

Life Stories

Destiny may choose un-willing and fearful to become next Hero



In memory of Remembrance Day, it would be rather inviting, if I could tell the story most people would prefer to hear. Such a story may go somewhat like this, “A brave young man who believed so much in freedom, boldly enlisted himself in the war. He fought and suffered, selflessly, never giving up, so everyone else could enjoy the very freedom which he valued so dearly.”

I cannot, however, tell such a story, not even a story that would emphasize patriotism nor a bold stance against evil dictatorship.

The story I will tell you is about a young, naïve and sensitive boy looking for adventure; this boy was my grandfather.

Jalmari Vastamaa was his name. He was just 15 years-old when World War II first broke out, spreading across Europe like a virus. Jalmari was a Finnish boy, mostly likely apprenticing in his father’s paper mill (a major economic industry within Social-democratic Finland).

During those days Finland was divided in what was termed, “the war of the brothers”. In lieu of the hard times felt by the poor, some Finnish people sided with Russia’s ideological communistic government. Such people, like my grandfather’s father, Imanuel, felt that communism was of greater benefit to the less fortunate. Others, like Imanuel’s brother however, wanted Finland to remain the same. Due to acts he deemed as treason, Imanuel’s brother wanted him dead. This was the war of the brothers, a silent war, but war the just the same.

When World War II broke out, Russia gave Finland no choice in the matter. Whether the people liked it or not, Finland was to become an extension of the great mother Russia.

Meanwhile, Finland responded by declaring war on Russia. The Finnish government quickly enlisted as many men as possible. Furthering their efforts, the Finnish government put up posters upon posters guaranteeing a paid soldier’s life to be one of excitement, adventure and travel.

Jalmari certainly enjoyed the idea of excitement, adventure and travel and enlisted himself in the Finnish army. Even though he was just 15 years-old, he had somehow swayed officials to think he was the legal age of 17, required for enlistment.

Jalmari certainly was well aware that people die in war. This fact probably did not bother him as life back then was hard, and people died all the time any-

way. In his young mind, Jalmari was thinking only of the adventure, smokes and drinks and good times traveling with his friends; then after the war, ‘boom’, he would be a hero!

I can just imagine that first day at camp; one soldier asked another: “What brings you here?” while they waited in line for their new uniforms.

The soldier frowned and replied, with some subtle resentment in his tone, “Drafted”.

Another soldier piped in, “Not me, I came to check this action out, and kick some Russian ass while I’m at it.” A few others laughed in agreement.

Jalmari noticed the back door opening, while he waited at the back of the line. “Oh my God!” he thought to himself.

Eight, heavily blue-toned, cold and lifeless bodies were carried by the line of standing men waiting for their uniforms. Jalmari could not help but stare, each body had wide open eyes and a hanging jaw.

Jalmari inadvertently made eye contact with one of the lifeless beings. Staring into the vacant, glazed eyes of the dead man, Jalmari, received a thought in his own mind; it was as if the dead man had sent him a message that said, “your time will come”!

While all this was going on, there was silent respect demonstrated by the soldiers in line. One soldier nervously whispered, “Russians”.

Jalmari thought to himself, “What the hell did I get my self into”.

Yes, that’s right; my grandfather regretted his hasty actions the very first day of his enlistment. I can’t imagine having such heavy regret, especially given that, unknown to grandfather and many others at the time, World War II stretched on for five very long years.

During the first few weeks of boot camp, more and more lifeless bodies, freakishly stiffened by rigor mortis, were carried through on stretchers. Jalmari succumbed to suffering a series of recurring nightmares. It seemed to him that the spirits of the dead soldiers were there to haunt him. One spirit said: “This war is not worth it, son, who cares what it’s about, I have nothing, not even my life.” Another unrepentantly screamed, “I hate you God!”

After the first four months of silent prayers and cold sweats, boot camp was over; Jalmari was further shocked to learn he was assigned to fight in front of the front line.

Jalmari would never know if he, personally, killed anyone during the next five years of the war. He was the one to calculate wind velocity and temperature for the high range cannon, so that it could shoot bullets over a clear mile.

At the very least, Jalmari was not alone in the frozen hard ditches wherein he and his unit hid. One day, however, the un-expected occurred and it was

determined that the unit would separate for a time, for the good of the whole.

Jalmari ended up walking alone for miles, his feet badly blistered. When night time fell, it came quickly, bringing its dark blinding curtain along with it. Jalmari finally found a place to rest, inside a baron barn under its front view window.

Just as he was dozing off to sleep, Jalmari heard three Russian soldiers talking in the distance. He carefully peered through the window and saw them approaching his shelter. Realizing he would surely be shot, Jalmari ran up the barn stairs to the second floor window.

Jalmari had never been so frightened in his life; he knew he was most definitely out numbered. His heart started pounding as if he was suffering his first heart attack. “Sorry God, sorry, sorry, sorry,” he rambled on to himself.

Jalmari grabbed his gun, and aimed with his greater anger, “son of a ___!” ‘Crack,’ went the gun, and one Russian soldier dropped to the ground. A second Russian assisted his fallen colleague while the third ran around the barn. ‘Pop,’ went Jalmari’s gun again, and down went the third soldier.

The second Russian soldier left his fallen comrade and ran towards the barn doors. Jalmari turned around, awaiting the Russian’s arrival on the second floor. “Just leave me alone!” he thought to himself.

Jalmari could see the gun in hand of the approaching Russian and he moved to shoot first; the Russian dropped his own gun in surprise. Jalmari ran quickly over to him, kicked him in the face, and then shot him in the stomach.

The next day, Jalmari met up with a friend from his unit and they talked about running away and hiding until the war ended. These young soldiers realized, however, if they were found they would be executed for treason. Jalmari and his friend decided to head back to find the unit.

Four years later, the war ended. A very relieved Jalmari returned home to his wife, Tuovi, whom he had met during the Great War, World War I.

It is incredible, how life continues on during such bad times. Many people truly believed that World War II was Armageddon, as foretold by the Holy Bible.

God showed mercy on this young soldier and kept him safe throughout the five years of the war. Jalmari was able to return to begin his family. Why this happened, no one really knew. During his military service, Jalmari had even tried to join the German army as did many other Finnish soldiers; ultimately, it was to be a united stance against Russia.

Jalmari, however, was not successful in getting

into the German army. Imanuel’s employer, the owner of a paper mill, found Jalmari’s application and tore it up. This astute businessman knew Hitler was up to something very sinister and he told Imanuel not to worry, he would ensure that Jalmari did not join the Germans.

Knowing so much of my grandfather’s story and the way he felt about fighting in the war, I cannot say that he fought solely for freedom. Within his own mind, he did not even know what he had accomplished, if anything.

Back at home with his wife, Tuovi, family life should have served Jalmari as more welcoming. Life at home, however, seemed anything but welcoming to this young man of twenty years. The couple had a home and two baby daughters, yet Jalmari acted as if he both loved and hated Tuovi.

His behaviour was strange to say the least and there were problems. My grandmother told me of the time Jalmari went hunting with a friend. Afterward, Jalmari’s friend said to Tuovi, “That man is very capable of killing someone.”

Jalmari spent his time riding alone on his beloved motorcycle, stopping for a few drinks here and there. Eventually, both Jalmari and Tuovi became alcoholics. His alcoholism lead Jalmari to threaten his daughter, my mother, with a shotgun to keep her mouth shut. After this incident, a neighbour ran into the house and grabbed the shotgun, saying to Jalmari, “Please understand, Jalmari, this is for the best”. A short time later, the family headed off to the alcohol addiction centre for counseling.

My grandmother had always said me, “The war really did something to Jalmari’s head; the war ends and they send you home like nothing happened.” The truth is, my grandfather was a good man. Jalmari would always say, “War is no damn good for nothing,” and “man needs religion; without religion there is war.” He truly saw no good that could come from any violence for any reason.

When I was born, Grandfather raised me with the most unconditional love, always referring to me as ‘his son’. He never raised a hand out of anger to me and always told me, “Darryl is a good boy, always be nice to the people, Darryl!”

Yes, Jalmari found his salvation through raising me, his grandson, learning very well from the lessons brought to him by the dark side of himself and humanity. He continued to suffer recurring nightmares of Russians surrounding his home, waiting to kill him. Many nights he would wake up, trembling in a cold sweat. These nightmares tormented him until he died in 1998.

We should remember soldiers like my grandfather, who reluctantly and quite un-willingly fought for the democracy and the freedom we all enjoy today.

To quote Jalmari Vastamaa, my grandfather, “The whole life is like a school. We teach more to the next generation than we teach ourselves; like technology, it improves because it is added onto.”

- Darryl Learie

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generation than we teach
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Jalmari Vastamaa

Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes of which all men have some.

Charles Dickens

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