

Memorial Day in Retrospect

The most moving letter to the editor that I have ever read struck me in last Sunday's Press Democrat. Actually the editorial page of any newspaper is to me the most interesting, because it's full of "opinions" – either by established pundits or by ordinary citizens. News reports pretend to be factual. They have a by-line but adhere to telling the where, when, why, who and what of daily events. Letters to the editor are usually more alive - with individual resentment, frustration, or condescension, a need to step forth and say something with an urgency - that *needs* saying. Emotion surfaces from between the lines.

The letter that gave me pause, that touched my heart went: *As a little girl growing-up in occupied Denmark during World War II, I remember my mother coming into my room and waking me up with the words, "They have landed! They are coming to save us." After a few minutes she added, "Now go to sleep." The joy and excitement are still with me . . .* The letter was signed: Inge McCormack; Sebastopol. The reference, of course, was to the Normandy landings on June 6th, 1944.

No doubt Inge is my contemporary. I was sixteen years old when Normandy happened, completing my first year at the Graymoor Friars minor seminary near Garrison, New York – overlooking the Hudson River. The lifestyle of the Christian Brothers at my high school inspired me to enroll at Graymoor – so far removed from inner city upbringing. Once I entered I had to give up my daily interest in current events; we were not allowed to read papers or listen to the radio – so I had no idea of what was going on in the outside world – except one day a flight of twenty B24 bombers flew over Graymoor mountain – at seeming tree top level - en route to Canada and Europe.

Oh, yes – the war made its demands. The water tanks of the monastery were kept in a tall building topped by a glassed-in observation post. Now, given the war, we seminarians were assigned by the Army to spot any planes approaching West Point across the river. We were equipped with binoculars and silhouettes of every German warplane. And we were to report every plane we saw during our watch. Only once did a seminarian see a Messerschmitt and called it in. We received a red star for incompetence that month. And then on May 9th, 1945 Germany surrendered. Crowds went crazy all over America – while all we knew of it was the sirens sounding in distant Peekskill.

But prior to all that I retain my remembrance in the 1930's of the older teens and young men who hung around the grocery stores on street corners, pitching pennies, talking about their dates, overseeing us younger kids out of the corner of their eyes to make sure we were ok – lowering me head first into a sewer opening while I retrieved a lost ball. Guys we looked up to – playing for the neighborhood sandlot team . . . not perfect but somehow trustworthy. And I remember when they all disappeared from the neighborhood, some never to return, when it was their call to land on foreign shores . . . and affect a young Danish girl - allowing her to go to sleep with joy in her heart.

Geoff Wood