

**Summers with My Bapuji:
Opening Up a World of What-Ifs**

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Throughout elementary school as I grew up in Georgia, I looked forward to the summers --not just because there was no school and my sister and I could go swimming and eat ice cream every day-- but because my *Bapuji*, an endearing term in Gujarati for one's paternal grandfather, would come stay with us for two months. And what I loved most about his annual visits was when he sat me down next to him on the couch and enthralled me with stories of his teenage years in British Tanganyika (formerly German East Africa, until the Treaty of Versailles), especially during World War II.

Because of his youth, he could not serve as one of the almost 100,000 troops from Tanganyika that fought for the Allied cause in World War II. And although the formal ground combat of the East African Campaign never reached him in Dar-Es-Salaam, he told me about locals sympathetic to the Axis cause (and desiring a return to the German rule prior to World War I) who sought to disrupt the British control of Tanganyika. Bapuji told me frightening stories of these rabble-rousers attempting to free Italian prisoners-of-war being held in Tanganyika and sowing fear around Dar-es-Salaam, and how he and his friends sought to foil their vile designs with the enthusiasm and trickery only teenagers can possess. I can fondly remember thinking that he put Macauley Culkin's Kevin McCallister of *Home Alone* renown to shame!

In this fashion, it was only natural that his stories got me interested in World War II: I would spend the afternoons I had free from soccer practice in my town's public library consuming books about not only World War II, but soon also the Civil War, World War I, and any other military conflict I could get my hands on. As I grew older, and would excitedly tell Bapuji upon his arrival about everything I was reading about, I was astonished at how much he, of no secondary education, knew about military history. And in our conversations, once he realized just how fascinated I was with military history, he would often ask me, "Well, what if..." and pose some war scenario unfolding differently than it actually did, and these questions would lead to vibrant, animated discussions that could last us hours and have my mom yelling at us to come to the table for dinner.

And though I kept studying hard so I could become a physician like my parents, I still treasured the conversations with Bapuji about his What Ifs? of military history that awaited me every summer. The summer between my ninth and tenth grades, when we picked him up from the airport, he brought for me the newly published *What If?* anthology of alternate military history stories, which would become the inaugural work in my military history book collection. Although he could no longer read books because of his failing eyesight, I read out loud to him these stories, like Hitler invading the Middle East or Japan surprising the US at the Battle of Midway, that launched us on incredible dialogues throughout that magical summer.

Upon matriculating at Duke for my undergraduate studies, I knew I wanted to go to medical school, but had no idea what I wanted to major in.

Fortunately, while taking a quick study break in between cramming for my pre-medical courses freshman year on the second floor of the Perkins Library, I accidentally came across the stacks filled with books about the World Wars— I had stumbled across a fortune! The next several months, in between study sessions and extracurriculars, I returned here often to devour the many works the stacks held, especially alternate military histories.

My mounting realization of how much this material captivated me led me to major in History at Duke, where I (not surprisingly) concentrated in military history, which I also loved for its ability to accelerate technological and medical development and illustrate the power of leadership. Between my pre-medical requisites, I engaged in coursework covering the American Revolution, the history of science, the Civil War Era, the history of warfare, the World Wars, and more. My History major culminated in my thesis exploring the similarities in the British perception of Mons in World War I and Dunkirk in World War II—two scenarios where a simple and frighteningly plausible *What If?* could have irrevocably shaken British resolve and transformed the 20th century.

Moreover, throughout college I began acquiring my favorite alternate military histories, building a collection that began with Bapuji's gift of the *What If?* anthology when I was in the ninth grade and that now numbers over 40 books. For example, I remember how the end of my freshman, sophomore, and junior years of college each brought with them a new third of Newt Gingrich and Thomas Forstchen's alternate Civil War history trilogy, which unfolds from a stunning Confederate victory at Gettysburg. I still distinctly remember enjoying each part with my travels each summer of college: the first on the Carolina shore,

the second while visiting my maternal grandparents in Malaysia, and the third while studying abroad in Australia's Kakadu National Park. Despite these geographically varied locations, all three novels took my imagination for a short enchanting while back to the same place: the Civil War battlefields of Pennsylvania, Northern Virginia, and Maryland. Even though I did not have the opportunity to spend these summers with Bapuji because of my travels, we began regular monthly conversations over the telephone, where I would keep him posted of the latest alternate military history book I had added to my collection. And at my graduation from college, Bapuji told me how happy he was that I had the chance to "study" something that fascinated me so much.

Now in my last year of medical school here at Washington University, my favorite way to spend a quiet evening after a long day of exciting but exhausting clinical work is to settle down on a couch and indulge myself in a story from my alternate military history collection, an exciting world to which Bapuji introduced me. But more importantly, these stories nestled in my book collection represent the avenues through which Bapuji and I still connect: whether during our monthly phone calls or on his yearly visit to Saint Louis to see me, our conversations invariably turn to a military history What If?—the same way they have for almost the last 20 years.

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