

My Granddad on the Burma Road  
By: Emily Mannheimer

I've heard the stories of my Granddad, Richard Warren Sommers, serving our country as a Flying Tiger all throughout my childhood and into my college years. Who could forget the charming stories of the brilliant, Harvard-educated would-be diplomat drafted to drive a truck through Asia during the World War II. Only as I have gotten older and come to understand what it is to be both an educated young adult and an active and patriotic citizen of our country, have I come to see that I had never come close to fully understanding the experiences of my grandfather and the honor and respect due him.

The way that the story goes, Granddad was drafted and sent to Burma to join the Flying Tigers and transport supplies to the pilots. The officer in charge of his unit lined all of the men up and told them that a few of them would be driving the trucks from Calcutta to Kunming—a total of 1739 miles through rocky terrain and close to the edge of a cliff. The rest of the men would just be along for the ride. The officer asked if any of the men had ever driven a truck before. One raised his hand and was assigned as a driver. The officer then asked if any of them had ever driven a tractor. Another two raised their hands and were assigned to drive. Slowly Granddad realized that most of the other men had about the same level of experience driving large vehicles as he did—about none. It only took a moment to understand that he was going to either have to drive a truck himself or ride along with someone with even less experience. The next time the officer asked for drivers, he volunteered.

The start of the story is funny, quick-witted, and charming, much like my grandfather himself. But perhaps what I failed to realize in my younger years was just how much bravery he displayed in that moment. He took a leap of faith into unfamiliar territory because he believed in himself, his purpose in the war, and his country. The rest of the story has similar hidden details:

All along the journey down the Burma Road, a Burmese kid sat in the front seat next to Granddad and stuck his head out the window to see if they were ever at risk of driving off the cliff. Of course, Granddad made the story electrifying and hilarious, but through it you can see the way that he clearly began to value and respect the boy in his car. Truly, this is how he came to see all of the people that he encountered in Burma in China—as people worthy of his gratitude and respect.

What I originally learned from this story is that each small role played in a military operation can have a huge effect. But what I see now is that I was also learning the importance of respecting those who are willing to help you and having faith in yourself to be strong enough to get through difficulties. I know that these are ideas that many members of the Flying Tigers took away from their experiences during the war, and I am glad that I am starting to gain a better understanding of them. I recently found out that Granddad served with Marty Oxenburg and in a note to my mother, he expressed a similar gratitude for the experience and the support of the Chinese people, as well as several kind thoughts on the relationship he enjoyed with my grandfather.

I am blessed that even though my grandfather is gone, his legacy can live on in the family stories passed down to each generation, and through the kind words of people who knew him during this important part of his life.