

Oscar

Earlier this month, I received a message from his daughter Diane that my former boss and mentor at The Quaker Oats Company in Barrington, IL had passed away. Oscar Green Gilbert Jr. had turned 92 just two weeks before, on March 25. I had spoken to him then, catching him while he was out having a breakfast celebration with his family. We had maintained a long tradition of calling on each other's birthday, his in March, mine in November. He was sharp as ever when we spoke but in less than two weeks he passed away peacefully during an afternoon nap.

Oscar belonged to the Greatest Generation. At one time I had the honor and pleasure of knowing quite a few. As a student in Pittsburgh, I met some ex-GI's who brought home Filipina "war brides." While working in Painesville, OH during the late 1960's there were several working with me at Lubrizol Corp. A couple had seen action in the Philippines. One was an 18 year old Army recruit who survived internment as a POW. Needless to say, he didn't like the Japanese. Another was a paratrooper who kept repeating stories about how he "jumped onto Corregidor" and "took care of the Japs." A former colleague at Quaker was in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium during the winter of 1944. A fellow Shriner in Illinois was based in Burma and flew "over the hump" to supply the Chinese Nationalist army. As recently as a few years ago there was a gentleman at our parish who showed me pictures during his days as an officer in the military police. I say gentleman because he was sometimes the only one at Mass who wore a jacket and tie. I tried vainly to have him write his memoirs but got nowhere. They would all leave it to others to memorialize their exploits. Oscar and all the millions of others who served liberated Europe, North Africa and Asia, returned home and went about their business. Oscar embodied all the qualities that led Tom Brokaw to call them "the greatest generation that any society ever produced."

Oscar served with the Navy in the Pacific theater during the war, arriving in Manila in 1946 on the USS Hawkins. It was less than a year after the city was liberated following horrific street-to-street fighting. He was assigned to Shore Patrol during their time in Manila. He was a tall man, 6 ft. 2 in., so holding a billy club, he could be intimidating to wayward sailors or civilians. His Navy career was eclectic. Besides SP, he did radio and radar maintenance. He even served as one of the ship's barbers! He never forgot what he saw in Manila, shaking his head whenever he described the devastation even months after the battle ended. He was always curious about how the rebuilding turned out but never made it back to visit.

Oscar and his younger brother Alfred were born in Georgia. Oscar described his grandfather farmer Green Gilbert plowing their field with a mule. (So that's how he got his middle name.) The mainstay of their diet was salt pork and beans. He said the salt and fat never affected their longevity. The family moved to Virginia where Oscar Sr. had taken a pastoral assignment. His father graduated from college but as a preacher during the Great Depression, he wasn't exactly in a lucrative profession. Oscar delivered newspapers throughout his high school and college years in Virginia. Oscar graduated from the University of Richmond in 1941, majoring in mathematics and chemistry. He then transferred to the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, taking engineering courses. War had broken out, so at the end of the 1941-1942 school year, Oscar went to work in the defense industry. For two years at the Solvay chemical plant in Hopewell, VA, Oscar worked on nitrogen fixation for ordnance. His job was considered essential to the war effort so he wasn't drafted. Oscar tried to volunteer but he wasn't allowed to enlist either. It wasn't until the Normandy invasion that he was finally drafted by the Navy,

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along with his brother Al. Oscar took the prerequisite Eddy Test for Navy and Marine Corps electronics training, gaining admission to radio & radar training. In at least one of the classes, Oscar taught the class material at the request of the instructor. He was then assigned to the newly commissioned destroyer USS Hawkins.

While Oscar was serving in the Navy, his future bride Ruth was among the countless "Rosie the Riveters" keeping the factories humming. She worked as a riveter at a Borg-Warner plant in Chicago. According to Borg-Warner's history, "Components for jeeps, tanks, trucks, ships, and airplanes flowed out of its plants. BWC's most famous wartime project was its amphibious vehicles." I can just see this demure, quiet lady hammering rivets into amphibious landing craft to be used by Marines in the Pacific.

Upon his discharge in 1946, Ruth and Oscar were married, with both fathers conducting the service. Both Oscar and Ruth's fathers had been classmates and roommates at Transylvania University. Oscar went to graduate school on the GI Bill at Vanderbilt University, and got an M.S. in Chemistry. He worked for a few years at Ethyl Corp. in Detroit before joining Quaker.

During the heady stock market days of the 80's, I would frequently tease Oscar about the volatility of Quaker stock. It was really subterfuge on my part, trying to have him reveal how much stock he had. Oscar subscribed to the old adage of "pay yourself first" after every paycheck. He bought Quaker stock and never sold. Splits came and went, divisions were spun off, but he never sold those shares either. I would kid him about still possessing the first Quaker share he bought in the 1950's (it would now be Pepsi, which bought Quaker in 2001). On particularly nasty days, like the Black Monday in October of 1987, I would jokingly remark "Oscar, you could have bought a new Chevrolet Caprice with what you lost." He would laugh and remark "I could have bought a Cadillac, not just a Caprice."

The Caprice was his vehicle of choice which made me wonder about why these old guys are attached to big V-8 rear wheel drive cars. Then I got older and became attached to similar cars like the Crown Vic and Grand Marquis. We still drive the latter. He did need a bigger car to haul his boat. I would say having a boat was the closest thing Oscar had to a vice. When he learned that I got divorced in 1972 and I had the children during the summer, he invited us all for a boat ride on Fox Lake. I still have the picture of my wind-blown kids sitting in Oscar's boat. Oscar knew of a place referred to as Puppet Bar on the Chain-O-Lakes that served hamburger. But its main attraction was sixty puppets of animals and various characters who would all dance if you played a certain tune on the jukebox. He was always thinking of others, this time getting my children entertained. Years later when he and Ruth were living in Bowling Green, KY, he took Val, me and our daughter Anita for another boat ride.

Having reached 65 and after working nearly thirty years with Quaker, Oscar retired in 1986. I had the pleasure of organizing his retirement party at a banquet hall near Barrington. Since his first move was to Florida, we thought it appropriate that one of his gifts was a newly planted palm tree. To plant the tree, I had to chase down the contractor who was building his house. After two years in Florida, they relocated to Bowling Green, KY. The town is only a short drive from lakes and rivers, so their Switzer Tri-Hull boat got lots of use.

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Ruth and Oscar were particularly fond of Elderhostel, going to programs all over the U.S. They also traveled to Europe. Oscar joined SCORE, an organization of former executives advising local businesses. When Ruth's health started to deteriorate, they moved from Bowling Green to a retirement home in Lisle, IL. Vascular dementia took its toll on Ruth and she predeceased him in 2011. Ruth and Oscar were married for 65 years.

During our last conversation on his birthday, Oscar's parting words were "you and Val keep on traveling as long as you're able. Don't have any regrets" We will, Oscar, we will. No regrets either. Thank you.

"Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." (Matthew 25:21)

Mario E. Orosa
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