

THEY CALLED ME "POP"
"A confidence my father shared with me
that first time I saw him cry."

Marilynn Bates

I knew things were going bad in the Pacific. But it didn't hit me how really bad until, at age 34, I received my draft notice. Hell, I tried to enlist in forty-one just after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor but they told me I was too old. Now, I guessed, they were needing to scrape the bottom of the barrel. And that scared the shit out of me.

When I reported and they asked me what branch I wanted, I said the Marines and they laughed. But somehow under my disguise of a business suit, white shirt and tie they must have sensed nobody dared mess with me and expect to get away with it. I guessed my lessons as an ex-boxer and ex-bootlegger in my frivolous years may have helped create the right image.

In the vernacular of this monstrous time, they called us the seven-week wonders because that was all the training we got. The drill instructors were tough on everyone, but knowing what was at stake we struggled through those seven weeks of raw reality, shock and sweat to emerge as the fighting team they needed. Our motivation? Our lives depended on it. But talk about being out of my element. Me, a sod, who paid others to keep my car running was assigned to the tank corps as a driver. In the sweaty bowels of the dark interior, my squad-mate's muddy boots dug into my shoulders when he wanted me to turn, because all I could see was a black metal wall in front of me.

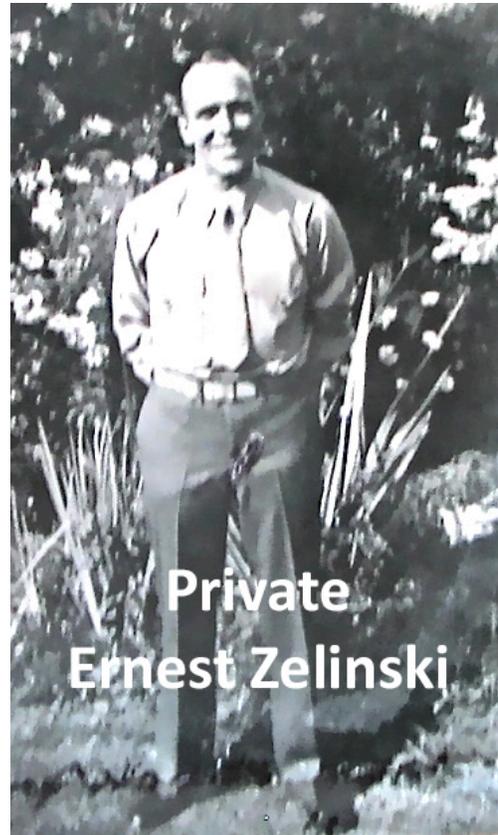
However, things quickly changed when orders came down reassigning me to underwater demolition. It had to be because my instincts as an ex-lifeguard kicked in when I dove into the pool to rescue a buddy tangled in his parachute lines. But damn, I thought, at least I'd be able to see while I swam like hell to keep from learning what it was like to be deaf when the charge I'd set exploded.

After being transferred from boot-camp to Camp Pendleton, the outside world no longer existed. In the name of security even the phones were off-limits. The mail that had accumulated from my wife and kid had been censored and some pages bore holes bigger than my fist. So, to avoid sending holes back, all I wrote was *everything was A-OK and not to worry*.

Then, the final night arrived. Our practicing at war was over. We were ready to do a job none of us wanted, but knew we had no choice.

I still remember those last hours before we shipped out. The sky was cloudy, the air dank and cold. Spread across the parade ground, a sea of men in full battle gear stood at attention. You could feel the pride. But what was crazy was what I remembered most about that gathering. Not the snappy Marine Corps Band or the early speeches by the top brass, but our one little fat mascot. I couldn't keep my eyes off him. That crazy, bull-legged bulldog dressed in his khaki saddle coat stood there, his head up and his tongue sucked in. Oh, sure it would slip out once-in-a-while, but he sucked it right back in until the Commanding Officer put us all at ease. At that command, our well-disciplined dog sat and that soft floppy tongue bounced up and down near his shoulder like a sagging bedspring. There was no doubt he new the code.

But the most unexpected situation occurred only a couple of minutes after the General began his speech. Without even a step of hesitation, a skinny Corporal came running up to the



Commanding Officer, a piece of paper fluttering in his hand. One didn't have to be hit over the head to figure the young man carried important information.

Could the war be over? I held my breath.

After a moment of perusal, the CO looked up and barked out the order. "If anyone here knows how to cut meat, make yourself known."

I glanced around. No one moved. In those days the unwritten law was *never volunteer*, but, then he wasn't asking for a volunteer. He'd issued an order.

My mind raced.

The Officer repeated his words, only the second time he added, "We need an experience butcher right now."

Head held high, I took that step forward. "I am, Sir." I felt a couple thousand eyes boring into my body.

"State your qualifications, Private."

"Five years, Sir. It was my profession until I became a--"

"That'll do, Private. Report to the galley on the double."

"Yes, Sir."

Ten minutes later, in a glass enclosure adjacent to the mess hall, a white apron covered my drab attire and I was hauling my first dead cow out of the cooler. We were already hours behind and had over fifteen hundred men and officers to feed in the morning. And we weren't feeding them **Shit** on a **Shingle** as usual, but inch thick steaks, smoked ham and bacon. The works. I tried not to think of it as their last supper. I tried to rationalize it as the last meal in the good old U.S. of A. for a while. But the truth laughed at me. That's why the food had to be the best. It had to.

Though none of us talked much, it wasn't long before I learned the head butcher lay under a different kind of threat. Acute appendicitis. Prognosis questionable. It had ruptured. But his future was a hell of a lot better than for the men boarding the ships in a few hours.

It didn't take long for my hands to get so cold that if I'd cut myself, I'd probably have bled to death before I'd have noticed. But during that time, I thought about how the Corps would get me back to my unit. Knowing the troop transports were slow, I wondered if they'd fly me or put me on a destroyer. I'd heard about those Boson's chair transfers at sea. The thought didn't appeal in the least. However, on the other hand, if I was mighty lucky, that destroyer might be the one now carrying my younger brother. I knew he was in the Pacific somewhere. I just didn't know if I'd be that lucky, but I could hope.

Later, when I was again coming out of the cooler with two more carcasses, one of the helpers jabbed my ribs with his elbow. Still slicing a slab of bacon, he motioned with his head I should look toward the galley on the other side of the windowed wall.

I turned around. I choked down the bile. Outside stood my whole platoon from the toe-headed kid who looked like he lied about his age to the burly guy who scared the shit out of me that first day when he bumped me to the upper berth. And there I was behind the glass wall of the shop, safe for the moment. Gone were their friendly looks. I wanted to throw down the cleaver and grab my gear still standing in the corner where I'd dropped it. But how could I? I was under orders. Work needed to be done. And after breakfast there was lunch for the new recruits. We had yet to gut and cut up the chickens, pull off the excess fat, and toss the pieces into the huge metal pans for the cooks.

My staff Sergeant motioned I come out to the galley.

I switched the bloody cleaver to my other hand, shoved open the door, and stepped into the din of men's voices and the forks and knives scraping against metal plates.

With his face grim, he simply said, "We just wanted to see if you *really* knew how to cut meat." The stress on the word really spoke the whole message.

"Yes, sir. This is temporary. 'Til the regular guy gets back." Maybe I'll beat you to where ever we're going."

Without waiting for my salute or saying another word, he turned and left me standing there.

"What'll you bet I beat you all?" I called after him before my mind went as numb as my hands. I was an insurance salesman for God's sake and all I could do was just stand there watching

as, one-by-one, the men filed into the chow line on the far side of the galley. Only the toe-headed kid at the end gave me a nod. It meant a lot to know he understood.

I never left my new post at Pendleton.

When the war ended, I was still cutting meat. The continuous flow of men leaving the base had slowed at last, but we still had men to feed; including the ones coming home. The war was over. Life was going to get good again. That was until, late one afternoon when the few who were left from my platoon paraded past my window. I'll never forget the look in their eyes. The toe-headed kid was one of the most who didn't make it.

I'll always wonder how many of my buddies fell because I wasn't around to protect their flanks. Though I can't apologize for what happened, I can tell you that all the rationalizing I do about the fact that I, too, was doing my duty never helped.

I didn't keep in touch with the men who made it safe for me and my family. And it infuriates me when I can't stop that little inner voice that says I must have been the luckiest jar-head in the whole world that night before we shipped out. So right now all I can do is stand to attention each night, make a smart salute to the heavens and say, "I love you, you lugs."

But deep inside I wait and pray that the day I get my brass plate when the ground is dropped over me that I can see them all and say thanks and shake their hands. Hell, I'm gonna kiss every one of them. "*Sempre Fi*, you guys. *Sempre Fi*.