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"Protecting What We Love" – by Nancy Pace

Memorial Day Sunday 2017

I was raised on Army posts all over the world. Men in uniform were my first heroes, my first saints. I *revered* soldiers. And to this day, I'm still drawn to them, to their values of service, integrity, courage, selflessness and leadership. All the soldiers I've ever known, including my own career-officer Dad, tried hard to live up to the highest ideals, and risked profligately for the profession--and the causes--they believed in.

So you may be surprised to hear that I've resisted every war since Vietnam, and that I can no longer support militarism, or even nationalism. Am I still a patriot? One who deeply loves her country and all soldiers everywhere who are protecting those they love? Here is my story.

My dad was a practicing attorney with a Doctorate of Letters in Law from the University of Wisconsin when he entered WWII as a wiry young ROTC-trained and recently-promoted Reserve Captain. Three years later—and thirty pounds lighter—he returned home, a highly-decorated, war-weary Colonel. When I asked him later, “Daddy, what is war?” he explained that sometimes bad people want to hurt Americans, so soldiers have to go and fight.

Dad’s shooting-war was over before I was born in 1946, but my entire childhood was constrained by the memory—and the possibility—of war.

Now you would think military brats would feel safe and secure growing up on fenced and guarded compounds. But what I learned was---fear.

I simply could *not* imagine why so many bad people would want to come all the way over here to America to kill nice people like my mom and sisters and me, or why so many nice American soldiers spent so much time in tanks and trucks and planes getting ready for war? To my mind, America was a perfectly wonderful place, her soldiers young gods.

It didn’t occur to me to wonder whether other faraway children just like me might also be lying awake, terrorized by the thought of *their* fathers suddenly being snatched away into war, of armies marching into *their* cities, climbing in *their*

windows, beating down *their* doors. All the soldiers *I* ever knew were really nice—and certainly not the source of any child's nightmare.

Back then, I was the military's most enthusiastic flag-waver and cheerleader. Drafted—at birth—I was quick to claim that military brats were the proudest, luckiest kids on earth.

So it's a little weird to confess that, as far back as I can remember, the question of: "What did Daddy do in the war?" was treated, in *my* family, like, well—almost a shameful family secret.

When my parents' war ended, they were told to "put the war behind you." So until an old family friend told me—in college—about my dad's two Purple Hearts, his Legion of Merit, his Bronze and Silver Stars, I'd never heard about them. My dad was *adamantly* silent about his war, and Mom told me later that she was forbidden to discuss it.

Mom *did* reluctantly tell me the story about my dad's heroism, but only under pressure.

It seems that Dad's tank battalion had long been under a heavy and highly-lethal period of shelling, despite a negotiated temporary truce which the other side apparently hadn't yet heard about.

My father was an openhearted, idealistic man with little reason to doubt the humanity of his German military counterparts. He thought most officers, regardless of country, were good-hearted patriots like himself, open to providing some relief to all their youthful charges serving under both commands.

So--sick of the incessant senseless casualties, Dad jumped in his tank, white truce-sheets flying, drove right through the smoke and the booming rounds, through the opposing tank-lines and deep into enemy territory, even as his men watched breathlessly from their foxholes, sure he would be killed, or captured and tortured.

Dad eventually found his way to his German counterpart field officers and informed them of the announced temporary truce--which was news to them.

Mom said Dad always considered those actions simply logical, necessary--what any officer would do. And later, when some of those same crack members of Rommel's Afrika Corps were captured, Dad gallantly saw them to safety in a Prisoner of War exchange.

After that awful war though, Dad was never again able to sleep--or wake up--peacefully. For fifty years, he had terrible nightmares, apparently a family secret we children weren't allowed to mention--to anyone--or even to notice.

Growing up, we always *just knew never* to go anywhere near my dad when he was sleeping, even if he was just napping in front of a ballgame. Mom's fear for our safety was clear in her frequent reminders—and in her wide blue eyes.

I must have learned those lessons early—and the hard way—because I just always knew to be wary of my gentle, affectionate dad, never to touch him without warning, or come up behind him, or surprise or startle him—especially when he was asleep.

My sisters and I weren't allowed to leave our beds at night. But sometimes, in yet one more dark, strange, scary new house, little girls have to get up.

I would dance on my tiptoes outside my parents' open bedroom-door, calling softly from a safe distance—Daddy, Daddy—until, finally, Dad would jerk and startle awake, throw his hands in front of his face, strike out wildly and half rise, straining to make sense of my nearby dark shape and small voice. Then his face would soften, and he'd accompany me down some long unfamiliar corridor to our current bathroom. Afterward, he'd walk me back to bed, planting an extra kiss on my head, as much for himself as for me.

Mom slept more deeply than Dad, after busy days chasing kids around. Tersely, she explained Dad's bizarre behaviors as, "what *all* returning soldiers do after war"—and *that was that*.

But we knew we were expected to *hide* Dad's--somehow guilty--secret, never to ask questions, and never even mention it to anyone. Eventually, this situation seemed almost ... normal and natural. But normal and natural are not the fruits of war. I *did* find it hard to understand why, when my dad woke up, his first thought was to kill me.

Once, I overheard a joke that someone told on my dad at one of their many boisterous cocktail parties. I only heard the punchline, which was followed by loud raucous laughter that my dad joined in heartily, but not really, I could tell. I was so upset that my mom reluctantly took me aside and told me the story, which helped me understand my dad's challenges.

Toward the end of dad's war, late on a moonless night, an orderly who shared Dad's tent went outside to relieve himself, and coming back in, he accidentally crawled over my sleeping Dad. According to the "funny" joke's punchline, the whole camp was awakened to shouts of, "Help! Help! The Colonel is killing the Corporal!" Apparently it took several burly recruits some time to pull my poor crazy emaciated Dad off his unfortunate orderly before he could successfully choke him to death.

Dad joined his friends that night in making a big macho joke of that unfortunate incident--for obvious reasons. But to my young ears, that story was heartbreaking, because it tragically

explained the enormous fear and continual tension my poor dad must have been under during those many long years, lying awake with his men in open tents scattered across the desert floor. That was also the time my mother broke down and told me that "other" story, the "good" story I just told you about my dad's selfless courage under fire.

To this day, veterans of combat *must* keep up their hale and hearty appearances or they'll miss promotions and be pushed out of their cherished--and for many, their only--professions.

In addition to what we now call PTSD, Dad also had to conceal his recurrent Malaria, a lifetime ailment he picked up in Africa. I never understood, while I was growing up, why Dad sometimes hurried home in the middle of his workday and jumped into bed, shaking violently, or why Mom threw blanket after blanket over him, slamming the bedroom door behind her.

Many years after Dad's war service in Africa and Italy, his expertise in military strategy led him to a three-year stint on the faculty of the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where he thoroughly enjoyed clambering about Gettysburg with his youthful scholars, and where, late into every night, I watched him pore over his beloved multi-volume war biographies by Churchill, Eisenhower, Lee, Washington--and Rommel.

Years after he retired, I was trying to understand a graduate history class, so I timidly dared raise the subject of the politics of his war. I was especially curious about his African missions: What did they have to do with saving our allies from Hitler, or with fighting Japanese aggressions?

I now believe that we were securing post-war hegemony over Libyan and Middle Eastern oil resources. But back then, I only wondered aloud, "What were you *doing*, Dad, charging around North Africa with all those men and tanks?"

Dad paused for a long moment, sighed heavily, shook his head, and said, "Damned if I know."

What a tragedy that *any* soldier should doubt what was gained from their long, terrible years of blood and sacrifice. Yet few veterans today are convinced that their wars were or are necessary--or even moral.

On this very day, today, western and Libyan factions are still fighting over those same oil-rich territories my Dad and three hundred thousand soldiers contested--over seventy years ago.

German General Erwin Rommel later wrote, "Rivers of blood were poured out over those miserable strips of land, which in normal times not even the poorest Arab would have bothered his head about." Will outsiders still care about those lands and

people when their oil runs out? It's easy enough to find pretexts for war, noble-sounding excuses to justify taking whatever one wants from strangers who are quickly designated as the world's most brutal enemies yet.

But no soldier anywhere can reasonably be blamed for the moral confusion or the mendacity of her or his leaders. If our Presidents, politicians, partisans, pundits and preachers—not to mention the united nations of the world—cannot agree on whether or not to go to war, if we can't even openly discuss or question wars' true reasons, costs and goals, aren't we expecting a bit much of our soldiers?

On this Memorial Day, may we remember, with the deepest affection and the greatest respect, all wholehearted, precious soldiers everywhere who have given their last full measure of devotion to war—every one someone's friend, lover, child, parent, grandchild, sister, brother; every one believing their duty clear, their loyalties and causes just, their leaders trustworthy and righteous. Soldiers everywhere are alike in their idealism and innocence, and they all stand valiantly on high walls, risking their lives to come between those they love —and destruction.

I'm not a pacifist. There might be circumstances when I would kill someone to protect someone I love. But no mother ever sent her son or daughter, and no soldier ever signed up to die or kill for cheaper oil.

Soldiers and peace activists aren't adversaries. We're partners, working for the same goals--a safer, gentler, more just planet. Peace activists are a soldier's best friends, working hard to keep soldiers out of unnecessary, immoral wars. Maybe we'll someday realize that, like slavery, all past wars were immoral.

Signing up to defend the weak is certainly patriotic. But it's no more patriotic--though far more dangerous--than spending one's entire lifetime resisting the injustices of catastrophically cruel, stupid, wasteful wars. Peace activists keep protesting until the last soldiers come home. That's why war propagandists work so hard to characterize anti-war protesters as degenerate, disloyal, cowardly soldier-haters.

No one hates war as much as a soldier who's been to war. No one understands war's real costs and insanities more clearly. Combat vets know wars don't make things better. What they and their families *do* know is who carries--*forever*--the wounds that war wreaks upon their vulnerable young minds and bodies.

These days, we throw around the words "defense," "security," and "national interests." But today's wars don't make us safer. They don't defend us from invading armies. And they don't make us more secure from the exponentially-multiplying number of terrorists seeking vengeance for those wars.

Our *real* national interests lie, not in pursuing wars, but in a strong economy, well-educated citizens, jobs for everyone at living wages, safety nets for the vulnerable, supportive infrastructure, a just justice system, and reliably democratic processes. Wars take all that away by pouring all our tax money into war industry profits and blowing stuff up.

Whenever *any* government *anywhere* sends soldiers hastily into wars, or interferes with another nation's sovereignty, or invades, attacks, or occupies another country, or murders innocents, we should all rise up in protest.

War is *never* the *best* solution—to *any* problem. War *is* the problem. War doesn't prevent catastrophes. War *is* a catastrophe. War isn't an appropriate response to horrible injustices. War adds infinitely to the sum of horrible injustices.

Eisenhower said: "The people of the world genuinely want peace. Some day, the leaders of the world are going to have to give in and give it to them."

I encourage all of you to gather this Tuesday at the Frederick Friends Meeting House at 7pm, to help us urge Congressman Delaney to generously fund a Defense Budget that supports war-*prevention*, *peace*-building, diplomacy, and better care for our veterans--but *not* war. It's time to hold our political representatives accountable to *their duty and obligation to keep us safe*—by keeping the peace.

And in so doing, we will be living into our highest Unitarian Universalist ideals and values, even as we work together to realize our shared vision of global peace, liberty, and justice--not just for some--but for all.