

A Tribute to My Father **John Koopman Jr.**

By John Koopman III

At the very beginning of this century a crowd gathered in Washington DC to witness the unveiling of a controversial statue. It was a statue representing one of the most famous political figures of the 20th century. The controversy had nothing to do with the political views of the person or whether a statue was deserved. The controversy was in regard to how the political figure was depicted. It was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a wheelchair.

President Roosevelt had been struck down with polio as a young man. He lost the use of his legs and had to use leg braces to walk. He did indeed spend a great deal of time in a wheel chair. The intent of the statue was to be an encouragement to those with a handicap. In spite of President Roosevelt's handicap he was able to attain the highest political office in the country. However, if you know anything about President Roosevelt, he would have fought with everything he had to stop the statue from being displayed. He would have been dead set against it.

I asked my father what he thought about the controversy. He said they should not have done it. My father did not like to talk about his handicap. If someone brought it up he would change the subject.

My father wanted his story to be told. He did give me one restriction. I must use the word "Handicap" only to explain his situation. It is a most inspiring story that needs to be told.

The year was 1926. Running through the streets of South Boston was five year old John Koopman Jr. He loved to run. He would run with other boys his age in informal foot races and he was always the fastest. Then one morning he got out of bed and fell flat on his face. He was rushed to the hospital and it was found that he had polio. After surgery and a time of recovery he suffered from a permanent handicap in his left leg. His mother paid a neighborhood boy to take him to school in a wagon. This went on for some time until that young boy came to a decision, "I ain't going to school in no wagon any more. There is nothing wrong with me". That iron will was born. I asked him how he did get to school after that. He said, "I hobbled".

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As soon as I could read as a boy I took an interest in WWII. I had a book home from the library that covered the war in the Pacific. There was a picture of a landing craft that had partially sunk just off shore from an island. My father looked over my shoulder and said, "I used to dive off that very landing craft". "Wow!" I thought to myself, I was amazed. That connection brought history alive to me.

For people of my father's generation life was divided into two parts. There was life before WWII and life after WWII. Some years ago Tom Brokaw wrote a book titled The Great Generation. His major theme was the fact that the men of that generation were prepared for the

suffering they would face in the war based on the hard times of growing up during the depression. My father was certainly a member of that great generation.

My father got his draft notice when he was working at the Boston Navy Yard. It was a dangerous place to work as they did not have the safety standards of today. It is amazing my father did not get seriously injured there. He told me that whenever he would walk by the infirmary, the men waiting to go in looked like they came out of a war zone. My father's boss liked him as he was a good worker. He was ready to give him a deferment to avoid serving. My father would have none of it. He was determined to go and serve his country over there.

At many points along the way my father could easily have gotten out of serving because of his handicap. But he was determined to go overseas and fight. His first choice was to be an aerial gunner on a bomber. With his excellent hand eye coordination he would have made a good one. Even though he would only have to walk from a jeep to a plane, and once inside the plane his handicap would make no difference, he was rejected. The Army in its infinite wisdom would have him march miles and miles instead. It's just as well; the life expectancy of bomber crews was not very good.

My father had scored high on the standardized tests and was assigned to the 860th Engineering Aviation Battalion. Just before he was to ship out, there was one last medical exam. The doctor failed him due to his handicap. It was all decided he was to stay in the US and be a clerk. My father explained that he had just come back from a 30 mile forced march. It made no difference, it was all decided. As typical with the Army the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. He got his orders to go overseas and off he went. My father had a sense of humor. I was looking through his military records in his desk drawer and found that rejection letter from the doctor. He had kept it all these years. He must have found it amusing.

On those 30 mile forced marches in training, it was done with a full field pack, steel helmet and rifle along with ammunition. They didn't have the light weight materials of today; it was all heavy canvas and steel. The pack alone weighed anywhere from 60 to 70 pounds. During those forced marches men with no handicap were ready to drop out. They were inspired by my father's example, "If Koopman can do it I can do it". The Army personnel in charge of the training were impressed with the young man with the handicap who wouldn't give up. There was a particular exercise that is essentially a jumping jack done with the rifle. My Dad could do those all day. He was often called upon to lead the exercise. Afterwards a fellow soldier said, "Koopman, do you have to do so many?"

My father's service in the South Pacific involved the building of air strips. This was part of the island hopping strategy to keep moving airpower forward and closer to Japan. My father was on the survey team. He served on islands such as Biak and New Guinea. The climate was oppressively hot and humid with bugs so big they could carry you away. The air strips were not built in rear areas. They were built in a war zone. The Japanese were often still on the islands as the air strips were built. The air strips were often bombed and strafed. My father had many close calls with death as he was jumping at the last second into a fox hole as the bombs were going off. On one occasion the 860th Engineering Aviation Battalion was called upon to be a reserve to guard against a Japanese attack. There was desperate fighting nearby and it was

feared that the Japanese would overrun the American lines with a bayonet attack, otherwise known as a “Banzai Charge”. They were that close. My father slept in his tent with his M1 rifle at his side with the bayonet fixed. Thank goodness that there was no breakthrough. But I know my Dad. If there had been a Banzai Charge he would have stood his ground.

The tents they lived in during construction were larger tents with six men each. My father recalls one guy who woke up every morning and said, “I hate this Army”. The day to day stress was intense. My father resigned to himself that he was going to die there. One day a man came into the tent with a completely blank stare on his face and pulled the pin on a grenade. My father talked him out of it and walked with him down to the beach. He took the grenade from the troubled man and thorough it into the water.

My father caught one of those dreaded jungle diseases and that brought him home. I am convinced to this day that the various jungle diseases he was exposed to caused a lot of the unusual health problems he had in his life, perhaps even the cancer.

After his honorable discharge from the Army at the end of WWII, my father found himself again at a crossroads in his life. He could have played it safe and gone into the printing trade as he was trained in high school. However, with the GI Bill it was now possible for him to go to college. He went on to become a Civil Engineer.

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My sister and I would watch him tackle a difficult problem or task when we were kids. We would wonder how he would so often succeed at difficult things. We came to the conclusion that he wouldn’t give up until he solved the problem. It was perseverance and persistence that got him through.

If I had to sum up my father’s life in one sentence, it would come from the words of George Washington, “Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages”.