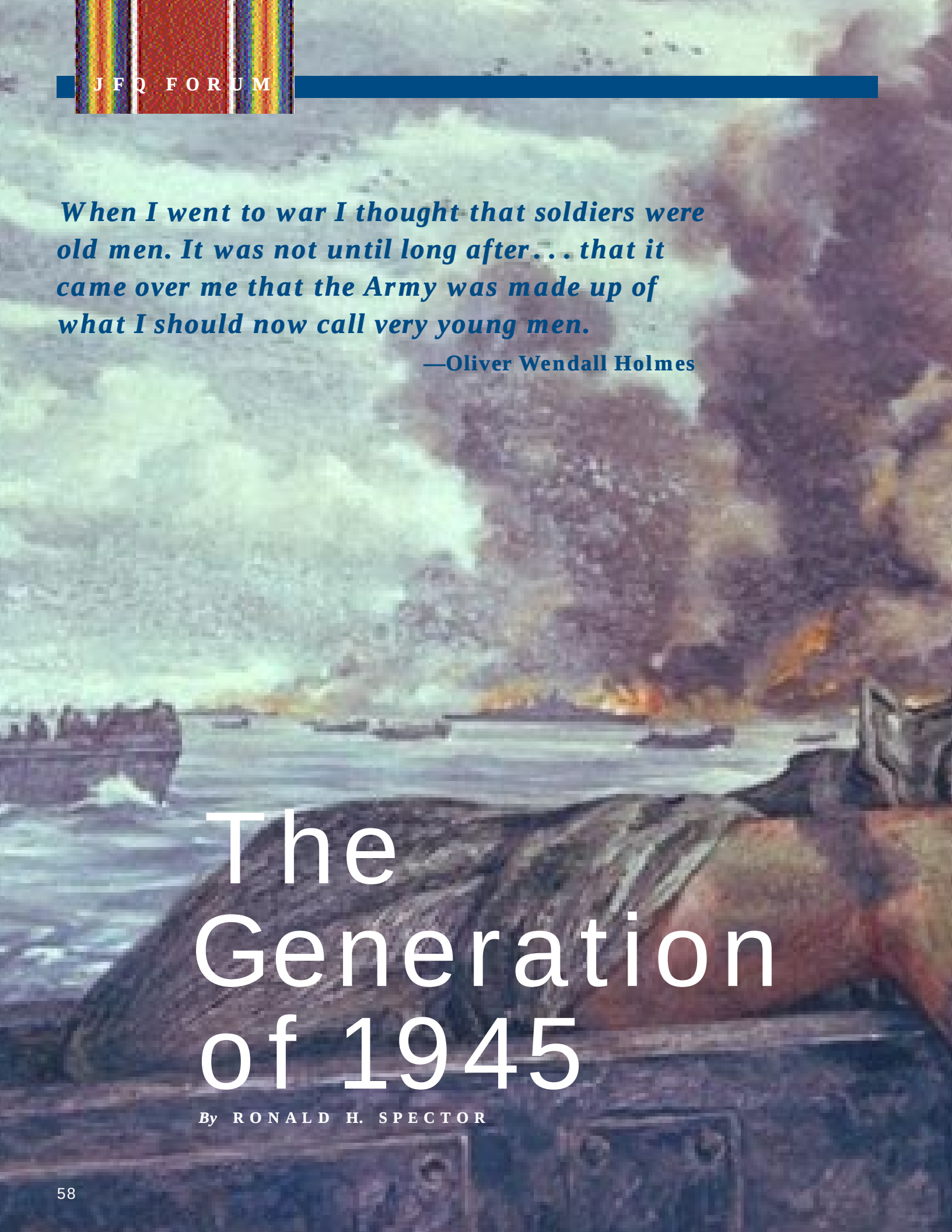

When I went to war I thought that soldiers were old men. It was not until long after . . . that it came over me that the Army was made up of what I should now call very young men.

—Oliver Wendall Holmes

The Generation of 1945

By RONALD H. SPECTOR

Camouflage Face by Tom Lea.

The *Life* Collection of World War II Art, U.S. Army Center of Military History

In the same way that it was hard for the college students in Holmes' audience at Harvard University thirty years after Appomattox to imagine him and his comrades "upon whose heads the white shadows have begun to fall" as the youthful soldiers many of them had been, it is difficult for us to think of the veterans of World War II as real people, as "very young men," some still in their teens, not a few from families still struggling with the effects of the Great Depression, and for whom the military was their first real job. Today they are all ten feet tall and have become not so much individuals as icons of patriotism.

Just as it is difficult to see the heroes honored at Normandy and other commemorations as real people, it is even harder to recall the mood of the country in 1941. Many older Americans, the parents and grandparents of the GIs who were about to be committed to battle, shared an uneasy belief that they had somehow botched it, that their generation had lost the chance to build a world where peace and freedom would prevail, and that their children would now have to pay the price. Anthropologist Margaret Mead worried that perhaps "the moral debauches of the last

twenty years left congenital scars on the children's souls which no medicine can cure nor scalpel remove. . . . We must be able to look them in the eye and say, 'We failed you because we lied to you, forcing ourselves and you to believe that we had no part in the way in which the world was getting steadily worse.' "

Along with the guilt was a nagging anxiety that the new generation might not be up to the task. "Many observers considered us a lost generation and feared we might collapse if summoned to some crucial battlefield," recalled James Michener. Many veterans of World War I looked at the new cohort of American soldiers and feared they had been softened by the antiwar ideas of their overindulgent mothers during the 1930s. "Our men who had to do the fighting didn't want to fight," concluded one veteran war correspondent. "They had been told in the all-important first ten years and in their teens that it was not necessary to fight. Our men just wanted to go home."

by the end of the war the GI had become a universal American symbol of courage and prowess

The campaigns of 1942 and 1943 quickly erased these doubts. Indeed by the end of the war the GI had become a universal American symbol of courage and prowess. Later writers might point out that the Russians had fought and defeated a larger number of German troops than Americans were ever to face in western Europe and that it was Australians, not Americans, who first turned back the tide of Japanese land offensives in the southwest Pacific. Analysts might use graphs, charts, and statistics to illustrate that the Germans were actually more effective fighters. To most Americans that was all unimportant and uninteresting detail. For them the U.S. conduct of the war soon became and was long remembered as the norm of how wars ought to be fought. The GI of World War II also became the model of what was expected of a fighting man.

Soldiers in the Vietnam era, most of them children of World War II veterans, were seldom unaware of the implicit comparison between their own exasperating, seemingly intractable war and the glorious achievements of their fathers.

Tim O'Brien served in Vietnam with the 23d Infantry Division. In World War II that division had relieved the Marines on Guadalcanal, fought under MacArthur in Bougainville, and played a major role in General Robert Eichelberger's campaigns in the southern Philippines. In Vietnam, O'Brien writes, the men of the Americal division "did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it. No sense of order and momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat rows, no Patton rushing for the Rhine, no beachheads to storm and win and hold for the duration. They did not have targets, they did not have a cause. On a given day they did not know where they were . . . or how being there might influence larger outcomes." During the Vietnam War the Americal soldier was best known not for Guadalcanal or Bougainville but for My Lai. Everybody knew, or at least said, that Vietnam was a different kind of war. Yet it may have been a half-conscious desire to repeat the great deeds of World War II that somehow contributed to that quixotic undertaking and increased the frustration level when events never followed the old script.

Whether the World War II generation was really the most successful in American history as soldiers, they were undoubtedly the most successful as veterans. In every field, from classics to corporate law, from play-writing to plasma physics, they quickly assumed positions of leadership, often transforming entire industries, research fields, and professions—or creating new ones. This transformation of society by veterans began almost immediately after the end of the war. The GI Bill of Rights, one of the most notable pieces of welfare legislation in U.S. history, provided job training and homes for millions of veterans and allowed millions more to attend college. Before the advent of the veteran, colleges and universities were places where a handful of young men and women went because of wealth and family tradition. The influx of veterans who often

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U.S. Army Center of Military History

Platoon Commander and Sherman Tank **by Albert Gold.**

went on to positions of leadership in academe changed higher education from a limited enterprise for the well-to-do into the meritocracy it still claims to be today.

What if anything did this generation have in common? Most of them were far too busy to be introspective, but those who considered the question usually had the same answer, a dedication to service, to something greater than making a living. "*Time* magazine had an editorial about the men and women of our age. They called us the 'Take Charge Generation,'" wrote Harry Crosby, a former command navigator with the 100th Bomb Group, and later a highly successful teacher of writing at Iowa and Harvard. "I don't know about that. If I were asked to list any one quality which characterized my associates from the 100th it would be their continued dedication to public service." Alvin Chester, who commanded a destroyer escort in both theaters and later headed a thriving shipping conglomerate, wrote disparagingly in his memoirs of "the wheeling and dealing of the greedy 1980s." He recalled a time when "decency prevailed and greed was not the driving force. I had the good fortune to have experienced a time when I shared the company of individuals who subordinated their own interests to those of their comrades in arms."

this commitment to public service was passed on to the children of the World War II generation

This commitment to public service, it might be argued, was passed on to the children of the World War II generation. Baby-boomers certainly did not feel the same obligation as their fathers to serve in the military. Quite the opposite. Yet many of the crusades of baby-boomers, with all their self-righteous nuttiness, resulted in solid achievements and advancement in areas such as civil rights, the environment, and women's status, thus continuing to express commitment to bettering the Nation in ways different from their parents. The children of World War II veterans themselves are now entering middle age, and may be the last generation to believe that making money is not necessarily life's highest goal.

The younger generation—born in the 1960s and 1970s—are less likely than their parents or grandparents to be deceived by spurious causes, but they are unlikely to make any sacrifices either. Rather than joining the military or protesting against military service they are content to hire others to take care of that distasteful necessity. In contrast to the impassioned protests of the 1960s, most student demonstrations in recent years have focused on a lack of parking for their late model cars.

James Michener, writing about veterans of the Pacific theater soon after the war, accurately foresaw the situation which has now come to pass.

They will live a long time, these men of the South Pacific. They had an American quality. They, like their victories, will be remembered as long as our generation lives. After that, like the men of the Confederacy they will become strangers. Longer and longer shadows will obscure them until their Guadalcanal sounds distant on the ear like Shiloh and Valley Forge. **JFQ**