

1945 or 46. Can't remember the reason I
wrote this. JR

Right at the end of World War II my parents bought me my first sailor suit. I can't begin to tell you how important that outfit was to me. You see, my eldest brother was wearing a real set of Navy blues at the time, and I was immensely proud of him.

In 1946, my family sat for our first (and only) formal family photo portrait. As I gaze now into the brown-tinted images preserved now nearly half a century, I see an innocent six-year-old standing between our parents. Mom and Dad still had color in their hair back then; I am sad to report that without the photo, I can't remember them except with shades of grey or silver. My pride in that sailor suit seems apparent as I search that young face. Behind me, my six elder brothers and sisters stand, arranged in descending order of height from the center.

We were, I guess, a very typical American family. Dad had gone away to the Army right at the end of World War I; had hardly reached the camp when the Armistice that ended the "War to End All Wars" was signed. By the time America entered the Second World War, his family had grown to seven children, and he, like millions of other Americans, had struggled almightily to provide for all of us throughout the harsh depression years. My parents, like most of that generation, never forgot the Depression; they lived frugally for the rest of their lives...and provided as best they could for us. Dad lost his job early on in the Depression, and the family lost our home --that was not uncommon then. But the luxury of bankruptcy and the absolution of debts was alien to

my Dad, and to most Americans back then. Rather, my father worked long and hard for many years to repay all of his debts. That was the American way back then, and I pray we will someday all regain that value.

Well, my eldest brother served in the Navy; by the time of Korea, brother number two was nearing service age, and got a commission in the Army. Much to my parents relief, I suspect, he went into ROTC at college, and later served in Germany.

For myself, there had never been any doubt: ever since I put on that sailor suit at age five, there had been no other career option. I would go to sea. And twelve hours after graduating from high school, I took the oath, and was promptly packed off to boot camp. Brother number three, two years older than me, was in no hurry; he joined the Army two years after I got my first real sailor suit.

By the mid-1960s, we two youngest boys were embarked on military careers. When America became involved in Vietnam, we served there, alternately, for four years. Aside from the demands of service, we both had young families, and, I must confess, the letters home to Mom and Dad were nowhere near as frequent as they should have been.

It wasn't until more years had passed that it occurred to me that although my brother and I had gone through some trial and tribulation, my parents (Dad had been born in 1898; Mom in 1908)

had, in their later years gone through four full years of worry about us. The casualties of the Vietnam War were more than just those who fought and died, or were wounded there. Every parent, every spouse, every child of Americans serving in Vietnam paid a price.

When Dad passed away in the mid-1970s, I rushed home from service with NATO in Italy, and my brother from service on the island of Kwajalein. In microcosm, we represented, I guess, the breadth of America's far-flung commitments. And in failing to be by our father's side, I believe too, we somehow represented some small part of the sacrifice America's servicemen and women had quietly made over many decades.

Nearly half a century has passed now since I first put on that sailor suit my parents gave me. Mom has long since joined Dad after a long struggle with cancer; they rest together on a hillside not far from the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. Somewhere along the line, almost without me noticing, we have become the older generation, and my children, I suspect, would have an equally hard time remembering me without grey hair.

I set aside my real sailor suit ---which I had worn for over twenty years--- in 1978, and spend my time now teaching your children and grandchildren. My principal topic is American military history, and I am thrilled still to recount for them the feats of America's countless patriots. I must confess, though, that I am politically incorrect. My heart still skips a beat

when I see the Stars & Stripes stirred by the West Texas breeze;
and I never suffer for a second the concern of many liberal
academics that our United States, blessed by God, might not be
the greatest nation on this earth.

And every now and again I receive a rare reward when I see
the light of understanding in the eyes of one of my students;
when I realize that in some unfathomable way I have managed
successfully to convey to just one or two of that remarkable
young generation I face each day, some small aspect of America's
rich military heritage. I would like to share with you my pride
and confidence in the young men and women who appear in my
classes; if they are representative of the American generation
currently maturing, we have nothing to worry about. They are
strong, and bright, and of an inquiring mind. In their hands our
generation will be safe and secure when finally we set aside our
burden. God bless the youth of this nation!