

## Service: Veteran Stories of Hunger and War

Episode 7 – “Dad, I Can’t Talk About It” – Part 2

[www.ServicePodcast.org](http://www.ServicePodcast.org)

### Transcript

**Music:** [A harmonica starts off a meandering country melody with banjo underscores the following:]

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Welcome to Part two of a special episode of Service: Stories of Hunger and War, a production from iHeartRadio and me, your host, Jacqueline Raposo. Interviewing World War II veterans, you start to notice some similarities in their stories. A simple one: how they crossed the country from their hometowns, to base camps, to deployment, and back again.

**John Bistrica:** "...I come home on a train five days before Christmas..."

**Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** "...They put me on a train. I had a duffel bag..."

**Frank Devita:** "...I got on a troop train. Took me five days..."

**Harold Bud Long:** "...I said, "you're gonna ride a troop train. You're gonna be held up forever. You got a seat, and that's it!"

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** This shared experience - taking a troop train - is one of many that forms their identity as World War II veterans. But then, depending on other identifying circumstances, that experience might not be the same for all service members. Pat D'Ambrosio describes his trip to base camp like this:

**Pat D'Ambrosio:** "We went down on a Pullman. We used to have to walk to the kitchen car and then come back, pick up our plates, go to our Pullman and sit down and eat in our chairs..."

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** George Hardy remembers his Pullman trip with this addition:

**George Hardy:** "Leaving Cincinnati, you go through the South. And the laws in the south say white and colored must be separated as far as eating. So they had this heavy curtain across with a few tables behind it for Afro-Americans. And the curtain was weighted so that if someone went through it, [Sound Effects: curtain being drawn] it would close on the bottom..."

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** So, then, different experiences between service members by race. There are also unifying identities within branches too.

**Music:** [1940s song "If They Let Me Join the Army"] "Oh give me a gun and away I'll run to join my Uncle Sam. I know the exercise will never harm me. For ever since I took a wife I've been in battles all my life and I feel at home as if they let me join the army. [Fades into background and underscores the following:]

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Let's let Military Times define the branches of the Armed Forces for us in a way we might best understand: as candy bars! The Army, that massive group makes up a bag of M&Ms - they're standard, fail-safe, and better in numbers. The Marines are like KitKats - they're rough on the outside but complex and conflicted on the inside. The Navy? Those guys are Reese's Peanut Butter Cups - pretty on the outside and salty within. The Air Force or the fancy Lindor Truffles of the group - underneath that pretty packaging, they're kinda nuts. And the Coast Guard? Evidently, they're an Almond Joy - You either love 'em or hate 'em and nothing in between. If those definitions don't sit right with you, head to Military Times on Instagram, where you can see the branches as defined by fast food joints and Christmas desserts.

**Sound Effects:** [Big bite ends the music and cartoon voice says, "What the heck was that?"]

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** The point is, especially in this modern social media era, bonding through identity has become a huge part of how we move through the world. As we explored in the first half of this episode, that works to our benefit when trying to make empowered choices and supporting one another. But it works to our disadvantage when we judge others for labels we snap on to them, or when we set up a system of law that defines who gets what based on those identities

**Music:** [A calm, slow, bluesy piano line underscores the following:]

**Bill Walker:** You didn't start speaking about your military life until very recently.

**William Walker:** Yeah. But the reason I didn't talk about it is because I saw how ill treatment was inflicted on so many Afro Americans. I was fortunate. But for every individual like myself, there was a hundred that were not treated right. This is the way life was.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** That's Navy veteran William Walker with his children, Bill and Leslie. Now, William had a good experience in the Navy: he rose to chief petty officer first class and, having been exposed to educated and successful African American families who encouraged him forward, Leslie calls the military "the great leveler" for their family. But his experiences were shaped by segregation and racism both in the service and when he returned home to Ohio in 1946. So let's compare Williams story to a caucasian veteran of his branch - Robert Hanson. Now, William and Bob could not have started out for more disparate circumstances. Here's William remembering food during his Great Depression childhood:

**William Walker:** My father would work down at the market. He was befriended by a butcher and he would bring leftover food home. My mother would cook it. And we ate a variety of food that people nowadays never heard of, like chicken feet.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** And now, Bob:

**Robert Hanson:** Here was my dad, a professor at the Harvard Business School. We had two maids. Mother was able to kind of sit back. This was almost a fairy tale life.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Without money for college, William enlisted and went through several schools of Naval training to first head up P.T. rescue teams stateside, and then he oversaw supply holds teams in the Pacific Theater. An Ivy League athlete, Bob was recruited to ski as an officer in training stateside before he then officer P.T. boats in the Pacific. After the war, Bob became an assistant to a colonel. William returned to Ohio and took the G.I. Bill to dental school. Now, here are some relatively mild examples of the reception William received upon returning home that just didn't fit into his episode.

**William Walker:** After the service, I learned a lot. I recall going to the restaurant in Cleveland - Clark's Restaurant. I had washed pots and pans in Clark's Restaurant. And they wouldn't serve us. And when I think about being turned away from the athletic club because I was black... It still hounds me. All the things that I have accomplished, those still left a mark on me. And will until I've died. Because you can eradicate that. That happened. That was for real.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Of 16.5 million World War Two veterans, around one million of them were African American. Yet their stories were silenced in coming decades. For the documentary version of Maria Höhn's book "Breath of Freedom", filmmakers had to comb hours of film to pull ten minutes of footage of the "tanned soldiers," as black media called them. It's been comparably impossible for me to find a clear audio of African Americans during this war time. For 70 years, there didn't seem to be a place for William's Service story.

**Leslie Walker:** When I was growing up, I never remember us ever having any white people in the house. I never recall my father mentioning a caucasian friend. I remember him telling me the incidents that he's related here and the anger and bitterness that he carried.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** And then... Something happened.

**Bill Walker:** Dad, could you explain when you were on the Honor Flight...?

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** The Veterans Network Committee is one of several organizations that takes veterans to visit hallowed grounds and war memorials. This summer, Bill took William on a trip with the VNC's Honor Flight to Washington, D.C.

**William Walker:** When we came off the plane, my son was pushing me in a wheelchair. And I never witnessed anything like that in my life. People were greeting us, little white children would come up and want to take their pictures with me! And fathers and their mothers wanted to shake my hand. And I almost lost it. I really did. I almost, 'cause I didn't believe that there was that type of gratitude from somebody. It was one of the greatest moments in my life.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** The only other World War II veteran on that trip was Bob.

**William Walker:** We were being interviewed and congratulated and wherever we went he wanted to instill upon the public that black veterans were ill treated and did not get the Service recognition that we should have gotten. And how he apologizin' for it. Everywhere we went, he and I were holding hands. I have a friend forever.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Now, I glazed over William's trials and accomplishments because he tells his story powerfully in his episode - "Service Within the Service" - and I urge you to hear him out fully in that. For now, I'll let Leslie describe the significance of what Honor Flight shifted for their family.

**Leslie Walker:** I was flabbergasted to see my father, born in 1925, holding hands and crying with a white man who would have been an officer at that time and would have never interacted with him. And I was so thankful that he was able to experience that kind of healing in his life -- that the military actually has gone full circle. Because I used to ask him when I was a kid. I used to say, "Why is it that you grew up here and you're the only one who made something out of himself?" Nobody else is driving Cadillacs. I remember when I was 10 years old, my father got the first Cadillac. I will never forget! I was in the fourth grade, he drove that car to pick me up from school: it was long, it was black, it had a white drop top, white interior. The kids' mouths dropped. I was like "AHHHH!!!" But I'm saying, there was no other family. He was alone in creating this reality for us. And I did not realize how important the military had been bringing him out of his environment and then discriminated against him and then turn around in the end, it's also created healing. This guy, Bob, has called the house. There are no white friends calling up to speak to Bill! And he is excited about it! And Bob is excited. You know, it's beautiful.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** I got Bob on the phone to ask straight out if this was a one-off of doing the right thing. It ends up, he'd continue to spend his life fighting to move the world forward, from pushing the Americans with Disabilities Act into law in 1990 to his current fight for elder care rights.

**Robert Hanson:** Meeting Bill, I knew what the hell he had gone through and is still going through. I think it's disgusting and, let's put it this way, we haven't even started to break these barriers!

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Various black service members now make up almost 17% of active duty military. Progress is being made. Yet, black commissioned officers only make up 8% of the Armed Forces. And there's so much healing still to be done. For those of us who can, let's keep chipping away at these barriers one conversation at a time.

**William Walker:** I want to say this in final: I'm proud of my family and I want them to carry on. And don't be defeated by a negative incident in your life because you can overcome it.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** To learn more about William and the VNC Honor Flight, head to [servicepodcast.org](http://servicepodcast.org). When we return, we sit down with Cindy Stephens of the Freedom Pantry for Veterans. Stay with us.

**Music:** [Upbeat soft rock with lyrics underscores the following:]

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Welcome back to Service: Stories of Hunger & War from My Heart Radio, I'm Jacqueline Raposo.

**Sarah Sicard:** Food doesn't know demographic boundaries. Everyone eats.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** That's Sarah Sicard, Branded Content Manager for Military Times and the genius behind the "military branches as..." Instagram posts. These food-forward posts get a huge response from Service members and the conversations are a delight to witness.

**Sarah Sicard:** Food can serve as sort of a bridge in that civilian/military divide that we talk so much about in the military community.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Now, for a podcast that focuses on war and food stories, we've taken our time getting to how food helps veterans acclimate back in to civilian life. But honestly, with organizations that plan massive memorials or fly veterans around the world, food talk is comparatively easy.

**Sarah Sicard:** Anytime a politician or an entertainer from the USO comes to visit a base, what they tend to be doing is they're serving food or sharing a meal with them. That's sort of a way to

create common ground for people who otherwise don't necessarily have much in common. And the candy post does that, too -- it sort of explains the military culture in a way that anyone could understand.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** For around 25 years, Cindy Stephens has run the Freedom Pantry for Veterans in Yakima, Washington -- an all-volunteer nonprofit that works to fill in the gaps left by larger organizations.

**Cindy Stephens:** We have food, non-perishables, we have clothing, we have blankets, cold winter gear for our homeless veterans, we do Christmas and Thanksgiving boxes.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** She says the greatest challenges to our veterans largely come from two places: First, many civilians think veteran care is entirely covered by government programs and so don't think to donate food, clothing and home items to small pantries like hers.

**Cindy Stephens:** There is some facilities that are amazing. But they claim some veterans make too much money, whether it be they're getting Social Security on top of whatever their pension is, so they're turned down for food stamps or anything else. Some of our veterans can't afford their medication.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Then, there is the sense of pride that runs strong through many of those who have served.

**Music:** [A piano plays the melody of America the Beautiful in the background of the following:]

**Cindy Stephens:** I've had to talk a couple of veterans into getting what is due them because they're like, "No, I don't want to take from somebody else."

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Veterans accepting assistance is where it gets particularly personal for Cindy. Her grandfather was a World War II Navy veteran who lived with injuries his V.A. told him were unrelated to his Service. After that, he refused to go back there for help. He then got cancer that spread rapidly and killed him within a year, two days before her 16th birthday.

**Cindy Stephens:** He was a very strong man who, for him, it was all about loving this country and helping others. I promised him then that I would never let another vet go past that I would turn my back on. I would make sure that in some way I would help.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** She found herself in a similar challenge a few years ago when her father-in-law passed from cancer only 24 hours after being diagnosed by a PET scan she'd been fighting the V.A. to give him for over a year.

**Cindy Stephens:** The head guy called and said, "I'm sorry, we did not do right. I'm sorry." This is the kind of scene I have had with our veterans' care.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Aside from the disparities in V.A. location quality, there are veterans denied care entirely because they were discharged with an "other than honorable" label, which is often given to those who leave the Service because of PTSD or other mental health issues. 1.7% Of World War II veterans were denied V.A. care as such. Today, 6.5% are, despite bipartisan pressure to expand not only coverage but communication with the many veterans who often lose out because of misinformation and limited windows to access a newly-available resources. Hearing the details of each veteran's story is how Cindy discovers what they need.

**Music:** ['America the beautiful' finishes on a sweet, cheerful note]

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** But she says veterans and service members are used to being somewhat at attention at official events and don't want to open up.

**Cindy Stephens:** They have been told people don't want to listen, so they don't give off too much information. At a table, it's more of a family setting -- it breaks down those walls.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** And so, the pantry hosts veteran thank you dinners and summer cookouts where Cindy will smoke up a bunch of meat and they'll all sit together.

**Cindy Stephens:** Food can remind them of their time in where they're talking with their battle buddies. Because when they're serving, they're on watch, they're on the ball. They have to just



keep their senses heightened. When they're eating, it's camaraderie. That's where they let down the guard.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** In other circumstances, just talking about food has helped her to dissipate dangerous situations.

**Cindy Stephens:** This veteran was on the verge of suicide.

**Music:** [Strum of guitars, and then an eerie tune underscores the following:]

**Cindy Stephens:** He was isolated. He just felt no one wanted to help, nobody wanted to listen. You know, it was Christmas time and it was to the point where he was ready to go. I was talking to him on the phone. I spent the entire time cooking, getting his mind off of where he was at. He's like, "You need to go take care of your family. It's Christmas." I said, "No, I am here to listen to you. You are important to me." We were talking about food and he was asking questions and he started feeling comfortable and letting me know of some of the things that he had gone through. He said, "You know, we're trained to follow orders: what to do, what not to do..."

**Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** [Echoed voice, a repeat from part 1 of the episode:] 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..."

**Cindy Stephens:** "... and then when we come back, we're discarded like used combat boots on the side of the road..."

**Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** ...There was no mention of your mental status...

**Cindy Stephens:** "...We're told to just go on with life. But we're not trained on how to assimilate back into society."

**Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** "...And you drank until you passed out."

**Cindy Stephens:** I ended up learning that some of these guys feel safer if you're giving them direction. And so, we got him into a hospital. And I told him, "I promise you, you'll be taken care of and I'll take care of your mother," because his mother lives by herself and he was worried that she wouldn't be taken care of. We had food delivered to her, whatever it could take I was taking care of her. He's doing really well, today. He went back to school to become a counselor in the hospital that he was at, to help others. It happened over Christmas dinner while I was preparing it - over the phone in another state! - because someone took the time to listen. But we almost lost him!

**Music:** [Music ends to silence.]

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Of course, not all of us are equipped to do such work. But to get conversation started. Cindy offers a simple invitation:

**Cindy Stephens:** If just tell someone, "Thank you for your Service and I appreciate your Service," that automatically lets them know that you care. On a day to day basis, they don't get that. If they say, "You're welcome," or if they light up, you can say, "I would love to know more." Some don't wanna talk because the experience was too harsh to talk about. And you can tell the difference. Just saying, "I'm here. I would listen," would be a big door opener.

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Or take a page out of Sarah's playbook and try food humor.

**Sound Effects:** [Host, Jacqueline Raposo speaking in Episode 7.1 underscores the following and fades into theme music:]

**Sarah Sicard:** That gentle ribbing between the branches is like sibling rivalry. And so, you're homing in on some of the major characteristics of every branch, but you're presenting it in a way that is extremely humorous, very accessible, and it encourages a laugh and it encourages that sort of rivalry to continue but in a funny capacity.

**Music:** [Light, instrumental theme music fades in and underscores the following:]

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** No matter which angle you aim from -- on Instagram, in a phone call, or over something delicious -- we urge you to invite your loved ones to the table to share their Service stories.

**Cindy Stephens:** If you are comfortable enough to listen, they will talk. They have wonderful stories -- stories you will not see in history books!

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** Especially this time of year, The Freedom Pantry for Veterans relies on donations of holiday items like turkeys and hams, toys for veterans' children, warm blankets, and the items they supply year-round like canned and packaged goods, hygiene items, and pet food. You can make monetary donations or order directly from their Amazon list at a link at [servicepodcast.org](http://servicepodcast.org).

**Jacqueline Raposo (host):** We thank Cindy, the Livingston County Veterans Association, The Tuskegee Airmen, Military Times, The Japanese American Veterans Association, The Greatest Generations Foundation, and the Veterans Network Committee for connecting us with veterans this season. Find more details and photos from this episode and hear extra audio clips at our Instagram and Facebook -- we're @ServicePodcast -- and at [servicepodcast.org](http://servicepodcast.org), where you can also send a message to our featured veterans.

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