



"Memorial Day"

When I was a young boy, I was fascinated by stories my grandparents would tell about their youth. When my grandmother was a small child, she watched from a hilltop as most of San Francisco burned from fires started by the famous 1906 earthquake. My grandfather saw an automobile for the first time when he was nine years old. A noisy "horseless carriage" rattled past his family's farm while he watched in amazement. When he told me this, in my young mind, I thought my grandfather must have been positively ancient!

My grandmother had a small wooden box on the nightstand in her bedroom that inspired many of these stories I heard as a child. It contained numerous small items that represented many of the important events in her life. There was a photograph of the car my grandparents drove across the country after they were married in 1925. A lock of hair from my father's first haircut was kept in a small envelope. There was a gold coin awarded to my grandfather for his engineering work at General Electric, but to me the most captivating items in this box were two newspaper clippings about my grandmother's oldest brother, George Alexander Stone.

The first article announced the public awarding of a medal of courage by the mayor of San Francisco. An armed madman was loose on the streets of the city. He had shot several people, and perhaps would have wounded or killed many more had a brave teenager not single-handedly wrestled the man to the ground, disarming him, and holding him until police arrived. My grandmother beamed with pride each time she told the story of her big brother's heroics.

The second clipping brought a more somber mood. It contained a simple statement of a local soldier's death during World War I. When called upon to serve his country in what was supposed to be "the war to end all wars," George Stone was declared a conscientious objector. His previous brave conduct left no doubt that

cowardice had nothing to do with his refusal to carry a weapon. A century ago it was not unusual for Baptists to be counted among those who, for conscience sake, refused to take a human life. But George Stone did not refuse to serve his country. He went to France with thousands of other American "Doughboys." He would wear the nation's uniform as a medic. He braved enemy fire in the battlefield to provide aid to the wounded. In spite of the fact that he wore a Red Cross on his sleeve, he was struck down by an enemy bullet while attempting to save another soldier's life.

Although more than a half century had passed since the death of her brother, it was obvious as my grandmother told the story that she still grieved. Her description of her father's weeping when he learned of his son's death is still vivid in my memory.

I doubt that it was her intention, but my grandmother taught me profound life lessons when she shared the treasures in her little wooden box. One of these lessons is inscribed on the Korean War Memorial in Washington DC. It says simply, "Freedom is not free." Every Memorial Day I remember a young man I never knew - a brave teenager who gave what Abraham Lincoln called "the last full measure of devotion." I have lived my life as a free man in part because of the price paid by my great uncle, George Stone. Although he was barely out of boyhood when he died, he will always be to me a great man. I will always remember his sacrifice, and I will always be grateful.