

*Three years ago this weekend, WAI was wrapping up our 30th Anniversary Reunion in sunny San Diego. It was a delightful time of fellowship and renewed friendships and walking together in a region justly famed for ideal weather.*

*Though we did not coordinate it this way, the dates of our Reunion fell on Veteran's Day, November 11, 2019, and our choice of venue, San Diego, has a long history as a center of military training and preparedness, and has long been the principal home port of the Pacific Fleet of the U.S. Navy.*

*The last day of the San Diego Reunion was Veteran's Day. We enjoyed a memorable dinner party together at a lovely restaurant overlooking San Diego Bay. Throughout the evening, we enjoyed music and a great meal, honored various travelers for their accomplishments as WAI travelers, and honored the service men and women present in the room.*

*I also made a few closing comments tying together the theme of Veteran's Day and travel. The transcript of those comments is offered below...*

\*\*\*\*\*

November 11, 2019

I'd like to wrap up our 30th Anniversary celebration by inviting you to join me on a short journey through my story as the leader of Walking Adventures International. My goal is to link the ideas of liberty, democracy, and patriotism embedded in our acknowledgment of Veteran's Day with Walking Adventures and international travel.

### **My first experiences with travel**

My life as a traveler began when I was quite young - I was actually born in Austria in the 50's while my parents were engaged in mission work in the midst of widespread turmoil following World War II. Since my folks returned home just a month or two after my birth, the only impact of that event was the oddity of writing "Salzburg, Austria" when filling out any official forms requiring my "Place of Birth".

Later, while in high school, Dad took a sabbatical from his position as a high school Germany language teacher to pursue a master's degree in German literature at Germany's Stuttgart University. In spite of his limited teacher's salary, Dad had the foresight to invest in our future by bringing part of the family to live with him.

For six months, we lived in Germany and did a fair bit of traveling throughout Europe during holidays. At one point, my sister, Ruthann, came over for a visit and Dad borrowed a VW Beetle from an American GI family so we could take a road trip. We left our home in the Stuttgart area and headed south into Austria, nipping the corner of former Yugoslavia en route to Italy.

There were 5 of us in that Slugbug with all our luggage packed on top, and at 6' 5" and well over 300 pounds, Dad was not the smallest human being to sit behind the wheel of a

Volkswagen Beetle. Through the discomforts of the journey, our motto became “ignore yourself”.

### **Dad and I begin our Walking Adventures journey**

In spite of that 6-month interlude in Europe as a teenager, in 1992 I joined Dad to help him run Walking Adventures with a somewhat limited perspective of the world.

I considered myself a patriotic American—one who chose to be American by taking the naturalization test when I was still Canadian by birth (both parents were Canadians when I was born in Austria).

And though my limited perspective and arguably narrow patriotic views as an American have been tempered and refined over the years, I maintain, in spite of our mistakes, that the sum of America’s contribution to the world is solidly in the plus column. Though some might disagree, in my view, America has added far more to the world than we have taken.

Clearly, America suffers the same vices as all humanity. We struggle with the same blind spots and end up passing along the same generational sins. I’m convinced, however, that something extraordinary took place at the founding of America. The vision may be less clear now, in the 21st century, but a series of remarkable events and people intersected to found and lead this nation through its infancy.

Reading the works of Pulitzer prize winning historians Ron Chernow (*Alexander Hamilton*) and David McCullough (*John Adams*), as well as Englishman Paul Johnson (*A History of the American People*) have repeatedly confirmed for me that our founding, though often messy, is an accomplishment about which we can safely be patriotic. It is an exceptional achievement in government.

### **The Greatest Generation takes the stage**

Fast forward from our founding to the 20th century, many of you in this room were part of or on the edge of the *Greatest Generation*, a label coined by journalist Tom Brokaw. The rest of us had mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles who were part of that generation.

This past summer, brother and fellow WAI guide, Tim Friesen, and I spent three weeks rebuilding our Route 66 walking tour from Chicago to Southern California. The story of that nostalgic “Mother Road” is inextricably linked to the Depression-era, Dust Bowl migration west to California, immortalized by John Steinbeck in his book, *Grapes of Wrath*. As we retraced the route of migration, we were often reminded of the pain the nation endured and our respect grew for this generation that persevered through the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s.

### **Challenges of World War II**

Much of the world shared in the suffering of the Great Depression. But in the 1940s, misery and pain from a different source—from World War II—provided a platform from which American character, culture, and economic power propelled the USA into a position of

global prominence.

WAI has many times visited sites in Europe that commemorate American leadership and sacrifice in pushing back Hitler and the Nazis. The beaches of Normandy in Northern France left an indelible impression on us. The Bastogne War Museum, immortalizing the famous Battle of the Bulge, and the nearby Luxembourg American Military Cemetery, where many of the casualties lie forever interred, are likewise compelling.

On our last visit, two of our travelers honored the memory of fathers who fought in that awful, wintry campaign of December 1944. The emotional impact of seeing the gravestones of these men, inscribed with their all-too-short lifespans, festooned with flags on Memorial Day (another unplanned calendar bonus) was overwhelming. Many of you were with us, and we all had a taste of that emotional impact today and yesterday at Fort Rosecrans cemetery.

### **Our first visit to Czechoslovakia**

Throughout World War II, the American military earned a reputation as a humane fighting force; differences between various military efforts and cultures emerged that cast America in a favorable light. One reason I know this is because of an experience I had on my very first tour with Dad in 1992. This was WAI's first visit to Czechoslovakia, just one year after the breakup of the Soviet Union—again, some of you were with us!

In the Bohemian hills of western Czechoslovakia, a fledgling walking club in a humble, little lead-crystal-producing village called Volary invited us to join them for our first walk in Czechoslovakia. On the day of the event, we were late. GPS mapping was not yet available, the town was in the middle of nowhere, and we were late. The mayor and the club were waiting there at the town hall to greet us. There was a welcome ceremony before the walk, and I'll never forget the short speech given by the mayor in Czech and translated by his son. The only part I truly remember is when he said "We have been waiting for you impatiently...just like we waited in 1945!"

It took a few seconds for that to sink in; at first, we thought the mayor was upset with us for being late. But then we realized that the mayor was saying that in the spring of 1945 townspeople knew they would be liberated; they knew the Nazis were finally finished. But the people of Volary did not know which army would get there first – the Russians or the Americans. Would the liberators come from the East or from the West? They desperately wanted to be liberated by the Americans. Reputations of both armies, and the resulting fate of the population, had preceded them. A general idea of the way of life in both Russia and America were known to them. They did NOT want to be "liberated" by the Russians.

Repeatedly, as I have traveled in the footsteps of the American military in Europe, I have experienced warmth and hospitality and gratitude earned by magnanimous way in the American military conducted themselves during World War II.

Ultimately the Americans did get there first, but that on-the-ground fact was overridden by agreements put in place by leaders of the Allies at Yalta; this part of Europe was already

destined to fall into the Russian sphere. After their liberation by American troops in 1945, they would wait another 50 years before they were free from the control of the communists and able to relearn how to live as a free people.

### **The World War I armistice compared to World War II**

At the close of World War I, The Great War with Germany was officially terminated on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, the origins of our current Veteran's Day, initially called Armistice Day. The 1918 Versailles Treaty was drafted by the Allies, in particular the French, to humiliate and punish Germany, laying the groundwork for the rise of Hitler and the fascist party.

By contrast, at the end of World War II, after fighting shoulder to shoulder with our allies and providing the great majority of the men and resources to beat back the dual threat of Nazi Germany and Japanese fascism that nearly overcame the Free World, America contributed to the rebuilding of both Europe, under the Marshall Plan, and Japan. Unlike the decades that followed World War I, today Germany and Japan have two of the world's largest economies with healthy cultural identities.

### **Is there more than American productivity?**

The tempering of my patriotic point of view developed over the years as I traveled further afield, connecting with a ever-broader array of cultures, ethnic groups, and world views. I began to realize that America is very good at being productive. After World War II, we taught much of the world about economic and agricultural productivity. We exported democracy and free-market prosperity and American business practices, and those concepts continue to change the world for good!

Along with the blessings of productivity and prosperity, however, I saw that we didn't necessarily package these productivity lessons in peace and contentment and happiness. Our lifestyle of productivity tended to be somewhat lopsided, somewhat materialistic. The more I have traveled, the more I've seen that we have much to learn from traditional, Old-World cultures, things like:

- Slowing down to enjoy life—for example, closing businesses one day a week.
- Cultivating respect for elders and for lessons of the past.
- Taking more time for relationships rather than squeezing every ounce of productivity out of every waking moment.
- Slowing down to spend more time with the next generation, teaching them to endure adversity and be content with what they have rather than trying to give them all the things we did not have.
- Living with humility and trusting that there is a higher purpose and meaning to life and that we are not always in control; things will work out.

Our objectives as providers of the travel experience have developed and matured over the years, and I know that you have had similar experiences of shifting paradigms. We still want to show North Americans a great time and have a ton of fun sampling cultures and foods and natural wonders around the planet—it is truly a miraculous planet, unique in all of the

known universe.

But we also hope that our inevitably America-centric paradigm is challenged by getting off this American island, by realizing how much of the rest of the world gets along in daily life just fine without speaking a word of English or taking their cues from our pop culture or our social media.

So on this Veteran's Day, I'll be the first to stand up and salute the flag. I still get a lump in my throat every time I visit a military cemetery. At the same time, it is a phenomenal privilege to realize the life-changing relevance of what is happening in other parts of the planet.

**Furthermore, it's a great time to be a traveler**

No generation has had the ability to travel like we have! The affluence that continues to be generated by free market principles is really quite historic and exceptional! Though problems remain and there is still much pain and sadness in the world, a less-news-saturated view tells us that now is a great time to be alive! It's a great time to be a traveler!!

So here we are with some of the best opportunities in history to go exploring and see the world. And **you** are the ones who have accepted that challenge!! We've been honoring the heroes of our military this evening, and that is entirely fitting and timely. But **you** are the heroes of the WAI 30th Year Anniversary - the WAI story. It is because of **you** that we are here celebrating! We can build it but if you didn't come, the WAI team would all be doing something else with our time.

You are the fuel that has energized WAI -

- You are the ones who have packed your bags and boarded the plane.
- You have assured your anxious relatives that the places that we are taking you are really even safer than getting in your automobile to take to the American road.
- You are the ones who have worked hard to condition yourselves physically to allow you to travel remarkable late in life.

And you have endured the hardships of travel -

- The long flights with the accompanying jet-lag
- The early wake up calls
- The constant flux of packing and prepping for the next day
- The occasional cold shower, and figuring out 1001 ways to flush toilets and regulate shower temperature

Your interest, your curiosity, your willingness to step outside your comfort zone has fueled this story. That, and the grace of God, the underlying force that keeps everything going, is why we are here celebrating 30 years of exploring the world together.

Thank you for being part of Walking Adventures International. Thank you for sharing the

Adventure. Thank you for being part of the journey. And thank you for being part of this celebration!!

We look forward to seeing you out there on the trail, or perhaps again at the next Reunion.

For questions or comments email [fun@walkingadventures.com](mailto:fun@walkingadventures.com)