

The Call of Duty

A short story and discussion by Ted Boretti

"Dad," I called to my father as he was halfway out the door of the Pearl Harbor gift shop. "What about this?" I held the cap up for him to see. It was one of those midnight blue ball caps that veterans sometimes wear, with the name of a war or battle station emblazoned across its front in commanding yellow thread. Those caps possess power. They make you want to bow your head in reverence of the wearer. I thought my dad deserved this one. He had, after all, survived Pearl Harbor. It read, "USS Arizona – BB-39."

He took a quick look at it, made a disgusted frown, and walked out, letting the door swing shut behind him. I knew he wouldn't like it, just like he never liked talking about what happened to him during the attack on Pearl Harbor. He went out of his way to avoid those memories and he would not stand to wear a cap that drew attention to a past he avoided at all cost. I bought the cap anyway.

The rain on Oahu that December never gave us a break. Sure, it was warm, but all the tourists shivered in their flip-flops, shorts, and those bright floral shirts. We were constantly wet and that made it feel cold. I could see that my father was cold. No matter how many layers he wore – pants, socks, long-sleeved shirt, wool sweater, and jacket – he was paper thin, eighty-six years old, bald, and he refused to wear a hat even though my entire life I grew up hearing him grumble about how he lost all his heat through his head. That's another reason why I thought the cap might be a good idea.

I watched him through the gift shop window. The wind would blow, his clothes would balloon, and he would falter backwards a step. I lived in fear that the next mighty gust might sweep him up and carry him far off and drop him with a wet plunk into the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But his stubbornness made him so heavy he never blew away. He planted his cane firmly into the ground, moved forward step by undaunted step, and I followed him.

"I bought it anyway," I said to him when I caught up. He didn't reply and I felt a little guilty. I was intentionally provoking him, trying to get him to talk. Even if all I got was an angry snap, I would have been

grateful. The only time I had heard him speak all day was when he gave the waitress his order at breakfast. He ignored me and we walked in silence across the parking lot.

When my father first called to invite me to come with him to Hawaii, I knew it wasn't for fun. My mother, may she rest in peace, had often suggested going to Hawaii under the pretenses of a vacation, but my father firmly opposed it. He knew she had ulterior motives and he didn't appreciate her meddling in what my mother described as, "your father's need to make peace with what happened at Pearl Harbor." So when he called me out of the blue and told me he wanted to go to Hawaii, I knew this was big. I told my husband he had to stay home with the kids. This wasn't a family vacation or some father-daughter bonding time. Even though he never stated it outright, I knew that my father had finally decided it was time to make his peace.

But since we arrived in Hawaii all we had done so far was drive around Oahu looking for a specific brand of Kona Coffee, this famous kind of coffee they grew over on the Big Island. My father was obsessed. For two days, we hit every Hawaiian grocery and specialty food store we could find, but we could not find any coffee from the Kona Japanese Coffee Mill Company. One morning I woke up to find my father on the phone with a history professor at the University of Hawaii. I could tell from the eager tone of his voice that he was excited. He learned that the Kona Japanese Coffee Mill Company no longer existed, but back in the early 1900s, this mill sold its beans to the Captain Cook Coffee Company, so a cup of Captain Cook coffee was like drinking a cup from the Kona Japanese Coffee Mill. My father was satisfied, elated even, and I was relieved, until he made a second call and booked us two flights for later that morning from Oahu to the Big Island. I thought he was crazy but I didn't dare ask any questions as we hurried to leave without packing a thing. If this was a necessary part of his healing process then I didn't dare interfere.

We spent all of five hours on the Big Island. My father directed me and I drove us straight from the airport down the winding, mountainous coast to the Captain Cook Coffee Company. My father spoke, in private, to the company president himself, and he emerged from his hour-long meeting carrying a five-pound bag of coffee beans that the president had repeatedly guaranteed us was grown on the exact same

spot as the Kona Japanese Coffee Mill Company's original plantation. These beans were the descendents of those beans. I don't know what they talked about, but the president insisted that my father take it as a gift. The president was also proud to announce that one five-pound bag of his Kona Coffee was worth over one hundred and fifty dollars. That's expensive coffee. My dad held the bag in his lap the entire flight back to Oahu. That was yesterday. This morning, after our hasty breakfast, we went in silence to the Pearl Harbor historic site on Ford Island.

I thought my father would want to take the ferry out to the observation platform over the harbor that lets you look down on the remains of the sunken *USS Arizona*. I imagined him on the platform paying his last respects to his fellow sailors in their watery battleship grave. Seventy years worth of tears would burst out of him and he would slump into my arms for support, finally telling me the entire story of what happened on the day of that infamous sneak attack. Strangers would be so moved by his show of emotion that tears would fill their eyes and they would be struck speechless, awestruck as they stood in the presence of what was surely a venerable survivor of the *USS Arizona*. But none of that happened. I was a fool to think that my hardened father would sink into anything like sadness or sentimentality. Instead, I forced him to come with me into the gift shop, and after a minute or two, he left, disgusted and annoyed, and I was slowly growing impatient at his coldness and distance. He was a good father, tender even. He showed me warmth and love and showered his grandchildren with kisses and affection. But where was that tenderness now? Where was his emotion when it came to his part in Pearl Harbor? I guess that his emotion, and all his memories of the attack that he refused to share with anyone, was locked away under water, sealed in an undisturbed iron hull, like his shipmates down in the *USS Arizona*. It made me furious.

When we made it back to the car, I let my temper get the best of me and I yelled at him, "Would you say something? I've been following you around this island, these two islands, for three days and you haven't told me anything. We spend the first two days looking for coffee. Coffee! And today, you don't say a word. You finally decide to come to Hawaii, to Pearl Harbor, on December 7th of all days, and you specifically invited me. I know this has something to do with what

happened when you were stationed here and the attack, but...and..." What else could I say? That I was upset because he wasn't giving me a play-by-play of all his thoughts and emotions? That I deserved to share in all his memories no matter how painful or powerful they were? I didn't deserve any of that. I should have just felt privileged that he invited me along. The truth was that I was being impatient and acting selfish. I regretted my outburst as soon as I had said it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't imagine what you must be feeling. Everything you see around here must remind you of some kind of bad memory. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," my father said, in as kind and gentle a voice as I've ever heard him speak. Just hearing him talk brought tears to my eyes. "Listen, Tiger..." Tiger. That's what he's called me ever since I was a little girl. Just hearing that kicked my tears into full out weeping. "...I know this has been hard, but I have one more thing I need to do. Just one order I have to carry out. Then I'll tell you everything. I swear to God, I swear I'll tell you everything, okay? Are you ready?"

I nodded and wiped away my tears, not fully understanding what he meant by carrying out an order. I was sitting in the driver's seat of the rental car and had just flicked the windshield wipers on when I realized my father hadn't climbed in with me. I turned and spotted him ambling through the rows of cars, heading across the parking lot with that five-pound bag of coffee in his hands. He was heading away from the Pearl Harbor visitor center, down the street towards the rows of naval office buildings and military housing.

It took me awhile to catch up to him. He was moving swiftly, like a man half his age, with his cane just barely grazing the pavement. He strode confidently and with purpose right past a distracted guard at the entrance gate who didn't even notice us. Fear and excitement rose in my stomach. I took my father's hand and followed beside him like I was a little girl instead of a grown woman. My father walked past a great many buildings and doors before he entered one, and only then did I realized that my father had made that walk a hundred times. This was his station during World War II and these buildings were as familiar to him now as they were in 1941.

While the buildings may have been familiar to my father, he was not familiar to the personnel inside. At first no one noticed the old man who had slipped into the naval offices, so confident were his steps and turns through the interior hallways and passages. But at last someone shouted, "Excuse me, sir." And when my father didn't stop, I heard hurried footsteps behind us. I gulped and spun on my heels, hardly able to control myself. I faced a smartly dressed officer who was just as surprised to see me as I was him. I stammered, "My father is a World War II veteran and survivor of the attack on the USS *Arizona*. He is here on official business and you had better not stop him."

My little speech momentarily stunned the officer, and when I turned around my father was nowhere to be seen.

I panicked. I spun around and around trying to find him. I finally spied him through the glass of one of the hallway doors and I quickly ran into the office behind him.

Our flap in the hallway had caused quite a stir inside the office. Young men and women in uniform were standing at their desks, looks of shock and confusion on their faces, demanding to know who my father was and why he was there. And who was I? Did we have clearance? What were our names? Who did we work for? How did we get past security? But my father waved them off with his cane, paying them no mind at all, and he didn't stop walking until he stood before an elegant, wood door. The officer from the hallway had followed us inside, and he had a slightly amused expression on his lips. Come to think of it, the scene must have looked quite amusing - an old man, almost ninety-years old, stirring up a block of young officers like a fox in a hen house.

The officer said, very reasonably, "The Admiral is not in at the moment."

The Admiral! My mouth dropped open. My father had come all this way to barge into the Admiral's office? He had surely lost his mind. And now he was jiggling the doorknob, trying to force his way through a locked door.

Again, the officer spoke, "You can't get in. The office is locked."

My father raised his head and I saw a little sparkle in his eyes. He licked his lips and said, "You can't lock this door."

He grabbed hold of one of the wood panels on the outside of the door and threw all his weight against it.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I asked in horror. I thought surely he had gone mad, throwing himself against the door. But he tried again and the panel slid ever so slightly to the right. Suddenly the door swung open and my father wasted no time slipping inside.

All of us – me, the officer, the workers at their desks – we stood in shock at what the old man, my father, had done, wondering what other tricks he had up his sleeve. I stood there as the officer slowly walked into the Admiral's office after my father, examining the secret panel of the doorway as he passed, and I did the same.

The office was one fit for an admiral. It was richly appointed in deep, dark red wood and shiny, polished brass. Nautical gadgets and maps adorned the walls. A large window overlooked the old battleships resting in the harbor. My father was on his knees behind the great wooden desk. When he saw me he immediately started to talk.

"In 1941, I was the special assistant to Rear Admiral Isaac Campbell Kidd. Admiral Kidd, as you, young man, should very well know," my father looked at the officer, "was Commanding Officer of the *USS Arizona*. God bless him, he wasn't in this office when the Japanese attacked. He was on the bridge, where he should have been, when the *Arizona* was hit and he was killed.

"I was just a young kid, only eighteen, nothing more than an errand boy in a fancy uniform. I hadn't known him very long, but we both were from Cleveland and he took a shine to me. One thing I learned fast was that Admiral Kidd loved his coffee; Kona Coffee from the Kona Japanese Coffee Mill Company. He'd get up early and have two cups. Exactly two cups first thing in the morning, always an hour or more before breakfast. Early on the morning of December 7, 1941, Admiral Kidd ordered me to fetch him some of his favorite beans."

My father held up the five-pound bag that he had so tirelessly tracked down with the efficiency of a bloodhound.

"Of course I was familiar with the whole routine. Get the beans, fill the canister he kept hidden in his secret hiding place. The secrecy was all for show, he never meant any harm by it."

My father popped open one of the legs of the Admiral's desk, revealing a secret, hollow compartment that likely had not been unlocked since my eighteen-year-old father last opened it in 1941.

"It was one of the duties I cherished most," my father's voice began to break. "A silly, insignificant charge, I know, fetching coffee for the Admiral's secret supply. Especially when you compare it to the duties of all the men who died during that attack. But as Admiral Kidd said, over and over, 'No order is too small, no duty too insignificant. Even the tiniest cog is necessary to ensure the perfect running of a complex machine.' When I got back to base with the coffee, the bombing had already started. The *Arizona* was blown to bits. That was my last order from Admiral Kidd, to resupply his coffee."

My father reached into the compartment and drew out an ancient canister, to which he popped the airtight seal, and he took a deep breath of Kona-flavored air from its insides, air from 1941. He did more than breathe it in, he drank it in, and he savored it.

After a few moments he, continued, "Even the tiniest cog is necessary to ensure the perfect running of a complex machine. The tiniest cog... that was me. And now I'm here to fulfill that last order, do my last duty. You have no idea how long this has followed me, tormented me, but today I can finally fulfill Admiral Kidd's request and maybe, up in heaven or wherever he is, he can enjoy his two cups of Kona Coffee."

No sooner had my father poured the coffee beans into the canister than the Admiral himself stormed into his office, livid at our breach of his office and his privacy, and then my father and the officer had to explain to him the entire extraordinary story all over again, which was good, in a way, because the more my father told and retold the story, to the Admiral, to me, to my husband, to his grandchildren, the clearer the details became, the more unburdened his memory became, and the happier he was. And from that moment on, I made sure my father had his own supply of Kona Coffee, which he seemed to appreciate, along with his USS *Arizona* ball cap.