



The Class of '44

"I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure that it will cost to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory. I can see that the end is worth more than all the means...." --John Adams

Dartmouth College is one of our nation's finest academic institutions. This iconic Ivy League school in Hanover, New Hampshire, was established in 1769 and is one of nine Colonial Colleges founded prior to the American Revolution.

Dartmouth was named in honor of William Legge, the Second Earl of Dartmouth and, like Harvard, Princeton and Yale, was established as a Christian institution. Legge was a primary benefactor of the ministry of Dartmouth's founder, Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, who established the institution "for the education and instruction of Youth of the Indian Tribes in this Land ... and also of English Youth and any others."

Dartmouth has produced many notable graduates over the years, including 164 members of the U.S. House and Senate, and a long list of cabinet secretaries and jurists.

But among the most distinguished of Dartmouth's graduates would be those of the Class of 1944. Although they will observe their 65th reunion this year, the Class of '44 never walked for a commencement. Neither did the Class of '43 before them, or '45 after them.

World War II interrupted their lives.

In 1940, there were 699 freshmen enrolled for Dartmouth's Class of '44, but in the years prior to their scheduled commencement, the entire class departed -- most to serve in WW II or in some capacity with the war-related industrial surge. By 1944, the Navy had requisitioned most of Dartmouth's teaching space for training its own personnel.

I have a particular reverence for the members of Dartmouth's Class of '44 because my father is one of them.

Dad joined the U.S. Navy in 1942. He was called to active duty in '43 and spent two years training to become a Naval Aviator. His two brothers also joined the armed services -- one left Princeton to become an Army officer and their younger brother joined the Marines.

My grandfather was among the first Naval Aviators, and he offered my Dad this essential advice when on final approach for a carrier trap: "If you have to sneeze, do it with your eyes open."

My father says that while most fighter pilots were certain they were bullet proof (that has not changed), he realized early on how dangerous and sometimes unforgiving the war birds they flew could be.

While leading a flight of six Wildcats out for their first carrier trials, the pilot ahead of him in the landing order experienced some difficulty, veered sharply to the left and crashed into the water. Dad took an automatic wave-off and said that the time it took him to come around for another approach was sobering.

Dad received his Wings of Gold and his ensign commission in early '45 and shortly thereafter transitioned to the F4U Corsair (a difficult plane to fly but one which had given the Navy an 11:1 kill ratio over the Pacific). He and his fellow aviators prepared for their Pacific Fleet assignment in advance of "Operation Downfall," the anticipated Allied invasion of Japan, which U.S. war planners feared might cost as many as a half-million casualties.

Dad knew that odds were he would be one of them.

Thankfully, two months before the planned invasion, a top-secret weapon was deployed over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the atomic bombs dropped on Japan killed more than 200,000 enemy

combatants and civilians, it is estimated that as many as 750,000 casualties, both Allied and Japanese, were avoided by using those weapons.

I did not fully understand how strongly my father felt about those bombings until their 50th anniversary, when the Smithsonian Institution prepared a major exhibit to commemorate the events. There was a movement afoot to water down the exhibit so as to not offend Japanese visitors. My father was infuriated by the thought of a politically correct whitewash. I share his contempt for historical revisionism, but inquired about his reaction just the same, and he responded, "Because if not for those bombs, I would likely not be here; thus neither would you."

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Class of '44 and all of the Greatest Generation, but also to naval aviation. You see, back stateside shortly after the Japanese surrendered, my Dad took leave (actually he was AWOL, having asked one of his Corsair squadron wingmen to complete his PT and flights). He went to visit his sister at a nearby college. While there, he looked up the sister of that wingman who was filling for him, and later married her. Ten years later, she delivered me into the world.

Though God called my mom to His side in 1989, my dad, now 86, continues to live every day with an irrevocable spirit of optimism and has been blessed with a second wife who honors the first through her love and devotion to my father and our family.

Two weeks ago, Dad was, again, staring at his own fate, the result of a serious infection. But as I sat with him in those touch-and-go days, I watched him cling tenaciously to that optimism, which has characterized his entire life. He did not waver once, and showed no fear. I know he is grateful for the life he has lived, and the one waiting on him, and he was content to have his fate in God's hands.

Selfishly, I am very thankful that, by the Grace of God in answer to the prayers of many, he pulled through and is recovering well. Selfish I say, because I want as many more days with him as our Creator will allow.

Dad is a tough old guy, and I have no doubt that he'll be in attendance at his Class of '44 reunion this summer. Of his original 699 classmates, most went on to complete their degrees after the war. Amazingly,

some 226 are still with us today, and many of them will be at that reunion.

Notably, however, some never had a chance to complete their degrees after WWII.

George Barton was killed in action over England. Roger Blood was KIA in the Pacific. Joel Coffin was KIA in Italy. Earle Cunningham was killed in a training flight over Arizona. Richard Dargle was KIA over France. Richard Farnsworth was KIA over the Pacific. Juels Finnell was killed in a carrier crash landing in the Atlantic. George Galbraith was killed in a training flight over Mississippi. Kevin Gough was KIA over Germany. James Hays was killed in a training flight over California. Robert Holman was KIA over England. Stephen Holmes was KIA at Iwo Jima. Houghton Letts was KIA in Europe. Edwin McGowan was MIA over the Pacific. William Mackoff was KIA at Iwo Jima. Robert Mulhern was KIA in North Africa. Richard Redington was killed in a transport crash in Iceland. John Shellenberger was killed in a training flight over Georgia. George Slusser was KIA over Ryukyus. Henry Urion was killed in a training flight over Tennessee. Ray Wilken was KIA over Germany. Frederick Wulfekuhler was KIA in New Caledonia. Lloyd Wyatt was KIA at Okinawa.

There are many others from the Class of '44 about whose sacrifice I do not know.

Indeed, theirs was the Greatest Generation, not only because of their enormous sacrifice during WWII, but because those who survived came home and, in the wake of that catastrophic event, set about building the mightiest powerhouse of economic and political liberty in the history of the world -- much of which has been squandered by recent generations.

In 2009, Dartmouth had 4,300 undergraduate students enrolled in liberal arts curricula and 1,200 students in graduate programs. The College will hold its 235th commencement in June and will award approximately 1,000 undergraduate and 500 advanced degrees.

It is my fervent prayer that on this and every Memorial Day, each of those young people, and all of our countrymen, will renew their gratitude for every generation of American Patriots who have bequeathed to us a legacy of liberty defended with great "toil and blood and treasure."

Indeed, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." (Luke 12:48)

Please join our PatriotPost.US editors and staff, and millions of Patriots across our great nation, by dedicating some time this Memorial Day for reverence and prayer. Flags should be flown at half-staff until noon, your local time.

Semper Vigilo, Fortis, Paratus et Fidelis!

Mark Alexander
Publisher, PatriotPost.US

(To submit reader comments visit our Letters to the Editor page.)

Quote of the Week

"Once each May, amid the quiet hills and rolling lanes and breeze-brushed trees of Arlington National Cemetery, far above the majestic Potomac and the monuments and memorials of our Nation's Capital just beyond, the graves of America's military dead are decorated with the beautiful flag that in life these brave souls followed and loved. This scene is repeated across our land and around the

world, wherever our defenders rest. Let us hold it our sacred duty and our inestimable privilege on this day to decorate these graves ourselves -- with a fervent prayer and a pledge of true allegiance to the cause of liberty, peace, and country for which America's own have ever served and sacrificed. ... Our pledge and our prayer this day are those of free men and free women who know that all we hold dear must constantly be built up, fostered, revered and guarded vigilantly from those in every age who seek its destruction. We know, as have our Nation's defenders down through the years, that there can never be peace without its essential elements of liberty, justice and independence. Those true and only building blocks of peace were the lone and lasting cause and hope and prayer that lighted the way of those whom we honor and remember this Memorial Day. To keep faith with our hallowed dead, let us be sure, and very sure, today and every day of our lives, that we keep their cause, their hope, their prayer, forever our country's own." --Ronald Reagan

(Please pray for our Patriot Armed Forces standing in harm's way around the world, and for their families -- especially families of those fallen Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen, who granted their lives in defense of American liberty.)