

Opinion

My father's ugly feet and what they stood for: Peter Jedick (Opinion)

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Cleveland author Peter Jedick

My father had ugly feet. He would take my friends and me swimming at what we called "Berea quarries" in the Cleveland Metroparks and he would jump in the water with us. But I was always embarrassed by his ugly feet.

It wasn't until decades later that I discovered why his feet were deformed. I knew that he was a paratrooper in World War II, 101st Airborne Division, and that he jumped into France on D-Day, June 6, 1944. I was proud of him at an early age and when I researched D-Day later in my life I was even more impressed by his service to our country.

Now that I am older, hardly a day goes by when I don't think about him, a 20-year-old guy, jumping out of an airplane in the middle of the night with a rifle and a hundred pounds of supplies on his back. And when he landed in a cornfield, there was a good chance that a bunch of enemy soldiers were waiting there to kill him.

There is nothing that I could ever do in my lifetime to match that act. But back to his ugly feet. I also knew he was eventually captured by the Nazis and was a prisoner of war for more than a year. I didn't have enough sense to put his feet and his concentration camp experience together. He spent a year with little food and warmth during one of Europe's coldest winters on record. He came back home weighing only 90 pounds.

In the 1990s, the U.S. government had some extra cash so the Veteran's Administration contacted him because his feet experienced frostbite during World War II. I was helping him with his paperwork at the time so we applied for the frostbite benefit. It was the first time I learned of it. He received a couple free visits to the podiatrist and the doctor trimmed his toenails for him, which was always a difficult task.

The only other benefit that he ever received for his war horrors was a free POW license plate from the state of Ohio. But he never complained about it. In fact, like many of his generation, he never talked about his World War II experiences. I guess they were just too brutal to recall.

The reason I bring up my dad's feet on today, Father's Day, is that despite my embarrassment, I sure was glad that he took us to Berea quarries after he came home from work. He was ahead of his time in that he took a pay cut and only worked a 35-hour week, a seven-hour day, so he could come home early and spend more time with his kids. My siblings and I would grab a few friends, pile in the back of his car and go swimming and fishing all summer long.

Sometimes we would go to Berea and sometimes we would go to Lake Erie but we would always stop for an ice cream cone on the way home. I like to remember that my father was the cream of the crop but the thing about the neighborhood where I grew up is that everyone had a father.

Which brings me to our modern world, 21st-century America. There are so many families today that don't have a father, it is becoming the new normal. I could list hundreds of examples of when my dad came through for me when I was growing up. Where do today's kids without dads go for help?

It is a sad fact that fathers today are an endangered species. I blame most of our nation's social ills on the lack of male role models within our culture. We are long overdue for a national policy to save dads. If we could do it for Bald Eagles, we should be able to do it for fathers.

Cleveland author Peter Jedick's newest book is "Why America is Bankrupt."