

Now and then, against my better judgement, I find myself peering into the cesspool of social media, reading comments about Ukraine, far too often from people who have no understanding of the present, no knowledge of the past, and no agenda other than venting their bitter little spleens. Bafflingly, for some Americans Putin's rickety empire has become synonymous with strength, military prowess and family values. The facts — those pesky facts — tell a very different story: Russia has the world's highest levels of alcoholism; it has suffered over 600,000 casualties in Ukraine; it's tied at 141st place with Uganda and Guinea on the Corruption Perceptions Index; and its per capita GDP is about that same as Mexico's and Argentina's.

In such circumstances, one of my father's favorite phrases comes to mind. "Man's capacity for self-deception is infinite". And he wasn't simply parroting a clever phrase; he knew the world very well and had few illusions.

If he'd been born a few years earlier or later, he might have spent his life as a high school or college instructor in Chicago. As it turned out, in 1944 the US Army took him and, as a lowly "dogface", he first walked and then drove a truck from Normandy to Germany, through France, Belgium and Holland. He was strafed by one of the world's very first jet planes, found himself in the Battle of the Bulge, had a tryst with a young Frenchwoman, and earned the Legion d'Honneur. He also spent some time in a hospital ward with a case of "battle fatigue", what is nowadays called PTSD.

He didn't talk much about his service, and when he did it was with the self-deprecating humor of an infantryman for whom the Army was a non-stop shit show. He mistrusted the fetishization of the military in recent decades, and thought civilians saying "thank you for your service" was just plain dumb. But it was clear he carried some pride at having done his bit.

At his core was a man who believed there was such a thing as right and wrong, not just endless shades of grey. He could be deeply sardonic, but he wasn't a cynic. And he had that Midwest thing about sticking up for the underdog.

He died several years before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, but there's not the slightest doubt in my mind whose side he would have been on. And he would have been angry and appalled that some of his compatriots didn't care, or worse that they had fallen for Putin's propaganda.

After the Army and graduate school, he went on to serve his country as a diplomat during the Cold War, a time when we understood the Russians much better than we seem to today. So when I feel the pessimism creeping in, when I fear Ukraine might be a lost cause, I think of my Dad. He'd have said "this is the right thing to do, keep it up." So I will.



[With his sisters]

Chris

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