

Dad at Rest in Arlington National Cemetery

By: Jeannine Curtin

The silver spire arcs of the United States Air Force Memorial seem to soar even higher this day as we make our way to Arlington National Cemetery for my dad's inurnment. My dad would feel so honored to be among fellow soldiers, airmen, and the dedicated men and women who served in the United States military.

It is so difficult to even conceive of someone with so much personality and gusto encapsulated inside the Air Force urn. His young years were first spent in the National Guard in the Bronx and I remember the black and white photos of him with fellow guardsmen in our garage (which he painted battleship grey)! I would search for him with my finger going up and down the rows of Guardsmen until I found his youthful face.

He took the ship to Japan to serve in the Korean War and when they anchored, he met both of his brothers, who served in the Army, on the dock in Japan! We have a family photo of this reunion where dad looked all scruffy from the long journey and all smiles alongside the Curtin brothers so far from Davidson Avenue in the Bronx. I viewed smaller black and white photos of him in uniform from 1952 to 1957 in Korea and Japan. He served at military bases like Brady Air Force base in Japan to Suffolk County AFB in Westhampton, NY, and Stewart AFB in Newburgh, NY. While at Newburgh, he met my mother and years later when I came along and they always told me, you were almost born at West Point! His military service was something he adored.

Serving his country opened a world for him and he was so proud of his effort as well as the other airmen who served around him. The military was a profound sense of brotherhood with focus on a core mission, and dedicated service to his nation. I believe the brotherhood left a lasting impression since he kept in touch with these men until the end of his life. He had kept the scrapbook we gave him with the Air Force emblem on the front cover, all in navy blue. He always took it out and looked at the photos to remember the moments from his time of service. He reconnected with his brethren at Air Force reunions and stayed in close touch with those he served.

His passing leaves a hole in our family and in my heart. We cannot hear his jokes, or his laughter, or witness the perfect way he carved the turkey. It's the little things you remember when you least expect it.

And he hung the American flag proudly outside our home every national holiday. He understood the essence of the flag and what each star, and stripe, meant to him and other soldiers. When the star-spangled banner came on 4th of July celebrations on television, he would rise and salute to honor fellow military men and women.

So, we walk near fallen soldiers on this hallowed ground laying wreaths on headstones at Christmas and flags on Memorial Day. Their passing is a testament to the heart of soul of this nation.

During the military honors at dad's interment, the United States Air Force Honor Guard carried the American flag, and dad's urn, in silence except for the taps of their shoes up to the canopied area. They opened the flag with their gloved hands and straightened it out and then the firing party shot off their rounds and taps was played. Just one note from the bugler sends an emotional outburst through your body. Then the Honor Guard continued spreading their gloved hands across the fibers of the flag and they began folding it into the traditional thirteen folds, each fold representing significant meaning. The first fold is a symbol of life and the second fold for the belief in eternal life through the final thirteenth fold where the stars stand out to remind us, "In God We Trust."

Typically, the Air Force Sergeant hands the flag to the widow, but this decorated gentleman, with massive medals, placed the flag on a stand for my mother due to the pandemic.

Over at the columbarium, the final resting place for my father's ashes, our parish priest gave the blessing and sprinkled holy water on the urn. Dad now resides on Patton Street, which is so fitting since he loved the General, as well as the film with George C. Scott.

For the endless military stories, dad's escapades, and the indelible mark it left on him, we felt so incredibly honored to have his final resting place at Arlington National Cemetery.

Being here, I also thought of our great Aunt Josephine, who was a nurse during World War II. Josephine was a Captain in the Army tending to wounds of the soldiers. She shared stories about her time in Germany and the Philippines during the war over countless dinners in New Jersey. Yet, I never heard about the medals and awards she received, but I remember the full honor bestowed during her inurnment. She was awarded not one, but 3 bronze stars, and several medals.

Today, nurses, doctors, and health care workers strive to alleviate sickness and death for their patients from this dreadful pandemic. How do they come to terms with this day in and day out? Unprecedented numbers cross our television screens and insurmountable atrocities. It's a war without bombs, but the internal fragments of souls lie in hospitals on ventilators grasping for life. Health care workers on the front lines resemble the nurses and doctors who have sewn the wounds and operated on soldiers in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq.

I just want to take a moment to thank all health care workers, along with the men and women who served in the military. Across the countless headstones zig zagging the Arlington horizon, I stand to salute you.

I recently learned that dad's best friend from the Air Force sadly died last week. I know in my heart these two are in heaven still sharing some great Air Force stories through layers of clouds and rainbows.

Jeannine Curtin is a writer based in Alexandria, Virginia.

