

## On the Western Front

By: Lauren K. Johnson

My grandfather and I were fighting separate wars.

I was oblivious to his while I jostled over rugged mountain passes in military vehicles; while I grumbled about long hours, bad food, and the sandbag I kept tripping over on my walk to the bathroom.

He was anything but oblivious to mine.

Grandpa had been in the Air Force, too, back when the food was even worse but the wars were mostly cold. He retired after twenty-six years as a chief master sergeant, the highest enlisted rank. Thirty years later he bought a new uniform—in the updated design, in a size more forgiving around the midsection—and wore it to my officer commissioning, where he rendered me my ceremonial first salute. It was spring 2006. War was raging in the Middle East, but as my family posed for pictures, with me flashing my shiny new lieutenant bars, none of us seemed to realize how close it was to us. Sometimes that's how it is with war; it creeps in slowly, low crawling through the brush and flanking you from behind. When you suddenly find yourself in the middle of a firefight, you wonder how you missed the warning shots.

Other times, like in Grandpa's case, war roars in overnight.

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While I was in Afghanistan, my grandparents sent me black licorice, trail mix with extra M&Ms, and bags and bags of Riesen chocolates. (I always snuck Riesens from the candy dish at their house, but I never realized they knew I was the culprit.) At the small Army outpost where I was stationed, we didn't have a grocery store, so if I needed new toiletries my family made sure I got them as quickly as possible, Afghanistan time: 2-4 weeks. Grandma and Grandpa always included other not-quite-so-necessary knickknacks. The singing coffee mug drove my colleagues crazy, but made me laugh.

In between packages, I received letters and postcards from the Oregon coast, where my grandparents vacationed a few times every year. I had been to their condo once, for New Year's Eve, 1999. The seven of us—my grandparents, parents, sister, brother and I—huddled in front of the TV, counting down the millennium's most influential people and wondering which electronics would short-circuit at midnight.

Ten years into the next millennium, I taped three-by-five slivers of coastline to the plywood wall above my bed in Afghanistan, my contributions to a haphazard collage compiled by eight years of tenants of the third room on the left. A poster of a Hawaiian sunset. An outdated, yellowing world map. Three choice selections from a Maxine desk calendar. The wallpaper of home. Sometimes my greeting cards fluttered down on me while I slept, blanketing me in sentiments: "Hang in there, sweetie! We're thinking of you!" "Kick some Taliban butt!" "Love and hugs from Washington!"

Afghanistan was twelve and a half hours ahead of Seattle. I made a time zone conversion spreadsheet to keep it straight. There was a phone in my office that could call back to the States, and I felt fortunate to not have to stand in line at the USO, to not have to sign out a “morale phone” for a thirty-minute block, to not have strangers hovering impatiently, overhearing bits of my conversation. In exchange, I took colleagues hovering and overhearing, and an unreliable connection that frequently dropped calls and never seemed to work on Wednesdays.

Every few days (except for Wednesdays) I called my parents. On the other side of the world, they worked the relative phone tree, informing everyone that I was okay, that I had eaten kabobs with the provincial governor, that the most recent suicide bombing attack was in the next province over, not ours. On his eightieth birthday, I called Grandpa. At the family party, they put me on speakerphone, and I spent most of the conversation giggling as I tried to distinguish who was yelling and whether they were yelling at me or at something burning on the stove or at one of the pets. Until Grandpa got on the line.

“Hi Grandpa, Happy Birthday! I wish I could be there!”

“I wish you could, too, Sweetie. There’s lots of good food.”

“There always is!”

Then his voice caught. “I’m so proud of you, Lauren. We all are.” The rest came out in a sob. “We love you so much.”

It was the only time I ever remember him crying.

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In December, after six months in Afghanistan, I was granted two weeks of mid-tour leave; chargeable vacation time and a plane ticket wherever I wanted to go. I went to Germany. The thought of a frenzied, bittersweet not-quite-Christmas, only to leave again a few days later, was too much to bear. I knew I was missing Christmas Eve roast at my grandparents’ house, wine glasses clinking when my Grandpa finished the toast, which this year would include a prayer for my safety. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sit on the floral print couch and reach up to my armpit into a giant stocking to pull out socks, tangerines and ornaments from the shops at Depoe Bay. I knew I was missing the contented smile on Grandpa’s face as we gathered after dinner and read “A Cup of Christmas Tea.”

I didn’t know I was missing his last Christmas.

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The next three months were hard on both of us. In Afghanistan, we were clamoring through what was usually the “quiet season.” Two government buildings were attacked in the nearby city of Gardez. Traces of mustard gas were found in the regional water supply, and four day’s worth of grime and talcum powder-fine dust collected under our camouflage before we were cleared to scrub ourselves clean. (The baby wipes arrived 2-4 weeks late.) A suicide bomber killed seven CIA agents at the base gym in neighboring Khost province, and one of our unit’s smaller outposts was also

attacked. We were ordered to wear body armor whenever we left our offices. I scarfed down my food in the dining hall, paranoid that a mortar round or a suicide bomber would interrupt my meal.

In Seattle, Grandpa ate slowly, relegated to a soft food diet. But he kept sending happy sentiments, trail mix and Riesens.

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My parents broke the news in the parking lot of Sonny's Barbeque. It was late March; I had been back at my home base in Florida for a few days and was determined to eat my way through two weeks of leave. But now I wasn't hungry any more.

"We didn't want to worry you," my mom explained. "Grandpa asked us not to tell you until you got back. You were dealing with so much."

I said I understood. I asked all the appropriate questions, trying to read between the lines of our deployed communication. When did he find out? What kind of cancer? What's the prognosis?

He had won several battles already; with chemotherapy, radiation, tumor removal, low sodium and hospital Jell-O. But Grandpa would lose his war.

Within four months I sat on the edge of a hospital bed in his Seattle living room, between the floral print couches, where the Christmas tree used to stand, while he smiled through an oxygen tube for a final collection of family photos: laughing with his sisters, who had flown in from California; surrounded by the five grandchildren; bouncing the great-granddaughters on his frail lap. I don't know if we had ever crammed so many people into that room. (It's funny how war brings people together.)

One night I slept on the couch beside the hospital bed, jolting awake when the springs creaked or when Grandpa moaned in his sleep. Earlier, before I tucked him in and nestled into the cushions, we talked. I turned on my voice recorder and asked him questions I'd been meaning to ask for a long time.

The lamplight basked him in a deceptive glow. It softened wrinkles and diffused the blue veins that now reached with such prominence across his bald head. Medical equipment dripped and buzzed in the background. The grandfather clock reminded us, in fifteen-minute increments, that our time was limited. Grandpa's voice was weak, but clear. His mind took leaps I couldn't quite follow, but I let it empty itself into my recorder.

He talked about his childhood, how at school he had cut more classes than any of his peers, and how at home he had tried to shelter his sisters from their father's violent alcoholism. When he joined the Air Force, he sent half his salary to his family. He told me how he met my grandmother during his initial period of military leave, how, at a feisty eighteen, she had hooked him after just one date. His wistful smile affirmed that fifty-eight years later he was still hooked. When my uncle and father were born, Grandpa said he vowed not to make the mistakes his father had. He talked about being stationed in Italy—back when you had to commute and ship your household goods (and wife and kids) by boat—and later in Germany and Greenland. He hadn't planned on staying in the Air Force, but the lure of travel changed his mind. I thought of the collector's plates that lined the walls of his

basement. When I was little I used to sit in the orange polyester chair and gaze at the souvenirs in awe, marveling at all the places my grandparents had been. Someday, I decided, I would go to those places too. I smiled when I realized, at twenty-six, how far along I already was.

Grandpa told me that at the end of his career he had been nominated to represent the entire Air Force enlisted service as chief master sergeant of the Air Force. We reminisced about winning the “Best Dressed Family” award at my commissioning: the chief; my mom, the Army lieutenant colonel; my other grandfather, the Navy lieutenant commander; and me, the wet-behind-the-ears lieutenant. Grandpa’s throat rattled when he laughed. He told me how proud he had been of me four years ago. He told me how proud he was of me now. He mentioned the orders I had received to report to report to Korea eighty-seven days after I got back from Afghanistan, and mumbled, not for the first time, that the Air Force wasn’t what it used to be.

“I guess a lot changes in thirty years,” he chuckled.

“A lot changes in four years,” I said.

A lot changes in one year. A lot changes in twenty-four hours.

That was Grandpa’s last lucid night.

I left a few days later. The next month I returned for his memorial service.

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Grandpa wasn’t there when I separated from the military after completing my commitment the following December. When I drove frantically across the country to get home in time for Christmas Eve roast, he wasn’t waiting for me in Seattle. Grandpa wasn’t there when my battle shifted to a mental, emotional one; reconciling my role in Afghanistan, and its role in me. (Some wars, it seems, never completely end.)

He is there in a shadowbox on my Grandma’s dining room hutch, framed by a folded flag and a row of military decorations that seem so few for all his accomplishments. In the picture he’s young again. Not youthful, but healthy and resolute—just as I remember him—his smile never betraying all the wars he fought alone, all those he helped others through.

I have my Grandpa’s smile. I like to think I inherited some of his strength.

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