

TAPS AT REVEILLE

Waking Up After All These Years

BY PETER RICHMOND

It was a teenager with a couple of earrings and badly dyed spiky blond hair, standing next to the barrel of dried pigs' ears in the Agway on Route 22, who told me that the logical place to look for a flag was the American Legion post in town. This was patently obvious to the kid, even a kid who seemed emblematic of slackerdom incarnate: that if you needed to buy an American flag, you'd go to the American Legion. This hadn't occurred to me, even though I'd driven past the Legion post next to the dry cleaners every day for the last four years, ever since we moved to town. But I'd never been inside it. Hell, I didn't even know what went on inside it.

I felt sort of foolish, that a kid in a feed store had to tell me where to buy a flag. Then again, I'd felt pretty foolish going around town all morning, two days after the attack, asking where to buy a flag in the first place, thereby admitting that I didn't have one in my attic or my basement or in a drawer somewhere.

The front doors of American Legion Post 178 were locked, but in the parking lot out back I saw three cars, and when I pressed my face to the glass of the back door, I saw a long bar inside, men hunched on stools and a TV tuned to CNN. When I tried the door and found it locked, one of them swung off his stool, walked over, opened the door without a word and returned to his glass of beer. It was in one of those old-fashioned beer glasses that men used to drink Schlitz out of in their basement rec rooms.

Three men sat at the bar, drinking beers and some kind of whiskey, even though it was just after 11 on a brilliantly sunny cloudless morning. It was a spotlessly clean place, lit by the sun outside and the neon beer signs in the room itself. If I were a different sort of man myself, this would have seemed like the best kind of time and place to be having a morning drink.

Instead, I asked the man behind the bar if he had any flags to sell, and he said he had

one left, a 3-foot-by-5-foot flag, for \$28. It was his last one. So I bought the last flag in Millerton, New York, my small blue-collar town two hours north of Ground Zero, and turned to leave.

"Thanks for showing the flag," said the man who'd opened the door, with no irony, nor judgment. Just thanks. I didn't know what to answer. I didn't know him, or why he was there, or what he had done for our country. Then I heard myself say, "Thanks for believing in the things we all believe in right now," and I walked out.

Back home, I tacked the flag to the roof of our front porch, with red and white tacks, next to an empty wasp nest. I hung it upright, the stripes horizontal, as if it were on a flagpole. But it looked wrong. So I climbed back up the ladder, and hung it again, downward this time, with the blue field of stars on the top, and the stripes vertical.

Then I stood back to admire my work. The pride I felt at seeing it—the first on the block!—ended all thoughts of how sorry a statement it was that I hadn't owned a flag and didn't even know how to hang one. After all, there was no surprise that I was unfamiliar with the flag. For when it came to being American, my generation, Eisenhower babies born in the mid-fifties, didn't have a clue.

Today, as I write, with my flag luffing in an autumn wind, visible out the living room window, my phone rings, and the e-mails arrive in clusters. They're nearly all from friends reaching out, to not only affirm that we're still here, but also that something is changing, something that even the most detached generation in American history can feel. The flurry of contacts from people with whom I thought I'd lost touch, as well as from regular friends, has been remarkable. They seem to share not only my age, but also my conviction that we have not just united as a nation, but that, finally, we have united as generations and—for the first time—that mine has a place. For the first time, we are part of the continuum that spans from my dad to my son—the 16-year-old slacker who told me the other day that he wanted to enlist, if only they'd let him. And that from

here on in, we belong to the land as strongly as the generations that came before us.

We weren't the lost generation, those of us who came to adulthood in the mid-Seventies, a decade that has been relegated in history to the status of a bad television show; we were the loser generation. We contributed nothing. We had no name, no pride, no identity. We were of no particular use to anyone other than ourselves and those right around us.

We were much too young to feel the pride of the last good war, of course, but we were also too young to even feel the pride of the anti-war movement thirty years ago, which at bottom was tremendously patriotic—as patriotic in its own way as my neighbors hunched over their morning beers at Legion Post 178. No one could be so outraged with a nation's policies unless they cared about their country. Don't kid yourself: Abbie Hoffman loved that flag.

Sure, I marched, but I was just trying on the attitude, like my older brother's borrowed "Strike!" t-shirt; neither fit. Then we were too old for the "Me Generation," which, in a perverse way, was as American as it gets: they had an industry of their own. They didn't make rails or cars, but they made money.

What we were willed was cynicism, and how detached it made us! Anchored to sarcasm and irony was like being anchored to the wind. We knew how to sneer. That's not much. But it was what we knew how to do. And our uselessness was obvious to everyone else. I learned that early on, three years out of Yale, when, as a sportswriter in New Haven, I was asked to interview Yale's new athletic director, Frank Ryan. The old Cleveland Brown quarterback had left his position on the faculty at Rice to reinvigorate Yale's fumbling sports program.

I told Ryan I'd been a Yalie myself.

"What class?" he asked.

Seventy-five originally, I said. '76 by the time I got the diploma. Took me five and a half years.

Ryan's answer has stayed with me ever since: "Oh," he said, with stunning nonchalance, as if he weren't telling me anything I didn't already know. "They've told me about your classes. You guys were the classes known for contributing nothing. Leaving no legacy. The selfish years."

He was right. All we ended up contributing were a legion of post-modern,

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post-ironic commentators. We had a take on everything, without adding anything to the mix, because we had nothing to add of our own, except a wave of cinematic retro-patriotism that veered from the sincere hero worship of *Saving Private Ryan* to the hokey, sterilized pablum of *Pearl Harbor*.

But that time is over. On September 11, 2001, we were attacked on our own soil for the first time, not only in my lifetime, but in all of our lifetimes. And now that every generation has experienced the trauma, we have common ground, we have a common stamp, and it is permanent. Patriotism has an entirely new meaning, now: to have witnessed and experienced the attacks and come out on the other side with a clearer sense of purpose.

It is always thus, in the development of the individual or of a nation: the organism matures, outside events trigger innate propensities, push it to the next level of awareness. Because of a handful of unthinkable acts of terrorism, our nation was forced to grow up a great deal in a very short time. We have now arrived in a place where the word "patriotism" will never again carry the taint of rah-rah jingoism, or a cynical subtext. Its meaning is now clear and clean, and as long as all of us share its understanding, this is all we will need to win this war.

Because for all of their cunning, the hijackers and their bosses somehow didn't anticipate the most basic law of American physics: that the good to come out of an act of terrorism will always be exponentially greater, correlatively, than the evil that contributed to the original tragedy. Somehow, our attackers hadn't anticipated that in attacking the fat and happy land, they would, in fact, change it. For now, in America, something new has been forged, just at the time when we needed some forging. And we have our enemies to thank for it.

The accumulating stories of heroism and hope and selflessness here at home out-



weigh the tragedy a hundredfold, on so many levels—this is obvious to all now. The world has seen that New York is not a city of arrogant, violent, materialistic boors, but an amalgam of all of us, a global gumbo, one of those clichéd melting-pot World War II movie platoons that, when put to the test, answers with its best. But all clichés are based on truth, aren't they? And those who thought they knew what made the U.S.A. run, who reacted as if we were a separate species made up of rich, spoiled, greedy little kids, now know how foolish their generalizations were.

I can feel this. And if I can feel it, from the depths of my cynicism, we all can. For wasn't it just a few hours after I put my own flag up that Peter Jennings told me Congress had passed a resolution to fly flags for 30 days? Mine was already up, Peter. For once, I—and, I hope, my generation—had been ahead of the American curve. "I just

wish that I had more/any faith that the fate of humanity is in able hands," says the e-mail I received a few minutes ago from a friend. But he's a guy in his early thirties, and I think his youth blinds him from seeing how we have never been in better hands: our own.

I know this for so many reasons, but none as telling as what happened on my local alt-radio station today. On "Hal's Show," Hal decided to play all the songs that "Clear Channel," the nationwide radio conglomerate, asked its thousand-plus stations not to play, lest they put us in mind of the horror of Black Tuesday. The company's motives may have been purely paternalistic, but its request rang far more of Big Brotherdom, as an absurd act of self-censorship and completely misconceived, for we must live with what happened on that day daily, from here on in, must be reminded of it always.

Anyway. Hal is my age. A very friendly guy. Hell of an acoustic guitar player, has a CD of his own. Plays the local club scene when he isn't doing his daily show. To know Hal, the alt-folkie, is to know a very familiar face of my generation: the guy who moves to a different kind of music; the guy who never owned a suit; the guy who keeps hours very different from those who march on Main Street America. The guy who, over a couple of beers, you share your cynicism with about big money, about country club politicians, about the morass of materialistic mainstream America.

Well, today, Hal—the happy hippie—broke down on the air, as he said these words, as he pleaded with all of us, listening to his show: "We have to leave something better than this for our children," came the cracking voice. And then, through my car-radio speakers, he started to sob.

Then the next song—the next on his list of defiant songs—came on. It was REM, singing "It's The End of the World As We Know It." And I feel fine. ■



My Private Olympus

BY RICH KARLGAARD

The desire to fly a small airplane, if it appears in one at all, normally does so in youth. But not for me. Quite suddenly at age 45 I was gripped by the idea of launching myself skyward.

One would like to say such a motivation was mostly ideological, and it was. To start there is ultimate freedom—roaming the skies. This is pleasing to both halves of the soul, the secular-libertarian and the transcendent. Both halves, incidentally, get to share another pleasure, dominion over the earth, precisely the feeling one enjoys at 5,500 feet on a clear day.

On top of this is the sublime delight of drinking Avgas by the quarter ton and burping out cubic miles of noise. Nothing annoys lefty Greens more.

So that's why I fly.

The stupidest thing one can do, which I immediately did, is go out and buy an airplane before one knows how to fly it. Not just any airplane, but the *prince* of single-engine planes, the Mercedes-like Beech Bonanza. My A36, a 1994 model, had every goodie a pilot could want—leather yoke, air-conditioning, six cylinders, six seats. The plane cost the yearly salaries of fifteen Appalachian social workers (another sublime thought). Before *Spectator* readers tell me how rock stupid it was to buy a 202-mph retractable-gear, complex “doctor killer” as a training aircraft, let me tell you that it was March 2000 when

I made the decision. Life was bountiful. Nasdaq had just hit 5000. Yahoo was worth \$100 billion, more than GM, Ford and Daimler-Chrysler combined. A company I had founded, Garage.com, had just filed for its IPO. I was going to be rich—didn't it say so in the IPO prospectus? I certainly felt it. What's a third of a million dollars? A trifle.

I'm not going to bore you with the sad story of how Garage.com's IPO never floated, or how, a few months after that, I actually started weeping when the mechanic presented a bill of \$4,500 for what seemed to me hardly any work on three of the Bonanza's six cylinders—\$4,500 for three cylinders! My wife started to weep, too, saying that my new sport had crowded out her dreams of a kitchen remodel and were keeping the kids in public school. The Bonanza went bye bye in February this year. But this is all side stuff. The main point is that until this summer, still short of obtaining my certificate, I did not fly. And I learned that I was very unhappy deprived of my aerial Prozac.

A little history on the economics of flying:

In 1978, the number of small aircraft built by Cessna, Mooney, Piper, Beechcraft, and others peaked at over 18,000. By 1994, the number had fallen to about 900. Some blame the 1986 tax law, which wiped out deductions for individual owner-pilots. But most blame trial lawyers. The evil shylocks convinced juries over the years that whenever a blind-drunk pilot flew over the mountains at night in a rainstorm and vanished, well, Cessna, you see, was to blame because it failed to warn him

of this risk. Yes, and it clearly was Mooney's fault whenever a 20-hour student pilot buzzed his girlfriend's house at 200 feet, stalled and spun it in. Ditto for the lucky pilot who was getting himself initiated into the “mile-high club,” forgot to switch fuel tanks and ran out of gas. Litigation exploded in the 1980s, and embedded itself into the price of every new airplane. In 1968, a new Beechcraft A36 cost \$38,700. In 2001 it costs \$645,000. During a period when the CPI has increased four-fold, the price of a new plane has gone up 18-fold. Thanks again, trial lawyers. Dirtbags.

If you take up flying, you'll be in for a shock when you visit an airport and see the fleet of 1970's-vintage trainers. The seats are torn, the plastic is peeling. Quite a number smell vaguely of puke. The general aviation fleet is old, because so few planes were built over the last twenty years. Last year the number of new planes crawled back to 2,500. In recessionary 2001, the number could slide back to 2,000. The entire fleet of piston planes in the U.S. is guessed to be about 300,000. With crashes and rust, stocks are actually delumping.

So for the last ten years, one's flying options have come down to this: buy a new plane and dispatch your wife to laundry jobs and your kids to public schools in ripped blue jeans. Or else manfully rent old junk. But now, thanks to the Internet, a middle way has been born: fractional ownership or leasing. It's a perfect example of what the Web does best. By speeding up information flow and lowering costs, the Net can “make markets” that had been previously too expensive or inconveniently “sticky.” And thus today there is a Web-based liquid market in new aircraft, for pilots who want to own as little as one-eighth of an airplane.

In June I plunked down \$8,000 for a one-

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