

# Unforgiven

This wasn't his idea. There were plenty of other places where someone from Chicago on his first trip east could while away a Sunday afternoon in or around New York City. Broadway and Times Square came to mind. And Coney Island, too. But Peter had promised his dad when the man was on his deathbed that he'd do it—something his father had never gotten around to doing and then couldn't because of his failing health: reconnect with his World War II platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class (ret.) Davin Cassidy, 3rd Battalion, 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division.

It took the help of a private investigator, but Peter had finally located the man at an assisted living facility near Palisades, New Jersey. Now, as he drove there from La Guardia on a sweltering Saturday afternoon in August, 2010, his only thoughts were to pay his respects, say something fitting—"Just tell him thanks for what he did for us," were his father's last words—and be on this way. Mission accomplished, as it were. He chuckled to himself and wondered why he was even making the trip, finally laying the 'blame', if that were the right word, on a son's duty to his father. Anyway, when all was said and done, what difference would it make? What, if anything, would change?

The assisted living facility, not as decoratively uninspiring as that of a hospital, was typical for its genre . . . it featured bright fluorescent lights embedded in sound-dampening ceiling panels, beige-painted walls on which were hung sparsely spaced, large but surely inexpensive reproductions of paintings by well-known landscape artists, and a type of sanitary flooring used in such buildings, polished to a high gloss. The faint scent of a sanitizer used to control odors was unmistakable. An elevator, one of four, waited for him in the area beyond the dining hall and to the left of the glassed-in entrance to the new health and fitness center. Encouraged by the center's resident trainer, a lone senior could be seen struggling with weights on a pulley, barely raising them an inch or two from the stack before yielding to gravity and collapsing for a rest. *Life's a bitch*, thought Peter, as he stepped over the threshold and punched the floor button. On the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, to where the receptionist had directed him, everything changed. The floors were carpeted, with wainscoting extending the entire length of the hallway. Above the paneling, wallpaper rendered in a tasteful floral pattern lent a serene atmosphere to the space while hanging fixtures provided more than sufficient light to assure the safety of residents and visitors alike. If he hadn't known where he was, he could have mistaken this part of the building for that found in most any hotel or motel. Architecturally nondescript, but generally not off-putting.

He had no trouble finding Davin Cassidy's room—number 637, to be exact—near the end of the hallway on the morning side of the building. The unmistakable voices of James Cagney and Jean Harlow could be heard through the wall. There was no missing the Purple Heart decoration and small American flag tacked next to the door, just above the small brass plate on which the name 'Cassidy' had been engraved. Whoever's behind that door, thought Peter, has been through Hell. He, of course, had no idea how bad it had been, given his father never would talk about 'the War'. That was a subject Peter and others in the family were strictly forbidden to discuss with the family patriarch. Not that Peter hadn't tried. But as a freshman in high school, after attempting to engage his father in a discussion of the Allied Force's landing on Omaha Beach at the dinner table one night, he was sent to his room in tears after being told never again to raise that or any other

subject pertaining to World War II in the house. Lesson learned. The embarrassment he felt that night welled up in his mind as he lifted his hand and knocked gently on the door.

A thin voice beckoned. "Come in, it's unlocked." Inside he found a man in his mid-80s sitting in a large leather-covered recliner to the left of a sliding glass door that led to a balcony overlooking the Hudson River. The old man let his *Times* slide to the floor. Then he picked up the remote, switched off the television set, and adjusting his glasses, squinted at Peter for a few seconds. Finally, he spoke, inquiring hesitantly, "Do I know you, sir?"

"No, Sergeant Cassidy, we've never met. My name's Peter Donato. I'm from Chicago."

"Donato?" The old man cocked his head, his eyes looking up into his mind's eye. Clearly he was searching for something, *anything* that would trigger when or where he had heard that name before. And then the light of recognition dawned upon his face.

"I knew a Donato once. Antonio Donato. Yes! Corporal Antonio Donato. But we called him Tony. He was one of my squad leaders! Good soldier. Served under me in Europe. Are you related to him?"

"He was my father, Sergeant."

Cassidy squinted again, attempting to get a better look at the young man standing before him. "Of course. Come in, come in." He pointed at a kitchen chair and beckoned Peter to bring it forward and sit. The old man smiled. "I shoulda known. You look just like I remember your father."

Peter laughed. "That's not the first time I've been told that," he said, sitting.

"Your father was a fine man, son. The finest! We had a lot in common, you know," he said, leaning forward, "both coming from large families and all, and then, joining the Army to do our duty." Like Peter's father, Cassidy had lied his way into the Army on his seventeenth birthday and served three years, parachuting into France on D-Day and fighting through the end of the European Campaign.

"He said the same about you, Sergeant. And on his deathbed—" The color suddenly drained from Cassidy's face and his voice went flat. "Tony's dead?"

"Yes, sadly. He died two months ago. His heart simply gave out." Seeing the despair in Cassidy's eyes, and remembering why he had made the journey east, Peter quickly turned the conversation to its intended purpose. "But he made me promise I'd find you and tell you what an honor it was for him to have fought with you. He also wanted me to tell you how much your friendship meant to him, something for which he was forever grateful." Peter watched as Cassidy nodded ever so slightly, but the old man said nothing. If he had been focusing on what Peter had been telling him up to now, it was difficult to say where his mind had gone, for his eyes were looking right though Peter. The silence was awkward, and compelled Peter to continue talking. "He also wanted me to tell you how grateful he was for your having saved his men's lives at Sainte-Mère-Église."

The sergeant's eyes moistened. Not wanting to embarrass him, Peter looked away, toward the old weathered book case across the room. On its top shelf stood several framed pictures, including a color photograph taken of Cassidy and a family of four—two adults and, Peter assumed, their children. Maybe one of the adults is Cassidy's child, he thought. But where was Cassidy's wife? Best not to ask. Peter shifted his gaze right. The next picture, smaller and rendered in black and white, was faded, with yellowing around the edges. Pictured were four soldiers standing in front of a burned-out church. He recognized one of the men—a teenager, really—as his father; another, on the end to the right, almost certainly must be Cassidy, he thought. God, they were young. They should

have been working at filling stations or doing the things kids 18 years old did at the time. Was the world totally crazy then? The four were smiling, flashing the 'Victory' sign with the fingers of their right hands, their left hands firmly grasping the slings of their rifles, which were slung over their shoulders. Two had cigarettes dangling from their lips. Peter rose, walked to the book case, reached for the picture frame, and returning to his chair in front of the sergeant, handed the photograph to the man. "When was this taken, Sarge?"

Cassidy regarded it for a moment and shook his head as if he could not believe how many years had passed. Then, as the memories of what had happened in the days leading up to the moment captured in that photograph flooded into his mind, he began to speak. "This was taken several days after we liberated the little French town of Sainte-Mère-Église following the invasion of Normandy. There were mines and booby-traps all over the place. It took a while until we were even able to bring in the people we needed to clean it up. But eventually we got the job done, gave the town back to the its people, and moved inland."

He gently, almost reverently, brushed the dust from the frame with the fingers of his right hand. "Those were great guys, son. See the fellow on the left—he poked a finger on the glass—that's Stanley Cohn, a wise-cracking Jewish kid from the Bronx. Boy, no matter how bad things got, he could always make us laugh. Kept us in stiches, all right, especially when he spoke with a Yiddish accent. Next to him is your dad, who was Roman Catholic, of course. He and I always attended Sunday Mass together. To his left is Walt Sutton. He was a devout Baptist from Dallas. And that's me on the other end, an old Irish Catholic from Boston. Rank didn't matter. Nor did religion or background. We were like brothers. We were never out of each other's sight." He paused and slumped in his chair, the picture frame falling to his lap. "Stanley was killed two days after this picture was taken when we were ambushed just to the south, in Carentan. Walt died in the Battle of the Bulge. Your dad held him in his arms as he passed. A medic tried to stem the bleeding, but his wounds were massive. It was late December, 1944. At Bastogne. We were attached, then, to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. The worst fighting I ever saw." Cassidy shook his head as if even now he still could not believe it. "And to think Walt almost made it through the war. Your father never was the same after that. It was like the light went out of his eyes . . . ." His voice trailed off and his focus drained.

The room fell silent. Peter rose almost without thinking, and taking the picture with his left hand, shook Cassidy's hand. "Thank you for your service, sir." Cassidy looked up slowly, hardly appearing to hear what Peter had said. His mind was elsewhere, a thousand miles away on a battlefield that had long ago fallen silent in honor of the dead. So while Sergeant First Class (ret.) Davin Cassidy, 3rd Battalion, 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, gathered his thoughts and again paid his respects to the fallen of World War II, Peter turned with a tear in his eye, took a few steps, and returned the picture of the four infantrymen to its place of honor on the book shelf.

When he turned around, he was surprised to see Cassidy struggling to his feet with the help of his cane. "Wait here, son. I wanna show you something." The sergeant walked with difficulty, and perhaps some pain, into his bedroom, which was off to the left of the small hallway at the entrance to the apartment. In a few seconds Peter heard a dresser drawer open and the sound of the old man rummaging through its contents. Soon he returned. In his left hand were an oval aluminum dog tag and its chain, which he handed to his visitor. A name and military unit had been punched in German into the tag. The most

remarkable feature of the piece, however, was the bullet hole in its center. Peter wondered what the story behind it was as he ran his fingers over the ragged edges on the back. As he looked closer, he saw the unmistakable signs of faint, reddish-brown blood stains.

Cassidy slowly lowered himself into his chair and set his cane on the floor. “Remember the church in the picture, son?”

Peter nodded. “Well, our unit had been pinned down for more than a day by a German sniper in the bell tower. Trouble was, we couldn’t get a tank or other piece of artillery in there to take him out. From the sound of it, we thought the guy was using a Karabiner 98k.” Cassidy shook his head. “He was taking a terrible toll on our guys. We lost half your dad’s squad just getting into position in front of the church.” At this point Cassidy leaned forward and started to whisper, as if he were briefing Peter on a Top Secret mission. He also started embellishing his delivery with hand gestures, painting a picture of the action as he relived that day more than 65 years earlier in Sainte-Mère-Église. “So, after dark, I worked my way ’round to the back of the building and into the sanctuary, where I crouched behind the pulpit. ’Long about two in the morning, I heard the bastard making his way slowly down from the bell tower—I dunno why he was comin’ down—maybe he needed to grab more ammo or take a leak. I couldn’t see nothin’, bein’ it was pitch black and all, but I heard him. He was taking very slow steps, feeling his way down, real careful like. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it was going to jump out of my chest. All at once I see the flare from a match he swiped on the stone wall of the spiral staircase. He musta thought he had gotten down far enough from the top so no one would see the light from a match.”

Peter almost stopped breathing as he listened to the old man’s story, so intent was he to hear every word.

The sergeant continued. “Anyway, he soon appeared and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. I rose ever so quietly, steadied myself on the pulpit in front of the large crucifix, and with Jesus Christ, Himself, looking down on me, took aim. Then, just as the match began to flicker, I slowly squeezed the trigger. The bullet went straight through his dog tag and into his heart. He dropped without uttering a sound. And that was the end of him.”

Peter said nothing, but nodded ever so slightly. He gave the appearance of understanding what he had just heard but in truth, he didn’t. He couldn’t. He couldn’t even *imagine* what it must have been like to fight in World War II, much less how it must have felt to kill another human being.

The old man sat back, thought for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and shook his head. “What I did was a sin, you know. A terrible sin.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“Killing him in God’s house of worship. I desecrated the sanctuary.” Cassidy made the sign of the cross. “But he would’ve done the same to me, given the chance. In a heartbeat! And I had my men to think of, Peter—your father and the others. I had to look out for them. They were my responsibility, you know. Some things you do just because you have no choice!” He blurted the words out as if he were pleading his case before Jesus and God Almighty. “Religion, morality, right and wrong . . . they had nothing to do with it. It was kill or be killed, as simple as that.” Peter wasn’t quite sure why he was telling him these things. Certainly, he hadn’t questioned the old man’s actions. “You do what you have to do to stay alive, son, and if you’re lucky, afterwards, you try to make peace with God . . . that is, when the cries of the dying and the wounded no longer wake you from the nightmares that leave you soaked in your own sweat. But the fact is, I still hear their cries

in the night, even after all these years. And after a while, I came to understand they're the price I'm paying for the sins I committed."

The room fell silent. Peter turned and looked out the sliding glass door toward the Hudson River, as if checking the weather. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't his place to judge this man or what he had done. And nothing he could say or do could erase whatever guilt Sergeant Cassidy harbored, feelings that haunted him even after more than six decades had elapsed since he parachuted into Sainte-Mère-Église and took up the battle against the entrenched German Army.

After a few seconds, Peter stood, and placing the German dog tag and chain in front of the photograph of the 'Band of Four', started for the door. But before he even could turn to say good-bye, he heard the old man speak. "I'm happy your father found peace, son."

It was impossible to miss the tinge of envy in the sergeant's voice.