



Jim Kurtz with several items he discovered in the green box

THE GREEN BOX

IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1957, A TYPICALLY OPPRESSIVE “DOG day” in August. I had just celebrated my eighth birthday. Life was mostly good.

My mom, my three brothers, and I lived at 9 Ralph Avenue, in White Plains, New York, a cozy, comfortable suburb about 30 miles north of New York City. When he was alive, my dad had commuted into Manhattan and my mom would pile us four boys into the car and drive to the train station to meet him. I don’t remember that or anything else about my dad. One cold March day, when I was almost three years old, he had died of a massive heart attack. Life at our home would never be the same. My mother was devastated by the loss of her husband. In one moment she had become a 30-year-old single mom of four boys, ages two through nine.

I don’t remember much about the first eight years of my life, but I know I always felt deeply loved, not only by my mom, but by my three older brothers as well. We were bonded forever by the loss of our father. A tightly knit family, the Kurtzes depended on each other; it is how we pulled through. One thing I do remember distinctly about the early years of my life was the lack of any discussion about my father. Concern for our mother’s grief was paramount, and we knew not to mention his name or ask questions about him. I was over 50 years old before I had my first conversation with my mother about my dad.

As a young boy, most of what I learned about my father was a result of eavesdropping. Stories were told about Dad being a pilot in the big war a few years earlier, somewhere far away in a place called Europe. When the adults would gather to chat in the living room, I would play inconspicuously on the floor in the next room, listening intently, drinking in every word and trying to make whatever sense I could of their discussion. I heard horrible stories about a plane crash, POW camps, and starvation. I remember feeling an overwhelming sadness and shock when I realized it was my father

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they were talking about. Although I never really knew him, it was incomprehensible to me that anyone would want to hurt my dad. The adults would also talk about strange numbers and letters like B-24, and even stranger names like Liberator. I knew my father had been a bomber pilot, but had never realized a bomber and a B-24 Liberator were one and the same. I wondered if all these stories I had overheard could somehow be related to the green box I had seen in the attic when I was younger. I was unaware of it at the time, but the next 56 years of my life were to be defined by its contents. My quest to find out about this wonderful man, the father I never knew, was about to begin.

It was a steamy late summer's afternoon; I had just turned eight and realized I could wait no longer to discover what was in the green box. I needed a time when all three of my brothers were not home. It was an unspoken rule that the box and its contents were off limits and I couldn't take the chance that one of them would tell my mom what I was planning to do. I could hear my mother vacuuming downstairs as I grabbed a flashlight and silently crept up to the attic.

I opened the door and was met by a blast of heat; it must have been close to 100 degrees up there, but that wasn't going to stop me. It took a couple of seconds for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and as I waited impatiently, I worried that my mother would soon come looking for me. Every second was important. I stood there squinting as objects began to take shape and then suddenly, there it was—the green metal box that I knew had been my father's. About nine inches long and four inches tall and olive drab, it was sitting on the shelf of an old yellow bookcase. Until that day, I had never gathered up enough courage to actually touch it, let alone open it. That moment is still etched in my mind. I sat on the floor drenched in sweat. The fear of getting caught, and therefore punished, was very real, and yet I had to find out what magical and mysterious contents this army-green box had to offer. I knew I didn't have much time.

I nervously opened the lid and the first thing revealed by the beam of my flashlight was an array of colors: reds, silvers, yellows, greens, and a particularly striking purple. I would find out years later that they were the ribbons my dad had earned and worn on his dress uniform. There were also two navy-blue boxes with the words "Air Medal" on one and "Purple Heart" on the other. I looked at the Air Medal box first. Slowly, with a lump forming in my throat, I opened

it. The ribbon was a stunning blue and orange that mesmerized me. On the face of the medal was an eagle with a fierce expression; its talons held lightning bolts. Although I didn't know what it was or why he had it, I could tell it was my dad's, because inscribed on the back was "2nd Lt. Robert R. Kurtz AC." As I touched every detail of the medal, the tips of my fingers felt as if they were burning. It made me feel intensely proud of my father. I would learn more about the Air Medal at a later date.

The Purple Heart box was next. I opened it and found a purple-and-white ribbon attached to a heart-shaped medal. It was gold on the outside with a purple interior and a silhouette of George Washington in the center. I was spellbound. On the reverse side, in raised gold lettering, were the words "For Military Merit," and etched below, "Robert R. Kurtz." For this too, it would be years before I learned its significance: an award given to soldiers wounded during military service.

Time was running short, but there were so many more items in the box. One that caught my eye was a pink fluffy baby slipper that zipped up the front. Everything I had seen so far had been military in nature. Medals, ribbons, silver wings, and gold bars were all obviously a part of my father's life during his World War II service. Why would there be a baby slipper among these items?

Right before closing the lid, I noticed a bundle of papers. Several bore the bold stamp of Western Union; I had never seen a telegram before. There were official-looking documents from the Army Air Force and letters from my father to my mom and to his parents. There were also papers with my father's picture on the front and his fingerprints on the back surrounded by writing in a strange language that I had never seen. Years later, I found out they were prisoner of war identification forms; the language was German.

My time was up, at least for the day. A whole new world had opened up to me. I had so many questions, some of which would not be answered for years, but one thing was undeniable. As I closed the box, I knew my life had been changed forever.

