

Not too long ago, K. Michael Ware, a 21-year veteran of the Air Force found himself with other veterans visiting Normandy, France.

His hands rested on the handles of a wheelchair. The old soldier he was assisting slowly stood and pointed to where he came ashore in the second wave of D-Day, June 6, 1944. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes as he recalled wading past wounded comrades he could not help, as his job was to hit the beach and fight for a stronghold to liberate Europe. Medical corpsmen would attend to the wounded.

He remembered the machine-gun fire, the sounds of heavy artillery, the smell of diesel fuel from friendly tanks that sat disabled on the beach from enemy fire, and the utter fear that nearly overwhelmed his 19-year old body. He was one of the lucky ones that day. He lived and fought to fight across Europe - through France, Belgium and to the gates of the German concentration camp, Dachau. As he sat back down he wiped his eyes and said he would do it all again for his great nation and its flag - the Stars and Stripes.

Michael was on a ten-day trip with 11 World War II veterans visiting Paris, Normandy and Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany. As a 21-year Air Force vet, it was a bucket-list trip for him. Eight of the men fought in Europe, while 3 fought in the Pacific. The youngest was 89, the oldest 94. They were on a Forever Young Senior Veterans Trip of Honor to heal from the emotional scars they had carried for more than 70 years. Their faces may have shown many years of life, but their mind were sharp - remembering minute details about their time spent fighting for freedom against tyrannical powers. They shared freely, talking of hardships, successes, fears and regrets, of duty, honor and country.

They asked for nothing special, continuing the humble nature they and their brethren of The Greatest Generation have demonstrated since retiring from the war. They were proud patriots who felt the only heroes were their fellow soldiers who are buried in cemeteries like the two American ones they visited in Normandy and Luxembourg. They didn't get to go home.

One member of the group was approached by a beautiful young lady as they were visiting a battlefield. She knelt down in front of his wheelchair and asked about his service as a Navy Seabee during the war. After a few

minutes she told him that she was a Seabee and had just returned from Afghanistan. They talked of her service, she gave him a hug, and then she left with tears in her eyes. Michael looked at the old vet and said “how about that!” He smiled and said, “Well I know now I left the Seabees way too early; we didn’t have any that looked like that.” The group of vets laughed and then said, “She gave me hope that her generation still holds the values that we fought for - she inspired me.” And that is what our hard-fought freedom does: inspires the youngest and even the greatest Americans to have faith and believe in the goodness of our country.

Well into the tour, they walked through the Ardennes forests of Belgium, where the frontline of American troops faced the force of the German Army at the Battle of the Bulge. Michael looked over his shoulder and saw Bob, a 90 year old Marine veteran who fought in the Pacific Campaign and later elected to continue his service in Korea and Vietnam in the Air Force.

Bob stood looking at a double foxhole dug between trees by soldiers who fought in the battle. He slowly came to full military attention with a straight back and head held high. His right hand slowly rose into a military salute. He held the position for nearly 2 minutes. As his arm slowly returned to his

side, Michael saw his shoulders sag, and he nearly collapsed. Michael hurried to his side and put his arm around his back to support him. He whispered that he was there now and knew this time must be very difficult. After a few minutes, Bob breathed deeply and said through tears, "I lost many friends over here. Now that I have traveled where they fought and honored their memory, maybe I can start to heal."

Michael's time with these veterans was coming to an end, and he started to reflect on his own life. As a young boy, he remembers attending movies where they all stood with their hands on their hearts as the National Anthem played and the American flag waved on the big screen. Newsreels from World War II would be shown as the lead-in for the main feature. These newsreels taught them about the gallantry of the Greatest Generation and inspired him to join the military too.

When they came home, these heroes, Michael reflects, would not talk about their service or the war. They melded right back into society, building careers and raising families. They wished to forget and move forward, though many could not.

Early in Michael's own career, he had a commander who had spent nearly 6 years in captivity at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, the POW camp. He asked him how he survived those years of torture, isolation, starvation and humiliation. He said he survived because he had faith: faith in his God, faith in his country and faith in his fellow POWs. He said, "When you have faith, there is hope; and if you have hope, you have life." His words of faith, hope and life were the exact mantra Michael heard from the World War II veterans as they spoke of their lives.

Michael now has a different perspective when he looks at the US flag. He doesn't just see the Stars and Stripes, he sees a cold and ragged army crossing the Delaware River under the leadership of General Washington; he sees brother fighting brother at Gettysburg; the gassed trenches of World War I; the beaches, hedgerows, bombing and concentration camps of World War II; the cold mountains of Korea; the rice paddies of Vietnam; and the deserts of the Middle East. He sees men and women of this great nation who sign up to give it all - including their very lives - to defend the freedoms that bind our nation. He also sees a nation that is first to offer assistance to friend or foe when disaster strikes. He knows our flag has some tattered edges, but through faith, hope and love. He says we can

continue to honor a flag that stands for freedom, which they can't take away.

The reason we have freedom as Americans is because so many people who have served as veterans have fought to preserve it. And people from both soldiers to civilians have through the centuries not only helped that freedom to endure, but also brought about such good through their actions of humble service.

Today is not Independence Day in our country, but in a way of sorts the Immaculate Conception celebrates how we are freed from sin in how we celebrate the life of Mary, and have so much to learn from her, namely through her complete trust in God, and through her humility in being the vessel through whom that salvation came to the world.

In the first reading, Adam and Eve fail to trust in God, whereas Mary has those powerful words "may it be done to me according to your word." This is the trust component - just like the vets trusted in God and others, it's worth asking ourselves do we trust too?

I think when we look to Mary's response, it's a challenge for us to have that trust, because so often in life, we can fail to trust anyone but ourselves. We can mistrust other people, think God has abandoned us, and sometimes even not trust in our own abilities or the gifts God has given us, looking at our shortcomings rather than our strengths. And so today, I'd just invite you to ponder what trust looks like in your life.

First, like Mary, do you trust that God loves you and wants a true relationship with you? Mary of course was not a veteran, but when you look at her life, the parallels to that of the soldier are striking. In our Gospel, she is greeted by an angel who has a message for her: God's got plans for you. Only thing is, Mary has plans as well. She's going to marry a nice man named Joseph, and settle down while he works as a carpenter. But, God's plans are different. She is told that through her, God will come into the world. Now she has no clue how this is going to happen; for she's not married yet. And on top of this, anyone in her position would have anxiety, and maybe fear and doubt as well. If she were to become pregnant out of wedlock, it would open up a host of problems. She would be ostracized from the community; and Joseph would probably leave her. She could even lose her life, such was the misogynistic attitude of society at the time. But

instead she trusts completely in God, and with a bold statement says “let it be done to me according to thy word.” She has no idea what the future will hold, much like the 19-year olds that signed up after Pearl Harbor – but she is going to be undeterred in her mission. She’s going to stand by her son, even when he takes off when he’s 12 and ends up in a Temple. She’s going to trust in Him, even when she sees people react with violence to Him. And she’s going to trust in God even when her Son dies on the cross. Through it all as a mom she will be a leader and a servant – because she realizes it’s not about her, but about God and carrying out her mission God loves us so very much - so hopefully we trust in His plan and know we can always turn to Him. Sometimes we may not feel His presence; but remember any relationship is not about

Secondly, do you trust yourself? Sometimes we can feel like we are the only ones that we can trust, but if you think about it, it can be very easy to get down on ourselves. Our Blessed Mother certainly had to trust God, but she also had to trust in herself too that she was making the right decision. At times it can be easy to focus on the rear-view mirror of life, and see some of the mistakes we’ve made, but there is no changing the past. We

can't make up for a bad decision, but we can work to change the future.

The journey ahead for Mary, just like for the soldiers on the beach, wasn't easy. She gives birth in a manger, she visits her cousin Elizabeth riding a donkey, she and Joseph flee as Herod massacres the innocents, and she stands at the foot of the cross as her Son dies. But through it all, she continually trusts both in God and in herself to do the right thing.

Third, we have to ask ourselves too how do you trust in other people? All of those soldiers relied on one another to help them through. God did not create us to live alone; that is why he created man and woman, two equals, to be partners, and why there are other people in our lives. Sometimes we can be mistrusting, and we need to be to a certain extent. People do, sadly, at times lie to us and let us down. But sometimes we can take it too far, and trust no one. When we are making decisions with our lives or helping others to do the same, we have to be open to acknowledging that sometimes others are giving us advice in our best interest, or that we should seek counsel before we act. We need to look around and try to trust loved ones as well. So look for the angels in your life who have a message for you, one that may be like, for Mary, a challenging one. On the one hand, an adult certainly needs to be treated as an adult and make

decisions on their own, but on the other just because someone is a so-called “grown-up” doesn’t mean that advice isn’t needed, so hopefully when people give you advice, you hear them out.

Lastly, as evidenced by so many veterans and also our blessed Mother, can we accept being a big part of God’s plan, but not having the focus put on us? CBS Evening News recently had a story on a young man named Miles who’s dad died in Iraq. On a February Day, he ran into Lt. Col Frank Daly at a Cracker Barrel. Miles Eckert came in and had just found a \$20 bill in the lot, and he thought about what he could spend it on. He wanted a video game at first, but changed his mind when he saw the man in uniform. He said soldiers remind him of his father, and he wrapped the bill in a note: “Dear soldier, my dad was a soldier, he’s in heaven now. I found this \$20 in the lot, We like to pay it forward in our family. I thank you for your service. Signed, Miles Eckert, a Gold Star kid.” His dad, an army sergeant, was killed five weeks before he was born in Iraq. And as for the soldier who got that lunch, he got a lot more than a meal. In the story, he said he reads the note every day and he got a lifetime direction. Lt. Col Daly says he gave away the \$20 and plans to do much more, and he hopes that this note will inspire to give as freely as Miles and his father Andy gave. Our Blessed

Mother shows us incredible humility not wanting the focus to be on her at all but rather on God. She'll visit Elizabeth and not expect anything in return, but will do so just to assist her cousin. Later in life at the Wedding at Cana she will say "do whatever He tells you." And of course at the Last Supper Jesus will humbly wash the feet of his apostles. Mary is fine being in the background, and when you think of all those veterans who have served our country, our heroes, none of them put the focus on themselves. Rather they serve their country and help one another. When we humbly do things out of love without wanting something in return, they can be incredibly powerful in making such a difference in the world.

It was through Mary that Jesus came to us and we were freed from sin; it is through our soldiers that our freedom as Americans endures. Jesus came as an infant, and while we will see Him one day again, and we also see Him on the altar, may we never forget that like Mary, we too can bring him into the world through how we lead our lives by trusting in Him to be with us, trusting that we are not in the fight alone, and remembering that through ordinary actions of love like Mary did for Elizabeth, Joseph and her Son, we can do truly extraordinary things, so that people through us are given freedom from darkness and sin, and experience and see the love of God.

