

## Grandpa

Why do we admire acts of bravery and courage? The sort of bravery you see in blockbuster movies, where the action hero is always the good guy and ends up saving the world. Spiderman, Black panther, and Captain Marvel. So, when I look at my grand-dad, frail from old age, cute white hair under a knitted beanie-wearing sheepskin slippers, it's hard to imagine him moving fast let alone sailing all around the world and going through all that he did. I know one man, he thought of my grandad as a hero. To his crew-mates, he was a legend. To me, he is just my grandad who never lost the twinkle in his eye, was always up for a bit of fun and loved playing tricks on my grandma. This is his story, handed down to me from my dad because my grandad isn't one to brag.

My grandad was only seven when his father passed away, so he was sent to boarding school in Edinburgh, Scotland. His parents owned a tea plantation in India and he grew up with a love of tea and hot curries. Every year he was put on a grand ship and sailed back to India to see his mother. He must have got his love of sailing from all those voyages as a young boy. He excelled at his school work but was always the prankster, and his young lad's ambition was to become an architect. He was accepted into Oxford University, but then the war broke out, shattering his dreams.

Wartime in England was harsh. You were right in the midst of the action- bombing raids, food rations and air-strikes. What was he to do now? My grandfather joined the British Merchant Navy as an officer. The BMN kept the United Kingdom supplied with raw material, fire arms, ammunition, fuel, food and all the required necessities needed for a nation at war, enabling the country to defend itself. Merchant ships also carried troops but did not directly engage in warfare. My grandfather served on many ships during the war and seven of them were torpedoed and sunk. A couple of his ships were even attacked by pirates off the North African coast and others were sunk by Nazi boats in the Indian and Atlantic oceans!

The last sinking of my grandfather's ship was a traumatic experience for him and his crew. Merchant ships were sitting ducks and very vulnerable to attack as the enemy wanted to stop them delivering much needed supplies. A German submarine had hunted them down. The attack came in the dead of night. Without warning the German submarine relentlessly started bombing them in a crucial conflict that later became known as the Battle of the Atlantic. Men

scrambled on deck, many of them jumping overboard into the raging seas. Very few lifeboats were launched and my grandfather was one of the last to leave by jumping into the sea. Luckily he was picked up by one of the lifeboats. Four-hundred of the crew lost their lives that night.

He was lucky but that was about to change. My grandfather's best friend, also on the lifeboat, had a badly injured leg. His pain was unbearable and was certain to die from infection if not blood loss. To save his friend's life my grandfather made the gutsy decision to amputate his friend's leg with his pocket-knife in the torchlight. In the morning only my grandfather and his friend had survived. It took another twenty days before that lifeboat was found. He buried the other six men at sea. My grandfather's medical skills and sheer will and determination to not only survive but lift the spirits and look after his badly wounded friend is an act of bravery and immense courage and skill that my grandfather doesn't like to talk about.

On another occasion, when my grandfather's ship was bombed, the crew had to dive under the water to try and escape enemies gun-fire. It was in this circumstance that he learnt to exhale his breath bit by bit and hold it for long periods of time. He learnt to sink as far as he could to the bottom of the ocean. Even as an old man he could still swim multiple laps of the pool underwater with just one breath. And, as for his friend Roger. He went on to become a very respected eye surgeon in Australia and throughout it all the years after the war, they would make an effort to write to each other every week, without fail. They shared an unbreakable bond that lasted forever.

As for my grandfather. He was unaffected by his heroic act and says they were lucky to have a supply of freshwater, some biscuits, a torch and that he was able to catch some fish. From his point of view, it was wartime. "You have to do what you have to do", he would say modestly. He refused any recognition and never marched in an ANZAC parade, instead preferring to have a quiet moment of remembrance at his home and a shot of rum to salute his fallen crewmen. When my father went to England, my grandfather gave him a list of all the ships he was on and the names of every crewman who lost his life. He wanted my dad to visit the wall of remembrance and say a little prayer for those who lost their lives. I think he was just grateful to have survived the war and grateful for the opportunity to emigrate to New Zealand, his adopted country which he loved. He never wanted to return to England ever again.

As I reflect on the actions of my grandfather it is hard to imagine what he went through as a young man. His story is certainly one of bravery and courage. I like the fact that he puts it all in perspective and doesn't boast about it. He went on to become the youngest ever captain aged just 29 in the Union Steamship Company in Auckland. He was an impeccable man in every sense of the word and my dad would tell me stories of how everything was absolutely ship-shape in their house growing up. So, was my grandfather a hero because of his bravery? I don't think so. I reckon he was a hero because he was a great father and loved my nana and his children very much. I myself am a sailor and I like to have that connection with my grand-dad. So when I'm out there sailing on water at 15 knots, I like to think of my grand-dad out sailing the treacherous seas, he is my motivation. And I want to do him proud.

*Sources:*

*BBC.*

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