What It's Like To Be Hit by a Bullet

Just for a moment this morning, between sips of coffee, before the dog wheedles a walk, let's poke through all the headlines about wars and shootouts and such, and tell you what it's like to be hit by a bullet.

We talk all the time about wars and conflicts and surges and police actions and international incursions and shootings and gunfire, but those are all just words for bullets hitting people, so this morning let's hear from a guy who got hit by a bullet.

My friend Donald is now a dignified silver-haired retired museum curator and former assistant principal who broke up race riots and had other interesting adventures like that during his career. In 1944 he was a skinny teenager fighting the Japanese all through the Pacific, mostly in New Guinea and the Philippines. He helped blow up Fort Drum in Manila Bay and was on Bataan, among other very difficult places to be.

Donald has many stories of hard and dark days and nights skippering his little two-man Army Boat Battalion landing craft — finding dead Japanese boy soldiers floating in the water, having a sniper shoot a huge coffee can under his arm (‘boy, were we mad losing that coffee’), heading off on a raid and discovering the battalion drunk had drained the alcohol from every compass. But he told me a story the other day that says something simple and awful and powerful, and it was so blunt and direct about bullets that I think you should hear it too.

I was hit once by a bullet, he says, and when you get hit by a bullet you never ever forget what it feels like. It feels like you got hit with the biggest rock there ever was. We were going along in the boat and we went around a beach where there was a battle, and a slug hit me in the armpit and knocked me right over. The bullet was almost spent, it had travelled pretty far, but still it went into me a couple inches and it knocked me over like I was punched by Joe Louis. My buddy in the boat pulled the bullet out and poured sulfa in and the sulfa hurt worse than the bullet. Guys said later I should have put in for a Purple Heart but that'd be wrong.

Listen, you hear a lot of talk about so-and-so getting shot but I am here to tell you that getting shot even with a bullet that's mostly spent, it hurts like hell. I was terrified. I'll never forget the feeling. We use all these words for bullets hitting people but we don't know what the hell we are saying. We are saying that whoever got hit feels like he got hit with the biggest rock there ever was, and that he was terrified. Anyway we just kept going that day, after my buddy pulled the bullet out. Most of what wars are is you just keep going.

No, I didn't keep it. That kind of souvenir is for idiots and movies. I never got hit again, although the Japanese sure kept shooting at me. But I sure remember what it was like to get hit with a bullet. Sometimes I wish anyone who says anything whatsoever
positive about war has to pay for his remark by getting hit with a bullet that's almost spent. He wouldn't get hurt real bad but he'd be sore for a week and he sure would be careful with words about wars ever after, you know what I'm saying?

-- Brian Doyle