

FORUM

On this day: In 1850, the steamer *G.P. Griffith* burns on Lake Erie, killing 250 pa-

Father's Day ties and cards leave so much unsaid

PETER JEDICK

Father's Day is not what it used to be. Not when one out of three American babies is now born to a single mom. That's according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

Fatherhood is becoming obsolete.

Father's Day never was much of a holiday, anyway. Since it is celebrated on a Sunday, few of us are given the day off from work or school. Other than the tie and greeting card industries, no one raises much of a fuss over dads anymore.

I thought about that as my own father was dying last summer. He passed away about the same time as former President Ronald Reagan and music icon Ray Charles.

I sat by his hospital bed last Fourth of July as the major networks were heaping praise on Reagan and Charles, calling them great American heroes. "But what about my dad?" I asked the television set — just like he used to do. What about the real patriot lying next to me in a coma?

You see, I believe my dad was the greatest hero of the three men. There should be a national holiday to honor men like him — all of the unsung heroes that our history books skip over. Every family has one.

I grew up in the 1950s, when everyone in our neighborhood had a father. But there were fathers and there were *fathers*.

Some countries in Europe are experimenting with a 35-hour work week so parents can spend quality time with their children. My dad invented the 35-hour work week. Of course, working a seven-hour day put a dent in his income, but he had a different set of priorities.

While most of the neighborhood dads were working overtime, chasing the big bucks or stopping at the corner bar to throw down a few cocktails, he would hurry home to take us fishing or swimming. Often, he'd take a few neighbor kids along for good measure.

In the fall, we would visit the Cleveland Metroparks, where he would start a fire while we explored the Rocky River for turtles or frogs. In the winter, we went to the library at least once a week. On weekends, he might take us downtown on the rapid. We would ride the escalators at the huge Higbee's store.

These activities cost my dad very little money. But what he lacked in funds, he made up for with laughs. With him, the journey was just as important as the destination.

Even a ride to the corner store was an adventure. I remember practicing Three Stooges skits as we rode.

"How long have you had a weak back?" he would ask me, mimicking Moe, the straight man.

"Oh, about a week back," I would give him Curly's response.

My father's greatest gift to us was his time, and he gave us a lot of it.

My father was a World War II vet. He parachuted into France on D-Day. I think about my dad when I take out the garbage on cold winter nights. I complain about spending five minutes in the snow; he spent his youth slogging through Europe in leaky boots and threadbare socks, carrying an M-1 rifle over his shoulder.

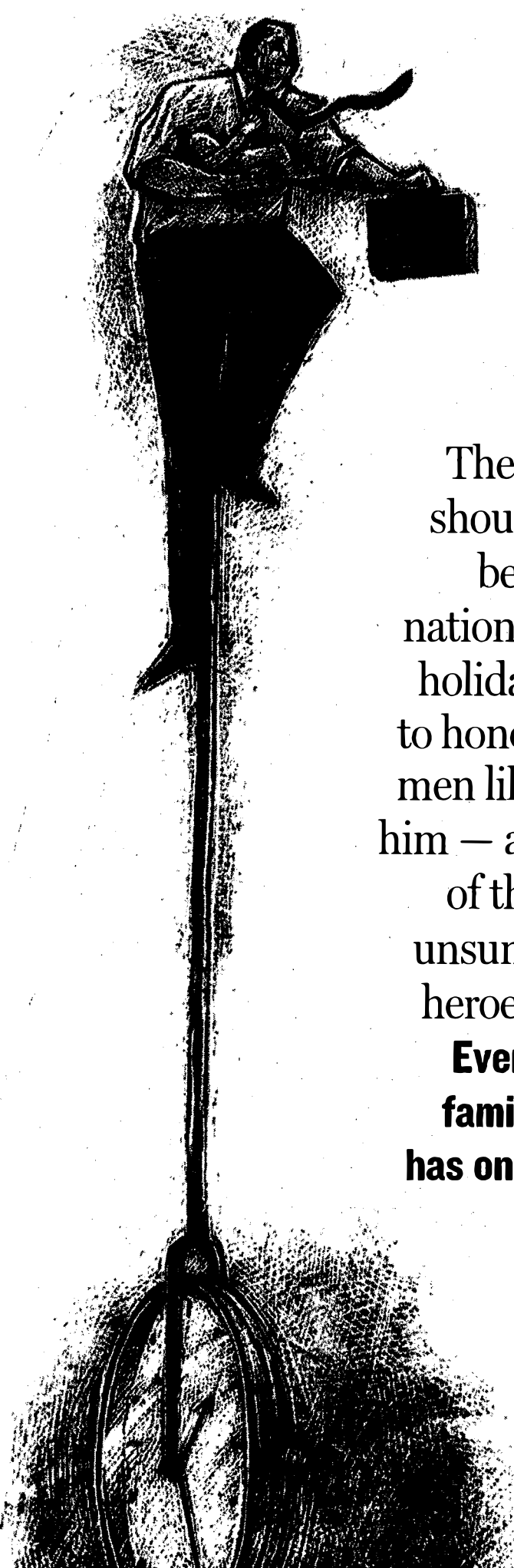
Then he ended up in a German prisoner of war camp with little food and even less warmth. He experienced the horrors of war, but he would never talk about them. Late in his life, the Cleveland VA hospital informed my father that he would be eligible for government assistance if he would just share his story. He refused, even though his fixed income was near the federal poverty level. My dad believed that real men did not talk trash. Their actions spoke louder than words.

We need fathers like mine as an example for today's young men. That's why I propose that we use his birthday, Feb. 29, as a national holiday to honor our country's quiet heroes.

Once every four years, on Feb. 29th, we should honor our country's real heroes. Make it a holiday as special as the Fourth of July, as extravagant as the Olympics.

A working title could be National Leap Year Day. We have three years to work out the details, maybe come up with a better name.

I'm open to suggestions.



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