

Real Men Of Honor

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Monday, 01 June 2009 19:00

For many Americans – too many – Memorial Day means a backyard barbecue, or a pleasant day spent at the beach or a ballpark when they otherwise would be at work or at school. Those who have never worn a uniform often miss the real significance of a national holiday created to honor the men and women who have served the United States in the military, and sometimes paid the ultimate price for preserving the liberty which we all should cherish but sometimes take for granted.

Now, with the 65th anniversary of D-Day coming up on Saturday – and for anyone who is unaware of what that date means to this country and the world, try renting a video of Saving Private Ryan – the time seems appropriate to recognize two men who exemplify the best of what we believe America to be. Most people probably haven't heard of them, which is a shame. But maybe that's about to change, at least a little bit.

The Boxing Writers Association of America will stage its 84th annual awards dinner on June 12, at The Capitale in New York City. Some deserving individuals will be honored, such as 2008's Fighter of the Year, Manny Pacquiao, and the gallant Israel Vazquez and Rafael Marquez, whose third bout in their unforgettable trilogy was voted Fight of the Year.

But the historic nature of this particular BWAA dinner is marked not so much by those who have made their mark in boxing, but by two gallant servicemen – a deceased soldier and a onetime Navy pilot who, thankfully, is still very much alive – who have earned the highest honor this country has to bestow.

Whether you know it or not, all of us who wake each morning free to live our lives as we choose owe a debt to heroes like the late Bill Crawford and Thomas J. Hudner, Jr., each of whom is a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The BWAA's award for "perseverance in overcoming adversity" is shared by cancer survivors Genaro "Chicanito" Hernandez, the two-time former WBA super featherweight champion, and boxing writer George Kimball, a heavyweight in the profession and a contributor to The Sweet Science. They have stared down their share of adversity, and they face the challenge of staring down more. Cancer is a terrible opponent, scarier than the in-their-prime likes of Sonny Liston, George Foreman and Mike Tyson in that it keeps coming and must be confronted and battled daily.

But even brave men like Hernandez and Kimball would have to be inspired by the amazing, true stories of Crawford, for whom the perseverance in overcoming adversity award has been named, and Hudner, a retired captain who will present the first Crawford awards.

All who know boxing understand it is a sport that demands a commitment from its participants unlike that made by any other athlete. Every fighter who makes that walk from his dressing room to the ring, where someone in the other corner will try to beat the hell out of him, is

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possessed of a courage most people can't begin to comprehend. Boxing is a hurtin' business, and each fight, each round, has the potential for danger for those who elect to enter its ranks. Even its finest practitioners understand that there must be an ample investment in pain that must be made if greatness is to be achieved.

Still, swapping punches with someone with padded gloves on his fists isn't as treacherous as dodging bullets and literally putting your own life on the line to save your comrades. The best of the best don't set out to collect medals and commendations; more often than not, they don't even think of themselves as being particularly special. Circumstances sometimes dictate that they find themselves in dangerous places to do a hard, thankless job, and in the course of doing it an ordinary guy will find that he is capable of performing extraordinary deeds.

Consider first the tale of the late Bill Crawford, a standout Golden Gloves boxer in Colorado who dreamed of becoming a professional world champion. But his fighting skills were used for a higher purpose in World War II.

Crawford was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry for his actions during heavy fighting in September 1943 near Altavilla, Italy. On three separate occasions, and on his own initiative, he raced through intense enemy fire to detonate hand grenades on enemy gun sites. Captured by the Germans during the same engagement for which he earned the Medal of Honor, he was listed as "presumed dead." His father was presented his CMH in 1945.

Later that year, Crawford was among a group of soldiers rescued from German control. He remained in the Army and retired in 1967 as a master sergeant, later serving as a custodian at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

Crawford, who was 81 when he died in his hometown of Palmer Lake, Colo., in 2000, spoke modestly, if at all, of his remarkable military service.

"I was glad I was able to do my part," he once said in an interview. "I figured it was just a normal call to duty."

Captain Thomas J. Hudner, Jr., 84, did not personally know Bill Crawford, but he is aware of him. Such is often the case with members of their exclusive fraternity. While they consider their own acts of heroism to be "just a normal call to duty," the acts of other CMH recipients often inspire a sense of awe and admiration.

The tale of Capt. Hudner – the first American recipient of the CMH for actions during the Korean War – is no less inspirational than that of Master Sergeant Crawford.

In support of United Nations forces in 1950, Capt. Hudner, then a lieutenant j.g., purposefully crash-landed his Corsair fighter plane behind enemy lines in mountainous terrain near the Chosin reservoir in an effort to rescue an injured pilot, Ensign Jesse L. Brown, who had been shot down and was trapped in burning wreckage.

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Despite no tools at his disposal other than a small hand ax, Lt. j.g. Hudner ignored enemy troops and subzero temperatures to pack the fuselage with snow in an unavailing effort to save his fellow flier. His Medal of Honor citation reads as follows: his "exceptionally valiant and selfless devotion to a shipmate sustain and enhance the highest tradition of the U.S. Naval Service."

Another Memorial Day is past, and the next anniversary of D-Day will soon follow. But in reflecting upon the lives of Bill Crawford and Thomas J. Hudner, Jr., perhaps it is best not to consider such dates on a calendar as once-a-year occurrences.

Every day, when you stop and think of it, ought to be Memorial Day.