

# Opinion: Humble start for a decorated sailor

*Publisher's note: After the annual Memorial Day ceremony in South Lake Tahoe this year, Mayor Hal Cole was criticized by members of the public for not attending. When Lake Tahoe News learned he spends every Memorial Day with his World War II veteran father, Hal Cole Sr., we asked Cole to write a tribute to and about his father for Veterans Day.*

By Hal Cole Jr.

He was born July 24, 1922, in St. Louis, Mo. His young mother died five years later and he spent the rest of his childhood shuffled between orphanages, aunts and a stepfather. He had just turned 18, fresh out of high school, and was on his own in the midst of the Great Depression. He witnessed long lines for a single job opening or for a free bowl of soup.

As he boarded a trolley in the summer 1940 with no particular destination in mind, he spotted a billboard. On it a sailor in a clean, starched uniform was pointing directly at him with the words: "We Want You!" underneath. It was the first time in his young life that he felt there was a place for him.



Hal Cole Sr.

The next day he donned his best outfit, combed his hair, and with high hopes entered the local recruiter's office. He was met by a pot-bellied, grumpy officer who had him fill out

endless forms before putting him on a scale. At 5-foot-11 he weighed in at just 118 pounds, 2 pounds shy of the Navy's minimum. To which the recruiter responded, "Go home son and come back when you grow up." As tears welled up in the young man's eyes, the grizzled old chief was visibly shaken. He dug in his pockets and pulled out 15 cents and told the boy to buy some bananas, drink as much water as he could and come back in an hour. Sure enough, upon his return the scale barely touched 120; to which the officer replied, "Congratulations, son, you're in the Navy!"

So began my father's journey that would take him to places he never dreamed of and horrors he could have never imagined.

As he exited the train in San Diego, my dad saw the ocean for the first time and a harbor full of warships dwarfing any Mississippi river boat he had ever seen. He was assigned to the USS Nashville, a Navy cruiser. After answering yes to three questions: "Can anyone here type?" (he had taken a class in high school) , "Anyone know Morse code?" (he was a Boy Scout) , and "Can anyone make coffee?" (how difficult could that be?), he was now a radioman.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor one year later on Dec. 7, 1941, the fate of my father and our country would never be the same.

I offer this commentary not so much as a recounting of my father's military career, but rather recognition of a generation that is rapidly disappearing. I'm sure, however, my dad would never forgive me if I didn't at least highlight some of his exploits. He received two battle stars, was aboard the USS Nashville when it participated in the Battle of Guadalcanal, escorted Jimmy Doolittle for his raid on Japan, carried Gen. Douglas MacArthur for his return to the Philippines in 1944, was hit by a kamikaze in December of that year that killed 133 of his fellow sailors, and not to be forgotten, he rescued actor Jason Robards from the sea after

his ship sank.

My father's story is not unique. Thousands of young men have gone off to war defending our country, witnessing life-altering events. My dad was lucky; he came back alive. Now, at 89, he lives in Reno.

As I pause and reflect on this Veterans Day, I have much to be thankful for. I am blessed to be living in such a beautiful place, seemingly safe while war and bloodshed still plagues our world. I can only hope that the suffering our men and women in uniform have endured and continue to face will not be forgotten or taken for granted.

I am also thankful for what the military gave to my father. In addition to giving him three square meals a day for the first time in his life, the U.S. Navy taught him a trade and paid for his college education, which enable him to start a small business and support his family.

Thank you veterans everywhere and thank you, dad. Although you gave me your name, I will never be your equal.