

When the United States was attacked by Japan and World War II began, there was a great sense of the unknown. Perhaps a bit like now we experience with the battle against the Corona virus, people, many wondered how long would the war go on, a war which had many dark days and setbacks. But they pressed on because they believed in something greater than themselves, having learned values and love from both God and their parents who passed it onto them. The yoke that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel reminds us that, tethered to Him, and trusting in Him, He will see us through the battles of life. But sometimes we all need a reminder that we aren't in the war of life alone, and that God is with us but so too are other people.

One of the many veterans of World War II who fought for our freedom was a man by the name of Don Bell. In 1985, he wrote a story that looked back on how he was reminded of this truth, of seeing the bigger picture and looking ahead and fighting on, when he encountered Ernie Pyle, a war correspondent who would be killed in April of 1945 in the Pacific Theater.

Mr. Bell writes that he got his greetings from President Roosevelt in 1942, when he was invited to join his fighting force. At the time, Don was a rodeo

rider and cowboy. He gladly accepted Franklin D.'s invite, figuring that in his army he might get paid better,

Don reported to Camp Roberts in California, where he went through 19 weeks of basic training and graduated as an Army rifleman. He was 31 years old.

Taking a "delayed route" to his next assignment, he hitched up to Oregon for one last rodeo. The rodeo announcer, the great Able Lefton, made a big deal out of him. "Here's a genuine G.I. rodeo rider. What a patriot!" The whole crowd stood and cheered. As he sat on a terrible bucking horse, a woman draped a U.S. flag over his shoulders. The gate opened and the horse flew out. A picture in next day's paper showed Don and the flag hitting terra firma. Bucked off. So much for the great rodeo soldier, Don wrote.

The next stop was Camp Meade in Maryland for more infantry training. Then to England, where he was assigned to Company K, 115th Battalion of the 29th Division. The 29th was an assault division, and every day they

assaulted the southwest coast of England. Practicing. They lived in tents. Was it ever wet.

The soldiers knew they were about to open a Second Front, but they didn't know when or where. Meanwhile German bombers and Stukas (German dive bombers) attacked them all the time.

Don says he was scared, but he also felt that his fate was out of his hands. It was in the hands of superiors. They ordered and instructed and disciplined him every minute of every day. As a cowboy he had to be self-reliant. That sounds nice he says, but it's often a headache. For a change he now had somebody else always telling him his next step. Part of Don bristled, but a bigger part of him was relieved.

On the night of June 5th, 1944, Don was handed real ammunition and real grenades for the first time. He knew the real thing was about to happen.

On the open deck of a troopship he rode in darkness, out into the English Channel. All he could think of was German submarines and mines. No one talked much. The sea was rough. Allied bombers droned back and forth from France.

His regiment wasn't in the very first Normandy assault wave. During the morning of June 6th he sat at sea, while Navy destroyers fired thousands of shells at the mainland. In the late morning he finally scurried down a rope ladder, then jumped into a heaving landing craft.

In the flat-bottomed craft they all kept tow. Many got sick. Rumor spread that the L.C. pilots were all from Father Flanagan's Boys Town. Don still didn't know if this rumor was true when he wrote his story, but at the time it made him feel better.

When the L.C. ramp let down, the war really began for Don. He jumped into the water expecting it to be shallow, but it came up to his chin. Thrashing to shore he lost his rifle and helmet.

By the time he was on the sand of Omaha Beach he'd lost his squad. He tried to burrow in, like a mole, thinking, Where's Sergeant? Where's Lieutenant?

Both of them were already killed, though Don didn't know it then. Just about witless, he grabbed the helmet and rifle of a guy lying dead beside him.

Here on Omaha Beach there were already a thousand men killed.

Bunkered German 88 guns and machine guns poured fire on him and the other soldiers. An American officer scampered by in a crouch, ordering Don to "get going up that bluff, Private!"

Don moved slowly ahead, and met up with a few guys from his squad.

They were glad to see him. He was quite a bit older. And wiser ... or so they thought. Crawling, Don led them toward a German machine-gun nest.

By nightfall they were on the top of the bluff. The Germans had fallen back, though not far. Their rear artillery was still in place, blasting at them.

Chaos reigned all through the night. For the next few days, in fact, they couldn't find a command post, although one officer did come along and promote Don from buck private to buck sergeant.

Otherwise, Don and his squad were on their own. They didn't sleep for two or three weeks, didn't bathe, and lived on what German food they could find. The Normandy countryside was a nightmare: hedges, dikes, sunken roads and flooded fields. Don never knew where the Germans would be and he got few specific orders. Find Germans and fight them. That was the basic idea.

He felt so alone. That was the worst thing he says. In England he'd felt part of a huge fighting force, presided over by all sorts of knowledgeable brass. But no more. Just ten of them pinned against a stone wall God knew where. No pillars of strength to lean on now. Where do you turn for strength so far from home?

He had no answer to this question. He kept fighting as hard as he could. By now they'd fought their way to the outskirts of St. Lô, France. It was early July and the summer heat had set in. One hot day, near the village of St. Claire, his company was pinned down in a flax field. His squad got awfully thirsty. Don said he'd go for water. He ran underneath the fire, scrambled over a dike, and then was fairly safe.

Catching his breath below the dike, he saw a big old roan horse, just standing in the grass 20 feet away. Don guessed he was a German draft horse, because the Germans still used horses to tow artillery.

Don walked up to the horse. He was gentle and just looked at him. He made a bridle out of his G.I. belt and then mounted the old fellow. A ways on he found two five-gallon G.I. cans and with another belt slung them over the roan's shoulders. He was glad to be on a horse again. He rode to a farmhouse, filled the cans from a well, and gave the horse a drink.

On his way back, a grizzled guy ran up to Don. He was wiry and short, wearing oversized fatigues and a helmet that dwarfed him. He carried no gun. All in all he looked a little looney Don thought.

"Hey, Tex." he said. "I hear you're a cowboy. Can I ask you a few questions?"

Questions? He looked for officer's stripes. None. So Don said, "Got no time for questions, mister. My men are thirsty."

He left the man behind and got water to his squad. By now a smoky dusk had fallen and the artillery had let up. As their company set up defenses for the night a fellow infantryman said to Don, "Did you hear that Ernie Pyle is here?"

"Who's Ernie Pyle?" Don asked.

"The famous war correspondent."

"Never heard of him."

"Well, you ought to. For us infantrymen he's the best friend we've got"

With nightfall the German 88s let loose again, and their guns answered back. Don took cover in a German-dug foxhole, crouching with his rifle. And out of the darkness he saw the grizzled guy running, this time carrying a box and a notebook. He jumped right into Don's foxhole.

"Hello again, Tex." he said. "I'm Ernie Pyle, Got time for questions now?"

“I guess so. But it’s awful dangerous out here, mister.”

“Don’t worry about me, you should’ve seen Sicily,” he said gruffly. “So where’s your horse, the one you were on this afternoon?”

“On a boat for England if he’s got any sense.”

“Pretty wild here.”

“You bet it is.”

A tree stood above them, stripped bare by shellfire. Between rounds Ernie Pyle asked him about civilian life. Don told him about rodeo riding and wrangling. He wanted more specifics. He told about Ernie driving cattle down in winter storms. Hunting elk in the hills. Ernie jotted down his answers. He got to asking him about the war.

“I’m fighting hard, Mr. Pyle. but it’s hell out here. At times, when the big guns get whaling away, when snipers start poppin ’from the hedges, I just want to fold my tent.”

“You’re not alone. Tex.” Ernie told him. I’ve met guys all along the front who feel that way.”

“That may be true. but it ain’t very comforting.”

“But a lot of those boys fight off that pitiful feeling,” Ernie said. “When they get down, they think of home, but they don’t pine for comforts and safety and all that. They think of the trials they’ve endured ... the values that’ve held them up. Take a West Virginia boy I saw yesterday, an infantryman like you. He always carries a little chunk of coal in his pocket. He’s a miner, from a family that’s always mined, and when he gets battle depression he reaches into his pocket and clenches that bit of coal. Then he says to himself, ‘If I can take the mines, I can take this.’”

“War or no war, Tex, struggles never let up. You keep the good ones in mind. You’re a cowboy. Just think of what you’ve lived through.”

Don mulled Ernie’s words. Ever since boyhood, growing up in a shack on the Colorado plain, he’d been tested by endless chores, bitter winters, and,

later on, by the ornery animals and trail bosses of cowboy life. What got him through, he thought? His mother's guiding hand, mainly. She'd planted faith and decent habits in him. She always said that you'd know strength and goodness as long as you heed God's will. And now Ernie had taken his ma's wisdom and turned it into a soldier's lesson: To find strength in battle you take hold of strength you've known at home ... and of the faith that underlies it.

Ernie and Don kept talking. He wanted to pry more wisdom out of him, but just then a German shell landed nearly in their laps. Their bones rattled and a ton of dirt showered onto the two of them. They struggled out of the foxhole. Ernie had lost his helmet. As they ran for better cover, he said. "Maybe I'll see you again, Tex. And, hey, my typewriter is buried in that hole. If you ever dig it out, it's yours."

That's the last time Don saw Ernie. The next day he did dig out Ernie's field typewriter, but he'd left their area. He entrusted the typewriter to a guy in Ordnance and went back to battle.

Don says that while he can't say Ernie's advice made him invincible, it certainly helped. In fact, a week later he was badly wounded at St. Lô and was sent to England for six months. When he returned to the front, though, during the infamous Battle of the Bulge, he kept his nerves by keeping in mind those times when he'd struggled through some bad times. He'd think of a rugged ride he'd weathered, a bull he'd stayed on. Don lasted the war and won two bronze stars for bravery in battle.

Ernie Pyle was killed on April 18, 1945, by Japanese gunfire in the Okinawa campaign. The end of the war was near and Don says he thanks God Ernie was around for most of the fight. He made the fighting men known to the folks back home, and he made the the men known to themselves.

Gain strength, Don says, by keeping in mind the strong things you've done—and where you got the strength in the first place. Ernie's lesson was one learned by Don many years prior, but he still lived by it he says for the rest of his days.

The lesson is of course there are things worth fighting for, but that there are things that get us through the battles.

In the first reading from Zechariah, which has the foreshadows of Palm Sunday in it, the people have returned from exile. But they have suffered greatly for many years, and must rebuild. The people are told a new King is coming, Lord of Hosts and that God is protector of the people. The people are to rely on God who will guide them along the path of life.

Jesus is of course the king. In a sense, Ernie was Jesus to Don in that foxhole, helping him to come to a better spot as a soldier but also as a Christian. Jesus reveals divine wisdom, and the disciples, like Don, accepted Jesus as the revealer of divine wisdom. Jesus though invites the follower of Him to be tethered to Him with the image of the Yoke, which was the term rabbis used to refer to the Torah, or the Word of God, which Jesus interprets for people.

In our spiritual lives, much like Don on the beach, we can go astray. We can get distracted from the path or we can get tired from the effort. Jesus though opens up our eyes and invites us to yoke ourselves to Him. He is

mEEK meaning not weak, but rather as derived from the Greek “praotes,” meaning “not easily provoked,” a virtue between the extremes of excessive anger and complete lack of it, the point where the control and direction of one’s temper displays moral character and power; a power Jesus is fully in control of. What a beautiful invitation it is to be yoked to Jesus, because from that relationship, we gain so much.

For one, there is the mercy and love of God. Life, like war, makes us tired. Sometimes we can lose our ways and try to find comfort in things that ultimately lead us further from God. But when we are tired, Jesus is there for us. The only qualification is to be like a “little one,” and to have a need and turn to Jesus with that need. There are no requirements; rather Jesus is just glad to have us there, to come to Him. So it’s worth reminding us whether bad decisions or sin have beat us up, or it’s just suffering, Jesus is with us in that fox hole. It means we turn to Him through prayer, through receiving Him in Communion, and knowing that He’ll be there to forgive, to love, and to guide is every day.

Second, as Don found comfort in now not being in charge, but trusting in his superiors, we find that too in our God. God gives us the law to guide us

and make us better people. So we strive to trust in it, to follow it, and to challenge ourselves when we go astray from it or pick and choose which parts we might want to follow.

Third, we need people like Ernie in our lives. As Ernie told Don, where did he learn so much about life and how to live it from? People like his mom who kept him on the right path. And of course people like Ernie, who reminded him of these things in that foxhole. We use the term “friends” a lot, but we need real friends, people who know us and know the faith, to challenge us, to listen to us, and to help us grow. We of course do that for others over the course of our lives as well, for as Don ran to get water for his fellow soldiers, people in our lives are thirsty too - for direction, for comfort, for peace, and when we go to the well of God’s love we can give them that for which they are thirsty.

Fourth, we fight on like Don. Ernie is right; war or no war, struggles never let up. Covid will hopefully come to an end. But there will still be family issues, financial issues, stress from school and work, health issues, and our spiritual battles. When we are linked to Jesus though He helps us to look forward - to the promise of heaven - but also we are reminded that

loving God with our whole heart, mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves takes a bit of work. It's worth remembering what we have learned from God and our parents over our lives when we might be tempted to give up on ourselves or others or life. Inevitably life will beat us up. But in those moments we need to remember that there is so much worth fighting for as we strive to make ourselves and others better, and that God sees us through these things. That means when we fall into sin and think it'll never get better, or when a loved one is seemingly making bad decision after bad decision, or things just get so hard, we can't give up, because hope will prevail as God helps us to move forward. We just have to see past the moment, and into the possibilities that are just beyond the horizon.

In the battle that is our life, it's quite alright to ask questions of God, such as why things like Covid happen and why there are so many evil things that go on. We might not get all the answers this side of heaven, but we will be brought closer to our God who doesn't abandon us, but is with us always, giving us the strength to fight on. He wins the victory on Easter, but also calls us to carry our crosses with Him. So let us turn to Him, by placing our vulnerabilities and needs before Jesus, and seeking out the Ernie Pyles God gives us in our lives while being like him to others too. For when we

do, we will be refreshed and able to carry our own weight in discipleship, because Jesus is carrying the load with us. The sacrifices of Don and so many have preserved our freedom as Americans as we celebrate our country's independence because freedom isn't free. But through people seeing the bigger picture, namely of a great land of freedom, so many have fought to preserve our liberties. An even greater liberty though is that to be free from sin, and Jesus wins that on Good Friday, but calls us to be soldiers in his army - so lets us go forward with our Savior, who came to us on a donkey, and comes to us on our altar, knowing that while the fight can be so hard at times, ultimately with Him with us, we will win the war over sin and death forever if only we don't fold up our tent, but go forward with Jesus leading us to the Heavenly Kingdom.