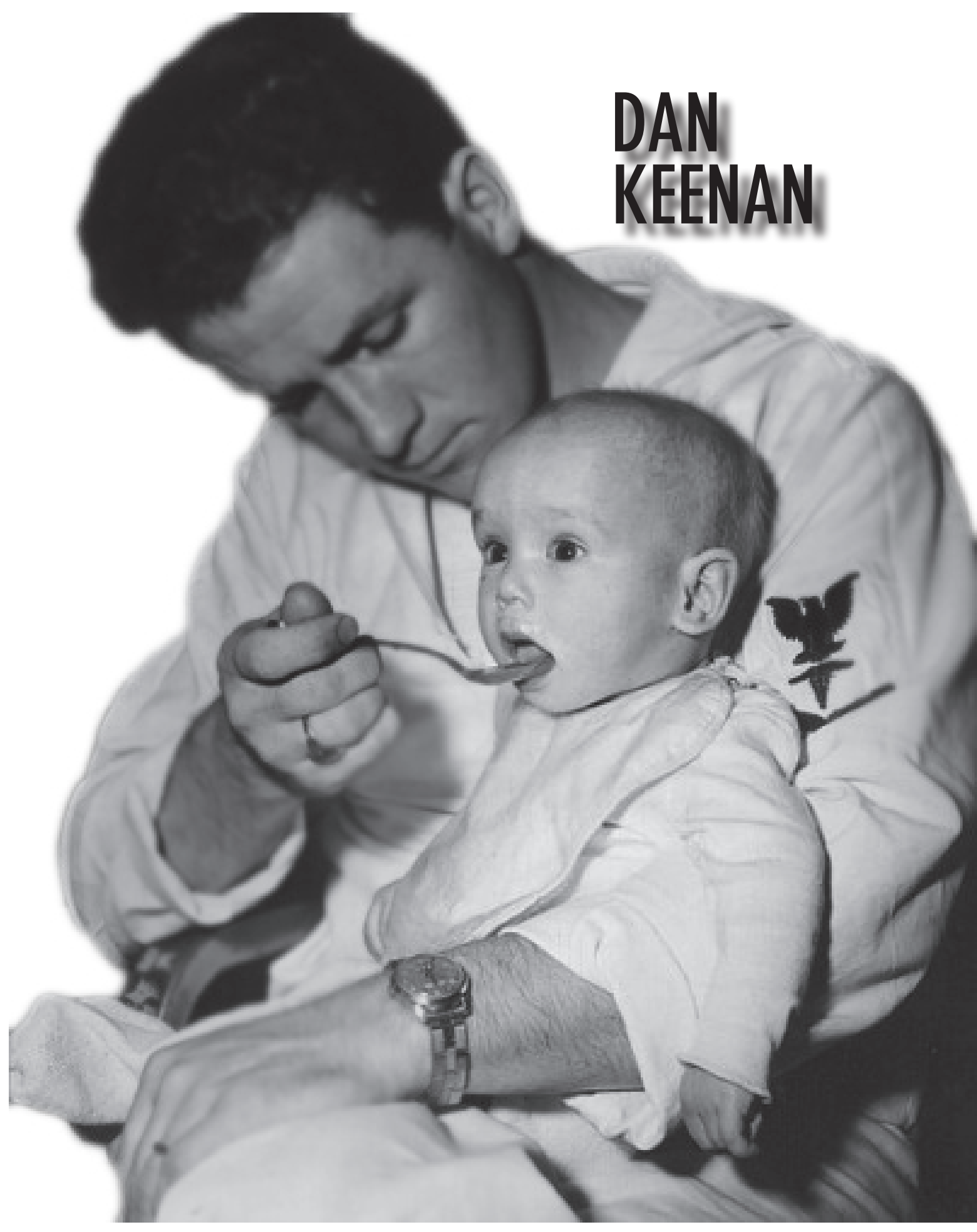


DAN KEENAN



THE GRATITUDE OF DAN KEENAN

At a quaint table inside Tacoma's Antique Sandwich Company, Dan Keenan, 64, unfolds a faded letter. It reveals a story so remarkable that it inspired a TV movie. The letter was written in 1954 by a U.S. Navy chaplain, Father Edward Riley. The kindly priest from Iowa couched Keenan's first weeks on the planet as a kind of mix-up in Heaven. Instead of sending Dan to Spokane in July 1953, "God's Angel" delivered him halfway around the world to war-torn Korea and got "his britches warmed for making such a serious error."

"Man, there's a baby out there!" a Navy medic exclaimed. Someone had left an emaciated infant wrapped in rags outside a sickbay in the Demilitarized Zone that separated the combatants on the Korean Peninsula.

Roused from a deep sleep, the other medics on the late shift came running. The baby was badly malnourished, filthy and afflicted with burns. The men sterilized a Coke bottle and concocted baby formula from milk, sugar and water. He was hungry. Then they carefully bathed him, dressed him in a clean GI T-shirt and rigged up a crib from a footlocker. The next morning the child was taken to an orphanage in nearby Inchon, the port where General MacArthur had staged a daring amphibious landing in 1950.

In the intense heat of summer, the Star of the Sea Children's Home was an oasis of hope surrounded by rubble. Inside the brick orphanage, 100 babies slept in apple crates; older children lined the floor in blankets. Caring for that many homeless children—many with injuries and disabilities—challenged the most nimble of the caretakers.



Keenan with Sister Philomena. They were reunited when he was 7. "She hugged me and I'm sure told Dad what a big boy I was now. Sister was a truly altruistic person whose daily life was simply devoted to God and helping those in need." *Keenan collection*



Keenan with John T. Hayward, the skipper, in 1953. Hayward authorized Keenan's stay on ship, declaring, "In an emergency, regulations are to be intelligently disregarded." A former batboy for the New York Yankees, Hayward retired from the U.S. Navy as a decorated aviator and a vice admiral after 45 years. *Keenan collection*

South Pacific in World War II and help develop the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. It was a career about to get even more legendary.

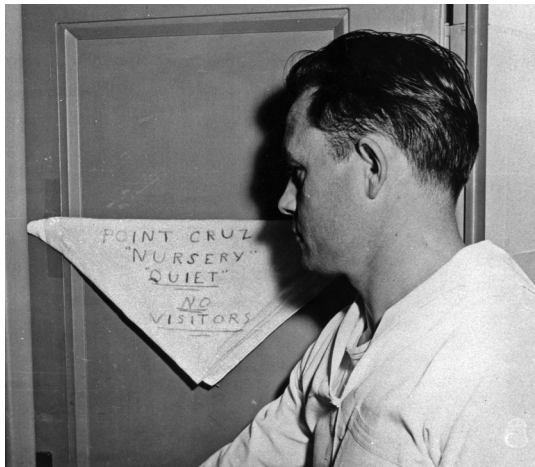
What would endear him most to the officers and men of the *Point Cruz* was a single decision he made just after the armistice ended three years of brutal warfare between the communist north and the U.N. backed south. The skipper's decision didn't impact the truce talks, but it saved Dan Keenan's life.

"A good leader knows when to intelligently disregard a regulation," was

Sister Philomena, the no-nonsense Irish nun who ran the orphanage, took one glance at Dan's fair skin and blue eyes and knew he'd never survive. "The Asians are very big on racial purity," Keenan explains. To the Koreans, he was a tiny pariah. "They wouldn't touch me. They wouldn't hold me. They wouldn't feed me. They didn't change my diapers. They didn't want anything to do with me. So, *she knew*."

"He's an American and he's very sick," Sister Philomena told Father Riley. "I have very little food for him and no medicine. Can you not help?"

He could. The 37-year-old priest alerted John T. "Chick" Hayward, captain of the *USS Point Cruz*, an aircraft carrier docked at Inchon. A former go-fer for Babe Ruth, Hayward had dropped out of a Jesuit high school at 15 to chase his dream of becoming a naval aviator. He went on to design and test America's earliest rockets, fly dozens of bombing missions in the



Sailors built a makeshift nursery. They made diapers from sheets and a carriage from a bomb cart. *Keenan collection*

the way Hayward put it. He agreed to bring the baby on board to be nursed back to health as long as the ship was docked in the harbor. "He literally put his career on the line," Keenan says. "He had killed countless people during World War II. He said that that always bothered him. When Father Riley told him about this Caucasian baby in the orphanage, Hayward saw this as an opportunity to save one life instead of taking lives."

The baby lifted the spirits of a thousand beleaguered sailors. Dan Keenan reminded them what they'd been fighting for. "By then, the armistice was signed and we were all waiting to go home," remembered William Powers, a petty officer in charge of the hanger deck. "And along comes this little kid to hit us right in the heart."

The *Point Cruz* had been patrolling the Yellow Sea that spring. The carrier played a key role in "Operation Platform." Six thousand Indian troops boarded helicopters on its flight deck to be airlifted to Panmunjom to supervise the prisoner of war exchange that was a crucial condition of the armistice.

When the ship dropped anchor at Inchon Harbor, its home base, the sailors tend-



Father Riley looks on as Mrs. Keenan holds her new son in 1953. The next year Riley wrote to Keenan: "You see, it happened this way: When God's Angel, who delivers little guys like you, started on his way from Heaven, he got his directions mixed up. So, instead of going to Spokane, he ended up in Inchon, Korea." *Keenan collection*

ed to the baby. The ship's carpenter built him a makeshift nursery, complete with a crib, a playpen and a carriage fashioned from a bomb cart. The crew called him "Baby-san."

When it was time to hoist anchor, Keenan bounced back to the Star of the Sea Children's Home. Sister Philomena focused on finding him a permanent home in America. She had her sights set on Lt. Hugh Keenan, a surgeon from Spokane serving as the doctor aboard the *USS Consolation*. Sister Philomena knew that the doctor was married and the father of an 8-year-old girl. She also knew his wife had endured several miscarriages. One day in November 1953, he came to the orphanage for tea. Keenan tells what happened:

He's feeding me and Sister goes: "Oh, saint's alive. It's a miracle! You're the only one who can feed the child." Which is total malarkey. I'm sure I was ravenous. But Sister was getting him to bond with this baby.



Keenan with his sisters, Marny and Coleen, and his parents, Hugh and Genevieve. Lt. Hugh Keenan, a Navy surgeon, was the doctor aboard the *U.S.S. Consolation*. He first met his son on downtime in Korea, at the Star of the Sea Children's Home in Inchon. Holding Danny for the first time, the elder Keenan said he "fell in love with the baby and decided to adopt." *Keenan collection*

The doctor came back the next day with ointment to treat the baby's rash, then returned to his shipboard duties.

Weeks passed. When Lt. Keenan returned to check on the child, he discovered that the baby would be sent to an orphanage in America. He wouldn't hear of it. He contacted Father Riley and told him he wanted to adopt the child. Then he wrote his wife Genevieve and explained that he was making arrangements "to send you a Christmas present that I hope you will love."

As the story goes, Captain Hayward gave Father Riley a bottle of whiskey and urged him to scrounge up a passport and a visa for Baby-san. Vice President Richard Nixon learned of "Hayward's baby" at an awards ceremony, and during a dinner in Seoul, prod-



Ben Helle photo

ded Ellis O. Briggs, the American ambassador, to make it happen. Before long, Father Riley and baby Dan were en route to the United States on the *USS Gaffey*.

Just before Christmas, Genevieve Keenan welcomed a new son she fell in love with instantly. The story about “the Navy’s baby” generated headlines around the country.

Every year Dan Keenan attends reunions of the *USS Point Cruz*. The most memorable occurred in 1996.

“Attention on deck!” came the command. The gray-haired men rose to their feet in the dining room of an Arkansas hotel. “Even now I get goosebumps thinking about it,” Keenan remembers.

White-haired and frail, their 88-year-old skipper emerged from a doorway. John T. Hayward, a retired vice admiral, was fighting a grueling battle with bone cancer. Yet he had flown from his home in Florida to be with his former shipmates. “It was quite a feat for him to go—to fly that far,” recalls Hayward’s daughter, Victoria. “He was not in terrible pain, but he was pretty

crippled up.” With the aid a cane, Hayward inched his way down the aisle, shaking hands with some of the best sailors of his 45-year career. “He loved that crew,” she said. “And it was a small ship. He really knew each and every man and some of the stories about them and some of the crazy things they did.”

When Dan Keenan saw Hayward, “It was an absolutely electric moment. I knew in a second *that’s him*—that’s the skipper.” They shook hands and Dan said, “You literally saved my life.” They sat together at the head table while photos were taken. “I was in awe. This is a great man. You know, the adjective ‘great’ is really overused. But it applies to him. And he couldn’t have been nicer.”

Today Keenan works as a social worker and lives in Spokane. He considers himself an ordinary guy with an extraordinary start. He says he owes his life to John Hayward, Sister Philomena—whom he met when he was 7—his adoptive parents and Father Riley. Unfortunately, Keenan was never reunited with the priest from Iowa.

Story told, he tucks the letter back into his briefcase and pauses to remember his remarkable life. “It has really brought to the forefront how much I have to be grateful for on a personal level. I think that’s important—to appreciate and be hopeful. Don’t take things for granted. To me, that’s one of the important legacies.”

Trova Heffernan