

According to Webster's Dictionary, a hero is "A man noted for courageous acts or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked his life." This definition describes many Americans, particularly the men who fought in WWII. These soldiers sacrificed their all for others, giving their strength, courage, and for some, their lives. My grandfather was one of those soldiers. He fought in the Philippines during WWII, experiencing very traumatic events. Grandpa won many medals for his bravery, and he is definitely a hero. However, it is not because of his wartime adventures that I think he is a real hero.

Grandpa, who turned ninety this year, is a full-time caretaker for my grandmother, who has Alzheimer's.

My grandfather, Felipe Fernandez, was born on August 13, 1916 in San Nicolas on the Philippine island Pangisinan. He graduated from the Pangisinan Academic High School in 1935 and married Grandma in 1942, when she was sixteen. Grandpa enlisted in the 26th Cavalry in 1936, and received many promotions, which included corporal, sergeant, 2nd lieutenant, 1st lieutenant, master sergeant, sergeant major, and captain. After over thirty years of military service, Grandpa retired in 1967. He was called to active duty twice in his military career, first in 1946 and again in 1951. Grandpa was chosen to be a member of the Philippine Scouts, a prestigious group composed of the most elite soldiers. His medals include the Silver Star Medal, the Purple Heart, two commendation medals, the Combat Infantry Badge, and the Prisoner of War and Good Conduct Medals. Considering all his accomplishments, Grandpa is certainly a decorated war hero. Nevertheless, his bravery and dedication in the war are small compared to his devotion to Grandma while she battles Alzheimer's Disease.

Alzheimer's is a disease that gradually destroys communications in the brain. It is characterized by the stringy plaques found in Alzheimer's patients' brains. Scientists have discovered that these plaques eat away at the brain's cells, diminishing its ability to function. The disease affects all the different portions of the brain, and varies from person to person. Common symptoms include memory loss, difficulty performing familiar tasks, poor or decreased judgment skills, difficulty with problem solving, anxiety, disorientation, and changes in personality, mood, and behavior. There are three stages to Alzheimer's, the Early Stage, Middle Stage, and Late Stage. It can be as few as five years before the disease progresses to the Late Stage, or as many as seventeen. The disease is very difficult because it is impossible to predict. The very few treatments that exist do not cure the disease but can only hamper its progression. Even then, the treatments eventually become ineffective. In the middle to late stages of Alzheimer's, the person needs a caregiver. This person, usually a close relative, takes care of the patient's ever-growing needs. This person is Grandpa.

Grandpa has assumed all of the household chores, and keeps Grandma's medicine, making sure she takes the right amount of each medication. Grandpa also takes care of her emotional needs. He holds her hand while they walk, giving her security. When Grandma is disoriented or agitated, Grandpa tells her that he is with her and she has nothing to fear. He patiently answers her questions, even if she has asked the same question three times in the past hour. Grandpa is never impatient with her and does everything at her pace. His mission is not to capture a bridge or liberate a village, but to

preserve her dignity. Grandpa has the love, patience, and enduring strength necessary to be an Alzheimer's caregiver.

I think Grandpa is a hero not just because of his deeds in war, but also because of his devotion to Grandma. His experiences in war prepared him for the battle he is fighting now. This fight is definitely brutal. War injuries have battered his body and now he does more work than ever before. It is very emotionally difficult for him to see Grandma ill like this. He is fighting an enemy he cannot see, day after day, without giving up. And despite all this, he still gives Grandma love and patience. Now that's what I call a hero.