

The Band Will Play On

by Martin “Red” Fredricks

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Last month, in the midst of all the blather surrounding Monica, Ken, Paula, Bill and all the bit players in Congress, it was refreshing to be reminded there are some things about this country that still exude dignity.

The U.S. Marine Band, dubbed “The President’s Own” by Thomas Jefferson, performed in the Crystal Ballroom at the Ramada Plaza Suites in October. I was fortunate enough to be in one of the front rows, tapping my feet to its rousing tunes. The talented musicians played some of my favorite marches, including “Sabre and Spurs” and “Semper Fidelis,” numbers I haven’t heard since my junior high school days.

Back then, I’d go over to my grandparents’ house after school in the early fall to cut the grass or rake the leaves. When I finished, whether I did a good job or not, my grandmother would invite me in and pay me \$5-\$10, with apple pie ala mode or chocolate chip cookies on the side. After ruining my dinner, I’d wander into the livingroom, where Martin C. “Red” Fredricks Jr. spent his retirement afternoons.

Grandpa Red would be sitting in his chair, watching Perry Mason on television or listening to the melancholy ballads of his Irish ancestors. When he was in a good mood, I’d hear the marches of John Philip Sousa.

My granddad was not the most gregarious or jovial person in the world. Truth to tell, I was afraid of him when I was younger. He was a district court judge for many years, and had that air of importance about him. To a kid like me, the solemnity and foreboding flowed off of him like the long, black robes he wore in his courtroom.

But in those later years, he loosened up. We often played checkers, him letting me win until one day I truly trapped his last king, or we listened to the marches together. He’d be tapping his foot to “The Stars and Stripes Forever” blasting out of the phonograph. He’d be smiling, which for Grandpa Red was even more unusual than mindless chitchat. The music must have reminded him of whatever good came of his service in World War II.

By today’s standards, Red Fredricks was old for military service when the United States entered the war. He was married with small children at home, but he volunteered, anyway. He landed on Omaha Beach during the invasion of Normandy. Several days later, he was wounded while filling his canteen in a

stream, and he spent months in Army hospitals recuperating. One of his wounds locked his elbow so that he couldn't lift his left arm above his head, condemning him to years of zip-up neckties for Christmas from his namesake grandson.

Grandfather didn't talk about the war, at least not to me. Only recently, when I saw the movie "Saving Private Ryan" did I gain at least a partial comprehension of what he and his buddies endured. They faced down tyranny, and many died, for something they believed in. For me.

At the end of the concert last month, the U.S. Marine Band played a medley of all the marches representing the various branches of service. The band's moderator invited those who had served to stand and be recognized when their branch's march was played. I saw the pride on the faces of those who stood, and the pride of their families who sat around them.

As the band played through the roaring applause, I was called back to lazy, cool, sunny afternoons in Grandpa's livingroom. Seeing him there again, waving his arms, even the bad one, back and forth in time with the music, I knew his service was important.

Grandpa Red died several years ago, so he wasn't there to stand as his march was played, but I was proud for him. I was too young and thoughtless before he died to thank him, to say I was proud to be his grandson. They say it's never too late.

So, thank you, Grandpa, for serving your country, for making it a place where one day your great-grandchildren will enjoy the freedom you and your comrades sacrificed to preserve.

With Veteran's Day just passed, I think about the concert and the men and women who stood to be recognized. I'm reminded there's a whole lot of good about this country, like grand marches, fabulous bands to play them, apple pie, afternoons with grandparents and people who give of themselves for others.

The U.S. Marine Band, formed in 1798, has accompanied more sorry times in the White House and on Capitol Hill than these. We'll get through this, too, and refocus on what's really important. The band will play on.

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