The Scars of Freedom
Memories of World War II

I was born feet first, one foot, then the other. It's called a breech birth and was not uncommon before they learned how to turn babies in the womb. Aside from that, my birth was uneventful, except for the timing. I was born into the world on the rising winds of war. Hitler chose the month of my birth, September of 1939, to invade Poland and initiate World War II in Europe.

I was, of course, oblivious of world affairs. I was busy mastering the alphabet-blocks I received for my second birthday in 1941 when Nazi Germany and its Axis partners invaded the Soviet Union. I have to admit, I wasn even unaware that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor that same December, but my mind was most likely on the coming of Christmas.

At the time of my third birthday, the adults around me talked about the great naval Battle at Midway in June of 1942, and of friends and relatives being drafted to fight in the war. I'm sure the toys I got as gifts for my birthday and Christmas were soldiers, tanks, battle ships and war planes.

The horrible bombing of Britain in 1940-41 was on everyone's mind. Could the Germans bomb us? Harsh air-raid sirens were installed everywhere in my town. Unidentified aircraft would cause near panic with authorities and blackouts were enforced. Air-raid wardens patrolled the residential streets and blew their police whistle to chastise blackout offenders.

By my fourth birthday, the war was all that adults talked about. The allied troops landed on the beaches of Salerno near Naples in September of 1943. There was hope for Europe after all. My family along with most families on our street were given plots of land to plant "Victory Gardens", raising vegetables for the war effort. I had my own set of child's garden tools to help in the garden.

In June 6, 1944, British and US troops successfully landed on the Normandy beaches of France, opening a "Second Front" against the Germans. Allied troops liberated Paris in August 25 and drove Germans out of France in time for my fifth birthday.

VE Day (Victory Europe), May 7, 1945, word came by radio (there was no TV at the time), Hitler was dead, and the Germans surrendered to the Allied command. The news came around 5pm in late afternoon on the east coast. No one could have anticipated the massive unleashing of pent up emotional energy that spread like a wave across the country. People ran from their houses and into the streets screaming, crying, wailing, hugging their neighbors. I was five and a half years old, walking down the sidewalk holding my sister's hand, and I was terrified.

In August of 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and on September 2, 1945, Japan surrendered (VJ Day) just as I turned six.

But it didn't end there. In the months to follow, soldiers began to return, still in uniform, bringing with them souvenirs from the battlefield and tales of blood and courage. My uncles would visit, and six-year-old-me would hang on their every word. There were seemingly endless military parades and veteran's celebrations. Tanks and planes and weapons of all kinds were on display at all kinds of events. I marched in many of those parades with my high school band and patriotism boiled in our blood. At age 18, I joined the Army as did many of my high-school graduating class.

Four hundred thousand American Servicemen and women were killed in World War II, and nearly 700,000 wounded. Freedom is not free. The scars from combat lasted for decades, and the scars on our collective psychology are with us still.

~Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona, 2017   *{posted on Facebook}*