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The First Chaparralians - Roy and Julie Halsey -

It's the holidays. I miss my parents.

I remember the smile my Dad had on his face when we told him we were going to have a second child. It was the last conversation I had with him. But he knew. That's what matters to me now. I just wish I'd gotten to know him before he died.

Sitting on the floor of our living room several years ago, I finally found the courage to sort through his papers, journals, and scraps of paper he had accumulated over 81 years. I think he left a lot of the stuff for me on purpose. Of his three kids, he knew I'd be the one to look

through it all. It was his way of explaining himself to me in the only way he could. One message was on a small box containing a gold coin he had purchased years before. He had written my name, followed by a short note, "For old time's sake. Love Dad."

Dad had gone to Occidental College in Pasadena, California to become a geologist. Reading his class notes, with little scribbles in the margins and doodles between paragraphs, I felt like I was looking in the mirror. They could have been my own. His questions and daydreams wandered the same paths I had taken during my own time in college.

Unfortunately, a future in geology was not to be for Dad. World War II intervened and, like so many others in his generation, he spent the next several years watching his friends die. After flight school he shipped overseas on July 14, 1943 to fly anti-submarine patrols. Several months later he became the commander of a squadron of B-17s and was responsible for leading bombing missions over targets in Europe, wherever the Nazi war machine had made its home. Each flight a crap shoot with death. During one incident an anti-aircraft shell exploded below his plane's cockpit and blasted shrapnel through the floor, through his flight suit, and out through the roof. "You're damn lucky you're here," one of his old war buddies told me during a reunion. "The flak just missed your father's family jewels. Another inch to the left and you'd never been born."





FRONT PAGE OF THE LOS ANGELES TIMES. July 23, 1944. The caption read "HOME-TOWN BOOSTERS - These Los Angeles area flyers and ground crewmen are telling the world, Los Angeles is a mighty big place and to prove it they've carried the city limits sign all over Europe. On fuselage, left to right: Cpl. Larry Burgoyne, Los Angeles; Lts. C.W. Reseigh and Lester Fine, Long Beach; Sgt. Ralph Price, Berkeley. On engine, left to right: Sgts. Harold Connelly, Hollywood; Byron Carter, Los Angeles; Edward Davis, Compton. On ground: Lt. Irving Moorese, Hollywood; Maj. C. Halsey, Montebello; Sgt. John Fitzgerald, Glendale."

Dad brought the damaged plane, along with his crew, home safely. He received a Distinguished Flying Cross. When I was growing up, it was always hidden in the back of a bedroom drawer, along with the other metals he had earned. When I was home alone, I would often go look at the collection, wondering what each one meant. He never told me. I never asked. The DFC is hanging on a wall in our own home now. I typed up the official citation and included it in the frame.

Dad had kept a journal during the war, or rather a partial one, its pages now yellowed with age. At first, with excitement and passion, he described days at the airbase near Cambridge, England; preparations for missions and the importance of what they were all doing so far from home. But with each entry the penciled text became shorter and terser, until he merely listed dates, mission destinations, and planes lost. Friends lost.

On February 16, 1944 he wrote that a “strained nervousness” had overcome him making it difficult to perform his duties. He was ordered to take leave for a week at the “rest home”, a place far away from base where pilots would try to recuperate from the strain of war. Afterwards, Dad returned to duty, more bombing, more loss. He never wrote in his journal again. After flying 30 missions, he came home October 19, 1944.

After the war, Dad started pursuing a number of dreams in order to build a new life, but I think too much was stolen from him inside those B-17’s. Each dream was frustrated by an assortment of issues. Looking back now, it was clear he was doing all he could to just maintain a semblance of sanity and forget what had happened in the skies over Europe. I wish I had known.

Mom did her best to hold it all together. I didn’t know that either. I so wish I could talk to her now. Hug my Dad one last time. They both died within a year of each other. After Dad left in 1995, Mom’s cancer returned. We took care of her at home. The day I realized Mom didn’t have much longer, I went outside and kicked over a portion of a split rail fence in the front yard. I used to walk along its top rails when I was a kid, trying to see if I could make all the way around the yard without falling off. The first time I made it I ran into the house and told my Mom. “That’s wonderful honey.”

No matter what I did, mom thought it was wonderful. According to my Dad, Mom thought I never made a mistake. They had a lot of arguments over that. I laughed the other day when I accused my wife Vicki of being our own sons’ defense council: the circle of life.

Mom was raised on a farm in Montebello, California. They grew flowers to sell at the Los Angeles Flower Market. Her parents were incredibly strict. My grandfather was the classic stubborn Dutchman. He wasn’t particularly kind to his daughters. The only memory I have of the guy is when he shook his finger at me for playing with a sliding glass door.

Mom loved her horses and often talked to me about them. I think she always wished that some day she could find that simple life again. Talking to her horses in the barn was one of the few places she could find peace. “I swore I would never raise my kids like I was raised,” she would often say to me.

Reading the letters Mom sent Dad during the war (they always called each other Darling), I understood



1956 or thereabouts. The war in Europe had ended, but Dad had been called back to help settle things in Korea. When it was finally over, Mom and Dad tried to bring smiles back into their lives after buying our family’s first home. From left: Mom, Dad, me, my sister Linda and brother Steve.

the overwhelming feelings of warmth I felt when I saw her car in the driveway when I came home from school. She would drop everything to greet me, offer to whip up a snack, and always made me feel important. Mom was a great cook. Every night a meal that could have come out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Dad said she was trying to kill him with all the good food she made.

Mom and I used to sit up at night together when I was in high school and watch Johnny Carson. Often times we'd end up talking politics. She taught me that my opinions and feelings had meaning, regardless of her own take on the world. She let me be me.



Grand Canyon, 1967. Exploring a different wild spot every summer, Mom and Dad made nature an important part of raising their youngest. Shag always came along. Sister and brother were in college

After becoming enlightened (or brainwashed as my father claimed) by a social studies teacher in 11th grade, I began to question things my parents thought. Talking with my Mom at night was the safest way to do so. We laughed a lot. But sometimes she grew sad when I kept hammering away at some point regarding the Vietnam War or social injustice. I feel bad about that now. Mom was really the only one who would listen to me. After all she had been through - the war, keeping Dad in one piece, raising three kids - I should have been more sensitive. One night, Dad had heard enough. Without saying a word, he came out from the bedroom, went to the kitchen and filled up the ice cube storage container with water. He dumped it on my head. He went back to bed.

Dad was fiercely patriotic. He would often remind me to always remember the price paid that allowed us the freedom to speak our truths, no matter what the circumstance. "A lot of good men died to protect your right to say what you think," he would say during those frequent conversations at dinner when I had tripped a switch. "Never forget it."

In contrast to Mom, speaking my truth to Dad was not something I was usually able to do without the wrath of hell descending upon my teenage sensibilities. Such reactions only reinforced the lessons he taught me. If you want to stand up for your beliefs, do it, but be prepared to fight. Have the courage to pay the consequences; the ultimate sacrifice if necessary. It's a sacred duty.

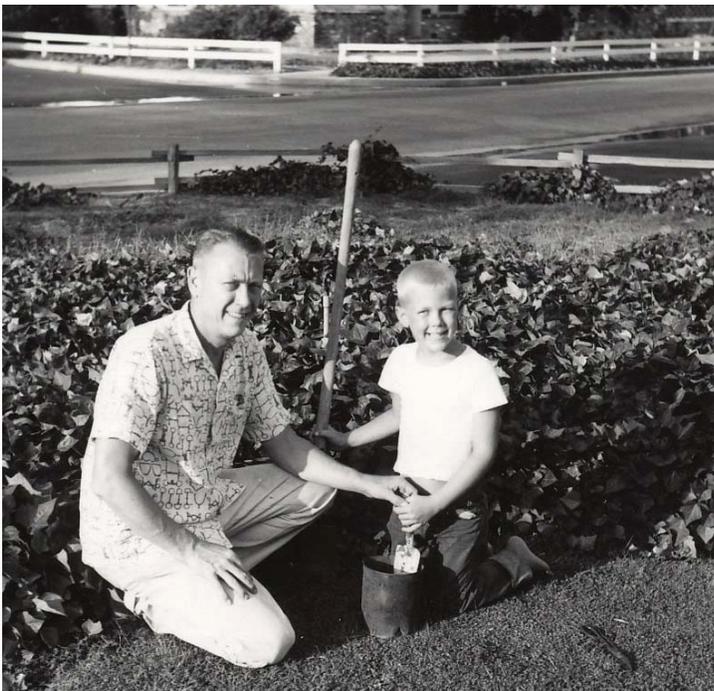
Unknown to me until I read through my dad's papers was that he willingly paid those consequences throughout his life - continuously. Where he saw the truth being trampled, he spoke up. He did what he could to set the story straight. "Honesty," he would say, "is all that really matters in the end."

Dad never rested. He always seemed to be embroiled in one crusade or another, trying to make sure the truth was heard and honesty ruled the day. He stranded an army general on a distant air base when the man had misused military aircraft for personal gain, lost his job after exposing a company thief, and quit

selling real estate because the broker he was working for was not beyond lying to sell a house. I found one file filled with letters and notes concerning improprieties Dad discovered during the formation of a veteran's group he was helping to organize. The records he kept about the company thief detailed what he said and how he said it. I feel Dad inside me quite a lot these days.

After finishing my archeological excavation of Mom and Dad's life together, I remember staring into that place you go when you can see the entire world clearly. Despite all they had gone through, my parents remained dreamers. They never lost hope that anyone could help make the world a better place if they tried hard enough. Strive to reach your dreams, search for the truth, and fight for your right to do so. To them, injustice only exists because people fail to stand up for truth.

But there was a softness in all of this. Mom and Dad always reminded me that when in the heat of the battle, never forget we are living in a world of people just like us – people who have their own reasons for being who they are, saying what they say. Granted, there are assuredly some who are terminally anesthetized to the world around them and strive only to pursue their own selfish goals. But for the most part, they believed, most people want to do the right thing. Sometimes they just need a kick in the ass to remember.



Oak Trees and Family. Dad and Mom always loved coast live oaks and planted three of them in our front yard in 1961 (one for my sister, brother, and me). The original acorns came from a special old oak on More Mesa in Santa Barbara where the family flower business was moved in the 1950's. Left: Dad and I planting my first oak at our home in Long Beach, California, September 1961. Right: Dad and Mom with our son Nicholas planting a new family oak at our home in Escondido, 1991. Dad made sure its acorn had come from my Long Beach tree. We sold the family home after Mom died in 1997. Unfortunately, the new owners didn't have the connection with nature that we did. They cut down all three of our family's oaks. A new tract house has replaced our old home.

I was recently in a meeting with a large number of participants who were trying to figure out the best way to protect lives, property, and natural resources from wildfire. While the focus of each individual was different, a general consensus was reached regarding a number of important issues. While the consensus did not go in the direction some may have wanted, the point was that we all listened to each other. It was a beginning anyway. Listening is a good thing. If I am correctly reading the mood of the country since November 4th, it looks like there is going to be a lot more of that. Hopefully there will also be a lot less telling.

It is a difficult challenge to listen rather than wait to talk. Each of us has so much to share. However, if we intend to make the world a better place, valuing others by asking the right questions and showing a sincere willingness to listen to their answers is essential. During this season of thanks, friends, and family, it would be a perfect time to start.

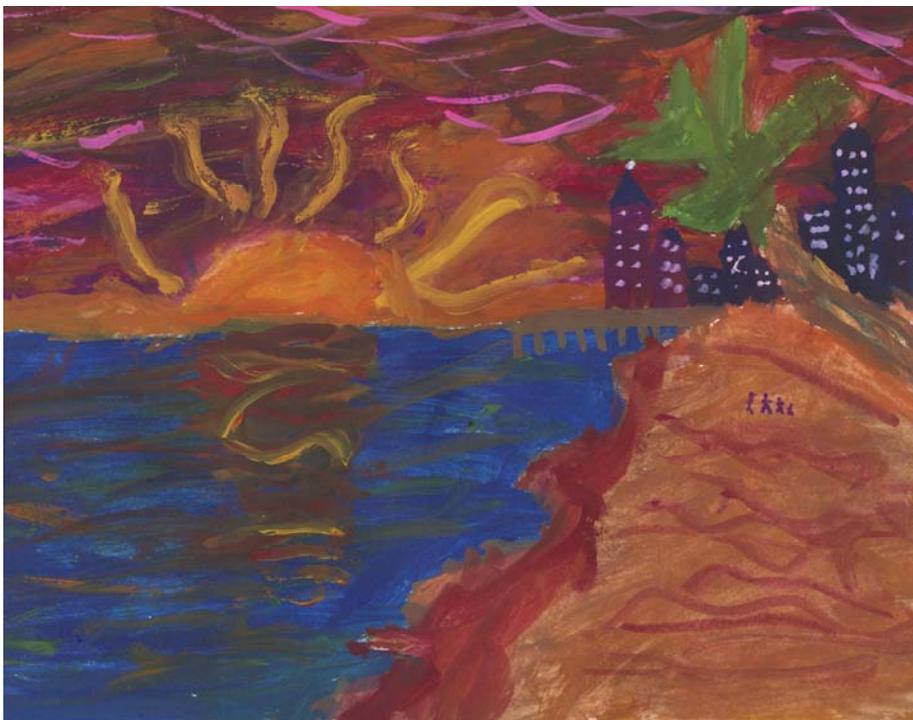
This Christmas morning, my 13-year-old son Jake gave his Mom a picture he had painted. It was of a

beautiful sunset at a special place we escape to from time to time. Off to the side he drew four tiny figures – our family. Although dwarfed by the overwhelming scene of sun, ocean, and nature, it was obvious we were an essential part of it all. Our hopes, love, and dreams all made possible by the connections we've established with each other and the world around us.

One Christmas morning when I was in high school, Dad gave me a picture of sorts, a set of wildlife conservation stamps beautifully arranged within a green picture frame. On the back he wrote,

May your dreams and ambitions find the freedom to roam through life and discover the true miracles of the world, and through your efforts may the beauty of the delicate balance of nature be preserved for the joy and appreciation of all mankind. With the greatest of expectations,

All my love, Dad. Christmas 1975.



Dad loved stamps. I realize now how much he loved me.

I regret not getting to know Dad before he left. I wish Mom could have hung around longer so I could have told her. It would be fun to sit up late at night watching DVDs of old Johnny Carson shows.

Mom and Dad. The first Chaparralians.

*Richard Halsey
Christmas 2008
Escondido, CA*



We Owe Them. Men of the 535th Bomb Squadron, 381st Bomb Group, Ridgewell, England, 1944. Dad is in front row, third from right.



**HAPPY
HOLIDAYS!**

**Remember
Those You
Love.**

**Big-cone Douglas Fir
in the Cleveland
National Chaparral
Recreation Area.**

**Photo:
Michael E. Pique**

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Signed Book: "Fire, Chaparral and Survival in Southern California"

DVD of the KPBS/Huell Howser's California's Green "Secrets of the Chaparral" show

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