Illegitimi Non Carborundum

Dan Clark June 07, 2016

The Greatest Generation will always inspire us, and set the standard to which we aspire - Happy Veteran's Day!

(Newswire.net -- June 7, 2016) -- Have you ever had a tough day? How about a rough month? Can you imagine twelve months of pure hell? The next time you think you have it bad, remember that neither success nor failure means anything in and of itself—the meaning of both emerges only in comparison to something or someone else. For this reason, I want to introduce you to one of the greatest men who ever lived.

My dear friend, hero and father-in-law is Donald C. Sansom. He graduated high school at the age of seventeen and on his eighteenth birthday, February 25, 1943, he enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps. America was in the middle of World War II, and Don wanted to do his part and serve his country. On April 7, Don left on a troop train headed for preflight officer training school in Santa Ana, California. That December, Don graduated third in his class of 130 servicemen, and at eighteen years of age, he was the youngest second lieutenant in the US Army Air Corps.

Overseas training took place in Sioux City, Iowa, and in April 1944, Don left for North Africa. On the morning of D-Day, when the Allied forces stormed the Normandy beaches, Don boarded a troopship bound for Italy. The message broadcast over the ship’s public address system instructed every soldier to meet on deck in fifteen minutes. More than four thousand soldiers stood at attention as the commander addressed them. “Men, we are headed into war,” he said solemnly. “Right now the Allies are flying one thousand plane raids into Germany every single day.” He then continued, “Using simple arithmetic, we can calculate that with ten crewmen aboard each of these bombers, we are losing between five hundred and one thousand men every day. This means that within the week, more than one-third of you could either be dead or captured.

“I don’t know about you, but I think we should change these odds. Look around. Let’s commit to one another right here and now to never-say-never. We shall change the odds. We shall win this conflict. We shall win it for our families, for our country, for the free world! God bless each of you for standing up for what’s right. God bless America!” He then concluded with the mock “Latin” phrase Illegitimi Non Carborundum.

Don couldn’t hold back the tears that welled up as he felt for the first time the true meaning of duty, pride, and honor. The loud cheers of the soldiers echoed in his mind and heart for days afterward. Finally they arrived in Italy, and Don was assigned to fly with the squadron commander. Because of his exceptional skill and proven leadership abilities, Don was named the lead bombardier in a B-17 flown by Deke Davies. Don felt great about his chances for survival, for Deke’s reputation was legendary. Deke had already flown forty-nine missions, returning with his planes shot up, ripped apart, missing their engines, and on fire. But somehow, he always found a way to bring his plane and crew back safely.

The next morning would be Don’s first bombing mission and Deke’s last prior to being rotated home to receive a true hero’s welcome. They took off and were flying over Budapest, Hungary. Don was sitting in the bombardier’s seat under the nose of the aircraft when they were severely hit by enemy fire. Engine number one was blown apart, and engine number two was on fire. With only two of four engines functioning, they finished the mission, successfully hit their target, and turned around to head back to the base. Halfway back to base, they lost fuel and altitude and crash-landed in a wheat field in Yugoslavia.

Try to imagine the emotions Don’s family must have felt upon receiving the news that he was missing in action. The news that he was alive and of his whereabouts wasn’t released for another six months. His friends and loved ones wondered whether he would ever come home. German soldiers immediately pulled up in trucks and opened machine-gun fire on the wreckage. Don ignited the plane in order to destroy the equipment and documents as he and his nine fellow crew members scattered for cover. The Germans quickly captured the entire crew except for Don and two others, who managed to elude the enemy for more than two hours by crawling on their bellies through the field. Finally they made it to a road at the end of the farmland. The peasants working alongside it pointed to a small nearby bridge underneath which Don and his comrades could hide. When Don heard the clomp of the soldiers as they marched
across the bridge, he thought he and his two comrades were safe—the enemy soldiers had suspended their search and were heading back to base.

But wouldn’t you know it? The last soldier had to relieve himself and stepped down the embankment for some privacy. He inadvertently looked under the bridge and saw the American airmen crouched in the shadows. He started screaming, and within seconds Don and his comrades were surrounded with enemy machine guns pointed at their heads. Don’s copilot pulled out a white handkerchief, waved it in surrender, and reminded his fellow airmen of their commander’s words, *Illegitimi Non Carborundum.*

Don and the others were immediately stripped and put in a local farmer’s pigpen together with the pigs, mud, and muck. They were guarded for two weeks until they were transferred by train to Frankfurt, Germany, for interrogation. After one week in solitary confinement, they were transferred to Stalag Luft 3, a German prison camp for airmen of the Allies. The day prior to the arrival of Don and his comrades, the Germans had captured and brutally executed fifty prisoners who were trying to escape. It was this prisoner-of-war camp that inspired the film *The Great Escape* and the television series *Hogan’s Heroes.*

When winter came, Don and his fellow prisoners were forced on death marches in fifteen to twenty degrees below zero temperatures and blizzard conditions. These marches spanned eighty-five miles and lasted three days. The cold was so fierce that many prisoners froze to death, literally dying as they marched. They eventually left this camp in northeastern Germany on the Baltic Sea and marched one last time across Germany to its southwestern corner, where they stopped at a huge installation called Stalag 7A. Ten thousand soldiers were incarcerated at this single location. Sustaining motivation and personal dignity while enduring torture and starvation would have been nearly impossible except for the tiny inspirational reminder Don’s copilot had carved in the latrine door: *Illegitimi Non Carborundum.*

Don and his fellow prisoners remained in this camp until it was finally liberated on April 29, 1945, by Patton’s Seventh Army Tank Battalion, which had just won a battle in a small village next to the camp. Don was sent to France for the rehabilitation of his sickly and weakened 129-pound body. He was released at a healthier 170 pounds and allowed to return home to the states. During the three weeks of his rehabilitation, Don had time to focus on his dreams and set personal and educational goals. It was during that time that he set his professional sights on becoming a dentist.

In 1946, while attending the University of Utah as a student in the pre-dentistry program, he fell in love with the beautiful, talented, and artistic Barbara Sims. They married and headed for Kansas City in 1947 for Don to attend dental school. Over the years, they became the proud parents of six children and settled in Utah to raise their family. Donald C. Sansom was affectionately known to his family and hundreds of admiring friends as “Doc” and ran one of the largest and most successful dental practices in the Intermountain West. But he was especially known for his amazing love of life. Doc was the legendary “Silver Fox” of the Snowbird Ski Resort and could out-ski anyone else on the mountain. He was an amazing water skier and golfer as well. Most important to him, though, were the scores of young people he taught how to snow ski, water ski, golf, mountain bike, hike, and be fully alive!

Many people only look forward to Friday instead of Monday. They hate their jobs and think they are paid for attendance instead of productivity. Not Doc. And why not Doc? His glass was never half empty. His work ethic was never one of half effort. His love of freedom and respect for America was never halfhearted, and his ability to bounce back was never half-cocked.

Since the day he first heard the phrase on the troopship and again underneath the enemy bridge when he was captured in war, and when he saw it on a daily basis on the prison camp latrine door, that phrase served as his rallying cry, helping him to persevere and to help others do the same. In fact, when he served as the president of the Utah Dental Society he claimed the phrase as the official dental motto. Regardless of whether he was dealing with a negative patient, a black diamond ski run, a cold mountain lake during a weekend of water-skiing, or a deep sand trap in the golf course rough, Doc Sansom grinned and won by understanding: *Illegitimi Non Carborundum*—Don’t let the bastards grind you down!

Although Doc passed away on March 19, 2004 at the age of 79, memorialized with a military honor guard, a 21 gun salute at the cemetery, and a four ship, “Missing-Man Formation” F-16 fly by, Doc's legacy of leadership lives on. He and his “Band of Brothers” from the Greatest Generation are missed, but never forgotten! We love you and honor you every day - especially on this Veteran's Day!