

THE MAKING OF A HERO

A True Story of D-Day During WWII

Seaman Stan Slaby gripped the lifeline with all the force that the body of the star athlete he had been in high school a few years earlier could generate. His heels dug into the sand of the beach, his back braced toward France and its uninvited German guests guiding their gallery of guns atop Omaha Beach, his face toward the Atlantic Ocean, he watched his compatriots barrel down the ramp of LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry) 499, grabbing the lifeline he anchored for their support as they waded into the water, faces unwillingly set in the direction of death and destruction, some of them living the last day of their lives. The American soldiers gasped as they smacked into the cold liquid, then staggered and stumbled chest-deep through it toward Seaman Slaby, struggling to hold their balance and their rifles with packs weighing up to 100 pounds strapped to their backs. Some fell face down into the sea and resurfaced. Others fell and did not. Slaby glanced to his left and noticed a soldier with arms flailing midway from ship to shore. Turning to a few passing men, he handed them the line. "Here, hold it tight," he shouted. The only sailor from LCI 499 on the beach then plunged headfirst into the Atlantic, wearing his navy lifejacket, and swam toward the drowning man. As he approached him, he saw the helpless man's eyes opened as big as baseballs on his face, his mouth spewing white foam, his arms desperately stretching for something solid. Sailor seized soldier and silently dragged him to shore, the only perceptible sound in their insulated crisis within a crisis the slapping of Slaby's arm against the sea. Seconds seemed like centuries. As soon as rescuer and rescued reached the beach, an army corpsman slid the stricken soldier onto a stretcher and took him away from Slaby's sight, the last moment the young sailor would ever see this young soldier whose name he would never know.

On June 6, 1944, this fourth day of Operation Overlord, the greatest moment of America's finest hour, this act of heroism served as a microcosm of all the acts of heroism performed by "the greatest generation" during "the war." The twenty year-old sailor from Ware, Massachusetts, became a hero without trying and without even realizing it. While simply doing his job, he noticed another human being, a comrade in arms, one of his own, an American, sinking in imminent peril of death and he reacted on God-given instinct, personifying the beliefs of his generation: duty and morality. You do your job, you help your neighbor and you do not boast. You do what you are supposed to do.

That is why, when Slaby was told later that day, in the afternoon, that the captain of his ship and of the flotilla wished to see him, he did not make the connection. His first thought was that he had done something wrong. The boss had never wanted to see him before. As he walked from his station on deck to the commander's cabin, he tried to keep his anxiety trapped in his brain and not let it descend to his kidneys. In his rush to the appointment with apparently angry authority, he racked that brain as coherently as he could to find his offense. When he reached his destination, he knocked on the door and entered. Inside the cramped quarters filled by a bunk bed, a table and a chair, the lieutenant commander stood up. A "90-day wonder," a college man in his twenties with no military background, his trim build was emphasized by his dark blue uniform. "Sailor, well done" were the only words he spoke to the surprised Slaby, who said nothing in reply. The lieutenant commander shook his hand and the seaman second class turned on his heels and left.

The months passed in routine shipboard duty after his participation in the invasion of Normandy. Stan Slaby still gave scarcely a second thought to his heroic act on Omaha

Beach. Since that day he saw no more action, but in early 1945 he was preparing for what would be an even bigger battle than Operation Overlord. He and 10 thousand other sailors were back in the USA, at the Newport Naval Training Station in Rhode Island, training for the invasion of Japan, although none of them knew the nature of their mission. Slaby was one of 400 men training on a new ship, the AKA Tobora 45. One day while all 10 thousand men of the fleet were on parade for the town of Newport, he was waiting with his shipmates for their turn to pass before the brass on the reviewing stand when he heard three voices calling his name in echo: "Seaman Slaby front and center!"..."Seaman Slaby front and center!"..."Seaman Slaby front and center!" He tried to hide.

This Polish boy who was raised in poverty in the nearby state of Massachusetts did not like being the center of attention unless it was on a baseball diamond, a basketball court or a football field. Other voices, closer, those of some of his shipmates in formation, reached his ears: "They're calling you! They want you!" When the realization sank into his head that there was neither nowhere to hide nor to run, Seaman Slaby stepped forward from the ranks and showed himself to his interlocutors. As they accompanied him on the long walk to the reviewing stand, he had no idea why he was going to meet the brass. During the interminable march his three guides said not a word, but when the naval quartet arrived at the podium, the officer there said it all. Admiral Harold Stark spoke into a microphone because his words were not meant solely for Slaby, but also for the thousands of others listening at the ceremony and for hundreds, thousands or perhaps millions of future generations. Admiral Stark read the following words from an official citation: "For HEROic performance of duty on June 9, 1944, during landing operation" (there were those letters —h-e-r-o—projecting through Stan's mind like a torpedo with his name on it; "Hero!? Me!? And in front of all these people!")..."Slaby, whose duty it was to take an anchor ashore to assist in disembarking" ("I was doing my job, what they trained me to do, that's all")..."caught sight of a drowning soldier, who

apparently stepped into a bomb crater” (“A bomb crater! Nobody told me”)...“and without regard for his own life swam to the assistance of the drowning man” (“It was what anyone who could do it would have done, SHOULD have done. Why didn’t anybody else do it? Why didn’t one of the guys from his own LCI do it? What made ME do it?”). As he stood motionless on display, like a mannequin in a department store window, that final question racing through his mind was the one that Stanley Slaby would ask himself over and over and over for the rest of his long life. He would never receive an answer.

After reading the citation, the admiral saluted and congratulated him, then said, “Come on. We’re going to take you to the barracks.” Seaman Slaby, still in a state of shock from the entire, unexpected situation, felt an aftershock register in him as the admiral led him to his waiting, black limousine with its chauffeur. At the end of the short ride, as he got out of the car and walked to his lodging, some of his bunkmates filled the air with comments seasoned with all the legendary saltiness of seafaring men on the seemingly incongruous and inappropriate spectacle of a seaman first class requiring an admiral’s limo to transport him a few hundred yards.

The palpable proof of his public praise that he could see and touch and feel did not appear until months later. Another encounter with a ship’s captain produced it. After much training for the anticipated, awesome Asian invasion, the metallic memorial of Slaby’s deed in the epic European invasion finally arrived on the Tobora in August 1945. The vessel was passing through the Panama Canal on its way to Japan, although the crew still did not know its destination. The captain handed him a package on deck. “This came in for you.” “Thank you, sir.” He opened it and out popped the Navy-Marine Corps Medal, inscribed with the same words Admiral Stark had announced to him in Rhode Island: “For heroic performance of duty on June 9, 1944...” Slaby read it as he held it in his hand, the

same hand that had propelled him and his human cargo through the Atlantic Ocean on that day more than a year before, toward temporary safety for the soldier and toward this tiny token for himself, signifying something more magnificent than its insignificant size suggested. Tiny though it was, able to fit inside the human hand, it epitomized the human heart. It symbolized the human spirit. It represented the rightful recognition of a remarkable republic known as the United States of America. It actually predated the computer chip, because engraved on it there were 130 million invisible signatures from a grateful, bleeding and weeping nation. That was what Stan Slaby held in his hand and contemplated, perched on the water of the Panama Canal that day in August of 1945. It was the first and final day he would see that particular medal.

The same day he placed the medal in his locker and forgot about it. Several days later Japan surrendered. The war was over. Relief washed over Tobora 45 like a summer shower, as the crew discovered they had been spared a massive, murderous invasion. They still proceeded to Japan, not on a fearful killing mission but on a happy one of retrieval, to bring home some of the troops. A few weeks in the devastated and defeated Land of the Rising Sun and it was time to go home. Seaman first class Slaby and all the American personnel on board the returning fleet may not have left their hearts in San Francisco, but they found them there, for that city was the USA to them as they passed under the Golden Gate Bridge, an image that would stay with them for life. If they never saw it again, they would never forget it. It meant home.

It was on that final naval voyage to San Francisco that Slaby looked for his Navy-Marine Corps Medal for the first time since he had placed it in his locker months earlier. It was gone. He assumed someone had stolen it, someone hungrier for glory-- not only vain glory but false glory—than he was. The medal still meant nothing to him.

Passing years bring new perspectives. As past blends imperceptibly into present, and the moments of our “present” dwindle, slipping away from yearning eyes and groping hands like water slowly leaking from an abandoned ship, time draining drop by drop into the ocean of eternity, we want the future to remember us well. So it was that 65 years passed in the life of Stanley Slaby from the day he became a hero in World War II to the day when a new generation of Americans honored him. These citizens had not experienced the war, yet realized the colossal importance of it, not merely as a musty fact of history beyond their memories, but as **their** story, the monumentally unique event that shaped the world of their “present,” of their very existence. In October of 2009, at a ceremony acknowledging a change of fleet command in Baltimore, Slaby was again surprised by official, public recognition, as he was at Newport in 1945. After the ceremony, out of the blue, another admiral approached the old hero, read the same citation he heard in 1945 and pinned a new version of the Navy-Marine Corps Medal on his chest. This admiral was no stranger to him, as Admiral Stark had been, and this time the honoree was the elder to the presenter. Admiral Mark Buzby was one of Slaby’s “boys” from Admiral Farragut Academy, where Slaby had been the beloved sports coach for 40 years. Buzby was one of many men whose lives “Coach” had helped mold through his own style of leadership, based on compassionate discipline, toughness with love, a boxing glove sheathed in velvet. It was incredibly fitting that one of the boys whom he had so influenced would rise to nearly the highest possible pinnacle in the navy and would close the circle of Slaby’s life and career this way. It was incredibly ironic that an admiral that he had helped to become one would pin on his mentor’s chest a medal that exemplifies one of the most profound values that the military strives to instill. It was incredibly beautiful to see the love in the eyes of “Buz,” the young admiral. Still more beautiful to behold were the tears in the eyes of “Coach,” the old hero.