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## A Conversation with a Reluctant American Hero

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There are times in life when you pause and consider, with almost utter intrigue, as to how exactly you find yourself in the present moment and circumstances.

Colonel Jack Jacobs (ret.) did not have that luxury on March 9, 1968 when he found himself nearly impossibly pinned down by an entrenched Viet Cong in the hours before he took the actions that earned him the nation's highest military acknowledgment, the Medal of Honor (MOH). He wasn't meant to be there at all; his combat duty was finished, or so said his superiors. Subterfuge: that's how he ended up in this situation...by his own choice.

As I sat across from one of our nation's most highly decorated combat veterans, my mind continued to wonder as to how I found myself there in the first place.

I was there, of course, to interview Jacobs for his new role as the spokesman for the [New York Film Academy's \(NYFA\) Veteran Advancement Program](#). But, we'll get back to that in a minute.

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It wasn't the first time I've met this American "hero" — a word he dismisses entirely and with a discernable measure of embarrassment. As for the "gallant actions" that took place on that March afternoon, his response was simple: "I did what anyone would have done." An obvious scholar, Jacobs refers to that moment with a paraphrase from the words of a Jewish sage: "If not you, then who. And if not now, then when?" In theory this made sense, but as a civilian his realities that day do not reflect even the grandest abstract that my mind can conjure.

As is often the case, the conversation with Jacobs takes as many twists and turns as the fascinating life he has led. At a lecture that he gave at the New York Film Academy last week, even his recount of the lugubrious circumstances of that March afternoon elicited a chuckle from his audiences — even if perhaps uncomfortably so. Self-deprecating, sarcastic and heartfelt, the dialogue is alluring, chockfull of wisdom and never dull.

We talk family, the country village where we have both called home, and the value of the "Quiet Car" on Amtrak. World peace, as well as daily inconveniences, are all on the table with Jacobs because, well, he's just that real.

All of these things crossed my mind as I considered the almost surreal irony of the Statue of Liberty lingering over his right shoulder through the windows of the sun-drenched NYFA studio at Battery Place, where we sat.



I had met the colonel several years ago at Stockton University as he began his tour of sharing his experiences and wisdom to a younger generation — a part that he clearly revels in and takes with unbridled urgency. As an ambassador of the less than 100 MOH living recipients, he visits schools of every age group to remind students that we all have a responsibility to "protect the Republic," and not only through military service. As for representing the MOH, there is no question it is a responsibility he assumes with a shared sense of tremendous pride and unwavering humility.

We discussed the Post-9/11 GI Bill and its over 70-year old predecessor, the original Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Mr. Jacobs spoke with passion on how the Post-World War II version of the entitlement transformed American society educationally, socially and economically. Does he agree that the latest version of the Post-911 GI Bill will lead to an equal generational metamorphosis? "Absolutely," he replied with conviction.

As the Director of Operation College Promise (OCP) – a program founded in 2008 by the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) to assist public colleges and universities, I share Jacob's passion for the utility of educational benefits as a generation changer. This reality becomes even more apparent as we acknowledge the over 60 percent utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill who are first generation learners. Our dialogue turns to the growth of support services and programs available to these learners that dwarf those of Jacob's peers in the Post-Vietnam era and, frankly, all previous generations of student veterans. And, one of the most avant-garde of these is through the media arts.

We further discussed how the New York Film Academy is building on this philosophy by expanding programming in the entertainment industry for this population of veterans. Currently serving over

200 student veterans, the Academy has transformed part of its mission to maximize the skills that Jacobs categorizes as the most “most capable and creative” segment of our population. It is exciting to witness the NYFA veteran students being educated in the skills of the creative industries that include acting, filmmaking, and screenwriting.

As for how he landed on the set of MSNBC as a military analyst, in his endearing comedic manner, he says simply, “They offered me a ride and a sandwich.” Why does this man not have his own talk show, I wondered nearly aloud.

The interview time has run out by now, likely by twice the allotment. I’m out of questions. Jacobs, loquacious by nature, resumes the dialogue unfettered. The discussion turns to current events, his colleagues at MSNBC, and the time he had to stand on a box to perfect a shot with his much taller colleague. I give him the opening to take a jab at my failed navigation skills that morning that took me 3 miles from Battery Place. He gleefully, and with a disarming glance, takes the bait and we agree that LANDNAV would not have been my forte.

We continue to chat until the next appointment arrives and I reluctantly give up my time with this hero.

He may not care much for the title, but if not him, then who?

**Special Note: The United States Congress has designated March 25th (this Wednesday) of each year as NATIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR DAY, a day dedicated to Medal of Honor recipients. (Public Law 101-564) Conceived in the State of Washington, this holiday should be one of our most revered. Unfortunately all too many Americans are not even aware of its existence.**

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***About Operation College Promise (OCP):*** Operation College Promise (OCP) is a national policy, research and education program based in Trenton, New Jersey, which supports the transition and postsecondary advancement of our nation's veterans. The Program's mission is to support student veterans “To, Through and Beyond” the attainment of their higher education objectives. Founded in 2008 as a web-based resource, the project was initiated by the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) to centralize transition information for servicemembers on a comprehensive website. Today, the program has reached more than 300 institutions in 25 states through its signature training – the Certificate for Veterans’ Service Providers (CVSP) program and is a national leader in research efforts on student veterans’ progress toward degree and employment, as well as in the development of innovative degree plans for military students. For more information, please visit: [www.OperationCollegePromise.com](http://www.OperationCollegePromise.com).