

Our Nation Came Together

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(1924–)

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I distinctly remember December 7, 1941. I recall walking across the campus there at Andover with several friends when we heard the news—and like everyone, I remember feeling stunned that someone would attack our country. President Roosevelt had navigated America along a course of neutrality, trying to keep us out of the building conflagration in both Europe and Asia. Pearl Harbor settled that policy debate with horrific clarity, erasing any question whether we could remain above the fray.

Feelings of shock, of course, soon gave way to a national sense of outrage—and a determination by millions of Americans to do their part to defeat the aggressors. Another sentiment soon took hold, too—that of patriotism as our Nation came together as never before and built the wartime infrastructure necessary to defeat fascism.

I recall how a beautiful young girl named Barbara Pierce of Rye, New York, did her part during the war working in a factory as a “Rosie the Riveter.”

Six months after Pearl Harbor, I received my diploma at Andover. Secretary of War [and Andover board president] Henry Stimson, himself an Andover grad, delivered the commencement address. He told members of my class that the coming war would be a long one, and though America needed fighting men, we would better serve our country by getting more education before getting in uniform. By then, I had already decided that college would have to wait. Given my love of the sea dating back to my earliest childhood summers spent in Maine, I was determined to become a naval aviator—and the sooner I could enlist, the better.

Still, after the graduation ceremony, my father approached me in the crowded hallway outside the auditorium. Dad was an imposing figure at six feet four inches, with deep-set blue-gray eyes and a resonant voice. My respect for him was complete. “George,” he said, “did the Secretary say anything to change your mind?” “No, sir,” I replied. “I am going in.” Dad nodded and shook my hand. On my 18th birthday, I went to Boston and was sworn into the Navy as a Seaman Second Class. Not long thereafter, Dad took me to Penn Station to put me on a railway coach headed south to North Carolina and pre-flight training. As we parted ways that day, it was the only time I ever saw my father shed a tear.

Driving this decision to forego college and join the war effort immediately, I am sure, was my Dad’s own service in World War I—but there was more to it. I was also heeding the Andover motto, *Non Sibi*, and as I say, our country was united. United in outrage, to be sure, but united also in a noble purpose to defend our homeland and defeat the forces of fascist imperialism that threatened the world.

There wasn’t anything unusual about this decision, mind you. Millions of Americans put their lives on hold to serve their country, and selflessly placed themselves in harm’s way. Far, far too many of them never came home to their families. Together with the martyrs of freedom at Pearl Harbor, they gave that last full measure of devotion so that America and our allies might remain free.

May Almighty God bless their memory, so that future generations understand both the blessings and burdens of liberty.

