

DUTY

A FATHER,
HIS SON,
AND THE MAN
WHO WON
THE WAR



BOB GREENE

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WON THE WAR**

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William Morrow

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

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FIRST EDITION

Designed by Jackie McKee

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 0-380-97849-0

00 01 02 03 04 QWM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DUTY

**A FATHER, HIS SON,
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BOOKS BY BOB GREENE

Duty

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For Tim Greene

DUTY

**A FATHER, HIS SON,
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ONE

The morning after the last meal I ever ate with my father, I finally met the man who won the war.

It was from my father that I had first heard about the man. The event—the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima—I of course knew about; like all children of the post–World War II generation, my classmates and I had learned about it in elementary school.

But the fact that the man who dropped the bomb—the pilot who flew the *Enola Gay* to Japan, who carried out the single most violent act in the history of mankind and thus brought World War II to an end—the fact that he lived quietly in the same town where I had grown up . . . that piece of knowledge came from my father.

It was never stated in an especially dramatic way. My dad would come home from work—from downtown Columbus, in central Ohio—and say: “I was buying some shirts today, and Paul Tibbets was in the next aisle, buying ties.”

They never met; my father never said a word to him. I sensed that my father might have been a little reluctant, maybe even a touch embarrassed; he had been a soldier with an infantry division, Tibbets had been a combat pilot, all these years had passed since the war and now here they both were, two all-but-anonymous businessmen in a sedate, landlocked town in a country at peace . . . what was my dad supposed to say? How was he supposed to begin the conversation?

Yet there was always a certain sound in his voice at the dinner table. “Paul Tibbets was in the next aisle buying ties. . . .” The

sound in my dad's voice told me—as if I needed reminding—that the story of his life had reached its most indelible and meaningful moments in the years of the war, the years before I was born.

Those dinner-table conversations were long ago, though; they were in the years when my dad was still vital, in good health, in the prime of his adult years, not yet ready to leave the world. I had all but forgotten the conversations—at least the specifics of them, other than the occasional mentions of Tibbets.

Now my dad was dying. We had dinner in his bedroom—he would not, it would turn out, again be able to sit in a chair and eat after this night—and the next morning I told him that I had somewhere to go and that I would be back in a few hours, and I went to find Paul Tibbets. Something told me that it was important.

TWO

It wasn't the first time I had tried. In fact, I had been attempting on and off to talk with Paul Tibbets for more than twenty years.

I had left Columbus to become a newspaperman in Chicago when I was in my early twenties; as I became a reporter, and then a syndicated columnist, I traveled around the world in search of stories, and, as most reporters do, met any number of well-known people as I pursued those stories. As often as not, the people were only too willing to talk; celebrity is embraced by most upon whom it is bestowed, even those who protest that it is a bother. Whether a famous athlete or an ambitious politician or a movie star or a newsmaker just feeling the spotlight's heat for the first time, the people who get a taste of fame often seem to crave it in a way that can fairly be described as addictive. There can never be enough; when the light turns away for even a second or two, some of the most famous men and women in the world seem almost to panic. They need to feel it constantly.

Which is what made me so curious about Paul Tibbets. He had been the central figure in the most momentous event of the Twentieth Century; what he had done changed the world in ways so profound that philosophers and theologians will be discussing and debating it as long as mankind exists. "The man who won the war," of course, is shorthand—no one person accomplished that. But it is shorthand based on fact—Tibbets was the man put in charge of preparing a top-secret military unit to deliver the bomb, he was the person who assembled and trained that unit, and when the time came to do what had never in the history of mankind been

done, to fly an atomic bomb over an enemy nation and then drop the bomb on a city below, Tibbets did not delegate. He climbed into the cockpit and flew the bomb to Japan.

But he was seldom spoken about; the war ended in 1945, and by the 1960s his was a name that few people seemed even to know. Part of this was doubtless because of the deep ambivalence many Americans felt about the end of the war. Yes, they were grateful that it had ended, and that the United States and the Allies had won. But the death and devastation from the bomb—the unprecedented human suffering caused by the unleashing of the nuclear fire—was something that people instinctively chose not to celebrate. Hiroshima was not the stuff of holidays.

So I would hear my father talk of seeing Paul Tibbets here and there in Columbus, and when I was a young reporter my journalistic instincts were to try to speak with him, to secure an interview. By this time—by the early 1970s—Tibbets was running a corporate-jet-for-hire service in central Ohio. I wrote him letters, I left messages at his office—not just once, but periodically over the course of two decades I tried. I never received an answer. He didn't decline, he didn't explain, he didn't offer reasons. He simply didn't respond at all. Never. Not a word.

By the autumn of 1998, my father had been dying for several months. It was a word my family avoided—"dying" was not something we said in his presence, or very often in the presence of one another—but we all knew it, and I think he knew it best.

I was covering a court case in Wisconsin, and during a break I called my office in Chicago and the person who gave me the message was as careful as possible in how she told me: "Your mother called and said your father has been taken to the hospital, but she said to make sure to tell you it's nothing to panic about. She said they're just taking a close look at him."

Within days that had changed. My sister, who lived in Nevada,

had flown to Columbus to help my mom. My father was home from the hospital, but he was not feeling strong enough to talk on the telephone. Another phone call from my sister: "Daddy wants you boys to come."

That day. Right away.

"I think he wants to say goodbye," my sister said.

My plane sat on the runway at O'Hare in Chicago for hours, its takeoff delayed due to some mechanical trouble or other. My brother was able to get to Ohio more quickly from Colorado than I was from Illinois. No working phones on the plane; no way to get word out, or to find out what was happening in my parents' home.

It was well after midnight when I landed at Port Columbus. I didn't call my parents' house—I didn't want to wake my father if he was asleep, and if the news was very bad, I wanted to hear it in person, not over the phone—so I just got in a cab and gave directions. The lights were all burning, at an hour when they never did.

My mom, my sister, my brother. All awake.

"Go on in and talk to him," my mom said.

Some moments, not a word is required. And my father and I had never talked all that easily anyway. I walked into the bedroom, seeing him smaller than I ever remembered him, gray and all but motionless in bed. My father had always been a man who led with a joke; he could make the soberest moment funny, especially when he needed to deflect matters of gravity.

Not tonight.

"Hello, Bob," he said. "Thanks for coming."

Too direct. Too unlike him.

"You've never seen your old man like this, have you?" he said.

I didn't ask him how he was doing. Having to answer that one was not what he needed this night. *Thanks for coming.* That's how he was doing.

Back in July, just a few months earlier, if you looked closely enough you could see it in his eyes.

He wasn't saying anything out loud about feeling especially ill. He seldom did complain, during all the years that diabetes ruled his life. But at the reunion of our immediate family that we held at my parents' house in July, he would sit off by himself and sort of look into the distance. He was present—but for long spans, it seemed that he was barely there. There is a country song with the lyric: *I can't see a single storm cloud in the sky, but I sure can smell the rain. . . .*

The rain was somewhere behind his eyes. A dozen family members were in Columbus for the reunion, more than could fit into my parents' house, so some of us were staying at a motel next to the airport.

One summer morning, before it was time to go to the house, I noticed something across a two-lane access road that separated Port Columbus from our motel: a modest little museum in a converted hangar, a place with a sign saying that it was the Ohio History of Flight Museum. I walked over to take a look.

I was the only visitor. Three bucks to get in—there were antique planes in the hangar, and airplane engines, and photos of Ohio's relationship with air travel. Which is considerable. The Wright brothers came from Ohio, and John Glenn, and Neil Armstrong—from man's first successful powered venture off the ground and into the sky, to man's first step onto the surface of the moon, Ohio may be the state that has had the most significant influence on flying.

The man who had sold me my ticket was strolling around the empty place. I said to him: "Does Mr. Tibbets come around much?"

"Not that often," the man said. "Once in a while."

I supposed it figured. Paul Tibbets had been thirty years old when he flew the bomb to Japan. Now, if I was doing the calculations in my head correctly, he was eighty-three, the same age as my father. With all the renewed appreciation that the World War II generation was receiving, people were noticing something: The

Americans who fought that war didn't go around telling stories about themselves. It made a certain sense that Tibbets would be a sporadic visitor here at best.

Outside the roadside air museum, it was a warm and beautiful summer morning in central Ohio. Land of the free. . . .

On October 20, my mother's seventy-ninth birthday, I was back in Columbus. She was determined to have her birthday dinner the same place she had eaten virtually every meal for the last two months: in the bedroom she shared with my father. If he couldn't leave to eat, then she wasn't going to either.

We ordered from a deliver-in place. My father, with some effort, had been moved from his bed into a nearby chair, and for about twenty minutes he was able to sit up and join us. He seemed almost ashamed of his halting, shaky motions; he had always been a physically strong man, and the fact that it was now a task for him to move a spoon from the plate to his mouth was something he was more than aware we were noticing.

My mother told him that his friend Bill Ehrman, who lived in Hawaii, had called that day to ask how he was doing. My dad smiled at that; Ehrman was a man with whom he had served in the war, and I never heard Ehrman's name mentioned without seeing a look of pleasure on my father's face. His friends from the war years seemed to occupy a place in his life that no other people did.

After dinner he fell asleep immediately. The meal had been the last time I would see him outside his bed.

I went into the room in my parents' house where they displayed the only visible artifact from World War II: an oil painting of my dad as a young soldier, painted, or so I had always been told, by a fellow American soldier in Italy who enjoyed doing portraits of his comrades. Growing up, when I had looked at the painting of my father, he had seemed so seasoned, so experienced. Now, looking at the portrait, I realized that he had been in his twenties when it was

painted. On this night—as I looked at the portrait, with him sleeping not so many feet away—I was fifty-one. The man in uniform in the painting still seemed older than I was.

It was the next morning that I went to see Tibbets.

I had written a column during the summer in which I mentioned my visit to the Ohio air museum. Soon after, I had received a call from a man named Gerry Newhouse, who said he was a friend of Tibbets. Someone in Texas had sent Newhouse a copy of the column from a paper down there, and Newhouse had showed it to Tibbets.

“He liked what you said about the World War II generation not going around bragging about themselves,” Newhouse said.

I said that I had been trying to get a chance to meet Tibbets for the last twenty years.

“Well, I think he’d be happy to say hello to you,” Newhouse said. “Do you ever get to Columbus these days?”

I said my dad hadn’t been doing so well. I said I had a feeling that I’d be in town quite a bit.

When I was a teenager, all of my friends lived in houses, except for one: a boy named Allen Schulman, whose family lived in the only high-rise apartment building in Columbus at that time, a place called the Park Towers. It was big-time, for central Ohio; it actually had a doorman—a dapper young fellow by the name of Jesse Harrell. Jesse knew about everything we did, especially everything we did wrong.

Now, more than thirty years later, I arrived at the front door of the Park Towers. Gerry Newhouse had an office on the first floor; he and Tibbets were going to have lunch together that day, and they were going to meet at Newhouse’s office before going to the

restaurant. I had called Newhouse to say I was in town, and he had said to drop by.

At the front door was Jesse. I knew him before he knew me. Thirty years and more at that front door; the dapper young man was now sixty. “You ever see your friend Allen?” he said, and when I said that yes, sometimes I did, Jesse said, “He never comes back here. There’s not a person in this building who was here when you all were kids.”

He told me where Newhouse’s office was, and I went back and introduced myself, and in a few minutes Tibbets arrived.

I’m not sure what I expected. He was a compact man with a full head of white hair, wearing a plaid shirt and well-used slacks. Hearing aids were in both of his ears; I sensed immediately that I would have to lean close to him in order to be heard. He could have been any of a thousand men in their eighties in the middle of Ohio. You wouldn’t know him in a line at the grocery store.

I told him how pleased I was to meet him—and how long I had wanted to get the chance.

His answer offered a glimpse of the reasons behind his reticence.

“I’ve heard rumors about myself over the years,” he said. “I’ve heard rumors that I had gone crazy, or that I was dead.”

Evidently that is what people had assumed: that the man responsible for all that death must inevitably have gone out of his mind.

I didn’t know where to take this—I didn’t know whether it was an indication that he wasn’t in the mood for conversation—so we just made some small talk for a short while, about Ohio and the Park Towers and the weather on the streets outside, and I told Tibbets that I knew he and his friend had lunch plans, and that I didn’t want to hold them up.

“That’s all right,” Tibbets said. “I’m not that hungry yet. We can talk some.”

THREE

Do people know my name?" Tibbets asked.

He was repeating the question I had just asked him.

A soft, private look crossed his face.

"They don't need to know my name," he said.

The deed he had carried out was one of the most famous the world has ever known; it will be talked about in terms of fear and awe forever. He, though, even here in the town where he lived, was not as famous as the local television weatherman.

"People knowing my name isn't important at all," he said. "It's more important—it was more important then, and it's more important now—that they know the name of my airplane. And that they understand the history of what happened.

"Although sometimes I think that no one really understands the history."

And so we started to talk. Neither of us knew it that day, but it would be the first of many conversations—about the war, about the men and women who lived through it, about their lives, and the lives of their sons and daughters: the lives of those of us who came after them, who inherited the world that they saved for us.

As I sat with Tibbets that first day—thinking of my father in his bed just a few miles away—it occurred to me that Eisenhower was dead, Patton was dead, Marshall was dead, MacArthur was