

Capt. Sidney P. Kozak, behind the wheel of a jeep on March 27, 1945, never talked much about his five years of service to his country.

Stumbling on a long-ago photo, I saw an America that no longer exists by WARREN KOZAK

This past Memorial Day, I happened upon a large batch of photographs from World War II posted on *The Atlantic* website. There were hundreds in various categories with titles like "Pearl Harbor," "The Allied Invasion of Europe" and "The Fall of Imperial Japan."

Among some of the famous images of the war were many I hadn't seen before. These were not the iconic

photographs that appeared in *Life* magazine or in newspapers across the country. These were pictures that an editor looked at once before moving on. They were ordinary pictures, almost snapshots of the war.

As I scrolled through the category called "The Fall of Nazi Germany," I stopped at image number 23. The caption reads: "Men of the American 7th Army pour through a breach in the Siegfried Line defenses on their way to Karlsruhe, Germany, on March 27, 1945, which lies on the road to Stuttgart."

The Siegfried Line was an anti-tank barrier Hitler built in the 1930s that was supposed to keep Allied troops from entering Germany. It ran for almost 400 miles from the Netherlands in the north to the Swiss border on the south and consisted of more than 18,000 bunkers along with concrete "teeth" that were intended as tank traps. These concrete teeth look a

lot like tombstones, giving it a very eerie feeling, like one very long graveyard.

Similar in purpose to
France's Maginot Line, it
was supposed to protect
the country from invasion. It
worked just about as well as
the failed French defense,
as American troops poured
through it in the later stages of the war.

What caught my eye in this particular photo wasn't the detailed picture of the Siegfried Line or even the composition. It was much more personal. There, in a jeep, looking straight at the camera was Capt. Sidney P. Kozak, my father.

I studied the picture for quite a while, but I wasn't

particularly surprised. I knew he was there, that he had his own jeep, and that in later life, he always preferred to drive and rarely gave up the wheel. My first thought was: "Well, there's Dad."

What struck me was the absolute ordinariness of the photo — just another Tuesday in the war. Of course, I don't know if it was ordinary at all or what had happened that morning or what was coming later that day. I don't know where my father was going, what his assignment was, but judging from his face, he looked relaxed. He looked like Dad.

The war in Europe was winding down. There was a little more than a month left, and the worst of the fighting was behind him. He had arrived on the beaches of Normandy after the invasion with a company that he had trained for two years at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. They soon saw a great deal of the war in northern France and Belgium, and they were in the middle of the worst of the Battle of the Bulge. But after the Bulge, the company was broken up, and my father and the two other officers

both lieutenants — were reassigned.

In the letters he sent home to my mother, he told her less about the war and more about the mundane. He talked about getting letters from her, what he had to eat and dreaming about what it would be like to get back

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home to Milwaukee.

Both my parents were born in Milwaukee, lived there for their entire lives and are buried together there. They are perfect products of Wisconsin. My father went to North Division High School, and my mother went to Washington. Both went to college in Madison. Until the war, Madison and Chicago were among the furthest points they visited.

While my father was overseas, my mother and

older sister lived with my grandparents on the north side of Milwaukee. I've often wondered what it was like in that house during those years. It was a two-family home, like many in the neighborhood. My grandparents, who lived upstairs, had two sons, my dad and my Uncle Bill. Both were in the Army in Europe. My grandmother's sister and her husband lived downstairs and also had two sons who were in the Pacific.

I really can't imagine the tension that must have been ever present in that house. I know they listened to the radio every night. WTMJ was always on, and they got their war news from it. Don't forget, there was no television. All the news came from newspapers, magazines, radio and, of course, letters.

As a way of escape, they would go downtown on a Saturday night to the movies. There were large movie palaces along Wisconsin Avenue. But even there, they were subjected to the real world through the newsreels that came on before each film. Newsreels are forgotten today. But they were the only chance that people had to actually watch events that they read about in the papers or heard about on the radio.

The newsreels came out weekly and always started with music. Then a seasoned announcer narrated everything from the war news to the president's comings and goings and, like today, the lives of celebrities of that era. They always ended on a light



Pvt. William Kozak (right) was able to visit brother Sidney after being wounded. They hadn't seen each other in two years of war.

note — some sort of funny or odd feature. And by the way, the war news was very sanitized. There was a conscious effort in Washington to keep up morale on the home front, and the really bad or disturbing news was kept from the public.

Amazingly, the Hollywood studios and news outlets went along with that directive. I say "amazingly"

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be placed on his coffin.

because it is hard to imagine that sort of compliance today. But as they say, it was a different war and a different time.

Most every family had a member engaged in the war effort.

Instead of an all-volunteer force that protects our country today, the Army, Navy, Air Forces and Marines were made up mostly from the civilian population. Another big difference: Even the powerful families had sons serving. All four of President Franklin Roosevelt's sons were in the military, as were sons of millionaires Joseph P. Kennedy and John D. Rockefeller and a Connecticut banker and later U.S. senator named Prescott Bush, whose son, George, flew off a carrier in the Pacific.

Even movie stars, professional baseball players and congressmen gave up their prestigious jobs to serve. One story that hits close to home: The very popular Milwaukee Mayor Carl Zeidler gave up his office to serve in the Navy and was killed in action in 1942.

The nation's elite along with the very ordinary people like my grandparents were, as they say, all in it together. And I believe that in spite of the hardship, the sacrifice and the terrible loss that so many families suffered, one of the reasons for the nostalgia of that period is the

unified bond that the country felt then and hasn't felt with that intensity since. It was like no other time, with the possible exception of a brief period following the attacks on 9/11.

The all-volunteer military today is perhaps the best we have ever had, but something also is lost when less

than 1 percent of the population shares the sacrifice. We've lost the spirit we had in the 1940s.

I grew up with that greatest

generation. Although I was born well after the war, I knew them as the fathers of my classmates at 53rd Street School in Milwaukee. They were my scoutmaster (Marines — Pacific), my dad and my uncle (Army — Europe) and my favorite teacher at John Marshall High School (second wave on D-Day). None of these men walked with a swagger. They were quiet and modest, and they never talked about the horrors they experienced.

My father was a perfect example. He went to work every day — he was an insurance agent — and he came home every night. He was a very quiet man. I could fish with him for hours on Cedar Lake, and if he said anything, it was usually about fish. I know that after the war, he remained very close with one of the lieutenants, who lived in Florida. (The other lieutenant in the company never made it home.) Like many in that generation, he saw his five years of service as his duty, and he considered it an honor to live in what he always regarded as the greatest country on earth. All that my father ever requested from the

government was a flag to be placed on his coffin.

I posted the picture on Facebook, and a lot of my friends wrote very nice responses. The most moving came from someone who knew my father. My cousin, Lawry Margolis, grew up down the street. He and his brother. Marv. were like older brothers to me. and I

> spent as much time in their house as I did in my own. He wrote:

"I was at your folks' house in about 1952 and several guys from his company came by to visit. They traded some stories, but I can tell you they absolutely loved and respected your dad, who was their captain. I got the feeling that they truly believed they were alive and survived the war and Battle of the Bulge because of Capt. Kozak

No. he wasn't Tom Hanks. and he was as ordinary as every other father that I grew up with. They quietly did their duty. They witnessed horrors that they chose to keep to themselves. They came home and figured out some way to make sense of it all. And they seemed happiest being with their

wives and their children. Oh yes, watching the Packers ... and fishing.

Here's to you, Dad! And thanks for the surprise hello on Memorial Day.

(Uncle Sid to me)."

The author's parents, Sidney and Gert, during training in South Carolina.

Warren Kozak is the author of LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay (Regnery 2009) and Presidential Courage: Three Speeches That Changed America, an ebook published in 2012.

To see The Atlantic's World War II photos, go to: http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/pages/ww2/