

By Eric A. Riess- ©2011

I can remember the first time, I asked my Dad about the scars on his back. I was about 10 and he was walking with a towel wrapped around his waist, from the bathroom back to his bedroom.

It took 51 years to get an answer, but a few months ago, when I returned home for a long weekend of father-son bonding he finally told me about his experiences in World War II.

I know he gave me the G-rated version because, even then, the violence of war still kept him up at night. In 1945 when he left the service no-one knew about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), so time was the only therapy most veterans got and often it was not enough.

He remembered everything about his experiences pretty vividly although he often had trouble remembering where he had dinner the previous evening.

He knew the names of friends he served with, transport ships, locations, generals he served under and even Jacline — the pretty French woman he met while on R&R in Algeria. All he will say is that her mother followed them everywhere. Probably a good thing or I might be writing this in French from a fishing village in North Africa.



Dad was born, August 15, 1920 and brought up in Jamaica, New York. -177 Rockaway St. to be exact. Just outside NYC on Western LI. His mother, Sadie, emigrated to this country from Russia with her parents Cora and Jake Cohen sometime between 1900-1918.

His dad was Jacob Riess who emigrated here from Poland around the same time. Among the many items we found recently was a copy of his dad's naturalization papers. Jacob was in the junk business, salvaging machinery, cars or anything else people didn't want, to take them apart and sell off the valuable parts as scrap.

Dad, and his younger brother Leon, helped their father after school, to the detriment of their studies. Neither finished high school because, Dad says, when they were in grade school they were often too tired from working, to do their homework. The reality was that they enjoyed taking things apart and working with their hands more than studying.

But the experience served them well as Dad learned a basic understanding of mechanics and has always been able to take anything apart and fix it. Leon learned his father's business and was a very successful M.D. (Metals Dealer) in Los Angeles, until he passed away in 2009.



Both boys preferred working over school. Whether it was shining shoes outside businesses on Jamaica Avenue, or delivering groceries, work was always an adventure. Dad started at the local produce store making deliveries on his bike, which he made himself from discarded bicycles. He had his favorite customers – the ones who tried to fatten him up with a piece of pie for a tip.

He learned a lot about produce and marketing too – especially tomatoes. When the boxes of tomatoes arrived it was his job to sort them. All the tomatoes came from Florida: green ones went into the storage room near the boiler, to ripen; overripe ones when right out front where they became today's special.

The perfect ones suddenly became California tomatoes worth 2cents more per pound. Dad always had time to find a

California tomato 'from the back' for a special customer.

In 1937 their father was killed tragically in Jamestown NY, where he was visiting a fellow junker. He was apparently collecting material while trying to decide if there were more opportunities in upstate NY than there were in the NYC area. According to the story in the *Jamestown Post-Journal*, his truck got stuck on the railroad tracks just as one of the two daily trains to and from NYC came by.

He left a wife and four young children with not much income. Their older sister had just been married but Dad and Leon needed to make money so school quickly became irrelevant. They had always worked, but this meant they would now have to work full time – which gave them an excuse to lie about their real ages so they could get real work papers.

He took a job making milk cartons. Those heavy wooden boxes with compartments separated by wires. You can find them now in antiques markets selling for \$20.00 although dad could make \$30/week on piece work pushing the metal wire into the

ready made boxed sides. It was tidy sum in the 1930's although his Mom got \$27 most weeks.

Dad and Leon didn't see much future in their 'careers,' so as Hitler moved through Europe and the prospect of a steady paycheck in the armed services began to look pretty good, they both enlisted. Dad was 18 and signed up to fly airplanes, although the Army said, "that would come later." Leon, as usual, had to talk his way into the Merchant Marines since he was just 16.

It's worth noting that Dad was well-over 6 feet tall and was already used to defending himself against the ethnic slurs that Jews encountered in New York – he says he lost track of how many times his nose was broken - so fighting Germans, and Italians was nothing new.

While Leon set sail for the Pacific, Dad headed to Governor's Island and basic training. The United States was trying very hard to stay out of the War, so the Army didn't take all this talk about fighting very seriously. After all, how was Hitler going to get across the Atlantic?



In 1940, Dad became part of the 16th Regiment, First Battalion, marching around Governor's Island with broom handles for rifles. In June of 1940 when France fell to the Germans the broomsticks were suddenly replaced with real rifles.

Dad was sent to Puerto Rico where he and his company were trained by the Navy in amphibious landing techniques - learning how to maneuver a wooden Higgins boat. More importantly they learned how to keep a diesel engine running in heavy seas. After 6 months invading friendly beaches they were transferred to Fort Devens in Massachusetts. This would be around September of 1941.

Dad was friendly with a bunch of buddies with New York roots. They weren't supposed to get any leave, as the war worsened for the English, but they convinced their captain that a few days to see their families in New York wouldn't hurt, since they all knew they could be shipping out any day.

"On the Town," the Frank Sinatra, Gene Kelley classic could have been based on their visit. They had three days, and once their bus let them off in NYC on Friday morning, they agreed to meet back Sunday night at the station for the 6:00 p.m. bus back to camp.

Being regular Army, they all showed up on time, but unanimously decided it wouldn't be so bad if they took the later bus. They would still be back for 6:00 a.m.

wakeup. Of course, they spent the next three hours drinking beer. Dad claims they were trying to keep a low profile, but when they left to go home, some MP's - looking for trouble-makers among the draftees of the 16th - were waiting for them.

When one of the MP's raised his baton to strike one of dad's buddies, Dad grabbed the baton and let him have it. A second MP tried to break them up but he wound up unconscious. The rest of the gang wanted to make a run for it, but Dad admits he was intent on finishing off the MP's and they all found themselves in the brig by the next morning.

They spent the next month mopping up sea water from the waves breaking on Governor's Island. To make matters worse, their army lawyer was transferred just before their trial and his replacement didn't have much luck convincing the military panel that they were just four innocent GI's walking outside a bar.

Dad lost his rank as corporal and was sentenced to six months confinement and the others to three months, that was in mid-November of 1941. Everything was forgotten two weeks later.

Dad found himself re-habilitated, swinging in a hammock aboard the re-outfitted Queen Elizabeth sailing for Scotland. "The Fastest ship in the World" got them there in three days from New York. Dad worried about being bombed from the air and was less concerned about German U-boats.

Conditions were not perfect. For many of the 'passengers,' the cruise was their first sailing experience and the rough winter seas of the North Atlantic made the quarters an unpleasant mix of toxic fumes. At one point Dad tried sleeping on deck, only to position himself just outside a door where he got kicked in the eye. - leaving him with what looked like another souvenir of a bar fight.

They made it to the British Isles where they began training by learning how to scale the famous cliffs at Dover. "The worst experience I ever had," he says although he offered few details. He did learn how to buy Scotch in local dress shops and met the Phillips family who became lifelong friends.

By the time the young Americans showed up, the British were used to nightly bombings and knew the best place to hide was under the steel reinforced kitchen table, but the crazy Americans, just stood outside watching the waves of German planes, with their pulsating engines, flying overhead.

"The Germans' couldn't hurt us, we were Americans," Dad said - until a shell landed a little too close for comfort. Then, the kitchen table looked pretty good.

The cliff climbing and bombing raids lasted just a few months before they were all back aboard ships headed for North Africa. They landed in Morocco and slowly

headed East fighting Rommel. To this day he often wondered how they succeeded since the army was very poorly organized and not particularly efficient.

Dad was injured in the invasion receiving shrapnel wounds to his hands and arms. They brought him to the field hospital where the doctor picked out the pieces he could reach and just left some he didn't feel skilled enough to remove. At one point the doctor looked at him and asked, "How's your head?" Confused, Dad just shrugged said he felt fine. He took off his helmet and found a 1" hole in one side and then saw another piece of shrapnel falling to the floor.

But there wasn't a mark on his skull. They wanted to give him a new helmet but Dad figured the one he had was pretty good and if it protected him once it was worth keeping.

He wore the helmet for the rest of his tour and it remains with him today.

They patched Dad up and pretty much sent him right back into battle - a sequence of events which changed as the war progressed and something that exemplified how the Army slowly learned how to do its job. Organization and command were not their strengths.

The only thing that saved them was the fact that they were fighting the Italians who had little stomach for war or Mussolini and were only too eager to surrender to the Americans. Dad observed the same attitude in older Germans who did not support Hitler. It seems it was only the younger fanatic German soldiers who believed in the Fuehrer's vision.

In fact, the lack of organization led to Dad's second wound and his first Oak Cluster. As the troops moved inland toward Tunisia they came to a point one evening where the only cover for Dad's troops was some scrub brush and small trees. Dad was told to advance and hold the position. He complained to his captain that it made them sitting ducks for the German tanks and artillery, but his complaint had little effect.

They could hear the fighting and the blasts, but could see very little. Dad admits he was scared. Then he could hear the Germans rushing towards them. Dad and his fellow soldiers dove for cover. He could see nothing, but heard the frightening sounds of being ambushed. He could hear his fellow soldiers dying.

Out of the dark, he saw a German soldier standing over him. This was it, he figured, shutting his eyes as he saw the German soldier squeezing the trigger. He heard a gun blast and thought that he must be dead.

Then he felt something fall on him and then he opened his eyes to find the dead German soldier. The soldier, who shot the German, yelled to ask if he was alright but Dad was more concerned about the more existential question, "Why did he live and not the German?"

I think it's a question he struggled with for many years if not the rest of his life.

As dawn broke the shelling began and the small arms the American's carried were little match for the all-out assault. The American troops retreated quickly – actually ran for their lives was more like it. Dad remembers running with his backpack and overcoat.

He tried unsuccessfully to hitch a ride with a truck pulling a mortar but they just ignored him. Minutes later German Messerschmidt's began strafing the troops in full retreat. Again, Dad thought, this was the end. As he continued to run, a plane was coming straight for him, but there was no machine gun fire. The pilot was apparently out of ammunition and was just throwing potato masher grenades from the cockpit. Dad says he can still see the face of the German pilot as he flew low over the troops.

Suddenly a grenade fell behind him and the next thing he remembers was waking up in a field hospital. This time he was seriously wounded in the back, as the telegram to his mother would attest, but after a short stay he was taken to the field hospital in Algeria and then to beach-front villas which had been commandeered as recovery units.

Dad was there for the duration of the successful battle for North Africa. – left with more shrapnel in his back and a large permanent scar. While the surroundings were much nicer than the battlefield they provided little comfort – except for a rather curious encounter with celebrity.

Out of the blue one day, the door to his room opened up and in walked General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. The general asked Dad if he had any swimming trunks, so, without thinking, Dad gave him his trunks. Before he left, the General looked at him and told him simply, "get better, we need you out there."

He admitted that he cried as the rest of his unit later packed up and headed for the beaches of Normandy. Dad was inconsolable at being left behind.

At one point during a USO show with Bob Hope and Al Jolson, dad was paged to the orderly tent and told he had a phone call. His brother Leon was docked in Oran (further West in Algeria) and wanted dad to meet him.

Leon figured they were pretty close, what's a few thousand miles across North Africa. They were closer than they had been in years but Dad tried to explain that getting from his hospital to Oran wasn't exactly like taking the subway into Manhattan from Jamaica, but Leon insisted so Dad felt he had no choice.

He found passage a plane, then hopped on a truck and 36 hours later they were reunited. They even met a Jewish photographer who took a snapshot and sent it

home to their mother who dutifully took it to the local Jewish newspaper which published a lengthy article about the two local brothers who met in North Africa.

Retracing his steps home, Dad spent the next month on the beach, swimming, flirting with Jacqueline a French woman who would have been a lot of fun if her mother hadn't accompanied her everywhere she went.

Eventually Dad was declared well enough to rejoin the battle and as a first sergeant was sent to Italy where his troops joined the march from Rome to Piza. At one point they were marching through Italian fields where irrigation ditches lined the road. Soldiers marched in the ditches while the vehicles rolled by on the roadway. They came under fire from German planes. As any GI can tell you, the ditches acted as perfect tubes to concentrate the concussive effects of the German bombs.

A strike nearby left any soldiers in the ditch, including Dad, with blown out eardrums and wounds from being thrown into the trees. Once again, Dad found himself in an army hospital, but this time when he was declared ready to fight again, he was put in charge of reconstituted units – groups of wounded soldiers who were being retrained for battle.

For the next two years, until he was discharged, he made up for the sacrifices of his first three years. He trained groups of soldiers from privates to officers who were destined to return to battle. He was in the enviable position of deciding who was 'ready' to rejoin their units and who needed more training.

He tried to be fair, but it was clear that a soldier who was physically ready but just wanted more time away, could get an extra week or two in R&R if Sgt. Riess believed he should stay.

He took particular pity on the Japanese Americans who came through. Their units were often sacrificed as the lead battle group, just because they were Japanese. To Dad they were Americans just like him and he made sure they received whatever care they needed. "It just wasn't fair," he would say about how the Japanese units were treated.



Gradually the hostilities subsided as Germany surrendered and then Japan. After two years rehabbing soldiers, and a total of five years in the Army, Dad decided it was time to ask for his discharge. At first he was denied, but one afternoon his captain quietly summoned his staff sergeant and told him to make plans to go home.

Dad and Leon returned to the family home in Jamaica, Long Island. Their mother had remarried and moved to Massachusetts where, among her hobbies was a weekly card game with friends.

Among those friends was Eva Glagovsky, who mentioned that she had two unmarried nieces which matched up nicely with Mrs. Riess's two eligible sons.

The boys took the train to Boston for their big double date. Leah and Millie Glagovsky met the boys in Haverhill and while Millie and Leon didn't hit it off, for Newty and Leah it was love at first sight.

Two months later, Leah visited New York where Dad proposed at the fanciest place in town – The Hotel Pierre- on Fifth Avenue.

Four months after that they began what became a marriage of 62 years. They lived in Haverhill, at 27 Oxford Street, on the top floor of a large duplex, with Diane and Bob Morris on the first floor.

All three Children were born in Hale Hospital, but when 'Baby Ellen' came along in 1955, the search began for a larger home closer to where dad worked in Lynn. They found a three bedroom home in Lynnfield, about 25 miles away. At the end of a dead-end street with a large yard, almost big enough for another house, the colonial-style house was priced at an even \$20,000- a lot of money for a young machinist.

Dad was a bit nervous about a mortgage that size but Mom said "offer them \$19,500," so he did, and the house became their home for the next 56 years.

Mom and Dad were devoted to each other and their love never wavered. Well, maybe once, as they often told us. They apparently got into a heated argument and Dad stormed off into the bedroom to pack. As mom told the story - about 15 minutes later she heard a call from the back room, "Honey," Dad's voice asked, "could you come in here and fold my shirts?"

They never argued in front of us, although I'm sure they had other disagreements. But Mom always won and whatever family decisions were made, mom had the final say. They were a matched set and were never apart. Even when mom started having trouble remembering anything and her final decline began, he was always at her side. Whether it was in the hospital or sleeping on the couch next to her bed set up in the dining room, he never wanted to be far away.

Dad played the role of disciplinarian, and the worst admonition we ever got from Mom was, "Just wait until I tell your father." I never remember getting spanked across the bottom or hit as a punishment, but it was enough that dad would threaten us with, "I'll take my belt off." That was until one day when I apparently answered back, "Yeah and your pants will fall down." He couldn't hold the laughter in and I never remember him using the threat again.

Dad never made a lot of money, but there was always enough for new school clothes or whatever we needed. I never thought of us as poor, but in hindsight we never had many of the things that our classmates had. But it never occurred to us to ask.

Dad only had one rule and he would never let us forget. It didn't matter if you were shoveling snow, washing the car or cutting the grass, there was only one way: "If you're going to do something, do it right or don't do it at all."

Dad had a succession of jobs, as a carpenter, machinist, or store manager - anything he could do to keep money coming in. It was never a question of what he wanted to do, just what he could find to support his family.

When he wasn't working he was always fixing something in the house. We never had any carpenters, plumbers or repairmen fix anything. Dad was always up to the task. I never knew until I was married, that a Jewish man who was actually handy around the house was supposedly a rarity.

We always had enough, although he often told the story of cashing his paycheck and sitting with mom around the kitchen table working out which bills to pay. Everyone got a little and if anything was left over it went into the bank.

One day in the mid 70's Dad decided to go into business for himself installing garage doors and automatic openers. I'm sure there was much more to the story but he never let on about why he suddenly needed a new career. For the next 30 years he operated East Coast Overhead Doors with the slogan his hot-shot college grad son dreamed up: "We open new doors for you," - complete with a folded business card imprinted with a picture of a garage door on the front and his business information inside.

From that day on, whenever we drove through town, he pointed out doors, openers, or new springs he installed. He worked at it into his 80's when his failing eyesight and bad knees just made it too difficult. One of the saddest days of his life was when he sold the last of a series of trucks he used. For years after, when an old customer would call, begging him to fix something he would mumble under his breath, 'Never should have sold that truck.'

Many of his customers became friends and when he was done with his repair work he always had time to come in from the cold for a cup of coffee and a pastry they had saved for him.

I don't think he ever said it, but they knew when Newton Riess did the work it was done right.

Mom died in 2008. Dad passed away last October. This week, we sold that house they bought 60 years ago.