

A Life of Liberty: The Justice that Defined the Greatest Generation

Each generation holds something special that defines them from others. Millennials might be known for a deep interest in diversity and technology, while Baby Boomers could be characterized as nonconformist and agents of major social change. However, what sets apart the Greatest Generation from others so drastically is the incomparable dedication to their country, a sense of steadfastness and courage in the face of adversity, and optimism “that there is something larger and more important than the life of any individual group” worth sacrificing one’s life for.

My grandfather, the son of Polish immigrants, was a young boy in 1929 when the Great Depression began. This period was characterized by a great deal of financial hardships for many Americans, and particularly for the members of the Greatest Generation, this may have been the point at which they were most immersed in American culture. However, rather than becoming disillusioned with America as a whole, the Greatest Generation found a way to look towards a brighter future, one they would earn with their own blood, sweat, and tears.

In the wake of the Great Depression and in the years leading up to World War II, survival itself was uncertain for those who chose to take up arms, and there was no guarantee of riches to obtain nor fame to revel in afterwards. Regardless, from the courageous soldiers on the front line to the diligent mechanics and factory workers to those who maintained society at home, the Greatest Generation was held together by a common thread: love. This generation not only loved America the country in a nationalistic sense but also found an even stronger love in the ideals that America had held so dearly since its founding: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These were ideals that were worth sacrificing one’s energy, time, and even one’s life to maintain and to hold true. Although this still applies to many Americans today, the Greatest Generation displayed this concept on a level that has not been matched since.

My grandfather enlisted for the United States Navy in 1942 at the age of 20. When I asked him why he decided to enlist in the first place, he told me that he wanted to help fight for our freedom because our country was at war. Even so, I knew that he was no “sunshine patriot” and that he recognized that American ideals were not worth just fighting for. These ideals were worth abandoning a life at home for locations all around the world, being thrust into an unfamiliar environment. These ideals were worth spending years at sea with limited resources and without any known time of return. These ideals were even literally putting oneself into the line of fire and making the ultimate sacrifice in order to ensure that these ideals stayed alive not just in America but for each man and woman on earth. Despite being a second-generation American, my grandfather had learned in such a short time to embody what America is at its very core—a model for service, sacrifice, and justice across the earth.

For those who currently serve in the United States Armed Forces, the sentiments that President Roosevelt expressed regarding the kind of service my grandfather exemplified continue to echo true. What drove Americans to dedicate themselves to their country not only 75 years ago but also almost 250 years ago has never disappeared from the American spirit. To find something larger than oneself that is so meaningful and important that one is willing to give up everything is not just honorable or noble—it is characteristically American.

Despite the significant generational gap between my grandfather and me, I recognize the immense sacrifice he and many others of his generation made in pushing and striving towards not only a greater America but, a greater world. In the end, I can only hope to be able to illustrate the great spiritual wealth apparent in the American soul, to offer an account of the principles that have driven so many men and women to sacrifice so much, and to embrace the legacy of those who were members of a generation that is truly worth being known as the greatest.