

Ed Miller Day
by Mark L. Psiaki
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This is a story with two heroes, ours and everyone else's. These heroes resembled each other in many ways: They grew up in the same corner of northern New Jersey. They earned spending money as newspaper delivery boys. They attended the same high school. They both went on to elite eastern universities, where they majored in physics and competed in intercollegiate sports. They both wore uniforms on the day of our story. They even shared the same birthday.

Their births, however, were 16 years apart. This gap contributed to immense differences in background and outlook on the day of our story. This day didn't seem particularly remarkable to our hero. The other hero was undergoing a monumental life transition that would be unimaginable to most of us.

Our hero received all the right training for his part. Important inputs came from school, reading, the examples set by elders, and that great teacher experience.

His English teacher had a significant impact. This teacher spent his time debunking people like Jonathan Edwards and events like the First Great Awakening. He and his whole class tried to discredit our hero's faith in Ayn Rand. Her fictional world was inhabited by a few worthy supermen/heroes on the one hand and everyone else on the other. Naturally our hero realized that he was one of Rand's supermen. Neither the teacher nor the class thought to point out Rand's use of an old literary trick: concoct a cheap, vicarious experience of heroism for Everyman in order to sell him a book.

The example set by this teacher proved more important than his ideas. Time and again he modeled the art of improvising rebuttals to any conceivable idea: The rebutter strikes a cynical pose of weariness at the world's follies. He shares "insights" about the idea's "negatives". He subtly invites the listener to become a cool, in-the-know person by agreeing. This method can be effective when supporters of the original idea are mute, or better still, absent.

The reconstruction of our story must be improvised because the teacher didn't give any guidance about how and why stories are written. This reconstruction will depend on our hero's memory and veracity to learn about his part. Newspaper clippings will be needed to fill in about the other hero. Our hero can provide only tidbits of direct information about the other hero. He wasn't interested in the existence of other heroes, and he paid this one as little attention as possible.

Our hero's memory is a tricky thing, especially on the day of our story. In the morning he could remember enough math and vocabulary on his SATs to set his sights on Princeton, with MIT as his only back-up. Later that day, drumming for a band, he couldn't recall how to play a well known song. Still later, he could retain the key statements of a speech and a response.

Our hero's veracity was tested in two different court appearances. They occurred a few months after our story. The police had seen him throw a bong and a bag of pot in some bushes shortly before he concluded another adventure by getting arrested. He admitted to owning the contraband. This testimony was given at a friend's trial. Our hero's confession won his friend an acquittal. He was less forthcoming at his own juvenile hearing. The judge demanded the names of his suppliers. He offered up a half-truth to protect his guilty friends and his own back side. The judge thundered back at him, accusing him of lying. Our hero meekly stuck to his story.

The other hero hadn't been as successful at withholding intelligence from an enemy. He was a navy pilot. He had been flying a reconnaissance mission over North Vietnam when he was shot down and captured on May 22, 1968. He spent almost 5 years in the Hanoi Hilton, 1.5 in solitary confinement. He was tortured and gave up information, as did other captured U.S. fliers of that war.

The name of the other hero is Edwin (Ed) F. Miller, Jr. Our hero first learned of his existence on April 7, 1973. This day was designated Ed Miller Day in Franklin Lakes, NJ. It was a celebration of Ed's homecoming. Our hero participated in the ceremonies as a member of the Ramapo High School marching band.

This band duty was a bother. After their morning SAT battles, our hero and several band friends felt entitled to unwind and celebrate. They sprinted to a nearby woods with ample supplies of alcohol and marijuana. The party was soon in full swing.

Meanwhile, Ed Miller was preparing to travel in a motorcade. It would wind through Franklin Lakes from his home to the high school. The route was lined with "Welcome Home Ed" banners, yellow ribbons, and people. Cars bore bumper stickers to honor Ed. The mayor was there. The local congressman joined the celebration.

Ed rode in an open car with his parents, Helen and Edwin Sr. The onlookers may have counted them heroes too. They had spent 5 years wondering whether they would see their son again. The North Vietnamese allowed Ed to send brief letters. Ed's letters were censored and arrived sporadically. Ed wrote things that would have seemed innocuous to censors but strange to his parents, prompting them to read between the lines. His between-the-lines messages raised serious alarms about his condition.

Helen and Edwin Sr.'s discouragement grew with the passing years of their son's captivity. Helen's determination to take action also grew. She journeyed to Paris to lobby North Vietnamese diplomats for better treatment of POWs. She volunteered for a presidential campaign, hoping that a change of administration would bring Ed home. All her efforts proved fruitless. The North Vietnamese were unsympathetic, and the American president won re-election. Nevertheless, a peace treaty was signed a few months after the election. Ed was freed!

Our hero's parents did not join in the celebration. His father was probably busy playing the hero to some other man's wife. His mother had given up dreaming about heroes. She was busy soldiering on as an almost-single parent.

Our hero knew nothing about the motorcade, the banners, the ribbons, the cheering crowds, or Ed's relieved parents. He wouldn't have cared. While Ed was in captivity, Mrs. Miller was quoted in a newspaper saying, "What am I going to tell my son when he comes back and asks what we did when he was gone? Am I going to tell him that I enjoyed my air-conditioned house and my air-conditioned car?" If our hero had read those lines, he probably would have made a clever remark: "If you don't care about your air conditioning, lady, why don't you give it to me?"



Lt. Edwin Miller of Franklin Lakes cheerfully smiles from the motorcade with his parents, Helen and Edwin. Yesterday the town honored his return from a POW camp in Vietnam with sunny weather greeting the celebration.

Our hero, however, hadn't read anything about the Millers. No word of Ed Miller day had been breathed to him by his parents, his teachers, his neighbors, or his friends. The only information came from the band director: Report in uniform for marching band duty at such-and-such an hour on Saturday to participate in some sort of ceremony.

Being good band members, our hero and his friends ended their bacchanal in the woods after just one hour. They hurried back to the high school, changed into uniforms, retrieved their instruments, and lined up in the parking lot outside the band room. The

director told the band to warm up with a patriotic march, the classic Navy song *Anchors Aweigh*.

A hero can smoke a lot of pot and drink a lot of beer in an hour. All that drink and pot caused our hero to forget whether the song's meter is 2/4 or 6/8. He glanced at the other snare drummer, also a participant in the post-SAT party and also befuddled. They shrugged at each other and guessed, wrongly. As the march wore on they may have had their doubts. They put on brave faces and played 6/8 to the end. After the last note died away, the entire band almost died of laughter, all doubled over.

The director didn't laugh. He might have died – of a heart attack – had he grasped the situation. The drum section is the core of a marching band. The snare drummers are its captains. These two were in no condition to lead this band in front of 5,000 people. The director responded as though the mishap were merely a practical joke. He delivered a sharp, public rebuke and considered the matter settled.

The sting of the rebuke and help from the two drummers' kidneys combined to save the day. The drum section performed passably for the march down to the football field. The band played creditable renditions of the national anthem at the start of the ceremony and the alma mater at the end. Our hero was relieved that his reputation as a drummer had avoided serious damage.

His attitude towards Ed Miller's reputation was decidedly different. Ed had imposed upon him and his friends. What right did Ed have getting released on a schedule that interfered with our hero's post-SAT celebrations? What right did Ed have being the excuse for local worthies to draft a marching band into service? Its members were forced to suffer through dull speeches in uncomfortable uniforms on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. Worst of all, what right did Ed have monopolizing everyone's attention?

Eventually Ed Miller came to the podium and gave a speech. He talked about the usual warrior things. His ideas were out of fashion in the anti-war early '70s. Although never a fashionable dresser, our hero knew all about the latest fashions in thought. "Hell no, we won't go!" was a cool chant. Patriotism was out, especially the kind that involves self sacrifice.

Our hero felt an urge to share his superior wisdom. He launched into a running commentary on the other hero's remarks. All of it was negative, cynical, and true to the form modeled by his English teacher. Our hero muted his volume to avoid drawing attention from Ed or any authorities. Band members around him could hear. Sympathizers may have snickered lightly. Others probably shot him annoyed glances. Our hero ate up the attention. All true heroes do.

Miller's speech proceeded to its climax: "If my country needed me to, I would do it all over again." The crowd roared its approval. Ed's line even managed to lodge itself in our hero's memory, despite his disdain and the residual chemicals in his system. His response was the climax of his own monologue: "If you're fool enough to say that, then

you deserve everything you got.” Our hero was certain that he had impressed his fellow band members. He was pleased with himself at the close of Ed Miller day.

Afterwards, our hero and the other hero went their separate ways. Ed Miller left active duty, married, reared 3 sons, and became a farmer in northern California. He remained scandalously unaware of our hero for more than three decades.

During those decades our hero grew up, married, and raised a family of his own. Many of his attitudes and values changed. His faith in Ayn Rand was supplanted by a faith 19 centuries more mature. Two of his children joined the military and went on active duty after 9/11. Both would eventually head into harm’s way, one in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq.

Our hero’s attitude towards Ed Miller changed. He felt compelled to track Ed down, phone him, and confess his contributions to the homecoming celebration. The conversation was surprising. Ed took no offense at our hero’s thoughtless youthful antics. Only one thing bothered Ed: the notion that anyone would call him a hero.