

Veterans: The Quiet Heroes

One of my favorite actors is Jimmy Stewart. He won a Best Actor Oscar for the Philadelphia Story, and over the next few weeks millions will get reacquainted with George Bailey. But for all his achievements on film, perhaps his best is what he did out of love for his country.

Coming from a military family, Stewart loved to fly, flying privately in the 1930s, logging 400-plus hours in the air before World War II. In the time leading up to the war, he helped build a pilot training school where more than 10,000 pilots would train during World War II. But Stewart wasn't content to just write a check.

In 1940, he would be drafted into the army. But there was a problem. He was too thin. He needed to weigh 148, and was 143 pounds. And so he hooked up with Don Loomis, the "muscle man" of MGM who helped actors gain or lose weight. He worked hard, and tried to enlist again into the Air Corps of the Army, but again was underweight. Lobbying for and getting a third test, he made it and went into the army as a pilot. He enlisted as a pilot, and was a lieutenant by 1942. Shortly after this he would do flight instruction, and make public appearances, be on the radio to support the war effort, and starred in a film to help encourage recruits. But Stewart wanted to do even more.

He heard a rumor that he'd be taken off flying status and be used for his acting, meaning making public appearances to sell war bonds. It was then he decided to act decisively. He appealed to his commander and was allowed to go overseas in the summer of 1943. He was in a bomber group, flying in a B-24. And he wanted to inspire his men, so he was in the lead plane. These were missions deep into Nazi-occupied Europe. He asked though that his missions go uncounted, but he was known to have flown at least 20, probably many more than that. At his funeral, retired Air Force Colonel John Regan wrote: "There were many celebrities at that time who wanted to be able to say that they served in combat for their country. The majority did the bare minimum to earn an award. Not Stewart. He did not seek special treatment. He did not pick and chose his missions. He flew them as they were scheduled—all were tough, some more than others."

I find his story remarkable for a couple of reasons. For one, here's a guy who is a star by 1940. He could easily go back to Hollywood, and no one would have questioned him. He could have done his part by making ads and movies. Then, he gets in the Air Corps, and he can sit behind a desk, or play it safe. But inside of him is something that says there is something greater that I need to do.

That same drive is in the women and men that our nation honored this past Friday, our veterans. In college when I was working part time at a community newspaper, I interviewed a Korean War veteran about his service, and he, and so many vets I've encountered, have all been so incredibly humble. Stewart made no effort to "cash in" on his service, and instead continued to serve and make pictures. He saw himself as part of a family of soldiers who had a job to do out of love for country.

Stewart, and all of our veterans, have so much to teach and to show us. I think it's worth asking ourselves, how often do we say thanks, not only to God but to those who help make it so we can worship our God freely? Or do we just take our freedom for granted?

We are so fortunate to live in a country founded upon freedom. But it's so easy to take what we are given for granted. We must never forget that evil is a real presence in the world, and since our country's inception, people have wanted to see our country perish. Others have worked hard to crush freedom, which is why people in the world are still persecuted for their faith. But right now at this very moment are men and women who, by their own choice, decided to go off to far away lands to serve our country to preserve freedom. These people, just like Jimmy Stewart, don't seek glory for themselves. Rather, they simply serve and do their job because they have a love for our nation and for what America stands for.

And so, a couple of challenges for us as we think of our Veterans' service.

The first is to be honest with ourselves about whether or not we are apathetic. By that, I mean it is so easy to take the gifts we are given for granted. We might not love all our government does, but my hope is we do love our country by praying for our soldiers, by voting and exercising our freedoms of speech. It's so easy to fall for one-liners such as "one person can't make a difference" or "things will never change." The early Christians did not fall for that, and instead they lived out the faith in the face of great struggle. Soldiers do not fall for that either – which is why throughout our country's history, so many people have served. You and I can do so much, and we need to live out our faith both here in the Church and in our civic lives.

And secondly, I'd invite you to show your appreciation for what our veterans have done. Pray for our servicemen and women. Talk to them; write them a letter; donate to a support organization for veterans. So often we define "hero" by what someone does on a gridiron Sunday afternoon or on a baseball diamond – and while I really enjoy sports – the true heroes are those who are willing to wear a uniform, most of whom will never be read about in the papers, but because of whom we have freedom.

Edmund Burke, the Irish politician, famously said: "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." Thank God for the men and women who do something to stand up to evil, to fight for truths that matter, and for our great country. May God bless them and keep them in His loving embrace, and may we never forget the great sacrifice all those who serve and have served make.

God bless,

Fr. Paul