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THOMAS AND EILEEN BRODERICK

"What's a handicap? I don't have a handicap."[1]

ON THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF D-Day, I was broadcasting from the American cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach at Colleville-sur-Mer in Normandy, one of the bloodiest battlefields in American history. The cemetery is at once haunting and beautiful, with 9,386 white marble headstones in long, even lines across the manicured fields of dark green, each headstone marking the death of a brave young American. The anniversary was a somber and celebratory moment, as veterans of that daring and dangerous invasion, unparalleled in the long history of warfare, gathered to pay tribute to those whose sacrifices were marked by the simple headstones and to share with the world their own remarkable stories of survival.

In the course of the extended Today show coverage on NBC, we concentrated more on the heroics of those who survived, but then the noted historian Stephen Ambrose interrupted to say, "I think we should talk about what was happening to so many men down there on those beaches. They were terribly wounded. Their stomachs opened. Their faces shot away. Their limbs blown off. That was the reality of that day and we shouldn't forget that."

Ambrose brought us back to the savage nature of war that we often overlook on those occasions when wars are celebrated for what they achieved.

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[1] This excerpt from “The Greatest Generation” by Tom Brokaw is used with the permission of Tom Broderick, whose words are quoted throughout the story. Additional permission has been requested from Tom Brokaw.

Tom Broderick in paratrooper training
Fort Benning, Georgia, 1944[2]

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[2] Although this photograph is labeled as being Tom Broderick, it is in fact Tom's buddy, Earl Carson. Tom explains the mix-up as follows,

> *"The picture of the paratrooper at the mock door is not I. When Brokaw's office asked my wife Eileen to send a series of pictures, Eileen found an old box of pictures. Eileen didn't know me until after the war, so, she thought I was the one. Discovered [it was not while I was] at the 508 reunion in Overland Park, Kansas [August 2000].*
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> *My pal Earl Carson, with whom I have been in contact since the service, was in a nursing home in Gladstone near the reunion. His son picked me up and on the way he said that the picture was his dad and they had my picture. Carson's wife took our pictures in the mock tower at Fort Benning. He and I do resemble [each other] and Eileen presumed it was I."*

For the warriors who live, the consequences of war become a lifelong condition. In its savagery, war strikes at the very idea of a sound and healthy body. In World War II, more than 292,000 Americans were killed in battle, and more than 1.7 million returned home physically affected in some way, from minor afflictions to blindness or missing limbs or paralysis, battle-scarred and exhausted, but oh so happy and relieved to be home. They had survived an extraordinary ordeal, but now they were eager to reclaim their ordinary lives of work, family, church, and community. The war had taught them what mattered most in the lives they wanted now to settle down and live.

Thomas Broderick was a nineteen-year-old premed student at Xavier College in Cincinnati in 1942, trying to decide which branch of the service fit his sense of adventure. This son of a south Chicago working-class family was bright and ambitious, so he enlisted in the Merchant Marine. "They gave us the best deal," he said. "If you didn't like it, you could quit. "After ten weeks of training he went on a mission to North Africa on a supply ship. The pay was excellent. The food was abundant. He had a private room on the officers' deck of his ship, the John W. Brown, but the trip was long and boring. He wanted out of the Merchant Marine. He wanted to join the Airborne so he could be like those cocky paratroopers he saw stationed in Algiers. "I'd never even been in a plane before," he says, "but it was the challenge I wanted."

His superiors in the Merchant Marine were astonished. Here he was, ready to go back to the security of the Merchant Marine Academy for another eighteen months of accelerated training, and he wanted to quit to join one of the most dangerous outfits in the service. His officer offered him a thirty-day furlough to think it over. Broderick said, "No, my mind's made up." When he returned home, his parents were equally appalled. When he told his draft board what he wanted, the clerk said, "You're nuts. I'll give you another month before we draft you, so you can change your mind." Broderick declined, saying he wanted in now.

Tom Broderick spent seventeen weeks in basic training for the infantry in Mineral Wells, Texas, before heading to Fort Benning, Georgia, to become a member of the 82nd Airborne. When he finished his training, a captain offered him an instructor's job and the rank of sergeant.

Again Broderick refused the safer alternative, saying he wanted to stay with his outfit and go overseas.

Broderick's unit shipped out to England as replacements for the 82nd Airborne men lost in the Normandy invasion. In September, Broderick made his first jump into combat, in Holland. He was in the thick of it immediately, the Battle of Arnhem. It was a joint mission of American and British paratroopers, and their objective was to take the Nijmegen bridge to help pave the Allies' way into Germany and to discourage any German counterattack. "We jumped at about five hundred feet because we wanted to be a low target. It was one-thirty in the afternoon.

"The first German I saw I couldn't shoot, because he was riding a bicycle away from me. I couldn't shoot at him because he wasn't shooting at me. Things were different ten minutes later. There were Germans all over the place — they outnumbered us about forty thousand to twenty-eight thousand. It was combat morning, noon, and night."

On the fifth day Broderick made a mistake that would alter his life forever. "I remember being in the foxhole and ... I was lining up my aim on a German. I got a little high in the foxhole and I got shot clean through the head—through the left temple."

A Catholic chaplain arrived to administer the last rites, but after slipping into unconsciousness, Broderick somehow managed to stay alive until he awoke a few days later in a British hospital. He was relieved to be out of combat but he had a problem: he couldn't see. Why not? he asked. His doctors told him, "When that hemorrhage clears up, you'll be all right." Broderick continued to believe them until he was sent to Dibble General Hospital in Menlo Park, California, one of the two facilities in the nation treating blind veterans.

Finally a doctor told him the truth. He would be blind forever. "I was stunned. I cried, 'Aren't you going to do anything?' " He rushed to a fellow veteran who had been hospitalized with him in England, a man recovering from shrapnel in one of his eyes. "I just cried and cried, and he said to me, 'We knew the whole time, Tom; we just didn't want to tell you.'"

Broderick was angry and disoriented. When the Army made him take a rehabilitation course in Connecticut, he said, "I rebelled—I just

didn't want to learn braille. I told them I was going to work in my dad's trucking business just so I could get out of there."

It didn't get much better when he returned to Chicago. He enrolled at Loyola University and the Veterans Administration hired a reader for him, but after only seven weeks Broderick dropped out and went to work for his father. His downslide continued. "They didn't know what to do with me. Dad had me taking orders on the phone because I could still write. But then I heard of people having to call back to get the orders straightened out. I thought, "Hell I'm screwing up.' " He quit after a month.

Broderick realized he'd have to learn braille. His Veterans Administration counselor also recommended he enroll in a class in insurance sales, a fast-growing field in postwar America. He learned the insurance business by day and braille by night. Before long the VA found him a job with an elderly insurance broker in his neighborhood. Not too long after that, Broderick had established his own insurance business. He was no longer the young man angry at his fate. He was now prepared to accept his blindness and get on with his life.

Broderick worked six days a week. When he wasn't taking orders by phone with his braille machine and dictating them to his secretary later, he was making house calls at night. He quickly developed a very keen audio sense; many customers he dealt with on the phone were astonished when they finally met him. He'd quickly call out their name when he heard their voice. Until that point they had no idea he was blind.

Later, when he and his wife were having children — seven in all — Broderick would tell each of them the same story as they reached the age when they could understand the real meaning of blindness. His daughter, Katy Broderick Duffy: "He'd tell us how he was hurt m the war and that when he came home he went with his mother to Lourdes, the famous shrine in France, to pray for a miracle. He said that before they put the water on his eyes, he asked the Lord for a favor: 'If I can't have my eyesight back, could you find a girl for me to marry?' And that's how he met my mother. When you're little and you hear that story, you really think it was a miracle."

Broderick's wife, Eileen, is a little skeptical of the story, but Tom insists it's true, although his version is a bit breezier. "I said, 'I know we don't always get what we want, but what's right for us. I'm really hoping

COURTESY TOM BRODERICK

HE 'LOOKS' TO THE FUTURE

Former Pfc. Thomas Broderick Jr., 20, who has been blind as a result of a German sniper's bullet, shows his two sisters, Patricia (left) and Jacqueline, that he is adept at operating a typewriter, an accomplishment he plans to use in his future work.

Tom Broderick, feature in the Chicago Tribune, *1944*

to meet the woman for me—and if you want to throw in the eyes, too, that's okay.' " Not long after that, Tom and Eileen met on a blind date, no irony intended. Eileen was a twenty-three-year-old nurse and Tom was twenty-seven. She fell in love instantly "That night, after the date, I went home, woke my cousin up, and said, I've met the man I'm going to marry.' She told me I'd been drinking too much and I should go to bed, but I knew.

"You didn't think about his blindness. It just didn't seem to matter. He was so unique. He ran a business by himself and didn't need help from anyone, although it was a little tricky when we went out alone. I'd have to take him to the men's room and ask someone to take him in. I'd stand outside. I think, being a nurse, I was a little more flexible. I understood that it was all just mechanics. "My father was worried when I said I was marrying Tom. He just didn't understand how Tom could take care of me and a family. But after three or four years of marriage they became very close. Tom's mother started him off right. When he came back from the war she would not allow anyone to use the word *blind* in the house. Tom had to be treated with dignity and respect, and anything he wanted to try, he could do it. When he left his father's business to set out on his own, she was happy."

Tom and Eileen had common roots as strongly faithful Roman Catholic Irish Americans. They settled into a life of the prosperous middle class on the south side of Chicago, where Tom's business continued to flourish and their family grew quickly. During one five-year stretch Eileen had five children, and then another two later. Eileen says, "He was very involved in their upbringing. There were things he could do and those he couldn't. It was kind of trial and error. He couldn't change diapers but he could give them a bottle. We never talked about how to make things work. It wasn't easy, but we did what we had to do."

The Broderick children were part of the equation of making things work. Daughter Katy says, "The blindness was just incidental. I'd see other people who were blind and not well adjusted and think, 'What's wrong with them?' Later I realized not everyone had the strength and determination of my father. When I was little, my friends would say, 'Your fathers not blind!' He could just do so many things it didn't seem like he was blind."

Dan Broderick, one of Tom's sons, says his father worked out a system to take care of most of the household chores, including assembling an elaborate stereo system, washing and waxing the car, and changing the storm windows. He refused to succumb to his blindness. He even refused to let Eileen get disability license plates for the family car when they became available. "What's a handicap?" he'd say. "I don't have a handicap." But then Tom isn't much for cars. Since he can't drive himself, he likes to walk, and his family was expected to do the same. Katy remembers, "We walked everywhere. He hated getting rides. He thought it was a waste."

During his introduction to the world of the blind at the rehabilitation center in Connecticut, Broderick and his friends formed an informal organization to help each other adjust to their new realities. It became the Blinded Veterans Association, and Broderick decided that he should share the lessons of his new life with other veterans who were struggling with their blindness. He began making trips to Chicago-area rehabilitation programs, counseling sightless veterans on the career possibilities in insurance, mortgage sales, and car financing — the hot financial service fields as America exploded out of the cities and into the suburbs.

"I'd tell them about my own struggle — how I was young when I became blind and I knew how they felt. I brought some of them down to my office so they could see the braille machine and what was possible. I don't feel any special bond with other blind organizations or blind people, but I wanted to help veterans. You have to do it. It was no big deal, really."

Tom's son Dan remembers that, during Vietnam, the nearby Veterans Administration office would send over young men who'd lost their sight in that war. "When you first saw them you thought you were at a wake — some of them were suicidal, with their eyes blown out. Mom would go out and get a case of beer, and they'd sit on the porch with my dad and listen to the White Sox game. Then he'd navigate 'em around our house to show them what we had—five bedrooms, a big house. By the end of the night they'd be back on the porch, drinking beer but laughing now."

Another son, Scott: "You know how everyone says their dad is the best. Well, do you know how many people I've heard that from about my dad? Friends, neighbors, clients. Every kid thinks it, but to hear it from other

people is so gratifying. He never let his disability get in the way of anything." Tom Broderick in so many ways embodies the best qualities of his generation. He was so eager to get involved in the war he enlisted in two branches of the service. He was gravely wounded, but once he got over the initial understandable anger, he set out to be the best husband, father, businessman, and citizen he could be --- sight or no sight. He didn't grow bitter and dependent on others. He didn't blame the world for his condition.

A common lament of the World War II generation is the absence today of personal responsibility Broderick remembers listening to an NPR broadcast and hearing an account of how two boys found a loaded gun in one of their homes. The visiting boy accidentally shot his friend. The victim’s father was on the radio, talking about suing the gun manufacturer. That got to Tom Broderick. "So," he said, "here's this man talking about suing and he's not accepting responsibility for having a loaded gun in the house." Tom knows something about personal responsibility He's been forced to live as a blind man for more than fifty years, and when asked about the moment when the lights were literally shot out of his eyes, he says only "It was my fault for getting too high in the foxhole. That happens sometimes."