

# From the Greatest Generation My Greatest Hero - Emil Sztanyo



Tiger - Charlie Gehringer, Emil's boyhood hero.

*The tribute below was presented to my father on Father's Day 2009 by a loving son. My love for him is far from unwarranted. He spent his life in sacrifice, commitment, and dedication to his faith, family and community. Now that his life is full it would seem that his efforts have come to an end. That, however, is not the case. Emil's energy, influence and impact still has a lasting legacy for us all.*

10/3/2012  
Mark Sztanyo

## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

There are many thoughts that we keep but are seldom shared, if ever. Sometimes we fail to express words of importance to ones we love. The following contains some of my personal thoughts that I hold dear.

So many things that we see in life, we intuitively ask a frequent question, “Where did that come from?” Just think of the times or things that you have encountered when that question came to mind. Sports acumen, achievement, bravery/valor, leadership, parenting (or lack of same), or commitment to faith, family and marriage to list just a few. Underlying my following thoughts, I can’t help but often times think of that question. While I do not pretend to know the answer in every case, before the end I will share my impression.

When Tom Brokaw wrote his book “the Greatest Generation” many of us felt a common sense of agreement. Tom’s writes, "In the spring of 1984, I went to the northwest of France, to Normandy, to prepare an NBC documentary on the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, the massive and daring Allied invasion of Europe that marked the beginning of the end of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. There, I underwent a life-changing experience. As I walked the beaches with the American veterans who had returned for this anniversary, men in their sixties and seventies, and listened to their stories, I was deeply moved and profoundly grateful for all they had done. Ten years later, I returned to Normandy for the fiftieth anniversary of the invasion, and by then I had come to understand what this generation of Americans meant to history. It is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced."

Brokaw got it right. What took place to and with-in that generation of Americans will likely never be duplicated in our country. A circumstance of epic proportions challenged a people to bind together in a unified effort to accomplish what no one could do alone and what no one could do without extraordinary conviction. Simply historic! What has become the by-product are decades of amazing prosperity and growth.

From the “greatest” generation I have known some amazing people. Harry Stratton weighed in at 180 pounds and this Kentucky boy was as fit as a fiddle when joining the ground war in Eastern Europe as a foot soldier. As they marched into France capturing ground as they went, they penetrated too

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

quickly becoming separated and isolated from other flanking US forces. They were surprised and surrounded by the Nazis, who quickly captured them without firing a shot. To personally hear Harry's POW experience (that begun from that point), is both riveting and filled with adventure, until his eventual escape, rescue and return. He was 90 pounds when recovered. It is a story of courage, cunning, will and faith. One that is impressive to any thankful American.

Eva Kalany (our neighbor), was imprisoned (with her family) in a Yugoslavian WWII concentration camp under the Serbs who came to power allowed by the after war Russian control. She was 12 when she along with her mother escaped from the camp. The tale was one of nerves fraying hour by hour. To remain or attempt to escape were both dangerous and life threatening. On the minds of all prisoners was that re-capture would result in certain public execution. But after escape they stayed low, blended in, and survived. She found her way to an American zone in Austria and as the war ended became sponsored by a Catholic church to America and Batavia, OH. There she met her husband who grew up in a town in Romania only 12 miles away from her Yugoslavian village and was also sponsored to America. Now very much a part of the American fabric, the Kalany's testify to grit, determination and blessing.

During my early flying career I had the privilege of flying with a gentlemen who shared a *similar* namesake to the infamous billionaire Howard Hughes. This "Harvey" Hughes (from Lansing, MI) was a famous local aviator in his own right. But this day, after receiving my flight training from him, I learned that I had *touched history*. This extraordinary man had been trained by none other than, Orville Wright himself. Imagine.... this aviator-instructor, now debriefing me and filling in my logbook, had trained with the father of modern powered flight!

Why share the above stories? Simply to refresh the knowledge that there are sooo many stories of heroes and extraordinary people from within this generation. Most of the people I know, born in this generation possess a little different metal than those of us to come along in years to follow. Today I choose to select and honor one from among the many. Great people from a great generation all, but my hero is and has always been from inside my family.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

Some have heroes in sports, some in politics, others in business, and some from episodes war. My hero, while an extraordinary example of this generation's best, is my hero for much *much* more. This is your story and it is my tribute to you, my father. You not only hold my love and admiration but you are today and have always been my greatest hero.



July 1986

Allow me to preface my remarks by simply saying “no,” I do not believe you walk on water. In fact working along side I have seen your entirely human side. A determination for quality work (particularly out of me) sometimes makes for a pretty short level of patience. That said, my earthly example of how to embrace and live with some of life's most challenging things, I've learned best from you. Not only did I learn values for life, but I also admire what you have accomplished.

Dad, I have always looked up to you. While you probably have always known this in the back corners of your mind, what you may not have known is that you have always been my role model. I grew up believing you could do anything. And you spent most of your life proving just that. And while I will spend a little time below writing about those things that you can and could do that so definitely impressed me, mind you, it isn't *what* you can do that I value the most. It is *who* you are. I believe that your life has demonstrated to friends and family that you are a man of high principle, deep faith and great love. For me, it isn't the *what*....it truly is *the who!*

***Achievement:***

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

Antonium Emil (Stan) Sztanyo: You were born the last of five to Grandpa and Grandma Sztanyo who were an immigrant family that had their share of struggles. Times were never easy for your family, but especially for those who had a difficult time acclimating to the new world and its new systems.



The language alone provided a barrier for many including walls of prejudice. In a nutshell, the vast majority of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants, while helping build the infrastructure for those who followed, never themselves realized the great American dream. For them and for my Sztanyo Grandparents the Great American Dream remained always just out of reach and maybe somewhat like a mirage.



## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

1936 Turner Country School Classes –Back row Emil 2<sup>nd</sup> from left, Warren Britt center, front row right of sign Howard Britt.

During the early 1920's you learned, as did all the kids what it was to work and work hard. You had given roles of tending the fire and helping with farm chores. Hard work was simply part of life. While your parents were giving up on the pursuit of the Great American Dream and settling for a life of coping, you never did. Most of urban America was prospering in a giddy sort of way during the 20's. But for the rural unassimilated immigrant families, prosperity was not in their lot. During these year's living poor in a small rural town none-the-less created some rich memories. Like when you use to help hold the live family geese to pluck the goose down so Grandma could make her famous goose down blankets. These blankets came in handy when snow would leak in the bedroom through disheveled and cracked windows. Like when you picked buckets upon buckets of dandelion heads so your Mom could make her famous dandelion wine. Like inheriting a discarded bent-barrel 12 gauge shotgun and by necessity learning how to "play the angle" to shoot prairie chickens for the family's dinner. Or trying to work ground with a untrained wild team of horses that spent more time working against you then for you. When grandpa was asked why his rows of corn were planted so crooked with this team, he would shrug and jokingly say. "I can get more in each row this way." In these years you developed a name for yourself pitching baseball to your brother Rudy who caught and provided firepower at the plate on your local Turner team.

Somehow you believed at early age that education could be your ticket to a better life in America and so you sought that out by leaving your home at a young age (by today's standards), to work and attend high school in the "big" city of Standish, MI. This distance from your family seems short in today's life with the prevalence of commuting cars. But in those days the few miles of separation were great and might has well been in the next state. The schedule was grueling. Working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week after a full day of school. For that you made \$2/week (\$10/week in the summer) at the areas largest and most successful restaurant. I believe your room and board ate up almost all of the \$2 so you had precious little, if any, left over. You worked while in 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> grades at Standish High School. To highlight what we would consider unusual today, your sister Helen left home alone for Chicago at the age of 12.

## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

In time you worked your way up to that of assistant cook. You tell of a time when you were trying out for the football team and needed new shoes desperately but did not have the money. The store owner knew all too well the situation and had somehow heard through the grapevine that you had some talent. He allowed you to buy the \$1.50 shoes for just \$.10. A lot of people became a help to you in a generation of cooperation and shared load.

### ***Sports Acumen:***

As I grew up and had an innate love affair with sport, I dreamed of accomplishing all that you, my Dad, had done, but I never did. I knew from all your tips and coaching that you had a natural ability to understand and actually do what was necessary at the right time with whatever sport I was trying to learn. This was just in you. But I always wondered and still do today where it came from.

Well, life at the Trading Post was not easy and many many stories can flow from this period working for a alcoholic chef and a stern owner. But during this time you were growing up and growing up fast. Still in high school yet away from home and living on your own, you fell in love with organized sport. Baseball, football and basketball became almost everything. And you excelled. How good were ya? You became the ace pitcher on the Standish baseball team that won the conference and you won All-Conference awards. You were thrown into the quarterback position on the football team as a Junior when the senior QB Norm Payea had a tiff with the coach. You became the regular QB from then on. The team won the conference and again you were named 1<sup>st</sup> Team All-Conference.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



Emil is wearing # 12  
Shell and Comeron. Referee—  
Eddie Mack.

Much of the success of the present season of football is due to the splendid work done by Emil Sztanyo. He was this season's quarterback and acting captain. Upon the injury of Captain Eddie Perlberg, Emil became the acting captain of the squad. He handled both jobs like the veteran that he is. Handicapped since the Arthur Hill game by a badly wrenched ankle, Emil still played a lot of football. His blocking, ball carrying and signal calling have been outstanding. The squad and the coach feel that Standish has the best football team in North Eastern Michigan and a quarterback second to none. We will miss you next year, Emil.

And basketball? You were the starting point guard on the basketball team. During these early team events you were showing your leadership abilities and afterward that never stopped. These early lessons learned as captain of your teams stood you in excellent shape with all that was to follow. Ask you about memories? How many of us can recall *every* member on the football



## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

team and further have an entertaining story about each? All of these stories were great to hear you recall. One such football story I got you to tell on repeated occasions. The team had a big offensive guard who was a teddy bear. Until he got perturbed he just wouldn't play with conviction. Well, one day you and your fullback schemed about a way to enhance his "conviction." You handed the ball to the fullback who proceeded to run up the back of this big teddy bear walking all over his back with his cleats. The guard got up asking everybody, "who did it?" You along with your teammates all pointed the finger at the guard's *defensive* opponent. On every play after that there was no problem finding a hole on his side of the line. He found his "conviction" and gave us all a lifelong chuckle.

While I do not doubt that you had great football skills, I really never got a chance to see them for myself. Baseball, on the other hand, was a different matter. You stayed active both as a player and as a coach and your skill and knowledge was simply obvious to me and others. Everything that I accomplished in baseball (playing 4 years of high school varsity and later college ball) I learned from you. Because I knew your ability and love for the game, I always attempted to simply make you proud. I never felt, for one minute, that I achieved enough. Your involvement with me and baseball, will always be some of my fondest memories.



Emil in full grey

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



At 87, you *still* have it going on. You perennially finish in the top 3 of your golf league. Often times you have won 1<sup>st</sup> place.

### ***Bravery/Honor/Duty/Valor:***

With your military service, you sacrificed on the behalf of your country, your family and the woman you love. It did not go unnoticed nor unappreciated.

Relatives already working in the auto plants of Detroit helped you find work. After high school, you moved to the big city to work for factories in the auto industry and try to start on your way toward a career. You were working for Cadillac motor. Not long after that, WWII broke out and the world would never be the same. You told me that you figured that you would be drafted soon and you shared a sentiment of wanting to contribute in some way, so you decided to sign up. You were going to sign up to be a Marine when a cold and a high temperature kept you from passing the physical and while recuperating allowed you to hear on the radio that the Army Air Corps needed pilots. Could you cut it? Did you have what it took to fly? Well, after giving it some thought you went down and signed up for the test for the non-college graduated applicants. By some quirk you ended up passing that test. To hear you tell it the test was graded on a curve of correct questions vs. those answered. You completely left the last few sections blank and figured it was hopeless. As you was walked out the recruiter convinced you to stay long enough to hear the results. You passed! Go figure. Months later you would become trained for aviation combat, rise in the ranks, and become selected by the elite group known as night-fighters.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



In WWII there were 91,000 aviators trained and during that same conflict for the entire time there were only 452 selectees that eventually became night-fighters after completing training. This flying was not for sissies. I have flown for a professional airline for over 26 years and have been an instrument rated aviator for 33 years. Flying at night and in the soup with the instruments that you had available to you at that time, seems absolutely crazy to me. Would I do it? Not a chance! In fact I still do not know how you and the others didn't take a mud bath or slam into a cumulo-granite cloud while performing your missions. So your group of aviators were indeed something special. Yet many of your comrades did not return home. You did, but not without your close calls. Here are three WWII stories that I believe will explain a little more about you and your experience.

**After accident – “put me back in.”** On Oct 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002 at Wright Pat AFB Museum, an ole Bristol Beaufighter was finally rolled out and permanently installed, after years of restoration. Dad, you were a Captain in the famous 415th night-fighter squadron and flew this type of airplane. The stories are really something. Before our forces had the P-61 Black Widow, the yanks "borrowed" the Beau's night-fighting technology from the Brits. Your squadron met up with this British airplane in North Africa in early 1943. You were given a couple hours of hangar lessons and then turned loose to fly solo in the single pilot seat fighter. Today you and your Radar Observer (RO) Ed Swayer remain as the oldest living flight crew from this squadron.

## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

One day people may visit the museum and remember that each aircraft there were piloted by men like you, my father. What a debt we owe.



The Bristol Beaufighter was the most heavily armored fighter in the war. It was also slow and unstable. So unstable that it was tricky to take off and land. Each aircraft had their peculiarities, but there was one that no one wanted to fly. These craft were quickly turned out to meet a demanding war machine and many made it to the front lines without all that was necessary. This bird had a bad history, and you knew it. But tonight you were acting Squadron commander and didn't want to assign this troubled bird to another pilot, so you took it. Well, the inevitable happened. On your take off roll, the airplane became un-steerable and it swayed back and forth until it ground looped into a vicious accident that broke the airframe in two. Stunned, you were trying to escape from the normal escape hatch that would not open when you looked at the opposite side that was completely missing and wide open. So you were able to get out before any potential fire. You shortly learned your RO had already escaped.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



After, you were away from the craft someone saw your wound and you had suffered, a large gash on his left arm. This wound was enough to send you to the hospital. But laying in your bed you saw a lot of other ground pounding soldiers wounded terribly by this battle at Anzio, Italy. Seeing this horrible reality of war had an affect on you. You didn't ask for more RR, but rather you determined that you wanted to return to flight status. You pleaded with your doctors and commanding officer to return and to fly again over Italy's dangerous night skies. And you did just that.

## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

**Anzio - “want to try ‘er again?”** During this war over Italy, the 5<sup>th</sup> Army was bogged down badly in its march toward northern Italy and beyond. Many kills and casualties happened. The American forces were trapped for 4 months in this pocket until troops break through the German defenses in Italy and link up with Anzio. Anzio was perhaps the biggest Allied blunder in World War II. Germany lost 100,000 killed/wounded/captured. The Allies lost 135,000 killed/wounded/captured. Think of it.

You were flying missions of support and protective cap over allied occupied territory. One of these dangerous missions you had an engine shot out by anti aircraft guns. You also got trapped over a fog bank with low fuel and had to be talked down through it with primitive radar. And you flew around the explosive ash of active Mt. Vesuvius near Pompei. But the one act that impresses me the most was your valley low reconnaissance flight over enemy occupied Anzio. Here is that story.

Since the US 5<sup>th</sup> Army was bogged down, there was incredible risks involved not moving this army forward. The problem was that the German positions were so entrenched in deep dug-out mountain installations encased in granite that overlooked this critical valley. Once the guns retracted inside the mountain, they were almost impervious. Stalemate had occurred. You had just landed at a base where some transient Generals were visiting looking for a night fighter pilot to perform a dangerous mission. Your landing was a little unusual because one engine had failed. The Generals needed a pilot and just witnessed your skill and said they wanted you for their dangerous assignment. I can imagine it going something like this. "Hey, who is that guy and what is he like?" "Sztanyo? Oh, he is a good one, one of our best." "We want him!"

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



Flying on a high altitude night mission.

Later in the briefing, you would learn that these 3 Generals would somehow squeeze into your craft (built for two) and ask you to fly in such a way as to force the German's heavy guns to come out and “play.” By so doing they hoped to pin point the locations so that they could once and for all.... take them out. Loaded up, you took off and flew in the still night air. Pass number one, and the “whispering widow maker” slipped through the valley announcing its presence but only attracting a smattering of enemy fire and none of the big guns. Before Pass number two, a little prayer was said, and now near red line the whispering widow maker was whispering no more. It was not flying but dancing through the sky in what might have been beautiful had it not been so deadly. Turning and twisting you flew the Beau through the valley that was totally on fire. Every gunner station was manned and every gun was blazing and the target.....one lowly night intruder carrying precious cargo of wartime intelligence. Blasts rocked the ship, the blood pressure couldn't get any higher. The big guns lit up, but fortunately the plan for staying low prevented them from zeroing in. Then just ahead the dark end of the gauntlet and soon the Beau was climbing. Your Beau, along with the important passengers were unscathed but not unshaken. Relieved from what easily could have been the end, you turned to the Generals and you asked a question that you hoped you knew the answer to, “Want to try ‘er again?” Their quick reply. “No, no, I think we’ve seen enough.” You were willing to make another pass. How crazy is that? I

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

simply chalk it up to bravery of the extraordinary kind. Heck, the first two passes bordered on suicidal. Not many *would even ask*. Fortunately, the Generals had seen enough and had taken good notes. What motivated you to ask? Knowing you, and your sense of duty and courage, I believe you did it for me. No, I wasn't born yet and I am not on an ego trip. My older brother or sister weren't born yet either. But, you were willing none-the-less because of the future you wanted. And I believe you were willing and asked based on the dreams you had.

This was the German's toughest stronghold on the southern front. This was where the Allies simply could not break through. Scores of books have been written about this infamous conflict. This reconnaissance flight was sooo important, yet after it was finished it would melt into the framework of so many other countless heroic tasks that simply "had" to be done.

The next day, B-25's. B-24's and everything else that could drop bombs, flew over these targets in the hills around Anzio. They bombed solid for several days and then the ground assault started anew. This time, the allies would finally break through with Rome only days away.



In Cantania, Sicily

Now, that story happened yet few have ever heard it. Why? Because you don't casually share that with many. Not only are you my hero for what you did on that fateful and fearful reconnaissance flight, but you are also my hero because somehow you think what you did wasn't anything special. Wow! It is hard for me to really truly comprehend a mindset like that. This truly is a great generation, and in it, you're my greatest hero



## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

**Commanding Officer of San Francisco secret meeting for pre-cursor to the League of Nations.** The war was still going on in Europe when you came home for a little RR and some more training. While in California, you had a chance to first fly the American built platform for our night-fighting called the P-61 Black Widow. Because you were being prepared for your own squadron for the Pacific theater, and because you had war experience, you were tapped for special duty. The world allied nation's representatives were to have a secret meeting in San Francisco in an assembly that eventually became the League of Nations. This meeting had to be secured and you were given the task to command the night operations of providing a safety cap over this meeting. As still a rank Captain, this was an unusual duty, yet one that you rose to and handled well. I have always believed that you get selected for these kinds of things because others felt that you could do it. That has been the pattern of your military life and your life back home. Others feel you *can do it*, and so to do I.



One of my most cherished possessions is a video tape. This tape has 2 hours of your recollections on it of your involvement with the NightFighters and the fabled 415<sup>th</sup>.

### ***Leadership:***

As your young son, one of the things that I remember you saying to me was “you were born to be a leader.” I always felt that you were working off the power of suggestion, because I didn’t feel it. But in a strange way it seemed to work. Your belief in me helped me rise. I can easily understand that idea

## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

coming from one who has himself been a leader among men like you. But for me the question remains, where did that confidence come from for you? Who was your wind, your support, your encouragement? Who whispered in your ear, put his arm around you, propped you up, with these words of strength?

Well, your leadership levels in sport started early. As mentioned above, being chosen captain for your football team and anchor pitcher for baseball, gave you a head start and as you led by example. I believe these years of sport leadership prepared you for your roles that you played in WWII and beyond. As told above, you rose to leadership roles of opportunity mostly, I believe, based on actions.

But what I have not shared are the roles of leadership that you came to after returning to family and business in the 1950's. When you joined Mom's family business of Forshee Funeral Homes you established a home in Prescott, MI that serves the community to this day. You have remained a Michigan licensed funeral director for now over 59 years. This business you conducted with integrity and compassion and served families of our area for years and years in their deepest time of need. While you never encouraged any of your kids to become involved, I personally witnessed your level of class and dignity, but most of all compassion on families during their loss.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



1950's Papps & Martins in home "tied" card party.

This community service, was at times, what allowed for your active level of community work in leadership roles. Before the final plans to build the future I-75 expressway, you were on a lobbying committee that work tirelessly and tried everything (traveling to Lansing and meeting with politicians) to have them settle on a more northerly route from its proposed angle at Standish. If successful, a whole set of struggling communities would have benefited. It was a well spent effort.

Whittemore-Prescott High Schools owe a debt of appreciation for their very beginning to your commitment and ever present leadership. When John Halbert formed an organizing committee to explore consolidation of Whittemore and Prescott, he tapped you. This was the group that connected the main families from the affected communities and "sold" them on the idea that the consolidation would be a better benefit to all communities. Once formed, you became one of the most influential members. In an attempt to draw Hale area into the mix, you met with Ira Schofield who used all of his influence to shoot the idea down.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



Early WP School Board Meeting

So Hale remained solo. But Whittemore and Prescott saw the need and would need property. You and you alone met with C.T. Prescott at the large ranch to see about some land. While you approached with some nervousness yet the optimism of a winner, the meeting was friendly and he made a call to the main owners of the ranch in NY. On the follow up meeting you and another member of the committee met with C.T. Prescott again and he was happy to carve out and offer a choice 40 acres for the newly formed school district. You were delighted and now needed to know what to tell the committee what it would cost. "C.T., how much will that cost us?" you asked. C.T. said, "how about \$1!" And so it was. 40 acres for the new consolidated school system on land that it currently resides cost the district a total of \$1.

After formed, you then served on the school board for Whittemore-Prescott High School. Were you a leader there? Not only were you elected for 25 straight years but you were internally selected by the board members to be President for 21 straight years up to your retirement. And true to your level of integrity you did it all, at your insistence, of never receiving more than \$100 per year. Why this dedication to the school system? All because you wanted a better school for your kids and those living in our community,

## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

holding firm to your belief that a good education has tremendous value. Today Whittemore-Prescott Shools are the pride of the community, the biggest employer and big resource for our entire area. Few adults, nary a teacher or student know the true story told above. Just the way you wanted it.

How about Chemical Bank, the 1<sup>st</sup> bank back in Prescott in decades. Did you play a leadership roll? Your 15 years serving on the board speaks for itself.

And at church, did you lead? Here as in many examples in my life, you chose to serve out of the limelight by example. Many of the construction related remodeling jobs, you were the driving force. I doubt very seriously, that Judson Baptist Church would have a new church building today without your commitment and support.

### ***Commitment – Family, Marriage, Faith:***

I attribute my values on faith, family and marriage mostly to you. Interestingly, it didn't come from long sermonized sit-down speeches or treatises. We never played chess together and you never had an undivided captured son as an audience to impart great ideals of faith. You didn't preach. I didn't ask and you seldom offered your deepest religious convictions. Rather I learned from you by watching your actions. I have since come to believe that is how you wanted it anyway. Now this may seem simple and maybe to some even a bit trivial, but on Sunday you went to church. At night you knelt by your bed and prayed before sleep. You were religious about that. And that was never lost on me.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*



1943 Florida wedding.

Now, about your marriage with Mom. Far too seldom in our day, do we see a marriage that is bathed in love, grounded in faith and disciplined over time. Your marriage example to Mom has been wonderful! You have always demonstrated affection towards one another, seldom took your fights public, and honor one another before others. I know that you each consider one another your best friend. It shows. I thank you for that example. I only wish more young males in this world could have had the privilege I did to see it. What I did see was affection. You never held back your public showing that you loved and cherished your wife. And by honoring your wife, you taught me one of the most basic yet important values of a family. The marriage comes first. Maybe the 66 years you have been married says it all. Little eyes were watching. And a little heart was moved.

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

It is a strange thing to think about all the tips and techniques of parenting that I attribute to you. One of the most shared tidbits that you constantly stressed long before modern day psychologist adopted, was your idea that kids learn early. “By the age of 5”, you use to say, “kids know much of all they need to know about right and wrong and being good.” Of course today we hear this from many learned counselors, but at that time, not so much.



Emil with Joey

While thinking of this the other day, I was amazed at just how much heritage plays a role in what we can draw upon from our bag of tricks. An incredible realization came to me in a jolt like a whiff of smelling salts. Who taught you? How did you pick up these marriage, family and faith tools? Yours was a different childhood than mine. How did you developed all that you intuitively seemed to know? I will never know. In a real sense, culture may have helped you to develop your core, center and traits. You learned from a generation, that regained their optimism about the American dream. In fact one could say they helped *advance* the optimism about America and life with meaning. The whole notion that one could make a difference, could achieve great heights, and that the American dream was achievable. You lived that way and made me a believer too. For that I am forever grateful.

## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

I will share this with you because you of all people may find this interesting. For years I have thought of the eventual time in life when we would have to say goodbye. While that may not be all that interesting, maybe the next thought might be. I often thought of the burden of having to prepare some nice words to say on your behalf. Recently, Heather wrote me a letter for Father's Day that was a tremendous honor. Then a light bulb turned on in my mind suggesting *why wait*. Why wait indeed! Pass it along in life!

I recently purchased a historical audio library of great moments from Ernie Harwell the hall of fame baseball announcer of the Detroit Tigers. Ernie is another man who holds my deepest admiration. The interviewer would throw a name at Ernie and that was all it took. Ruth, Mays, Yazstremski, Cobb. Ernie would recall effortlessly and with great entertainment a story or two about each of them. As Ernie did that I thought immediately of you. Any mention of a name or special moment (especially on your team's or in your squadron) would get the same type of response from you. A great story would ensue and usually end with a smile. Similarities between men are not always on the outside, what draws a similarity between Ernie and you lies on the inside.

At the completion of the Harwell library he was asked how he would like to be remembered and this is how Ernie answered; "The good book ( that generation always seemed to give the Bible this extra measure of reverence) says that what is required of a man is, 'to act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with our God' (Micah 6:8) I haven't always done a good job of that but I would like to be remembered as a man who tried the best he could." Ernie summed up what I believe to be your sentiments precisely.

Are you born with the ability to run, jump and throw, or do you acquire it? What about naturally rising to positions of leadership time and time again? How about bravery or valor? What is it that creates integrity and honor within a soul? What keeps one committed in family, marriage and faith? Well, some of the answers to these questions may seem as unknowing as asking what is the meaning to life? But when I contemplate the life of a poor rural kid coming from a small and struggling community, and list so many areas of success, I cannot help but ask "where did that come from?" Like I said earlier, I don't know the real answers in every case, and can only share



## **From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo***

my impression. My inclination is, however, to believe that these were gifts by God, *opened and used* by you....Emil Sztanyo. For that I am so grateful.

The reason I write this tribute is because I have a deep sense of gratitude for what you have done and how that has impacted me. I am filled with thanksgiving.

**I am thankful for your love of sport.** While growing up, the intensity of involvement with sport, consumed much of my time and provided tremendous satisfaction while at the same time teaching me many of life's important lessons.

**I am thankful for your parenting.** Barb and I have a wonderful relationship with our boys and are very proud of the fine people they have become. But it was you who modeled the parenting that I employed.

**I am thankful for your example in leadership roles.** Others elevated you to these positions, because you were always capable and willing. You held the esteem of your cohorts. You exercised common sense wisdom that came to be your personal hallmark and was appreciated by many.

**I am thankful for your marriage commitment.** Today marriages break up over socks on the floor or dishes in the sink. Your love for mom has always been constant and you have truly been a man who remained true to his vows and even thrived within them. Marriage is so basic to the stability of a culture and nation. Our current modern culture is (to put it mildly) worrisome. Your example remains a rock.

**I am thankful for your service to our nation** and to the cause of freedom. The ideals held high by our founding fathers are periodically under serious threat. Your generation rose up to thwart one of its biggest tests. Because of yours and others efforts, today we speak English, live in a prosperous nation, and enjoy personal freedoms. On top of that millions upon millions of people worldwide benefited from this crowning moment in history.

**I am thankful for your faith.** Your commitment and faithfulness to your beliefs and church is a powerful strength that has influenced many. To a

## From the Greatest Generation – My Greatest Hero - *Emil Sztanyo*

large part, because of your example, I serve our Lord today and rest my hope in Him completely.

Again I repeat, that most of all, **I am thankful for who you are.** And on Father's Day I thank you for being my father. Many.... *many* people grow, live and die without an earthly father to look up too, admire, love and follow. Thanks be to God, I was blessed with you.

Dad, this has been a wonderful exercise for me to recount the character traits you possess and have so clearly exhibited. It is a personal shame that all too often I failed to express to others my best thoughts. I believe the words that I have written about you and thank God for you. I can not honestly think of a better exemplarily life as a model. I am happy to share this tribute with you on Father's Day 2009 while you are still going, golfing and gardening. It is a privilege to have your presence in our lives.

God bless you and never forget that Barb and I love you as our father.

With my love and admiration, your son,

Mark Sztanyo



Update: Emil and Iris celebrated 69 married years together! Emil made 91 years old as of Oct 4, 2012. Though a lot of things changed, in the last two years, he has lived a remarkable full and healthy life.