd go up there fishing for about a week. And the first night we get up there, we sat there talking, laughing, tears running down at stuff that happened to us at that that time was scary: "Remember the time we heard a racket down in the hanger?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "We went down and kicked the door in, and there was about a hundred Germans in there! But they'd already thrown their rifles down. And all wanted to give up." We take them back to the major. He said, "What are we gonna do with them!?"

Jacqueline Raposo (host): As we heard Lawson detail, most veterans face challenges upon returning to civilian life that the overwhelmed V.A. can't always address. With intimate and individualized approaches, countless local organizations work to bring veterans out into their communities. To sit with Bud for his episode, we drove far upstate to Livingston County, New York; a rural community almost at our border with Canada, where the creation of a unique veteran's monument is doing just that.

Jason Skinner: We don't usually gain this kind of traction. I think we've had nearly 200 people come together just for hotdogs and soda around this program.

Sound Effects: [Doors opening and footsteps down a hard floor underscores the following:]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): This is Jason Skinner, Army veteran of the Iraq War and Director of Veterans Services for Livingston County. Jason invited us to interview Bud on a day when they were working on their memorial. It's a collaboration between the county and the Genesee Valley Educational Partnership Career and Tech Center, headed up by metal trades instructor Olie Olson.

Olie Olson: Jason Skinner asked me about doing something. He had showed me an illustration. In London, there's some poppies coming down off the castle wall. It's very impressive. On my desk I have a small American flag. So that was the driving force for creating the poppies. But to have it in the shape of the American flag. So the red stripes will be the poppies and then the white stripes will be the concrete.

Music: [A guitar melody and voices humming "Oh, Canada" underscores the following:]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): The National American Legion adopted the poppy as the symbol of remembrance for fallen soldiers in 1920. Inspired by Canadian World War One Lieutenant Colonel Sergeant John McCrae's poem in Flanders Field: "In Flanders Field, the poppies blow between the crosses row on row," McCrae wrote. Each metal Livingston County poppy is two feet wide, painted red, and fused atop a green iron stem of varying height, connected to the ground by bearings so that they'll sway when the wind blows. When completed this spring, the flag will cover 195 by 85 feet. White concrete flag stripes between them make handicapped-accessible rows perfect for wandering and quiet contemplation. It's a monument designed to inspire awe. But the process has been just as important as the product.

Music: [Music fades and transitions:]

Sound Effects: [The sound of people talking and milling about underscores the following:]

Jason Skinner: When I first presented the idea, I said, "I'll do this project, but with this stipulation: I want veterans coming into the school being shown how to use the equipment and

create their own poppies." I could have done a hundred poppies, but it's not about me. The significance should be them being recognized for their Service. And so this does that.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Every poppy is designed, traced, cut, molded, welded, and painted by the individual. A dog tag on each identifies their name, dates of service, and any other information deemed particularly significant. Then, a unique totem welded into the center or on a petal adds a personal touch. Olie made one for his father, a veteran of the Canadian Air Force...

Olie Olson: So, his poppy is a maple leaf.

Jason Skinner: There's all sorts of really unique centers in them: stars...

Olie Olson: ...One, his uncle was a pilot. And he put an airplane...

Jason Skinner: ...There's one with a VFW and one with an American Legion emblem...

Rory Benkleman: I've built five poppies: one for a friend and the rest are all family members, three of which were World War II veterans.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): That's Rory Benkleman, teacher's aide at the Mount Morris BOCES Center and the Metal Trades Program. He's assisting Olie with the monument.

Rory Benkleman: I'm also a veteran of the United States Air Force and New York Air National Guard. You know, we're slowly losing family members, we're slowly losing our World War II vets, and Vietnam vets. I'm proud to say I'm a veteran and associate with the organizations as one of them.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): They emphasize self-generating veteran involvement has been the incidental key to their monument's success.

Olie Olson: There were veterans that were coming from other counties. "I'm here to make a poppy." I'd get them hooked up with their PPE gear. And as soon as we got them in the shop, other veterans that had been coming regularly, they could see that there was a deer in the

headlights. They'd just go, "Let me help you. This is where we start, and we go from one step to the next..." Veterans helping other veterans to create this monument! And I wasn't doing it! The finish is going to look great. But really, that was the most impressive part of this whole project.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Creating a poppy gets the veteran or family member in the door. But the greater service is they're inviting veterans into a space where people want to listen.

Olie Olson: There were some nights that we had over 40 veterans, which was almost too much because we're limited with the equipment and space. But they all worked together, and they shared equipment, they shared their time, they shared their stories. Then they came back.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Psychologists are recognizing the power of narrative storytelling to help veterans acclimate back into civilian life and heal from combat conflict. Over months and years of military brigade training, the veteran's brain has become wired to move through the world in a specific way: to follow orders and to make order of high-stress scenarios. The therapeutic narrative approach helps to reverse that wiring. By sharing a story aloud, we first take control of the story, choosing to narrate with horror or, as Bud does, with humor. We can paint ourselves as the victim or the hero.

Jason Skinner: It's been kind of all generations. And there's always a story behind each one of these poppies. The vets get to tell their story to other veterans. It's been a very unique and healing experience for some of these guys. It kind of brings them together and makes them more resilient as a bunch of veterans together.

Sound Effects: [Sound of voices and people stop:]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): With time, intention, and insight from new perspectives, the veteran can choose to mold that narrative until a story no longer has any power over them -- over their physical reaction to past experiences or current triggers.

Lawson Ichiro Sakai: You can't talk to strangers or family about that, they wouldn't understand.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): This seemingly unbreachable gap is often felt by veterans' loved ones as well. We want to help but don't know how. Rather than forcing conversation, creating a poppy becomes a gateway for a shared experience -- a space for the veteran to talk, and the loved one to simply offer compassion.

Olie Olson: Another young man that -- well, he's 91 years old -- his daughter came and said, "I want to make a poppy for my dad, but he's a little frail." So, she's created this poppy and springtime had come around here and she goes, "Do you mind if one day I just drive him back here to show him the poppy?" So, overhead doors are open to the shop. And I see this car pull up.

Sound Effects: [Car doors open and close.]

Olie Olson: She steps out, opens the door for her dad -- tall man, 6'4", maybe 6'5". So, his daughter says, "Dad, I made this poppy for you." And he starts crying. A good friend of his, Porter, was here in the shop working on his poppy. They were lifelong friends, they grew up in the same town, they were in the same Service. And he looks up, goes over and gives him a big hug. He says "It's OK. I did the same thing!" Because his daughter started one and he goes, "I can do that!" It was a father and daughter making this poppy. Some of the stories were like that.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): What started as a goal of 100 poppies blossomed to 250, by the time we left them in September. Bud is their oldest veteran at 98. Their youngest participant is 4. Without wanting to detail specifics, they relayed how one younger veteran had remained so reclusive since returning home, loved ones had been worried about him -- the project has gotten him returning to the group over and over again. Such accessible spaces invite veterans to come together and share their Service stories and the lives they're newly carving. They bring coffee and doughnuts or -- this being farm country -- the varying kinds of garlic they're currently growing. (We left with several heads in our pockets, maple syrup, and local restaurant referrals mapped out.) Unless such spaces are created, the sacrifices that still burden many of them will remain trapped where they've remained for our World War II veterans in the past: largely speaking, at the bar or AA meetings.

Jason Skinner: I'm an Iraq war vet and my period in time in Service has been very well respected. People thank me for my Service. And it always felt kind of weird. Until you look at it in the perspective of the job I hold now; I get to pay tribute to those people that served in Vietnam and various earlier conflicts that weren't either recognized or were not appreciated for their Service. And it's because of their Service and how our country feels about my Service now, and what they had to go through to ensure that no other generation of veteran would be that disrespected.

Sound Effects: [Sound of people and voices fades and shifts to a large metal door opening, closing, and footsteps echoing through a corridor.]

Jacqueline Raposo (host): In their memorial, the Livingston County team reminds all of us that we have a choice: a choice to serve our country, to serve each other, and to serve the best version of our future selves.

Sound Effects: [Footsteps walking in dry grass.]

Jason Skinner: When they walk into this -- well, it's not a field of poppies, but it is -- and they're standing there, not just to see this, but to realize the love that went into the project: veterans or loved one of veterans created this monument, it's a service of our country, that they chose to do it. Every one of these poppies tells a story. And that's what I would like people to know.

Sound Effects: [Sound of people walking and geese flying fades:]

Music: [Steady, solemn, and processional piano:]

Rory Benkleman: The commemoration of our veterans in recent times has been great, but it has been long overdue for a long period of time. I believe the recognition because everybody has their freedoms, because of what everybody else has given in the past.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): In the second part of this episode, we'll hear how Honor Flight Columbus opened the conversation for our Navy veteran William Walker. And then, about a veteran food pantry bringing veterans across generations to the table.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): Until then, you can learn more about this episode on our Instagram and Facebook -we're @ServicePodcast - and at servicepodcast.org, where you can also send a message to any of the veterans you're hearing from this season. Don't forget to subscribe to Service on your favorite podcasting platform. And thanks for dropping a review while you're there. Service is a production of iHeartRadio.

Jacqueline Raposo (host): This episode was produced and edited by me, Jacqueline Raposo. Misty Boettiger was the associate producer for this episode. Coby McDonald and Andrew Stezler engineered our interviews with Lawson, Elizabeth Emery with William, and Junni Ramocan with John. Our supervising producer is Gabrielle Collins, our executive producer, Christopher Hassiotis. Thank you for listening. And thank you to those serving and those who have served.