Other Voices

'My father gave a lot for his military funeral — his whole life . . . to the loyalty he felt for his country. He gave without reservation, and he didn't put qualifications on his service'
Rosemary Knower (see below)

For Memorial Day

The life and death of a 'brown-shoe' soldier

Rosemary Knower

MY FATHER was a professional soldier. He was born on a small farm in Harford County, and spent his whole adult life "following the bugles." Family legend has it that he fell in love with the army when he was nine years old, and a group of Maryland National Guard troops came through on summer maneuvers. He walked down to that encampment in the cowpasture, and was fed beans and stories over the campfire, and never looked back.

He was what they called, in the infantry, a "brown-shoe soldier" — old line. One of my earliest memories is of watching him clean all his brass and his Sam Browne belt for inspection. That was when we had most of our talks, to the sharp smell of ammonia, the heavy, pleasant odor of leather polish, and the rhythmic spit-rub, spit-rub of the work.

We talked about life, and honor — how to be proud of your family, and never let down your back hair to anybody, no matter how low and lonesome you got. A fierce, and fiercely private code, which went beyond the stiff upper lip of British tradition and said: "Remember, you're always on parade. Other people can indulge in crazy dress, bizarre behavior, public opinion, private whims. Not you. You're part of the Army, and as much responsible for her honor as I am." That was drummed into my head over the brass-polishing at every station from Kentucky to Paris, from Kansas to Georgia.

We were always "from the post." Separate. And sometimes looked down on as "army trash" in the little towns where we were assigned for a year, or two. Growing up in civilian schools meant that, even if you were the colonel's daughter on the post, you were just another transient student Monday through Friday in school.

When I asked my father about this, he quoted Kipling to me. (He read a lot of Kipling, and read it to us when we were growing up. Before I started school I could recite "There is neither East nor West, border nor breed nor birth. When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.") He turned the crossed rifles of the infantry insignia over in his big hands, and rubbed the last spot off. "It's Tommy, this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Chuck 'im out, the brute!' But it's 'Savior of 'is country, when the guns begin to shoot." He began rubbing leather cream into his holster strap. "People feel differently about the army in war than they do in peacetime."

In 1960, he was sent to a hardship assignment on the Syrio-Turkish-Russian border. My mother packed up what she called "the nunnery" — my sister and me — and took us home to Bel Air. For the first time in my life, I knew what it was like to belong somewhere. Half the people in town knew my father, and many of them had fought with him when the 29th Division hit the Omaha beachhead on D-Day. I understood better, after that year, what he had given up. Growing old with friends, putting in a garden, putting down roots.

His love affair with the Army was lifelong, but he had some bad times with her, as with any mistress. They sent him in with the guard to Chicago in 1968, to keep order in the streets for the Democratic Convention. He couldn't believe that what he saw was part of the America he knew. I couldn't believe he could condone the army supporting the Daley machine. The close relationship we had had when I was little had given way to furious disagreement over the Vietnam War.

One of our bitterest fights occurred when they assigned him to guard the trains carrying nerve gas for disposal — through Chicago and down to the East Coast. "Christ," he cried out. "I didn't make the stuff. But somebody has to deal with it. Wouldn't you rather it were me than somebody else?" Only in the last years of his life were we, like so many families, able to heal the breach of that war, those times.

Two years ago, on the Fourth of July, he died. He was only 64, but he was worn out. My sister and I drove south for the civilian funeral in Georgia, then north, for the ceremony at Arlington. He had been very careful, that last spring, to lay out his full dress uniform, with all its insignia, in a plastic bag, ready.

There is no ceremony that assuages grief like the full military funeral at Arlington. It has none of the mawkish sentiment and hushed euphemism of civilian undertaking. Crisp, bright with colors and battle flags: military hymns, and the young soldiers of the honor guard at full attention in the sun. The riderless horse, the volley, taps — all underscored by the clink of brass harness, the creak of leather, the slow march to the caisson, and the quick, triumphant elevation of the flag-draped casket before they settle it, and the horses draw away.

He gave a lot for that funeral. His whole life, in the good times and the bad, to the loyalty he felt for this country. He gave without reservations, and he didn't put qualifications on his service. Thinking of him on Memorial Day, I hear his voices, saying from Kipling a verse he never read to me, but let me find for myself in the worn, dog-eared volume he left behind:

"All that we have of freedom, all we use or know —
This our fathers bought for us, long and long ago."

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