War Stories

by Jake Barnes

We were having dinner at the Olive Garden. We did that every Thursday. It was boys' night out.

Bert was there; so were Alvin, Eddie, and Phil. Phil was a retired used car salesman. He had a lot just up the road from where we were, on Alamo Boulevard. He was an old Okie. He was a cocky little bastard, in my opinion.

We got to talking about Presidents for some reason, and somebody said (as if it were news) that Jack Kennedy was a war hero. Phil went nuts. Kennedy was no war hero, he said. *He* was a war hero, he said, meaning himself. I asked him what medals he had won, but he didn't say.

Alvin said Eddie was a war hero. Everybody laughed. "Yessir," Eddie said. "I got more deferments than what's-his-name, Cheney. I got flat feet and a busted eardrum."

I winked at Bert. "Tell 'em about the time the kid blew up the bar you were in in Saigon." Bert shook his head. "Bert was in the john at the time," I said. "Saved my ass," Bert said. "I told the MPs about the kid peddling fruit in a basket, and they said, yup, that's how they do it. The kid was seven, eight years old."

I told about the time during the early part of WW II when I shook hands with a member of the Flying Tigers. He was home on leave, and he stopped by to see my dad, who had been his scout master. He flew P-40s at first, but by then he was flying DC-3s. I asked him if he had shot down any Japanese airplanes, and he said one. That was in 1943, I said. He was killed in 1944.

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I told them about my uncle, too. He was on a minesweeper in the invasion of Italy. Their sister ship got blown clean out of the water. My uncle got wounded. They gave him the Purple Heart.

"Funny," I said. "He didn't seem to think he had done anything special. He seemed guilty about it if anything." He was quiet, I said, and I told them how his hands shook when he picked up his coffee cup.