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Vanishing Voices: The Impact of Life Behind the Barbed Wire on World War II Prisoners of War

James Reginald Burgess

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VANISHING VOICES: THE IMPACT OF LIFE BEHIND THE BARBED WIRE
ON WORLD WAR II PRISONERS OF WAR

by

JAMES REGINALD BURGESS

(under the direction of John A. Weaver)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an exploration into the lived experiences and interconnectedness of World War II prisoners of war (POWs). It is driven by the personal accounts of four men who experienced life on the wrong side of the barbed wire: my father, the late William Austin Burgess, formerly of Hinesville, Georgia; C. Neill Baylor, of Vidalia, Georgia; Herman Cranman, of Savannah, Georgia; and Robert Waldrop, of Beaufort, South Carolina. The impetus for this exploration began with the stories I received as a child when my father would share his wartime military experiences with me and continues with the learning of pre-war, wartime, and post-war experiences. The story purposefully has no end. The experiences of these men are meant to live on, not vanish with them.

INDEX WORDS: World War II, Prisoner of War, Kriegie, Hell on Wheels, Swing, Barbed Wire, Georgia Boys

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ON WORLD WAR II PRISONERS OF WAR

by

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B.B.A, Georgia Southern University, 1989

M.Ed., Mercer University, 2001

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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2008

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DEDICATION

This expedition was inspired by the life course of my father, William Austin Burgess. His tales of warfare fascinated me and made me want to be like him. I knew nothing of the man who killed his enemy and later became their captive. I knew only the soft-spoken, infinitely patient man who gave great hugs, play-wrestled with me when he came home for lunch, took me and my brother to the toy store just about every Friday, and taught me by example how to become an upstanding, moral, and virtuous man. This pursuit to knowledge and understanding is made possible by the sacrifices of an entire generation of men and women who changed the course of history. World War II veterans are now dying at a rate of greater than 1,000 per day so their voices will soon vanish. Less than one percent of American servicemen in World War II (approximately 79,000) were classified as POWs. Because they were such a small percentage of an awesome fighting force, they are a segment of history that has been largely brushed aside in comparison. My prayer is that my work – the shedding of light upon their lives and the interpretation I offer – remains true to them and does them justice.

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My first thanks go to my family who selflessly sacrificed weekends and evenings to allow me the time to do my research and writing. Your never-waning support and encouragement kept me motivated through a difficult stretch and made me stay focused on the task at hand.

Thanks to the Mighty Eighth Air Force Heritage Museum in Pooler, Georgia, are also in order. I greatly appreciate your willingness to allow me access to the wealth of World War II publications in your library but, most especially, to gentlemen who served in the war.

Many thanks to the three veterans – Mr. C. Neill Baylor, Mr. Herman L. Cranman, and Mr. Robert Waldrop – who took the time to speak with me and share their life stories. Your experiences and willingness to share them so openly has touched me deeply. You certainly are the Greatest Generation and we are all in your debt for your service to our country.

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PROLOGUE – MY INSPIRATION

It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was

(Sexton, 1977).

The preceding quote capsulates this entire dissertation in a mere fourteen words. My father as well as those of his generation who spent a portion their lives between the years of 1942 and 1945 as captives provide the impetus for this exploration via descriptive narrative inquiry, which allows the participants “an expression of self identity” (Glover, 2005, p. 58), and gives me, as researcher, a chance to better understand the participants, the setting in which they were placed, and their experiences biographically.

I would like to say that I knew my father better than anyone. But, since our lives intersected for only thirty-six of his seventy-seven years, I really knew very little about him. I carry with me what I observed, what I was told about him by others, and what he, himself, told me. There is no way for me to know for certain what his life during the years of World War II was really like. So, at this point in my life, the best I can do is glean what I can from his peers. It really does not matter if he was a sinner or a saint. What matters is how I remember him. I choose to remember him by placing him in context with those who fought figuratively by his side, on both sides of the barbed wire. The pages that follow are an amalgam of historical facts, genuine and fictional characters, and factual first-hand accounts of World War II experiences of my father and three of his peers.

William Austin Burgess was 44-years old when I was born. He was not really forty-four, so a more thorough explanation is in order in ensuing pages. Because of

numerous health problems he had encountered prior to my birth (diabetes, gastric bypass surgery, and other ailments aggravated by unsanitary conditions and poor diet in a German POW camp), he and I did not spend a lot of time in athletic pursuits like many of my young peers and their fathers. In fact, I had three friends whose grandfathers were just a couple of years older than my father. My father and I spent much of our time fishing, camping, building things, doing yard work, and working in the shop. During these times, I would often ask him to tell me stories. Though he found it uncomfortable to talk about, he would often share his wartime experiences with me. For whatever the reason, I was the only person with which my father would share this information. Many years later, in fact, I learned that I possessed information about my father's youth that even my grandmother, aunts and uncles, mother, and older half-brother did not know. Of course this made me feel extremely important, as if I was a repository of some top secret information.

Having served with the United States Army in North Africa, Sicily, England, France, Belgium, and Germany, my father's active participation in the war was temporarily interrupted when he was captured by the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. For a brief time he, like some 79,000 other GIs, was a fighting man powerless to fight. He found it difficult to talk about his wartime experiences, particularly those associated with his imprisonment in a POW camp, Oflag VI-H, near Germany's westernmost city of Aachen. But the information he shared with me, unquestionably filtered by a man trying to protect the innocence of youth, enthralled me and inspired me to learn more. His death in March 2002 motivated me to begin chronicling his accounts so that my two children would not forget the sacrifices made by

the men and women who changed the course of history more than 60 years ago. An anthology of my father's war stories, which I began compiling in 2005, was the first vehicle through which this inquiry became possible. Those words will be italicized in this narrative inquiry, which is a collection of my father's true stories of warfare and captivity superimposed upon a historically fictional tale. The accounts, locales, and experiences are accurate. And while a few of the characters are fictional, they are based upon real people, both family members and people my father met before and during the war. Embedded within this narrative are the actual lived experiences of three other veterans. The stories of Mr. C. Neill Baylor, Mr. Herman L. Cranman, and Mr. Robert Waldrop are in regular type throughout the storyline that begins with a setting in which my father creates a situation that gives him an opportunity to tell me of his wartime experiences. The text of the narrative is fragmented in order that I might interject contrasts and comparisons, sharing of personal accounts, and commentary and findings that support my writing. Interludes will also take the form of research on popular culture of the 1930s and 1940s, POWs' autobiographical and biographical accounts, and information gleaned from personal interviews.

My initial investigation of military documentation in 2000 unwittingly became the foundation for my doctoral pursuits. My timely entrance into doctoral studies in 2004 provided me with a wealth of information and a desire to add academic validation to my writing. The expository manner in which I built upon the works of military scholars and POWS, combined with a study of the narrative inquiry and narrative analysis writings of Connelly & Clandinin (1991), Denzin & Lincoln (2003), Doll (2000), and He (2003), afforded me the opportunity to approach the warrior from a narrative perspective and

offer interpretation of what I discovered. As a result, I have combined the tales my father shared with me with the accounts of POWs in autobiographies, biographies, and personal interviews to reveal a three-fold purpose of this dissertation: (1) to first create a narrative that will draw me closer to my father and, subsequently, reveal more of who I am and from whence I came, (2) to offer a perspective of the American POW that documents their lives before, during, and after the war, and (3) to make meaning of their lived experiences. The investigation probes how veteran-POWs' life decisions were impacted by their military service and explores the outcomes and consequences of those decisions. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1991), "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 5). People's lives indelibly consist of stories. It is my task, as the narrative researcher, to uncover those stories and uproot their meanings. Narrative is the best tool for such an inquiry because, as He (2003) states, "Narrative allows me to bring my personal experience to bear on research, to embed research in participants' daily lives, to respect participants' voices, and to validate their... experience" (p. 19). The descriptive narrative inquiry that follows is, "a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 121). It commences in a fictional setting in which my father shares true his war stories with his eleven-year old son.

CHAPTER ONE – WHEN I WAS A KID

Prelude

My hometown, Hinesville, GA, is a decidedly different place than it was 40 years ago. It has been the home of Fort Stewart since World War II, but even in the late '60s and early '70s Hinesville had a unique local flavor to it. But as time has progressed and more military families from throughout the world settled there, both through assignment and retirement, the local population has dwindled to the point that it is exceedingly difficult to find those who were born there. Testament to this point is the fact that of 18 of my fellow kindergartners who began their educational journey in 1970 only five of us graduated from the local high school in 1984. Most had military ties that took them to other parts of the world.

Despite the transience of my community and the few lifelong friends I have been able to cling to, my childhood gave me wonderful memories, and it is with school that many of those memories are associated. My first school, Bacon Primary School, is still where it was 35+ years ago. A dear friend who was one year behind me in school is now an administrator there and I have had many opportunities to visit the campus in recent years. To my surprise, it still looks much the same as it did back in the early 70s. It has had a number of renovations and a name change, but it is still basically the place I remember. Of course, the classrooms, cafeteria, and library (we didn't have "media centers" back then) look a little smaller to the eyes of an adult than they did to a five-year old child, but it is still my old school.

The first book I can recall ever checking out of my school library was the Dr. Seuss 1960 classic *Green Eggs and Ham*. I remember it not only for its allure but

because I dropped it in a puddle on my way back to class and my parents had to buy a new one for the school. I still have “my” copy of what I came to call simply *The Ham Book*, and I have read its muddy and crinkled pages to my own children countless times over the years. Fiction held a special attraction for me as a young boy just as it does today. One of the main characters with whom I felt I could identify, Sam-I-Am, is filled with energy and enthusiasm. These attributes endeared me to him and perhaps that is why I unwittingly chose the name Sam as my pseudonym in this narrative. Sam I am.
Sam I Am

I suppose all kids have those places they just don't like to go. For some, it's going to see a doctor or a dentist. Others may feel that way about church or school. But those are places I didn't mind at all. In fact, I loved church and school. I got to see lots of friends there, and I felt really accepted for who I was. Heck, I could even tolerate doctors and dentists, even though their offices seemed to always have a weird smell to them. My doctor was a great guy. He always gave me the coolest band-aids whenever I got a shot and didn't cry. But if I did cry I had to get a “girl band-aid” – a pink one. Yuck! And my dentist had a big window with a bird bath just outside where I could watch squirrels and birds duke it out while I was waiting. Yep, those places were a breeze compared to the two I don't like.

Come to think of it, I guess you might say I've outgrown one of them. When I was really little, say three or four, my mom would take me to a department store and actually make me go to the Ladies' Room with her! That may not sound so bad, except that I'm a boy! How humiliating! Thankfully, none of my preschool buddies ever saw me.

But, there is one trip that still looms in the distance. It has come every

Thanksgiving weekend for my 11 years, and I fear it will for a long time to come. I dread it not so much because of where it is, but rather who's there. I'm sure you probably have one of those aunts who loves to pinch your cheek and say, "Oh, isn't he just precious!" Well, guess what...multiply that times 75 and you have the most dreaded event of all time – my annual family reunion. That's right, 75 aunts, uncles, and cousins – most of whom I see (thankfully) only once a year.

What a gathering it is, every year the same thing. The old men (of course, by 'old' I mean anyone over 50) all sit around two tables, totally oblivious to what's being said around them. Since they're all hard of hearing, they just smile and nod a lot. They look like those little balancing birds that bob up and down until they finally get their little red beaks wet.

Then there are the old women. They sit at two other tables all the way across the yard and talk about – you guessed it - the men. I've always wondered why they bother to sit so far away. They could sit in their husbands' laps and talk, and the men still couldn't hear them. I wonder...why is it that these men can't hear very well? That comes later.

My cousins are a strange bunch, too. Of course, they probably feel the same way about me. There's Billy, the pinch-and-runner. Ever since he was five, we suspected that he had world-class speed. That rascal can raise a blood blister and be out of sight before you even feel the pain. Next, we have Robbie. Robbie picks his nose a lot and then tries to shake hands with you. Needless to say he's not very popular. Missy's a hair puller. She has long, strawberry blonde hair and freckles, and I guess hair pulling is her best defense against getting picked on by all the other cousins. Oh, and I can't forget 3-year old little Trey. He follows me everywhere, and actually thinks my name is That.

That's right, That. At last year's reunion, when Trey was just learning to talk, his mom, Aunt Patti, pointed at me and said, "Trey, who's that?" From that day on I've been That to the little guy. He even wrote me a letter last spring and addressed the envelope to That Webster. I didn't actually get the letter until August since our mailman couldn't figure out who, or what, a That was. No wonder my mailman stayed so confused – Precious, That, Little Austin (another favorite of my aunts since my dad's name is Austin). Why can't anyone call me by my real name, Sam?

November 26, 1977

My older half-brother, Josh, (we have different dads) and I had just put a serious hurt on our Thanksgiving turkey, and were settling into the den to watch football on TV when my dad hollered from upstairs, "Time to load the car! Josh? Sam? You guys start packing, and then take your bags to the car. You know what time we're leaving, right?" We knew, alright – 3:00A.M.

Instantly, wild thoughts of exotic illnesses began to run through my mind. Every year I had tried to fake the symptoms of some disease that would keep me at home. Last year, it was malaria. Problem was I really didn't know what malaria was, so my pitiful attempt at a limp didn't work very well. My parents sniffed that one out pretty easily. None of my maladies ever seemed to work. What's up with that? Ten imaginary symptoms, ten trips to Thomasville – that's in Georgia. But this year would be different.

I'd worked for 364 days to find the perfect infirmity to keep me at home. This one was flawless. It just couldn't miss. I decided to adopt symptoms of multiple diseases. That way it would be harder to pinpoint just exactly what I was faking. I set my plan into action by running around my room to get all sweaty. I rubbed my eyes to make them red.

My nose was good and runny, which was a bonus symptom I hadn't counted on, but it added to the effect. I even stuck my hands in the refrigerator for a few minutes to get them good and clammy. I grabbed my stomach, moaned and wailed, and set out for my dad's room. In my oft-rehearsed and most pitiful of voices, I let out a squeamish "Dad?"

Without even looking up from his packing to see my horrendous state, he said, "Are you bleeding from your eyes, Sam?"

"No, sir," I meekly replied, still holding my abdomen, limping, and snorting everywhere.

"See you at 3:00."

Ugh! Total dejection! What's a guy to do? Looks like I'm going after all.

There would be only five people in Hinesville awake at 3:00A.M. – my mom, dad, Josh, me, and Mr. Williams, the owner of the ice house. We never went on any long trip that we didn't stop by the ice house to fill up our cooler. Dad would always call Mr. Williams on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving to remind him we'd be coming, and he'd always be waiting at the front door with two giant pairs of tongs, one for Josh and one for me. Cutting and carrying our own ice block was the only highlight of the entire day. Unfortunately, we'd have been up for only 15 minutes by that time, so the rest of the day was sure to be a bust.

So, reluctantly, we trudged up to our rooms and began to throw clothes into suitcases with no regard as to how they matched. After all, who were we trying to impress? We could dress like Amazon headhunters and most of my aunts would still say we're precious!

Precious? Precious? I'm 11, I'm not supposed to be precious. Cute, maybe, but never any description that a person could possibly use to name a cat, Precious. Ugh!

With the car loaded, gassed up, and facing the opposite way in the garage there was nothing to do but wait. 3:00P.M. – 12 hours and counting. Another totally wasted day was ahead. Oh well, look on the bright side... Wait a minute, there is no bright side. I'm doomed!

It just so happened that I had the loudest alarm clock/radio in history. And, to keep me from repeatedly hitting the snooze button (I once did that 14 times), my mom cleverly stationed it across the room and set the dial to a 24-hour opera station so that I'd be sure to wake up as soon as some fat guy with Viking horns coming out of his head started singing. Worked like a charm, too. Never have been late for a day of school in my life.

"Figaro! Figaro! Figaro!"

'It's 2:30 already?' I thought to myself. Still groggy from only three hours of sleep, an attempt to throw rolled up socks at the radio failed. I fumbled around in the dark in a frantic search for the snooze button but couldn't find it, and was forced to stick the radio in my dresser drawer between t-shirts and underwear to drown out the shrill squawking of the giant Viking. But on the way back to bed, with Figaro still blaring, I admitted defeat, turned on the lights, unplugged the radio, and tried find my clothes, which I had accidentally packed in my suitcase. I had to wear shoes without socks because all of my socks were behind the dresser where my clock was.

At 3:00A.M. sharp dad turned the ignition of our midnight blue 1970 Oldsmobile 88, affectionately referred to as The Tank. As usual, we stopped by the ice house,

chopped our block, and were soon on our way. With the best part of the day behind me, I decided that four hours of sleep was my only consolation so I nuzzled down in the backseat, leaned my head on the car door, and quickly drifted off.

The next sound I heard was the squeak of our brakes. Figuring we were already at the reunion location, I tried pretending to still be asleep in order to postpone the inevitable agony of cheek pinches, blood blisters, and chunks of pulled-out hair, but it was to no avail. Dad had gotten out of the car, and was tapping on the glass with the tip of his finger to get my attention. The longer I waited to answer him, the louder he tapped. Clearly approaching a state of perturbed-ness, he began tapping harder with his birthstone ring. I figured I better show signs of life before he broke the glass.

Sitting up, I saw that it was still dark outside, and I noticed that we were on a dirt road. But nothing looked familiar. Puzzled at not knowing where we were, I asked, "Dad, have they changed the reunion site this year? I don't remember this place."

"No, son, they haven't. We're not going to the reunion just yet. I have something a little different in mind."

"Different? What do you mean?"

As the deep orange sun slowly began to inch its way above the tall, straight South Georgia pines and the morning fog began to dissipate, dad took me by the hand, then pointed and said, "Son, you see that old building over there?" Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I squinted to look across an unplowed field filled with weeds surrounded by rusty barbed wire. On the far edge of the field sat a rickety old wooden structure about 10 feet wide and 20 feet long. The horizontal siding boards were weathered and gray, and you could see between them all the way to the trees on the other side. Spanish moss

draped over the rusted tin roof after it had fallen off the branches of the massive four live oak trees which made a canopy over the entire building. The foundation's four corners were supported by huge brown and white oval boulders protruding from the ground.

"Yes, sir, I see it. It sure does look old. What kind of building is it, a barn?"

Kneeling down on the dusty road and grabbing a handful of the cool sand, he said, "Well, I'm sure it was a barn when it was first built. But it served another purpose when I was your age."

Intrigued, I, too, scooped up some sand and then climbed onto his knee and put my arm around his neck. "It did? What was it, Daddy?"

"Sam, you're looking at the first place I ever went to school."

"That's where you went to school? No way!"

"Yep. What do you say we walk on over and take a closer look," he said, standing and pulling my hand. Hopping the ditch, he carefully ducked underneath the highest tier of barbed wire and stepped over the middle one. Once safely through, he reached back, stepped on the lowest wire and raised the middle one so that I could join him.

Crossing the field was harder than I expected. Old, hardened furrows imitated stationary ocean waves that made walking, at least for a city boy like me, complicated. But I could see that dad had no trouble at all. He seemed to be right at home despite the cockleburs and beggars' lice which were attaching themselves to our pants legs with every step.

Halfway through the field, we stirred up a small rabbit which quickly went scurrying for cover. A high-pitched squeal came from the sky as a large red-tail hawk

swooped down and grabbed the rabbit for its morning meal.

Looking back up at my father, I said, “Daddy, do you think mom and Josh will be okay in the car by themselves?”

“They’ll be okay. They both know what we’re doing. Besides, there’s no one around here for miles. When they wake up they’re going on to the reunion and leave us here for a while.”

“Why would they leave us? Don’t you want to see your mom and all your brothers and sisters?”

“Oh, we’ll see them before the day’s over, but I have some important things I need to share with you.”

Confused, I asked, “What did you mean when you said that there’s no one around for miles?”

“Son, we’re out in the country. The closest town to here is Pavo, and it’s a good 10 or 12 miles.”

“What about houses? If kids went to school here there must be houses nearby.”

“Yeah, there are houses, but they’re pretty far piece, too. Will, my best friend when I was little, lived closest to school, and he had to start walking at six o’clock every morning to get to school by eight o’clock.”

“He walked for two hours just to go to school?” I asked in amazement. “Why didn’t he ride the bus like everybody else?”

“Sam, we didn’t have any school buses. All these folks out here were just poor farming families. The kids in cities like Moultrie, Thomasville, and Valdosta had buses, but we had to walk. Every once in a while, when it was real cold, Old Man Blake would

let some of us ride in the back of his pick-up.”

“How far did you and your brother and sisters have to walk?”

“Let’s just put it this way, most days it was dark when we left home and dark when we got back.”

“No way! You gotta to be kidding!” I shouted.

“Nope, that’s the way it was.”

I walked around the old school house, astonished that anyone would go to such great lengths just to sit in this wobbly old thing all day. “Did it look this bad when you were little, Daddy?” I asked.

“As best I can remember, it looks exactly as it did the last day I saw it,” he replied.

*“When **was** the last time you saw it, Daddy? Last year? The year before?”*

“No, son, the last time I saw this old school was October 28, 1939,” he said sadly.

“October 28th? Why, that’s your birthday.” After a few seconds of silent calculation I said, “You were 14 then, right?” He nodded. “Why’d you leave school on your birthday?”

“Well, son, that’s exactly why I brought you here. There are a lot of things I need to tell you. Some of it your mom and brother don’t even know. But now you’re old enough and there are some things I need you to remember. You see, Sam, I’ve seen a lot in my lifetime, and I’ve had lots of experiences that shouldn’t be forgotten. I’m counting on you to keep those memories alive and one day pass them on down to your children. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir, I think so,” I replied, not fully understanding.

Pointing to an old oak stump he said, “Good. Have a seat here and let me tell you how it was when I was a kid.

Interlude – Meeting the Men

Warfare is about transitions. Civilians transition into green recruits. Those recruits become fighting men in a matter of weeks, and sometimes in just mere days, as we will see. Fighting men then become warriors. This is where the road forks, however. Warriors have three options to follow: they may become killers of their enemy; they may become captives of their enemy; they may die in service to their country. Some experience one, two, or all three. A few may make the military their career, but for even them, most will one day have to transition back into civilian life.

For the men who found themselves as POWs in World War II, transitions were both good and bad. Research has proven that the very first day of captivity is the most difficult. The attitude one carries into a situation such as captivity can be the difference between living to reach the next transition – freedom – and death. For many POWs who returned home after the war, readjusting to civilian life was very difficult. Some, like Mr. Baylor, whom we will learn more about later, were fortunate in that they were able to slip back into their old lives just as if they had never left. For others, however, the memories were still too fresh. The sound of an automobile backfire, the scream of a baby, or a familiar aroma might send their mind to a time and place across the Pacific or Atlantic. Some men even found themselves leaving their dates in their seats in movie theaters when the action in a war movie became too intense.

Many World War II veterans, particularly those just who had just returned from

the various theaters of warfare, found it very difficult to talk about their experiences, even with others who had gone through the same ordeals. Some felt isolated and some felt that their forthrightness may open them up to ridicule. For POWs, this was an even more daunting task. These men were an enigma: fighters who were powerless to fight. The enigmatic puzzle did not stop when they left the confines of the camp. Once they reached the States, some returning GIs were seen as heroes, while others were cast aside and scorned as cowards. For instance, in reflecting upon how he was treated when he first arrived back in the States and desperately wanted to contact his family and fiancé via telephone, Mr. Cranman said,

Those [telephone operators] could not do enough for us. They were as sweet and cooperative as they possibly could be, and since they were aware of the nature of our calls, they were extremely anxious to get them placed as soon as possible. This was the thing that I had first noticed back in Germany...it was how people viewed returning POWs, from the troops that liberated us to the truck drivers that brought us to the air strip, to the air crews in our transport aircraft, to the Army people at Camp Lucky Strike, to the crew of our ship, to the people of Boston, to the Army personnel at Camp Miles Standish, and finally the telephone operators. They all treated us as heroes.

Not all on the home front, however, perceived POWs in the same light. Upon receiving confirmation that her sweetheart was captured by the Germans, one woman wrote a cruel Dear John letter to him while he was still imprisoned, stating, “You can consider our friendship at an end. I’d rather be engaged to a 1944 hero, than a 1943 coward” (Seeger, 1999/2002, p. 63). One can only imagine the devastation that a man in that situation,

with little to cling to but hope for a return to his loved one, would feel after reading such a letter.

Mr. Cranman, himself, expressed reluctance that being classified as POW automatically makes one a hero, as he stated,

In my eyes the POW experience, although unique, did not automatically make heroes out of us. We did our job like all the others who engaged in actual combat, and, due to circumstances beyond our control, we were captured by the other side. However, as in any large number of combat troops, there were also POWs who were real heroes. They were the guys who, when faced with the opportunity or necessity, risked their own lives to help save others. Even though there were plenty of those people scattered within the POW ranks, nobody knew who they were.

My father found the war difficult to talk about to everyone but me. From what I can gather from his brothers and sisters, he talked little of the war to his first two wives, one of whom died prior to my birth and the other is unknown to me, and even less to them. My grandmother and aunts knew almost nothing of the war, a result of an involuntary union between my father and his brothers who also served in the war. They could not have discussed the war had they wanted to. It was just too fresh and too painful. But, as they say, time heals all wounds, and they eventually were able to face and share what they had experienced.

I remember as a child my father talking about this experience and that experience and then his voice quavering and trailing into silence. I was too young at that time to realize the pain he was going through as he remembered fallen friends and difficult times.

I would always say something like, “Are you okay, Daddy?” and he would reply with, “I’m fine,” and resume his story. But from that point in the conversation, I noticed a difference in the way my father spoke. It was as if he had gotten to a point at which the memories were too painful and he had to take great effort to find words that would get his point across without further opening old wounds.

Speaking of wounds, my father had one noticeable scar on his forehead, the gift of a German soldier who thrust the butt of his rifle against his head when he fell while walking in formation on the way to Oflag VI-H. Not knowing the scar’s origin as a small child I once ran my finger across its jagged three-inch path, and my father winced, his face cringed, and he involuntarily jerked away in pain, scaring me. I thought I had done something wrong and began to cry. Surely, the scar itself carried no pain after 25 years, but it was if it had not been touched since that time and the sensation of someone touching it instantly brought back recollection of the painful confrontation.

Until the day he died, my father also had exceedingly sensitive feet, the result of frostbite incurred by days of walking almost completely barefoot in the snow during the winter of December 1944. My brother and I tried to tickle my father’s feet once, but only once. His reaction let us know very quickly that this, too, was a painful reminder. It was clear to me that it was not his forehead and feet that ached but, instead, it was his heart that had not completely healed.

Of the three gentlemen I interviewed, only Mr. Cranman seemed able to speak openly of life behind the barbed wire without noticeable reservation. Comments such as the following offer testament to his ability to openly share his experiences:

I have two reasons for [sharing my experiences]. The most important one

has to do with my children and my grandchildren. They are the ones who have a right to know as much as I am able to tell them about myself, because not only will it become part of their background, but more importantly, it will allow them to see more clearly how all the pieces had fit together before they were able to receive the gift of life. The other reason has to do with the many who seemed to have a sincere interest in learning about my war experience.

Mr. Cranman has chronicled his experiences for the sole purpose of keeping his memories alive for his children, grandchildren, and subsequent generations of his family. His book entitled *A Measure of Life: War * Captivity * Freedom* (2003) is witness to his experiences.

Mr. Baylor, who speaks with the assistance of an audio device was, by far, the most eloquent of speakers, though he struggled to make his thoughts audible during the interview because of a cancerous throat condition. At times it was difficult to discern whether the pain he felt as we conversed was due to the rekindling of memories or merely from laboring to talk. On several occasions, however, the expression on his face was reminiscent of my father's when he would share stories with me, and it was apparent that the memories still hurt him. The pain and distant look in his eyes were apparent as he recalled the most painful of memories:

I guess from the time I was conscripted until I was discharged, the time I spent in a camp which was about fifteen miles from Auschwitz was the most terrible. I confess, I didn't know, and most of my buddies didn't know about what was going on with Hitler's final solution...about ridding Europe of all the Jews. But I noticed during the first couple of days a wreaking odor in the air...

His eyes possessed a blank stare and his words fell silent as he, no doubt, conjured memories of something he could not or would not disclose to me. His eyes blinked, his head shook, and his lips turned white as they tightened. He was clearly shaken. It unnerved me somewhat as well to see those same facial expressions after so many years.

Mr. Waldrop, whom I would consider the jokester in the group (for some reason, he reminded me of Br'er Rabbit), had the gift of being able to find humor in nearly all of his tales. As one who had started a local POW chapter in his hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana, and had spoken to school children for many years, he had become quite adept at relating his experiences without getting mired down by their memory. But even with his years of public speaking, I sensed occasional pain in his voice and face as he shared his stories with me. Having listened over and over to the recording of his interview, I recall numerous times when his voice would trail to silence as his eyes and thoughts looked into a time long gone. It was clear that, just as my father had done for me many years earlier, Mr. Waldrop had sanitized his experiences for the school children he'd talked with but, now that he was truly opening up and sharing uninhibitedly, he was recalling some experiences in detail for the first time in a long time. It was during these times of awkward silence that I was tempted to break the deafening stillness with a question or comment, but experience with my father taught me to wait for him to speak first, as these turned out to be the most poignant and revealing times in the interviews.

CHAPTER TWO – GOOD HARD TIMES

I have learned through years as a classroom teacher that children can be brutally blunt. It's not that they deliberately intend to hurt someone's feelings with their words. Rather, they just simply speak their mind in honesty. I hurt my uncle's feelings once at one of our family reunions. He had a somewhat misshapen head and, not knowing any better, I bluntly asked, "Why does your head look so funny?" His countenance dropped and I knew I'd hurt him. Here's why...

June 5, 1939

"Hey, Will! Watch this one!" Austin yelled as he ran down the bank and toward the rope that hung from a cypress limb which reached across the creek. Grabbing onto the rope and swinging himself out over the water, he screamed, "Wooooooooooooooooo!" let go, and then hit the water face first with a splat from the attempted flip that yielded only a belly flop. Dazed from the crash, he shook his head and swam back toward the bank.

"Great flip, Austin! How's that stomach feel?" Will chuckled sarcastically as he grabbed his sides in laughter.

More laughs came from the creek bank. Austin's older brother, Jeremiah, age 17, and younger brother and sister, Daniel and Caroline, ages eight and 10, respectively, were also rolling on the ground, screaming with laughter.

More embarrassed than hurt, Austin grumbled, "Aw, hush! You think you can do better? Just try. I dare you. No, I double-dog-dare you."

One to never let a double-dog-dare go unchallenged, Jeremiah pulled off his shirt, socks, and shoes, and said, "You name the dive, and I'll do it. And after I do it,

you have to do all my chores for a whole week. Is it a deal?"

After a moment of careful consideration, Austin nodded.

As Jeremiah slowly scraped his feet in the sand imitating a bull preparing to charge, Austin yelled, "A one-and-a-half! I wanna see a one-and-a-half! With a twist, too!"

"No problem, squirt," Jeremiah replied confidently. "Just get ready to chop that whole cord of wood behind the barn, boy!"

"Never happen," Austin goaded. "You'll flop. You ain't got it in ya!"

With one last foot scrape in the sand, Jeremiah took off running toward the rope. He didn't jump very high, preferring instead to let the rope pull him as high and as far as possible. When he reached the peak of his swing, he let go and pulled off a perfect one-and-a-half flip. But not with just one twist. He managed two full twists, and rubbed it in with a taunting laugh all the way to the surface of the water. Austin looked away to keep from seeing the fulfillment of his brother's prediction. When he heard the splash it sounded strange. Nevertheless, he resigned himself to the fact that he'd be chopping wood for what would seem like forever.

He waited for the cheers from the onlookers, but instead an eerie silence filled the air. The first sound to break the stillness was a scream from Caroline, followed by Will and Daniel's yells of "Jeremiah! Jeremiah! Are you okay?"

Austin turned to see his brother lying face first in the water in the dead man's float position, motionless. Without thought, he leaped into the water and swam out to rescue his brother. He turned him over and pulled him back to the bank. It was there that they all realized what had happened. Jeremiah had run so fast, and swung so far

across the creek that he had reached the shallow water filled with cypress knees hiding just below the surface. When he hit the water head first, the top of his head met a small, rounded stump which had compressed his skull. The indentation of the knee was still visible in Jeremiah's head. He lay unconscious, but breathing, with his cranium pressing against his brain.

"We gotta get him home, now," Austin said frantically. "Daniel, Will, help me pick him up. We gotta hurry." Not wanting his sister to feel helpless, he stood and calmly lifted her chin with his hand, wiped away her tears, and said, "Caroline, we need your help. Do you think you can carry his clothes? He'll need 'em when we get home. You lead us home, okay?" Caroline nodded, picked up her brother's clothes, and led the boys on the two-mile walk.

"Mama, Mama, we need help! Something's wrong with Jeremiah. He's hurt! He's hurt!" Caroline shrieked as she approached the house. A few yards behind, the boys, exhausted to the point of collapsing, were still carry Jeremiah's limp body.

"Oh, my God, no!" Emily Webster screamed as she ran from the small wooden house. "What happened?"

"The boys were jumping off the rope at the creek, and Jeremiah hit his head on a cypress knee," Caroline replied, choking back tears. "He won't wake up, Mama. He just won't wake up."

Sarah cradled Jeremiah's head in her hands, and whispered his name in his ear. "Jeremiah, wake up, honey. You're home." Upon getting no response, she said, "Take him on in the house, boys, and put him on his bed. I'll run and get Doc Smith."

"No, Mama," Austin begged as he gasped for air. "Please let me go. I can

make it. I'm okay. I promise."

"I'll go with you," said Will.

The boys took off running across the 20-acre peanut field. When they reached the woods, they ran parallel to the trees until they came to Pavo Road, a one lane sandy road that led into town. From the point where the boys got onto the road, they still had a three-mile run. They stopped only once to get a quick drink of cool creek water.

When they reached Doc Smith's house, Austin rushed in without knocking.

"Doc? Doc? Are you here? When need help, fast."

"Who's there?" Doc replied.

"It's me, Austin Webster and Will Thomas. My brother's hurt bad, and Mama sent us to fetch you. You gotta come quick."

"Slow down now, son. Tell me what happened."

After the boys had explained all that had taken place, Doc stroked his long, snow-white beard, then said, "Scyooze me just a minute, fellas. I gotta run to the bathroom and I'll be right back. Will, you go to the barn and bring around Zach. He's already hitched to the carriage."

Will ran to the barn and Doc left the room for only a few seconds then returned with his black bag. Out of it extended a brown wooden handle. Doc put on his topcoat and Abraham Lincoln-style hat, and Austin and Doc climbed aboard the wagon with Will. The trip back to the Webster farm would take 10 minutes, even with a horse and carriage. On the way home, all Austin could think about was that it was his fault his brother was hurt. Over and over, he told himself that if only he hadn't dared him to dive, he'd be okay. Only eight words were spoken during the whole ride. Will placed his hand

on Austin's shoulder and, as if he could read his mind he said, "Austin, it's not your fault. He'll be okay." With time to finally reflect upon what had happened, Austin could only stare into the distance, his thoughts weighing heavily upon his mind. He prayed to God silently for a miracle.

"Mama, we're back!" Austin announced as soon as the carriage was close enough to the house.

As he stopped the carriage in front of the house and locked the brake, Doc said, "Sarah, how's the boy?"

"Oh, Doc, thank you for comin'. He's still not awake, and his heart's beatin' awful slow," she replied.

"Well, let's just have a look-see, shall we?" Doc said calmly. He removed his hat and knelt down beside the bed." He placed his right forefinger on the side of Jeremiah's neck just below his ear and looked at his watch. A few seconds later he said, "You're right, Sarah. His heart rate's down. But I think he's stable." Still on his knees, Doc crawled around to the head of the bed to examine Jeremiah's misshapen head. He studied from every angle, and then declared, "Well, it don't look like his neck's broke. I think I have just the thing to wake this boy up. Austin, hand me my bag." Austin complied, his curiosity piqued once again upon noticing the brown handle protruding outward.

"What is that thing stickin' out of your bag, Doc?" Austin asked.

"Oh, you might say it's a miracle cure. Even better than snake oil," Doc replied jokingly as he chuckled.

"A miracle," Austin thought silently to himself. "Please, God, let it work. I don't

want my brother to die.”

“Sarah,” Doc said, “why don’t you and little Caroline go fix us up some cider. I know these here boys gotta be thirsty after all that runnin’. And when this boy wakes up, I’m sure he’ll be thirsty, too.” Ignoring their thirst, both Austin and Will realized that this was Doc’s way of getting Caroline to leave the room. “Austin, go out to the well and bring me some water. We’re gonna have to shave his head. Without questioning or hesitating, Austin sprang from the room and returned in no time with a bucket of water. Both he and Will stood watching the locks of thick brown hair fall to the wooden floor as Doc used his shears to cut the long strands. When all that was left was too short to cut, Doc switched to a straight razor, pausing periodically to sharpen the blade on a leather strap or rinse it in the bucket.

When he finished, he said, “Boys, I need both of you to help me now. Let’s turn him sideways on the bed so’s I can get more leverage.”

“Leverage for what, Doc?” Will asked.

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough. You fellas go down there to his feet. I want each of you to use both hands to hold onto his ankles. When I say ‘pull,’ I want you to slowly lean back so’s I can do my work. Understand?”

“Yes, sir. We got it,” the boys replied.

Doc stood up and positioned himself in a crouch at Jeremiah’s head. In the dimly lit room, the boys still could not see what kind of “miracle” Doc had in his hands. He stuck one end of the handle into the bucket, then gripped the handle firmly and placed the wet end on top of Jeremiah’s bare head. He twisted the handle, and a squeaking sound ensued.

“Alright, fellas, ya ready?” Doc asked.

“Ready,” they proclaimed.

“On the count of three.” Doc’s voiced continued to crescendo with each word.

“One...two...three!”

The boys slowly leaned backward, as did Doc in the opposite direction. A loud pop rang through the entire room as Doc went stumbling back into a dresser, knocking everything off. The ruckus brought Emily and Caroline into the room. As they opened the door, Jeremiah’s eyes slowly opened and he said, “Mama, what’s going on? Where am I?”

Everyone, except Doc, lunged for the bed to hug Jeremiah. “What’s all this fuss about?” Jeremiah asked his mama. “I’m okay, Mama. Please don’t cry.” He tried to get up, but didn’t have the strength.

“You lay still, honey,” Sarah said. “Don’t try to get up. Austin? You and Will help Doc up, okay?”

The boys went around the bed and grabbed Doc at the elbows to hoist him up. When he got to his feet, he proudly displayed the “miracle.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Austin exclaimed. “Mama, you ain’t gonna believe this. Doc fixed everything with a plunger! Doc, how’d you know that thing would do the trick?”

“Son,” Doc replied, “he ain’t the first young-un to dive headfirst into that cold crick.” Pulling back his long white locks, he leaned toward the oil lamp and said, “You see that scar up there? Them cypress knees has been around a mighty long time.”

The small Webster home had gotten electricity just a few months before Austin’s father, James Robert, died in March of ’38. The convenience of electric lights made the

simplest of tasks like reading and eating much easier. But what all of the family seemed to enjoy most was the opportunity to listen to their new-fangled Philco radio. Having heard the radio in the hardware store from time to time, Austin and Jeremiah were intrigued by the sounds of swing music, radio dramas, and event baseball games, and they had plowed many a neighbor's field to earn extra pennies in order to buy it. The only way the boys talk their mother into letting them buy it was by convincing her that she would be able to hear southern and bluegrass gospel music on WWXC out of Albany on Sunday mornings before church. The radio opened up new avenues for them and made the world seem like a much smaller place.

For the first few weeks, all chores had to be completed before the radio could be turned on. But slowly the children convinced their mother that one could work and still listen at the same time. Now that that hurdle had been cleared, the tedium of washing, ironing, and sweeping could be done while listening to favorite songs and radio shows.

Interlude – Radio Days

The solitary nature of bucolic life in the Deep South in the late 1930s and early 1940s did not lend itself to very well to the easy transmission of popular culture from person to person. Farms meant seclusion, and families living on large plots of acreage might go weeks at a time without seeing non-family members, especially if they did not venture to church on Sundays. Neighbors were close figuratively, but not literally. “Going to town” once a month was, itself, quite a treat. And though this was the tail-end of the Golden Age of Hollywood, many families simply lacked the money to partake of luxuries such as trips to the movie theater. The fairly new genre of swing music was in its heyday, but the lack of discretionary funds rendered the purchasing of albums an

impossibility for many. Depression years had taken their toll on the U.S. economy and many families simply could not afford to indulge in frivolous pursuits. But what almost every family did have was a radio, the vehicle most responsible for transmitting popular culture, at least at the onset of the war. No doubt, many parents in the '20s and '30s felt like my father did in the '70s when he rebuked me with a lecture on the cost of one radio compared to the cost of many albums. I remember as if it were yesterday: "Albums cost, money, son, but listening to the radio's free." Testament to this line of thought is provided by Weaver (2005), who states, "By the 1920s, radios were common in households and offered free news and entertainment" (pp. 8-9). Radio had the unique ability to convey popular culture in the various forms of comedy, drama, news, and sports. In fact, according to Weaver (2005, p. 11), "radio...was regarded originally as a medium to transmit information and broadcast sporting events," but it was in its association with music that radio had its greatest impact.

Having endured the long, hard years of the Great Depression, the United States was eager to emerge into a new era both economically and culturally in the early 1940s. According to Jones (1994, p. 10), "War, as it turned out, was a good antidote to the Depression. But it also changed the way the nation lived and, in turn, the nature of the music heard." As the nation's factories were mobilized from dormant units of production into 'round-the-clock centers of industrial power, so, too, did the music of the day undergo a tremendous transformation.

As the music fed into the mainstream popular culture during the '20s and '30s, it tended to become bowdlerized, drained of surplus eroticism, and any hint of anger or recrimination blown along 'hot' lines was delicately refined into an

inoffensive nightclub sound. White swing represents the climax of this process, innocuous, generally unobtrusive, possessing a broad appeal, it was a laundered product which contained none of the subversive connotations of its original black sources (Hebdige, 1979).

Radio had the potential to impact the war in ways media had never done in the past – a fact that both the Allied and Axis leaders were well aware of. Its readily available access to millions of people made it an ideal implement for appealing to the masses on an unparalleled magnitude. According to Braverman (1996), “Whether in peace or war, radio has a unique power to marshal the spiritual and ethical forces of a nation because it so easily enters into millions of homes, work sites, and other locations” (p. 71). To those who remained on the home front, radio had the power to boost morale, increase efficiency on the factory floor, keep them attuned to current events in Europe and the Pacific, and simply offer a distraction in the midst of the mundane-ness of every day life. “One of radio’s greatest contributions to the war effort like that of other forms of media was helping the nation maintain its morale through these terrible days and years” (Braverman, 1996, p. 72). Braverman continues, stating that “Radio through its various programming efforts became one of the more important elements bonding the American people together at home and abroad during this period of international strife” (1996, p. 90).

For the men and women serving their country in foreign lands and waters, radio was more than simply a means for passing away idle time. Under government control, “The newly created Armed Forces Radio helped spread the word, just as the enemy attempted to compete for the allegiance of the troops with the swing-laced radio

propaganda of Tokyo Rose and Axis Sally” (Erenberg, 1996, p. 151). But to the men putting their lives on the line every day, radio was even more:

[R]adio was theater, the daily newspaper, and the postman bringing a letter...Radio brought variety shows like ‘Command Performance’...shows with swing music like ‘G.I. Jive’ and ‘Downbeat’...musical programs called ‘Melody Roundup’ and ‘Personal Album’...sports programs such as ‘Sports Review’ and ‘Sports Parade’ as well as “‘News From Home,’ a series of local and national news programs (Braverman, 1996, p. 90).

While there were certainly many forms of popular music on the airwaves during the war years – “the classics, patriotic, hillbilly, crooning songs...sweet and hot (that is, jazz)...torch...and the blues (Braverman, 1996, p. 119) – the genre that has endured as most representative of the war is swing, and no one person exemplified the spirit of swing more than Glenn Miller. Miller, a Midwesterner with an all-American persona, willingly gave up millions of dollars in annual income during the zenith of his career to join the military. In doing so, he was a highly visible symbol of patriotism and sacrifice. Miller embodied the wartime ideal of sacrifice for a nation that allowed individuals to succeed and prosper, and in going to war Miller infused the depression’s popular music with national purpose.

As swing became enmeshed in the conflict, “it signified that the defense of popular values nurtured during the depression and imbued with particular conceptions of American life – rather than an ideological or militaristic crusade – would be the basis of the war effort” (Erenberg, 1996, pp. 144-145). Swing was no longer just music with a good beat, well-suited for dancing. It had now been elevated to the status of a rallying

point for civilians and GIs alike, and Miller was just the man who would carry its banner into war. Although he had a commanding and rigid style that angered some musicians, his fans appreciated his authority, patriarchal air, fatherly reassurance, and modesty. He was a tall, masculine, and scholarly looking man who, by his appearance, brought a sense of credibility to jazz, making a previously “nasty” musical genre clean-cut and respectable. The combination of these attributes afforded him the opportunity to “merg[e] the two popular music strains of the 1930s – adventurous swing and romantic, more melodic sweet music – into a powerful amalgam” (Erenberg, 1996, p. 146).

And by taking swing to war, Miller narrowed the gulf between Europe and the United States for those who were fighting and those left behind. As Heide & Gilman (1995) state, “On the home front and in military camps the popular music of World War II became the channel through which powerful emotions and sentiments could be expressed, either to help bolster the fight against the enemy or to express the loneliness of those left behind” (p. 117).

Indeed music is a potent tool, as it has the uncanny power to trigger our memory. Each of us can remember a song from our youth that makes us recall certain events or people we knew at the time. The war song is especially powerful, possessing the ability to rally millions of men and women to a common cause. “A song of war is often long remembered when other media have been forgotten. It outlives the spoken word” (Braverman, 1996, p. 113). The popular music of World War II seems to stand still in history. Its popularity was short-lived yet its impact is timeless. It stands as a lasting tribute to those who lived in an era that is quickly fading away with the daily deaths of hundreds of those who fought.

Neither the current war in Iraq nor the Gulf War of the 1990s spawned new songs of patriotism. The most recent song that stirred a sense of national pride – Lee Greenwood’s *God Bless the U.S.A.* – was written in 1984. It was so commonly used during the Gulf War that I, myself, heard returning soldiers express disdain at being forced to hear it at various ceremonies. Many of the war-related songs from the Vietnam era were considered songs of protest. One would be hard-pressed to remember any popular song from the Korean War years that either denounced or supported the war effort. This sentiment is even reinforced by an episode of the 1970s sitcom *M*A*S*H* in which the camp priest, Father Mulcahy, seeks to write his own war ditty because there are no rallying cries for the Korean War.

World War II was the last war which inspired songs that brought the nation together. Songs like *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition* and *Brave Men of the Infantry* stirred a sense of pride so deep that men and women wanted to fight for their nation. Countless songs of the era spoke, more often than not, favorably of life in the military. For these reasons the songs of World War II stand alone over the last 60 years as a musical genre.

This war’s music continues to live on as a tribute to both the men and the spirit of a nation: “If music can be said to reflect a nation’s spirit, then its lyrics can be said to mirror a nation’s soul. ¹The music of a nation demonstrates, as nothing else, the inner feelings of its people – their temperament, hopes, fears, and way of life” (Braverman,

¹ More on the impact of music and radio ensues in Chapter 9, *The Women Who Were Left*

1996, p. 113). And if Glenn Miller were with us today, he would certainly echo Weaver's statement that "[I]f one wants to change society one has to change music" (Weaver, 2005, p. 61).

CHAPTER THREE – WORTHLESS

Prelude – A Day of Infamy (Not What You Think)

Many of the dates in this narrative hold special meaning for me. Most, I admit, are birthdays and anniversaries of family members. The events of one date, however, hold particular significance in my mind, so as to warrant inclusion just as it happened back on October 28, 1940. Nothing special happened that day – literally nothing happened, yet it was a day that changed the life-course of my father. To set the stage let us first begin on July 4.

Pondering Peanuts

“Mama,” Austin asked, as he turned down the Philco’s volume on Kate Smith singing ‘God Bless America.’ “Do you think we’ll be able to go into town tonight to watch the fireworks?”

“No, son,” Sarah replied, I’m afraid not. Jeremiah’s still been having pretty bad headaches. I’d be afraid to get him out in the night air. Why don’t you see if Will’s family’s going? If they are, and don’t mind you taggin’ along, it’s fine by me.”

Pondering his mother’s offer, Austin sadly said, “No, Mama, I think I’d rather stay with y’all. I know it’s been hard on you since Daddy died last spring. And with Jeremiah not able to work it’s gotten even tougher on you, what with trying keep the farm goin’ and all. Why don’t you take a break, Mama, and let me do the rest of your chores today. I’m all done with mine. You deserve a rest.”

“Oh, Austin, I can’t let you do that, son. We each do our part, right? That’s how we’ll make it through these hard times. Ya know, I read in the papers up at Burke’s Store the other day something about some Great Dee-pression is upon us. Seems that

everyone in the whole country's got it rough. I heard tell that there's been men jumping outta buildings in some place called Wall Street, wherever that is. Seems that they've lost all their money, and feel like they gots nothin' else to live for."

"That must be terrible," Austin said in a distant voice. "I mean, it must be terrible to feel like you got nothin' to live for."

"I reckon it is," Sarah replied. "But ya know how I sees it? The good Lord has truly blessed us through this whole thing."

"How's that, Mama?" Austin interrupted, remembering all the hardships they had endured over the past few years. "How can we be blessed when we got next to nothin'?" 'Bout all we got is a bunch of peanuts we can't harvest, a rickety house that's 'bout to fall down, an old mule that can't hardly pull a plow, and a half-dead old dawg that's so dumb he don't even know his name."

"Son, you listen to me," Sarah said as she took Austin by the shoulders, sat down, and looked him in the eyes. "We got more blessin's than we could ever count in a lifetime. We got the biggest blessin' of all – we got family. We'll always have that, no matter what. Sure, it's a little tough right now, but that's just God's way of makin' us stronger. We all do the best we can to help out, don't we? Jeremiah's slowed up a bit from his accident but he still does what he can. You and I are healthy as can be, and we work the farm the best we know how. You got a younger brother and sister who do all they can to help out, too. Even though they're small, they do their share. And even though your daddy ain't here no more, he saw to it that we all had a place to live. The bank may hold the note on this here place, but it's still ours. We're the ones who work for it. It may not be much compared to what others has got, but it's our field of peanuts,

our house, our mule, and even though he may be dumb as stump, he's still our dawg."

Austin and Sarah laughed aloud as they envisioned their sorry excuse for a dog, Diddy-by-cha, lying on the front porch, too lazy to even wag his old yellow tail.

When the laughing had subsided, Sarah's face grew stern. "As for them peanuts," she said, "you don't worry. You and me can bring in that crop. You're as strong as a horse, and I can just about out-work any man in Georgia, ain't that right?"

Austin chuckled on the inside and grinned for he knew that to be true.

"Yeah, son," she continued, "we got plenty of blessings. The way I sees it, the less ya gots to start with, the less ya gots to lose. Them there men jumpin' offa buildings on Wall Street has lost millions, and it's a long drop all the way from the top. We may be poor, son, but we're a whole lot closer to the ground than them there fellas."

"What's that mean, Mama?" Austin asked.

"What that means, son, is that we don't have nearly as far to fall as they do."

September 17, 1940

The morning dew was still clinging to the leaves as Austin pushed his way through the peanut field. He stopped to look at the fresh deer tracks that had been left from the night before. As he knelt down to the finger the tracks, he felt the coldness of his damp pants legs against his thighs, and he could hear the water squishing inside his tattered pair of brown hand-me-down Brogan shoes.

Kneeling down in the still quietness, his mind drifted to a happier time – a time when his father was still alive. So much had changed in the course of the last few years. In the spring of 1939, his father, once strong and healthy, had taken on a terrible cough. No one seemed to know how or why he'd gotten sick so quickly, but within a few short

weeks he was dead from pneumonia.

After their father died, Austin, Jeremiah, and Daniel were now the men of the house. They had done their best to take care of their family, but it was painfully obvious that food was in short supply. The only hope for keeping the bank from foreclosing on the farm was that this year's peanut crop would fetch a high price. The price of most foods had skyrocketed in recent months, and there had been rumors swirling around the farmer's market all summer that peanuts were in high demand and that they would easily bring the highest price in years. Problem was, few people had any money.

"The highest price in years," Austin mumbled to himself as he reached deep into the dark gray, moist soil. He scooped up a handful of giant peanut shells, pulled them from the roots, and brushed off the dirt. He cracked open the shells, dropped them to the ground, and popped the raw pink-skinned peanuts into his mouth. As he savored their earthy flavor, he stood, stretched his back, and squinted his eyes at the early morning sun. The warmth he felt on his face reminded him that he was fighting the clock. He had 20 acres to bring in, and if he wanted to have his harvest at the market before any of the other farmers brought theirs, he'd better get busy. He brushed the remainder of the dirt from his hands and put on his father's tan rawhide gloves. He resembled the Hunchback of Notre Dame as he walked down the first furrow, pulling the stalks two at a time. He stayed in this crouched position until he reached the far end of the field, some 200 yards across, at which time he once again stood and stretched. This pattern continued until noon when his sister brought some leftover cornbread and ice water. The two of them sat under a giant moss-draped live oak tree near the split rail fence on the west side of the field and enjoyed their meal. When lunch was over, Austin stood and noticed a

silhouette moving in the distance. He strained to see who it was. It could be only one person – his mother. She was crouched over just he'd been, and she was steadily moving down the furrow. Austin and Caroline walked across the field toward their mother. Austin watched in sheer amazement at her proficiency. He knew right away that he had not been the field alone since daybreak. Sarah had pulled four more rows of peanuts than he had.

First upset at the realization that his mother was actually out-working him, he soon found himself thankful for the help. He once again chuckled to himself and thought, 'Geemanitty! That woman really can out-work any man in Georgia!'

What had started at daybreak on September 17 ended at sundown exactly five weeks later. The wagons were loaded down with peanuts. October 28 would be the day that would change their lives forever.

Austin awoke to the aroma of sizzling bacon which permeated every room. It was a scent he loved, but had smelled all too infrequently in recent months. Though it was several hours before the roosters would crow, there was much activity in the small house and a sense of anticipation filled the air.

Sarah was in the kitchen, frying the last of the bacon and scrambling the eggs that Caroline had collected the day before. She was trying her best not to dance in place as the sounds of Guy Lombardo's 'Penny Serenade,' but the sweet music gave her feet a mind of their own. Caroline was standing with her back to the pot-bellied stove in an attempt to cut the chill of the morning air, giggling at her mother who didn't realize she was being watched. Daniel, shivering and still wrapped in the quilt from his bed, entered the back door on his return trip from the outhouse.

Only Jeremiah remained in bed, still feeling the lingering effects of his accident 17 months earlier. He was able to walk fairly well, but occasionally suffered from dizzy spells which left him unable to do much work. His chores had been reduced to only ironing in order to prevent him from over exerting himself. He wanted to do more, but simply was not able, and that made him feel bad.

Austin quickly put on his red and black flannel shirt, overalls, socks, and Brogans. He preferred to wear more than long johns and a quilt to do business outside. As he passed through the kitchen, he said a cheerful, "Good mornin'" to everyone, and they replied the same way.

"Son," Sarah said, "It's gonna be a few more minutes before I get this breakfast done. When you finish up out back, why don't you and Daniel go on out to the barn and get the horses hitched to the wagons? That should save us some time."

"Okay, Mama," Austin replied, as he and Daniel went outside. When Old Tobe and the two horses they'd borrowed from Will's father had been hitched, the boys headed back in for breakfast.

"Austin, do you really think we'll get a good price for these peanuts?" Daniel turned and asked.

"I think so. It's what everybody 'round town's been talking about all summer. I hope there's enough that I can get Mama a store-bought dress. She's worked so hard and really deserves it. I hate that the dress she has to wear to church is the same one she works the field in."

"Yeah, I know whatcha mean. It'll be great when all these are sold and she can take a long rest."

The boys stopped on the back porch as they instinctively picked up an armful of oak for the stove. Austin looked down at his brother's shoes then at his own. "Sure would be nice to have some new shoes, too," he said. "The pair I got belonged to Daddy, and those you got on were mine."

"Do yours have any holes?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, there's a couple in the right one," Austin said, as he lifted his foot so that Daniel could see. "But they're not too bad as long as I watch where I'm a-steppin'. It only bothers me when I step in a puddle or where Old Tobe's been."

"I got three in this one, and they're whoppers!" Daniel said, lifting his foot as well. It's just about like not wearin' any shoe at all.

"Well, I'll tell you what, little brother. After we get Mama that new dress, how 'bout a new pair of shoes for you?"

As he looked down at the three quarter-sized holes in his shoe and felt the dampness of his sock from the morning dew, he said, "Man, a new pair of shoes. It'll be just like Christmas!"

As the wagons neared the farmer's market, the sun was just beginning to peek its eyes over the horizon. A half-cold, half-nervous shiver ran down Austin's back as he anticipated what lay ahead. Harvest time had always been a joyous occasion for the entire family. The food that had been eaten during the summer months seemed to be just enough to get them to this very day. His mother was especially adept at making their provisions last as long as possible, though for the last couple of years it seemed as if market day had been one day later there would have been no food left for them to eat.

A cool October breeze hit their faces as the Webster family stopped the wagons at

the gate leading into the market. Surprisingly, they were the first ones to arrive. It had been common practice for many families to camp out and spend the night to ensure a good spot in line. Austin set the brake, alit from the wagon, and ran over to the gate. The large lock and chain were cold in his hands. Puzzled by their rusty condition, he looked up at his mama and said, "They're all rusted up, Mama. Whatcha suppose that means?"

"I don't know," Sarah replied as she climbed from the wagon to get a closer look. She gave the lock a strong yank, but it held firm. Bits of rust broken loose and covered her palms. "Beats all I ever seen," she said as she scratched her head. "By this time, there's usually at least four or five other families here."

Daniel attempted to get off the second wagon, but Sarah motioned for him to stay with Caroline. "We're gonna take a look around. Y'all stay here in case someone comes up. That way you can keep our in place in line, okay?"

"Okay, Mama," Daniel and Caroline replied in unison as they nodded.

As they walked away from the wagons, Sarah whispered under her breath, "Austin, somethin's not right, son. I didn't want to say anything in front of your brother and sister, but there's somethin' wrong here. In all the years I've been coming, I've never seen this place look so deserted. And there's never been a lock on that gate, least not as long as I can remember."

Continuing to walk, they began to call out, "Is anyone in there? If anyone's in there, please unlock the gate!" Their echoes echoed through the market but there was no response. Twenty minutes later they had encircled the market and were approaching the wagons. Austin was first to spy a tall, slender figure standing by the rear wagon.

“Mama, look! That must be the man who runs the market!” Both Sarah and Austin began to run as their excitement got the best of them. Panting small, white clouds with every breath, they stopped at the wagon together.

Sarah said, “Why, Sheriff Barrett, what a surprise to see you here. Is everything alright?”

“Mornin’, Ms. Webster,” he replied, tipping his hat. “Yes, ma’am, everything’s alright.” His voice stammered and his eyes looked toward the ground as he spoke. An uneasy silence filled the morning air, then the sheriff said in a low voice as he moved his foot over the dirt., “No, ma’am. Everything’s not alright.”

“What do you mean, Roy?” Sarah asked. The sound of hearing the sheriff’s first name startled Austin. Always the lady, it wasn’t like his mother to call an elected official by his first name.

Sarah could see the pain in the sheriff’s eyes as he looked up, and the sun shone under the brim of his hat. “Roy, tell me, what’s a-goin’ on here? Why is the market all locked up?”

“I don’t rightly know how to tell ya this, Sarah. You won’t be sellin’ them there peanuts here today. Not today or any other, least not for a long time.”

“I don’t understand,” Sarah replied. Her voice raising in volume and tone, she said, “There’s 20 acres worth of peanuts in them two wagons. Everybody said peanuts was gonna go sky high this year. What’s changed?”

“It’s this damned depression. You’re right, Sarah, peanuts were supposed to fetch a right fair price this year, but I’m afraid they’re...” The sheriff paused to wipe his eyes and mouth with his handkerchief.”

“They’re what?” Austin asked.

“They’re...worthless, son,” he replied sorrowfully as he looked at the ground.

“What do ya mean, ‘worthless’? They ain’t worthless!” Austin yelled. Sarah sighed as she sunk here face into her hands.

“I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you folks. Most all the farmers from around these parts got together in the county seat a few weeks back to hear some fella from Atlanta talk about how bad things are all across the country. He said that in some places bread’s even goin’ for four or five dollars a loaf. Seems that the kinda crops we’re growin’ just ain’t in demand. He said the farmers won’t feel the effects of this depression as much as city folk since we can grow our own food. Nobody wants peanuts so the market won’t buy ‘em. That’s why everything’s locked tighter than Dick’s hatband. I decided to come out this mornin’ just in case there was anybody who hadn’t gotten the word.”

Sarah and Austin stood motionless, staring at the loaded wagons, unable to utter a single word.

“Fact is, Ms. Webster, most farmers didn’t even bother to harvest their crops this year. They said it wasn’t worth the effort. How come ya’ll didn’t hear ‘bout this at church? I know they been talkin’ ‘bout it up there.”

Sarah drew a deep breath and looked up at the sky. “There’s only been the two of us pickin,’ ya know, what with Jeremiah bein’ hurt and all. We been so busy workin’ them fields that ‘bout all we could do on Sundays was sleep. We’ve missed church the last three weeks.” As she looked into the distance, a single tear ran slowly down her cheek. Daniel and Caroline jumped from the wagon to be with their mother, and Austin

joined as the family shared a long embrace.

“Children,” Sarah said as she stood and wiped her face, “I guess this may be the good Lord’s way of tellin’ us that we shouldn’t work so hard that we forget about Him.”

Turning to the sheriff, she said, “Thank you, Sheriff, for your kind deed. We appreciate ya lettin’ us know.”

“What are we gonna do, Mama?” Caroline asked as she held her mother’s hand.

“Well, baby girl,” Sarah replied, “I guess there’s not much left we can do. I reckon we’ll go home and start eatin’ peanuts.”

All the way home, Sarah hummed hymns while the children sat listening silently. Usually interested in what awaited him around each bend, Austin found himself concentrating intently on the road. Slowly he raised his head and spied the familiar old schoolhouse where he’d spent so many happy days. The wheels in Austin’s mind began to turn as he thought about what his mother had said, ‘There’s not much left we can do.’ Never one to disagree with his mother aloud, he knew she was wrong. There was one more thing he could do, and he would do that first thing in the morning. But it would mean he might never see his schoolhouse again.

Interlude – Depression, But Not Depressed

The Great Depression hit the nation hard, but it struck the South with particular force. Industrial and financial centers were impacted by the depression, but so, too, was the nation’s agricultural commerce. The sanguinity of the early 1920s relented itself to desolation in the South where bank failures, disappearing credit, and drought were rampant. Even though most farmers in Georgia were able to grow their own food for subsistence, they just could not turn a profit. Sharecropping, which had become the only

option for many families who had been tied to the land since Reconstruction, grew to be even more prevalent for many families who had lost their land or perhaps had never owned land and had no other alternative. For the South, the Depression served only to worsen an economic downward spiral that had begun in the mid '20s. The United States experienced unbalanced prosperity in the second decade of the twentieth century, with industrial profits increasing while farm profits plummeted. In the early 1930s, the entire country sank into economic peril with the disintegration of many banks. This, in turn, dramatically reduced consumer spending and increased unemployment, leading to the worse economic chapter in U.S. history.

President Roosevelt's New Deal, a nationwide series of programs for economic relief and recovery...arrived late in Georgia and were only sporadically effective, yet they did lay the foundation for far-reaching changes. Not until the United States' entry into World War II did the depression in Georgia fully recede (Zainaldin, 2004). Much of the \$250 million that eventually made its way into Georgia to construct libraries, roads, schools, parks, hospitals, airports, and public housing came just before Pearl Harbor. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (1934) was designed to raise woefully low cotton prices, but this turned out to be of little benefit to the small landowner. Instead, only the large mechanized farms were able to see a positive yield from their proprietors' efforts. Less than a third of small farmers who had made the transition from cotton to soybeans, peanuts, corn, livestock, and hogs had ample resources to help them ride out the depression years. The remaining seventy percent were hit hard and forced to turn to sharecropping, live in Hoovervilles, or sever their ties to their ancestral land and seek better fortune in cities.

Life on rural Georgia small farms in the 1930s was, to say the least, difficult. “The typical rural Georgia family did not yet have electricity, running water, or indoor privies. Diets were inadequate, consisting mainly of molasses, fatback, and cornbread. There were few rural clinics, hospitals, or health care workers” (Zainaldin, 2004). Without jobs and dismal prospects for income, the best and perhaps only alternative for many was military service.

Only one of my dissertation participants, Mr. Cranman, grew up in Georgia prior to World War II. He was born in Savannah, and aside from his war years, he spent his entire life there. The son of a prominent Jewish businessman, he expressed that his life prior to the war was not at all difficult. His family was fairly wealthy despite the economic downturn and although times were perhaps leaner than in earlier years, they had all they needed and wanted. Helen, the girl he grew to love before the war and eventually married when he got home, is from Savannah as well.

Mr. Baylor is from Hagerstown, Maryland, a hamlet of approximately 30,000 in the 1930s situated approximately 65 miles west of Baltimore and just a few miles south of the Pennsylvania border. He, too, conveyed that his days prior to the war were fairly prosperous in comparison to what many others were experiencing. Though his family was not wealthy, they lived a reasonably comfortable life. He said, “Well, fortunately, I came from a home that was not wealthy, but was well-to-do and [I had] a very good life. Never wanted anything. On top of that, I was an only child and that made it a little better.” His girlfriend prior to the war and eventual bride after the war is from Salisbury, MD, which is situated halfway between the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay.

Mr. Waldrop is originally from Indianapolis, Indiana, and only recently settled in

Beaufort, South Carolina, to live with his daughter. His father was in law enforcement, a career that he, too, would eventually pursue after the war. According to him, his life was uneventful prior to joining the military after high school.

Waldrop

Even in the depression years, as hard as they were, cities still needed cops, so my dad never lost his job. He was a good provider. Things got tight, but we had everything we needed. I guess that was one of the perks of living in the city. Nobody was looking for a handout, but whenever there was a need, people did what they could. We lived in a real close-knit neighborhood so there were always people willing to help others. I had relatives who lived in rural areas around Indianapolis, and they had it a lot rougher than we did. They weren't farmers so they didn't grow their own food. At least we could go down to a market or get food from neighbors from time to time. But they had nobody. How they made it during those years, I'll never know. But my life was probably just like any other kid's...nothing special, at least until the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor. That was in December of my last year of high school. When we got back to school on the 8th, every boy there was talking about enlisting after graduation so there was really no doubt where I was headed. It was just a matter of deciding which branch of service was right for me.

My father, William Austin Burgess, was the fifth of nine children born to James R. And Autry Burgess of Pavo, Georgia. He was born in 1925 – delivered by a Dr. Austin (hence his middle name, the result of a fashionable manner of naming children in 1920s rural Georgia) and he spent the majority of his childhood working on the family farm. In addition to the farm chores that were divided up between the children, he was

designated as the ironer in the group. Oddly enough, he enjoyed ironing, despite the fact that it was done with a cast-iron iron that spent much of its time warming in the fireplace embers. This skill served him well in the military. He attended school in the proverbial one-room schoolhouse, but did not enjoy the academics of school very much. He saw school as the opportunity to socialize with friends he saw no other place, except church. Still, despite leaving school during the fall of his eighth grade year, he was clever enough to attend and graduate from the University of Georgia after he was discharged from the Army (thanks to the GI Bill).

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, “some 320,000 [men and women] served in the U.S. Armed Forces and countless others found employment on burgeoning wartime industries” (Hatfield, 2006) in Georgia alone. Cities such as Savannah, Brunswick, Columbus, and Hinesville owe much of their existence today to the ship building and military bases that pumped life into them during the war years. When the federal government decided in June 1940 that coastal Georgia would be the location for an anti-aircraft artillery training center named Camp Stewart, hundreds of families in Liberty, Long, Bryan, Evans, and Tattnall Counties were displaced from their familial land. Acreage was “bought” at ridiculously low prices and families that once lived in communities such as Taylor’s Creek, Clyde, and Willie were forced to move to surrounding towns or find other farmland elsewhere and start over. Ironically, in light of this study, by late 1943, Camp Stewart was designated as one of the many holding areas in the United States for German and Italian prisoners of war (POWs), who had fallen into Allied hands following battles in North Africa. These men were held in two separate POW facilities on the base, and they were used as a labor force for base operations,

construction projects, and for area farming. In comparison to American servicemen held in Europe and even more so in comparison to those held as POWs in the Pacific, these men were very well treated, having been provided with very nutritious, regular meals and even given the opportunity to be educated, taught English, and work for income.

The base, later to become Fort Stewart, did bring enormous growth and prosperity to those who lived nearby. Government contracts, on-base civilian jobs, and the ancillary jobs that sprung up because of the increased population brought unprecedented, but unequally distributed, wealth to the region.

CHAPTER FOUR – GETTIN’ IN AND GETTIN’ ON

Prelude – Short Shadows

As we sat by the rickety old schoolhouse, I found myself growing more and more immune to the sights and sounds that surrounded me. My father’s words all but hypnotized me just as they had before bedtime each night when I was younger. As he paused to catch his breath or collect his thoughts, I noticed that the shadows on the ground had shortened considerably as the sun continued its morning ascent. Though it was late November, it was unseasonably warm and we were dressed in heavy flannel long-sleeved shirts since we’d left home so early in the morning. The chill in the early morning air was now gone and I could feel beads of sweat beginning to form on my brow. Daddy began to roll up his sleeves and I followed his lead. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his bald head. As he took a deep breath to continue his story, a solitary drop of sweat found its way to the end of nose. Daddy had the unique ability to touch the end of his nose with his tongue, something I could not do. I wanted to be able to do this desperately because I wanted to be just like him. And, as I’d seen him do so many times as we worked in the shop, he caught the drop of sweat with his tongue just before it fell. My mother voiced on several occasions how disgusting it was, but to an 11-year old boy, that was pretty cool! I instinctively stuck out my tongue to emulate him, hoping I could somehow touch my nose.

He continued...

Long Shadows

There was a heavy feeling in the Webster home the next morning. No one was stirring when Austin got out of bed. The sun was already casting long shadows above

the distant trees, letting him know it was already past 7:00. There was no aroma of coffee brewing or food sizzling in the skillet. Everyone, even Caroline, the earliest riser of all, was still in bed. Austin decided that this would work in his favor, as he would not have to explain to anyone where he was headed.

The night before, he'd hidden his black and red plaid shirt, oft-patched denim overalls, and hole-filled Brogans on the back porch so that he could dress without disturbing his brother who shared the bedroom with him. On the way out the back door, he grabbed a handful of shelled peanuts to munch on, then slipped on his clothes and headed for the barn. He threw a tattered blanket across Old Tobe's back, set the harness in place, and walked him past the house so as to not awaken anyone with the sound of clopping hoof beats. Once past the gate at the end of their lane, he climbed aboard and rode for town.

Pavo, once abuzz with people going to and fro, looked like a ghost town. The absence of activity scared Austin. He'd never seen the little hamlet so deserted. Most all the shops were closed, and only a few people could be seen on the once-busy streets. Signs hung from rusty nails on shop doors. "Closed for the duration." "No inventory." "Nothing to sell." One even said "Will work for food – if you have any to spare." It was then that Austin realized that it was not only his family who were in dire straits.

The ringing of a small bell was the only sound to be heard, and it was coming from the hardware store. The bell, hanging from the top of the door, jingled every time the door opened and closed. This was the destination of the few people he'd seen walking the street and, as it turned out, it was his destination as well.

Austin tapped his heels on Old Tobe's sides, gently persuading him toward the

store. Old Tobe sauntered slowly forward with his head down. Once he was in front of the store, Austin tightened the reins, then alit and tied the harness straps to a lamppost and went inside. There was a long line of men standing from just inside the doorway all the way to the back of the store. They talked quietly with one another, but it was obvious that there was a sense of excitement in their words. Austin tapped the shoulder of the young man at the end of the line and said, "Is this the place?"

The young man nodded and said, "Yep, this is it. I didn't think there'd be this many here, though."

"Me, neither," Austin replied as he grinned. "Ya think this'll take long?"

"Nah. Word just came through the line that there's six or eight fellas back there checkin' guys out. It seems to be movin' pretty quick."

"I hope so. I need to get back home before too long."

"Yeah, I know whatcha mean. What's ya name?"

"Austin. Austin Webster."

"I'm Josiah Dockery. Nice to meetcha."

The two shook hands as the bell rang again. They turned around in unison to see who was coming in. It was Will.

Austin said, "Man, I didn't think you was gonna make it. I was gettin' worried."

"You know I wouldn't miss this," Will replied.

"Will, this here's Josiah Dockery," Austin said, placing his hand on Josiah's shoulder. "Josiah, this here's my best friend, Will Thomas." The two shook hands and nodded in acknowledgment.

"I reckon we're all here for the same thing," Will prodded.

“Yep. Looks like this here’s ‘bout the onlyest way left to make a livin,” Josiah replied.

“We know,” Will said. “When I talked to Austin yesterday evenin’, we figured enlistin’ was the best way we could help out our families, so here we are. If ya don’t mind me askin’, Josiah, how old are you?”

“I’ll be 18 next month. How ‘bout you fellas?”

Without thinking, Austin said, “I’m four----,” just as Will elbowed him in the ribs.

“We’re both seventeen, too,” Will interrupted.

“What year was ya born?” Josiah inquired.

Both Austin and Will hesitated, trying to do the math in their heads. Their lack of an immediate response gave them away. Josiah knew they were lying.

“Don’t worry, boys. I ain’t gonna tell,” Josiah said. “I don’t think there’s a fella in this line who’s really old enough to join up. Heck, I’m only 15 myself. Now how old are ya, really?”

“I just turned 15,” Will whispered.

Austin’s eyes were focused on the floor. He looked up and said, “I was fourteen yesterday.”

As the morning passed, a few more boys fell in at the end of the line. At 11:00A.M. Josiah, Austin, and Will were finally at the head of the line. A man in an olive green uniform with two stripes on his sleeves directed them to go into the back room and strip down to their underwear and socks. The boys complied and emerged from the room with their clothes in their hands.

“Just set ‘em there,” the man said gruffly as he pointed to a large table with piles of clothes on it. “The doc will see y’all next. Gimme ya names and just wait here ‘til they call for ya.” The three did as they were told.

Austin’s hands began to feel clammy. “Will, lookin’ at all these fellas ‘round here’s got me worried. Most of these boys are a lot bigger than us. Do ya reckon they’ll really believe we’re 17?”

Will whispered, “Just stand straight and tall – cast a long shadow –, and talk in a deep voice when they ask ya somethin’. I think we’ll be okay.”

From the next room came a deep, bellowing voice, “Dockery, Josiah! Webster, Austin! Thomas, Will!” All three boys, feeling uneasy, walked into a room in which white partitions divided the examination areas.

Another soldier pointed and said, “You, here. You, here. And you, there.” His long, bony finger showed the way for each boy to follow. Austin hesitantly looked around the corner of the linen partition.

A doctor, wearing a white overcoat, was seated behind a small desk. He said, “Have a seat, son.” Austin sat on a small, round, cold metal stool. The doctor removed the stethoscope from around his neck and placed the ends in his ears. He placed the other end on Austin’s bare chest and said, “Breathe in and out three times. Real deep.” Austin was startled by how cold it felt against his chest, but he obeyed.

“Okay, good,” the doctor continued. He picked up a flat wooden stick, told Austin to open wide, and stuck it to the back of his tongue. “Say, ‘ah.’” The feeling of the stick on his tongue made him gag, and he almost threw up. He thought to himself, ‘If I throw up on this doctor, he’ll never believe I’m 17.’

“Good,” the doctor said again. He used a small candle to look into Austin eyes and ears. “Hmmm,” he hummed.

“Anything wrong, doc?” Austin asked in the deepest voice he could muster.

“No, no. You’re in excellent health. Probably from all that farmin.’ You are a farmer, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” Austin said in satisfaction. “How’d ya know that? Somethin’ in my ear give me away?” Austin chuckled at his own joke.

“Nope. It’s those hands. I’ve never seen a city boy with calloused hands like those. No, sir, those are definitely a man’s hands.”

Austin swelled with pride, stuck out his chest, and held his chin high. It was the first time he’d ever been called a man. He knew he was going to make it. He’d be a soldier by lunch!

“There is just one hitch, though,” the doctor said.

“What’s that, Doc?”

“Son, I’ve been a physician for nearly thirty years, and I’ve seen just about everything there is to see.”

Confused and beginning to get worried, Austin said, “Whatcha mean?”

The doctor sat back at his desk and stroked his beard. He looked Austin in the eye and said, “Son, there’s no way you’re seventeen. At best, you might be fifteen. Tell me the truth. How old are you?”

“Oh, I’m seventeen alright, Austin replied. “At least I will be tomorrow. I was gonna wait and come then, but with it being Sunday, I knew there wouldn’t be anyone here.”

“I see,” the doctor said, knowing full well that Austin was not telling the truth. “I tell ya what. In order to get into the service, every man’s gotta show proof of age. You were born at home instead of a hospital, right?”

“Yes, sir, at home. How’d you know that?”

“Aw, that’s not important. I’m sure your mama has your birthday written down in the family Bible, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, that’s the proof the Army’s gonna need to letcha enlist. I’m willing to give ya a clean bill of health, but without proof that you’re at least 17, there’s nothin’ I can do.”

Thoroughly dejected, Austin’s head hung low, but he refused to let a tear fall. He knew the family Bible would prove he was only 14. The doctor could see how badly Austin felt. He thought for a moment then said, “Excuse me, son. I’ll be right back.” He returned a few minutes later with a small brown leather satchel. He opened it, took out a small black book, and handed it to Austin. “Son, look at me. Do ya know what this is?”

Austin took it, turned it over, and saw the words ‘Holy Bible.’

“Does ya mama know what you’re doing?” the doctor asked.

“No, sir.”

“Here’s what I want you to do. You take this Bible home and talk to your mama. Tell her what ya got on your mind. If she agrees to letcha join the Army, ask her to write your family’s birthdays down in this one. For your birthday, she’ll need to write the year 1923. That’ll make ya 17. Understand?”

Austin said, "Yes, sir. I sure do appreciate your helpin' me like this. But if ya don't mind me askin', why are ya doin' this for me?"

"Well, I'll tell ya. You know that boy, Josiah? The one you were in line with? He's my son. He's only 15, but he wants to fight for his country. His mama's gone, so it's just me and him. There's nothin' 'round these parts for him so he wants to join the Army. So, I'm gonna help him. If I can help him, I can help you.

Lifting the bag, the doctor said, "See this here satchel? When I left a few minutes ago, that was the 12th trip I've made to my car this morning. I knew there'd be a lotta young boys here this mornin' who'd want to sign up, but they'd be too young. The Army pays me a little extra to go from town to town and see that men are fit to serve. With what they pay me I buy Bibles for the very reason I'm givin' you this one. Now you take this one and another for ya friend. You boys bring 'em back on Monday if your mamas agree to change your birthdays. Then y'all can join up."

"Thank ya again, sir." Austin shook the doctor's hand and left to get redressed. He decided to wait for Will outside the hardware store to see how he fared. Will slammed the door behind him as he left the store and the small bell went flying across the sidewalk.

"Didn't go too good, huh?" Austin asked.

"I'll say. That stupid doctor said I was too young to join up. He said I didn't know what I was a-doin' and that I should go back home and grow some more before I try to be a man. What's he know?" Will paused and studied Austin. "Wait a minute. Why you smilin' like that?"

Hiding the Bibles behind his back and grinning from ear to ear, he said, "Hop up

on Old Tobe here, and I'll explain it while I give ya a ride home."

After supper, Sarah was still in the kitchen washing the dishes, more from habit than necessity. The meal of stale cornbread and water was hardly worthy of soiling clean plates. Caroline was practicing her reading by reciting Bible verses to her brothers by the fireplace's flickering flames. Every so often a gust of wind would shoot down the chimney and cause her page to turn without her consent.

Austin offered to help his mother by drying the dishes. He could see that she was in deep thought as she scrubbed the already spotless dish. "Whatcha thinkin' 'bout, Mama?" he asked.

"Oh, I was just thinkin' 'bout your daddy. I sure do miss him."

"Me, too, Mama," Austin said as he put his arm around his mother's waist.

"I just don't know where we're gonna get the money to buy food and keep this farm a-runnin'."

After a few moments of uneasy silence, Austin said, "Mama, if there was a way I could earn us some money, would you be in favor of it?"

"Well, I suppose it just depends on what it is you'd be doin'. I don't want ya runnin' moonshine or somethin' like that," she chuckled.

"Oh, no, Mama. It's nothin' like that. It's an honorable job, I promise. But the thing is I need your permission to do it."

"What in the world is there to do around here that would need my permission?"

"Well, I went down to the hardware store this mornin' where they was havin' sign up for the Army and...." The plate in Sarah's hand fell to the floor and shattered, startling everyone.

“Is everything okay, Mama?” Daniel yelled from his spot by the fireplace.

In a quavering voice, she replied, “I’m fine. Y’all keep readin’.” She knelt down to pick up the broken pieces. Austin, standing over her, could feel a knot forming in his throat. He knew he’d hurt his mother. He knelt beside her and took her by the hand.

“Mama, it’s the only way I can earn money. If we don’t get some money soon we’re gonna lose everything.”

Sarah drew a deep breath and let it out. “I knew it would come to this.”

“What, Mama?”

“Emily Thomas came by the house this mornin’ lookin’ for Will. She’d heard some of the men at church talkin’ the other day about enlistment. As headstrong as Will is, she knew he’d be down here talkin’ to you so she was hopin’ she’d get here before him. But it was well after nine before she got here. I knew then where you were, but I prayed it wasn’t true.”

“I’m sorry, Mama. I just don’t know what else to do.”

“I know, son. Emily and I talked for hours, tryin’ to reason things out. Sad thing is the only conclusion we could come to is that you boys are right. As much as hate to, I’m gonna have to let ya go.”

Austin stood, walked to his room, then returned with the Bible the doctor had given him in his hand. “I gotta prove I’m 17 to get in, Mama. The doctor in town told me to give you this Bible so you could write down the birthdays in it. Just change my birthday to...”

“I know,” Sarah interrupted as she stood up. “1923. Emily and I already had it figured.” She took the Bible and opened it to the first page. The headings on the page

read ‘Marriages, Births, Deaths, and Special Occasions.’ She walked over to the family Bible, opened it up to its first page and began writing, word for word, the names and dates with only two changes, Austin’s birthday and Jeremiah’s birthday. Since Jeremiah really was born in 1923, his birth date had to be moved up by 4 years as well. The doctor’s Bible now read:

Marriages

Sarah Autrey Davis and James Robert Webster, June 27, 1917

Births

Jeremiah Edward Webster, March 31, 1919

Austin Tucker Webster, October 28, 1923

Daniel Clayton Webster, December 22, 1928

Caroline Elizabeth Webster, January 19, 1930

Deaths

James Robert Webster, March 12, 1938

Special Occasions

Sarah had never really noticed that the ‘Special Occasions’ section of their Bible was not written in. She began to wonder why that was so. They’d had so many wonderful moments together as a family. It saddened her that she’d never taken the time to write any of them down.

Through the tears in her eyes, she handed the new Bible to Austin and said, “Take this page over to the fireplace and hold it up to the fire. You may want to crinkle the pages a bit and fray the cover, too, so it’ll look older. No one would ever believe that

this brand new Bible's been around our house twenty years."

Careful not to tear the pages or in any way seem disrespectful to God, Austin carefully took a few pages in his hand at a time and roughed up the edges. All the while, Sarah watched. She could hardly believe that her 14-year-old son was about to join the Army.

At 9:00 on Monday morning, Austin and Will were waiting at the door to the hardware store. The storekeeper, Mr. Williams, unlocked the door and welcomed them inside. "I reckon you boys are here to join up, huh?"

"Oh yes, sir, we sure are." Will replied.

"Well, the recruiters are already in the store room. Just head on back."

"Thanks, Mr. Williams," Austin said.

When they reached the door to the store room, a soldier motioned for them to enter, which they did quietly. "So," a seated soldier who was shuffling paperwork said curtly, "You fellas are wantin' to join up for Uncle Sam, huh?"

"Yes, sir, we are," Will said, standing at attention.

"You boys look mighty young," he said. You got proof of age?"

"Right here, sir," Austin said as he extended his arm. Will did the same.

The recruiter checked their names off a piece of paper on his desk which listed all the names of those who'd had their physicals a few days earlier. He opened each of the Bibles to the first page and ran his finger across it. "Hmm," he said as he grunted. He eyed both boys as they stood motionless. This don't appear to be fresh ink. I reckon it must be authentic."

Austin knew then why his mother had him take the book to the fireplace. The

heat from the fire dried the ink and would not allow it to be smudged. It was obvious that Will had done the same. Their mothers weren't educated, but they sure were smart.

"Alright, boys," the recruiter said. You've passed your physicals. The only thing left to do is sign here." He held two pens out. The boys took the pens in hand, and signed their names at the bottom of a long, heavily-worded piece of paper that neither of them took time to read. When they were done, the recruiter said, "Congratulations! You report to Fort Dix, New Jersey, in three weeks. A bus will leave the station promptly at nine o'clock in the morning. Be there, ready to go, or you'll be considered A-W-O-L. You don't ever want to be A-W-O-L, boys. The arms of Uncle Sam cast mighty long shadows. You are now United States soldiers so you need to act like it."

"Thank you, sir," both boys replied as they turned and excitedly headed for the door, having no idea that A-W-O-L meant 'Absent Without Leave.'. They had done it. No one suspected they were too young to join the Army. Fortunately for Will and Austin, no one had thought to check page 2 of the Bibles where the copyright date read '1939.'

Interlude – Farm Boys & City Slickers

In a comparison of the men whom I interviewed and my father, only my father would have been considered a "farm boy." He had a different childhood from those of these three peers, as his life was decidedly countrified and the three gentlemen were what he would have dubbed "city slickers." Mr. Baylor, Mr. Cranman, and Mr. Waldrop joined the military in 1943, 1942, and 1942, respectively, out of a sense of patriotism and support for their nation. My father enlisted prior to the onset of war in 1939 and, like many other Southern adolescent males, he joined primarily to put food on the table or to keep creditors at bay. Three felt the call to keep a nation safe and one joined to keep his

family safe.

Mr. Cranman was in his third year of high school in December 1941. Like thousands of his peers, he felt an inner call to join the military. He was exasperated, however, because he, like many who were too young to enlist, thought that America would make short work of the Japanese then move on to cleaning up Europe, and the war would be over before he could get into the fray. Few knew, however, exactly how weak the U.S. military really was at that time.

Cranman

I pondered for many months which branch of service I should join. I did not want to fight in the Pacific so the Navy was ruled out. My experience in high school R.O.T.C. convinced me that the infantry was not to my liking. So, eager to aid those in Europe who shared my Jewish heritage, I chose to enlist in the branch of service that would give me the best shot at fighting against Germany, the U.S. Army Air Corps. I longed to serve my country as an Army fighter pilot, but that was not to be. Despite my young age and my disdain for school work, I enrolled in the Army's Aviation Cadet program. This program originally required that its candidates have completed at least two years of college coursework. But when the entrance requirements were lowered to passing a written high school equivalency test, I found the opportunity I had been searching for.

Baylor

When President Roosevelt declared war on Japan and Germany in December 1941, I was still in high school. But then it wasn't long after that they started conscription so I knew that, ultimately, my life would be to go in the service just like all my buddies. I had a good number of buddies who, before they left high school, joined

the service. It wasn't long before I got what we called in the '40s my "greetings." All the letters from the government started out with the words, "Greetings, you have been selected by a board of your friends and neighbors, blah, blah, blah..." I was ready to go because so many of my friends were already in the military.

Note: Having already established at the onset of the interview that I was from Hinesville, the home of Fort Stewart's 3rd Infantry Division, Mr. Baylor responded when asked which branch of service he joined by stating,

I wanted to join the Army. And I was in the infantry which, as a matter of fact, being from Hinesville, you must know all about Fort Stewart...oddly enough my outfit was the 3rd Infantry Division. Of course at that time, the 3rd was not based in Georgia. I was only 18-years old at the time and had not yet gone too far from home. About the farthest from home I had been was in the summertime. I had an uncle and aunt who had a farm on the James River right up from Richmond, [Virginia], and I would go there and spend some time. At first, I was sent to Fort Meade, Maryland, where all of the conscripts in our area came through, and I got reassigned and ended up in Spartanburg, South Carolina, at a camp that was called Camp Croft. If I remember correctly, I believe it was named after a gentleman from South Carolina who has distinguished himself in some way during World War I. It was an infantry replacement basic training center. That means that all of us who found ourselves there were replacements to go overseas either east or west to serve in an infantry outfit for somebody else who had been killed. That thought always bothered me a little.

Note: Again, a bit of irony in that Camp Croft, too, was used as a POW camp for German and Italian prisoners captured during World War II. It was deemed by the

government to be an excess in 1947 and its assets were shipped to other bases or sold to private investors, and the base was closed for good.

Waldrop

I was always interested in flying. I loved to make model airplanes. Of course, I graduated from high school, and it wasn't long after that that we felt like it was our duty to save our country. I think that a lot of young guys at that time, with Hitler's threat and the Japanese with what they did at Pearl Harbor, just made people want to fight for their country. We, all my friends and I, couldn't believe that someone would have the balls to attack us, but those Japs sure did it. It really pissed us off and made us want to kill every one of them. There was never really any thought given to doing something else. I decided that the branch of service that best fit my taste was the United States Army Air Corps. I sure didn't want to be in the water and I didn't like the thought of crawling in the mud much so I figured that the Air Corps would be my best shot. Everybody was so consumed by what was going on with the war, it was just about all anybody could think about. The Monday after we graduated [from high school] on Friday, every boy in my graduating class met at a recruiter's office to sign on the dotted line. We were a small class so there were only about 30 or so boys, but I thought it was quite impressive that every one of us wanted to fight.

All three gentlemen clearly felt the call to join the military and fight for their country. But the words they chose to describe their motivation leads me to believe that there is a deeper meaning lying beneath the surface. Mr. Cranman used the words "I longed to *serve* my country as an Army fighter pilot" while Mr. Waldrop stated, "[After] I graduated from high school...it wasn't long after that that we felt like it was our duty to

save our country.” Mr. Baylor expressed that he joined when he did to avoid being drafted.

I feel as though Mr. Cranman went into the war with somewhat of a servant’s heart. His motivation was to help not only his country, but even more so to help those with whom he shared his heritage – the Jews in Europe. Mr. Cranman admitted that he knew practically nothing of the plight the Jews faced as Hitler sought to wipe them from existence so his motivation for joining the military when he did, I feel, was perhaps to avoid being seen as one who waited to get drafted rather than one who voluntarily stepped forward. He expressed also that many of his buddies had already joined so perhaps he was feeling a bit left out and wanted to be perceived in the same light they were.

Mr. Waldrop’s use of the words “save our country” leads me to believe that there may have been a bit of positive peer pressure involved in his decision as well. But what differs in his case is that he and his friends wanted to be seen as saviors of a nation as well as patriots in service of it. Certainly there is nothing wrong with that. A nation needs those who enter warfare with a sense of invulnerability in order to accomplish the task of defeating the enemy and winning the war.

Mr. Baylor, however, seemed a bit more reluctant. His decision seemed more motivated by trying to avoid being drafted. Certainly the prospect of being drafted and subsequently being placed in the infantry, which was the common practice of the day, may have been a deciding factor in his decision to join of his own accord before he was forced to. Ironically, he ended up just that – an infantryman.

For Love...

The morning of the boys' departure for Fort Dix was an unusually cold and dreary one. Gray, puffy clouds filled the sky such that there was no blue backdrop visible and a light drizzle, which had started in the early morning hours, had everything wet. By the time Austin reached the bus station, there were already 16 other young men there. Will, with his plaid carpet bag hoisted over his shoulder, walked over to Austin and said, "Good morning, Private."

Austin stood at attention, saluted, and said, "Good morning, General." Both boys then chuckled.

Sarah gave Emily a hug and said, "Today's the day."

"So it is," Sarah replied. "I've been dreadin' this day for what seems like forever. It wouldn't be so bad except for all that talk of war in Europe. I'm just so thankful that we aren't involved in that thing. I can't stand the thought of these boys goin' off to fight at their ages."

They'll be okay, Sarah," Emily said, placing her hand on her shoulder. All that fightin' over there don't concern us. These boys'll be fine. They'll take good care of each other."

Sarah sighed and replied, "I suppose."

A man in a soldier's uniform yelled from a distance, "All aboard for Fort Dix! Bus pulls out in 5 minutes, with or without you! Let's go! Move out!"

Immediately, people started hugging all around the station, and the sounds of weeping filled the air.

"Austin Tucker Webster," you take good care of my boy, you understand?" Emily

said. *“Don’t make me come up to that Fort whatever-it-is and put a strap on you.”*

Chuckling, Austin replied, “Oh, yes ma’am. Don’tcha worry none.”

“We’ll be fine, Mama,” Will said, embarrassed by his mother’s joking.

The two boys stood side by side as their mothers looked at them. They could see the sadness in their mothers’ eyes, yet there was also a gleam of pride.

Austin kissed his mother on the cheek, said, “I love you, Mama. I’ll writecha as soon as I get settled. Don’t worry ‘bout me. I’ll be fine.” He gave her a long embrace, turned, and headed for the bus.

“Why didn’t you hug your Mama ‘bye?” Austin asked Will.

“We done all that at home,” Will replied. “I didn’t want these Army fellas seein’ me bein’ all mushy. They might think I was soft or somethin’.”

“Well, they can think what they want ‘bout me. I sure am gonna miss my mama.” Austin looked back over his shoulder and gave a wink. Sarah waved her handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

The boys climbed aboard the Greyhound bus, placed their bags above the seats, and sat side by side. As the bus pulled away, the driver honked the horn, and everyone stuck their head out the window to wave goodbye. A few of the men shouted, but Austin and Will simply extended their arms and watched their mothers until the bus rounded a curve and they were out of sight.

Neither boy had ever been on a bus, nor ventured farther than Thomasville, only 17 miles from Pavo. At first, they were wide-eyed at the sights along the roadside. Neither knew what a billboard was. The unfamiliar stench of the foul air billowing from a nearby paper mill turned their stomachs. The novelty of being on the road, however,

soon wore off and both were asleep after a few hours.

At 7:00A.M., twenty-two hours later, the Greyhound charter entered the gates of Fort Dix.

“Austin, wake up. We’re here,” Will said as he tugged at Austin’s arm.

Austin stretched, let out a groan, rubbed his eyes, and ran his tongue across his teeth. “Already?” he replied. “Man, time shore did go by so fast...”

“Everybody up...NOW!” a corporal screamed in raspy voice. “Nobody in the Army sleeps this late! Get up! This’ll be the latest you ladies will sleep for the next four years, I can promise you that! Get up!”

The brakes squeaked as the bus pulled up to a long white wooden building. The driver opened the door and the corporal yelled, “Grab your bags and move out! Hup! Hup! Hup!”

Immediately, all the green recruits on the bus stood, retrieved their bags, and formed a line in the aisle. Will, directly behind Austin, noticed that another corporal was splitting them into two groups with every other person being directed to either the left or the right as they were disembarking. Not wanting to be separated from his best friend, he quickly stepped from the aisle and asked the soldier behind him to go forward then fell into line behind him. According to Will’s plan, both he and Austin were directed into the same group.

“TEN-CHUN!”

The voice was none like the boys had ever heard. Its deep bellowing tone seemed to rumble through the fort like thunder. Scared to even turn to see from where the voice came, everyone in the platoon stood frozen in their place. When the thunder cleared, the

silence hurt their ears.

“My name, ladies, is Sergeant Love. For the next 13 weeks, I am your mama and your daddy! The only thing more important to you than me is God Himself,” the drill sergeant yelled as he paced slowly in front of the ranks. His shoes were spit-shined and spotless. His uniform was pressed without a single wrinkle, and he carried a riding crop – a memento of his days in the Calvary during the Great War – under his right arm. “You will jump when I say ‘jump!’ You will eat when I say ‘eat!’ You will pee when I say ‘pee!’ If I don’t say ‘pee,’ you will hold it until I get the urge to relieve MY bladder! In other words, ladies, you belong to me! Do you understand?”

A weak “Yes, sir” followed from a few of the men.

“Sound off! Do you understand?”

“YES, SIR!” everyone proclaimed in unison.

The sound of distant gunfire on a firing range echoed. Then, suddenly, an earsplitting chorus of BOOM, BOOM, BOOM shook the ground and the entire platoon jerked. Only the sergeant was unshaken.

“Stand still in ranks, maggots!” The sergeant yelled. “The sound you just heard, ladies, was a Sherman tank. Provided you do not sustain a life-threatening injury or die during your stay here, you pitiful excuses for human beings will be trained as either tank commanders, gunners, drivers, or munitions loaders.” Without giving anyone a chance to ask questions, the sergeant continued, “If there are no questions, fall out to receive your gear. Dismissed!”

A corporal yelled, “First Platoon, double time!” All the soldiers in Austin’s and Will’s platoon jogged in a straight line toward the supply building. A soldier near the

rear of the line said, "I don't think I can do this," and three corporals pounced on him immediately.

"Platoon halt!" one of them screamed. "About face!"

The platoon turned to see three soldiers standing with their noses only inches from the talker's face. All three were screaming at him, and spit was flying from their mouths. With all of them talking at once, their words indistinguishable, but their intentions were obvious – to humiliate the man who'd broken a rule. All the talker could do was stand and take the abuse he'd brought on himself. No one else in the platoon dared utter a word or make a move which would get him noticed.

A few minutes later, the corporals' assault on the poor soldier was complete. He was given 24 hours of scrubbing garbage cans as a punishment. "Let this be a lesson, ladies. No one speaks until they are spoken to." Directing his attention to the talker, he said, "Back in line, boy," and the soldier ran to get back into place. Saliva was dripping from his nose, chin, and ears, but he dared not wipe it.

"Double-time, ladies. Move out!" a corporal yelled. Once again, the soldiers jogged toward the supply building, but this time everyone held their head down and kept their mouth shut for fear of being singled out.

After getting their gear, the platoon was directed to their barracks. The barracks had yellow hardwood floors, and they glistened from the sunlight shining through the windows. White columns stood along the center of the room and there were 25 sets of bunk beds on each side of the aisle. The mattresses were bare and the room smelled a bit musky. On the far side of the room was the latrine. Its floors also shone though there were no windows. The two showers were each 20 feet long with five shower heads.

There were no dividers which meant there would be no privacy. There were twelve sinks and twelve toilets. The toilets lacked dividers as well.

“Grab a bunk, ladies!” a corporal yelled, and everyone in the platoon scrambled without a word. Austin and Will were able to get a set of bunks together, and Will chose the top bunk. “Stow your gear, get dressed, and be in formation in front of the barracks in 10 minutes!”

All the soldiers worked at a frantic pace to get their belongings put away. Austin and Will made their beds first, then put on their uniforms which consisted of a white, short-sleeved T-shirt, heavy canvas pants and belt, black steel-toed boots, and a cap. They neatly placed everything they’d brought with them in the foot lockers at the foot of their bunks and then hurried outside to fall into formation.

Sergeant Love had returned, and barked, “You have 10 seconds, ladies!” to those still inside as he looked at his watch. Upon his order, men fought to scramble through the door. Fortunately, everyone made into place in time.

“Alright, ladies, now is where the real fun begins. I want everyone to drop and give me 50 push-ups. And I want you to sound off as you do them! Assume the position...begin!” Everyone in the push-up position with arms locked began to count in unison. When they reached 48, the drill sergeant yelled, “One!” and everyone started over. Most of the men were unable to finish and had to remain in the push-up position while the others completed the drill. By the time they reached the 90th push-up, only two voices were still counting as they worked – Austin’s and Will’s. Working on the farm had finally paid some dividends.

The silence of the night was shattered by two corporals walking through the

barracks and banging lids on garbage cans. "O-500! Everybody out of bed! Five minutes to formation!"

As soon as everyone was in place, Sergeant Love bellowed, "Let's see what kind of shape you ladies are in! Five-mile hi..."

Thinking no one was looking, one of the soldiers swatted at a mosquito that had landed on his ear. The same three corporals who'd caught the talker the day before converged on him immediately. "Why can't you stand at attention, private?" one of the corporals yelled.

"Sir, a mosquito bit my ear," the private replied.

"A mosquito?" the second corporal yelled. "Who gave you permission to kill one of my mosquitoes?"

Petrified, the private said, "No one, sir."

"Then you broke one of my rules, didn't you, private?"

"Yes, sir! But I didn't mean to, sir!"

"Corporal Ellis, bring me that shovel," the second corporal requested as he turned his attention away from the private. He handed the shovel to the private and said in a frighteningly calm voice, "You killed it. You bury it. You will drop, find that poor mosquito, hold it gently in your right hand, and use your left hand to dig six- by six- by six-foot grave. At which time you have completed the grave, you will gently place the mosquito in its tomb, climb from the tomb, and proceed to back-fill it. When it has been completely back-filled, you will stand at attention, salute, and sing Taps in honor of this valiant warrior who gave his life today. Are my instructions in any way unclear, private?"

“No, sir!” the private replied.

“Proceed.”

As the private began digging, the rest of the platoon stood frozen, afraid to even blink. They could see the digging peripherally, but dared not turn their head to get a closer look.

“First Platoon!” a corporal yelled. “Right face! Forward, march!” Everyone in the platoon, with the exception of Private “Digger,” as he became known, started off on the left foot and marched in step. “Double time...march!” he continued, and the entire platoon quickened the pace.

When the run was completed, every soldier stood bent over, with his hands on his knees and gasping for air. The platoon was right back where they had started 40 minutes earlier. Private Digger was only knee-deep in the mosquito’s grave.

The rest of the day was filled with various drills on an obstacle course: crawling under barbed wire, swinging on a rope across a water-filled pit, scaling a 30-foot cargo net then jumping into a sawdust pit, ducking under and climbing over horizontal poles, doing chin-ups, scaling a knotted rope to a 20-foot platform then crossing a deep ravine on a rope bridge, and ascending a 15-foot wooden wall using only a rope. The only break the platoon received the entire day was a 15-minute silent lunch break. When they returned to the spot in front of the barracks where they’d started their day, Private Digger was packing the last of the dirt back into place over the mosquito’s grave. The short shovel handle was covered in blood from the open blisters on his left hand. With the platoon looking on, Private Digger stood tall and winced as he saluted. The muscles in his right arm had stiffened from holding the deceased insect for nine straight hours.

He made an O with his thumb and index finger. The remaining three fingers followed suit and he placed the makeshift trumpet against his lips. With a dry voice from lack of water, he hummed a makeshift rendition of Taps. The rest of the platoon remained at attention until the song was completed.

“First Platoon,” the corporal ordered. “Chow time! Left face! Forward, march!” The platoon marched toward the chow hall, and filed through the line to receive their trays. Two of the soldiers, exhausted from the day’s work, fell asleep at the table as they ate, but they were awakened before any of the corporals or sergeants noticed. After the meal and the march back to the barracks, each soldier gingerly made his way up the steps and into the barracks. Every man, excluding Private Digger, was covered in mosquito bites from head to toe from the run through the forest, but no one complained.

Corporal Miller exclaimed, “One hour to lights out, ladies. You may speak.” Having been silent for two straight days, one might think that the soldiers would be anxious to talk and get to know more about one other. But there would be time for that later. Fifteen minutes after they’d been dismissed, every soldier in the platoon was fast asleep.

At the beginning of the seventh week, the platoon was taking a break from the rigorous tank training which had occupied their time nearly all their time. Instead, they were preparing to take an overnight hike through a swampy area of the base. The soldiers of First Platoon had grown close to each other, and had learned to depend on one another during the exercises and drills the sergeants threw at them. The thought of hiking through a swamp, however, terrified most of them. A few of the men had heard a

rumor, unfounded though it was, that a soldier in the previous training class had been attacked and killed by an alligator on this same hike. Two days later, a dog showed up in camp with a long, bloody bone in his mouth that everyone assumed was a human femur. It turned out to be a whitetail deer bone, but the rumor of the attack still persisted and was embellished each time it was repeated.

The night before the hike was a rainy, miserable one. Sergeant Love instructed the corporals to conduct barracks drills, an exercise the men hated. Unlike all the other drills the men performed which created a sense of unity among the platoon, this one seemed to serve no purpose other than to create havoc. It consisted of every soldier, wearing only a T-shirt and a pair of under shorts, emptying the entire contents of his footlocker into a giant pile in the center of the barracks. When the corporal blew his whistle, every man was expected to race the center of the room, scavenge the pile, find his own belongings, and return them neatly to his footlocker in three minutes. Each time the exercise failed to yield the results desired by the sergeant, the men were marched outside in the rain and ordered to do push-ups in the mud.

Corporal Miller called the men into formation, gave the instructions, and blew his whistle. Every man rushed forward into the pile and began picking up towels, shaving cream, razors, boots, T-shirts, caps, pens, pencils, writing pads, and other assorted items. Within seconds the floor was completely empty. Each soldier was sitting silently on the foot of his bunk, placing the new-found items smartly in his footlocker. When the three-minute whistle blew, every soldier was already standing at attention aside his locker.

The corporal paced up one end of the formation and down the other, his hands

clasped together behind his waist. He eyed each box, but did not look inside. When he reached the door, he yelled "Dismissed!" without stopping or turning around.

Immediately, the men threw open the footlockers and began scurrying throughout the barracks whispering, "Is this yours?" or "Have you seen my ...?" And within minutes, every item had been returned to its correct place.

The soldiers had planned days earlier to put their plan into action the very next time a barracks drill was ordered. Without even realizing it, they had come together as a team to accomplish a common goal. The barracks drill had a higher purpose after all.

The rain had subsided by reveille, but the ground remained soaked. After morning chow, the platoon loaded into trucks for a three hour ride to the swamp. Some of the men passed the time by smoking, others by writing. Both Austin and Will, neither of whom smoked, pulled small notepads and pencils from their packs and began to write letters home. The writing was tough since the road was so bumpy, but they both managed to finish before they reached their destination.

When the convoy of trucks came to a halt, everyone disembarked. The soldiers fell into formation in a light drizzle which had begun about an hour earlier. They were told that they would be broken into squads of 10 and that each squad would then be taken to a different location in the swamp. Their objective would be to return to the barracks by 1600 hours the following afternoon. As an added incentive, the first squad to return to the barracks with a captured prisoner by 1600 hours would earn a weekend pass off the base. With that announcement, the soldiers gave an excited, "Oooooooh," but remained at attention. Any soldier who was caught would spend the remaining six weeks of basic training on KP duty during his "free" time. Once again the soldiers gave

out an, "Ooooooooooh." But this time the disgust was evident in their voices.

Unbeknownst to the soldiers who'd ridden in canvas-covered trucks for three hours, they were actually only five miles from the barracks. The long ride had taken dozens of turns and had lasted three hours merely to give them the impression that they were farther away than they actually were.

Each squad selected a squad leader from among themselves who was given a pack of supplies. They were also accompanied by a corporal who was merely to observe the exercise, not to participate in any way. His only contribution could be to discipline soldiers who broke rules or refused to obey orders. The corporals knew their location, but could not divulge that information.

The pack contained, a compass, a flashlight, some rope, and a few waterproof matches, and enough rations for each soldier to have only one meal.

When the first squad was formed, it contained Austin, Will, Private Digger, and seven others. After a few minutes of discussion, it was decided that Austin would be the squad leader. Sticking to his philosophy of blending in and not doing anything to get himself noticed, he tried to decline the position, but everyone insisted, and he finally relented.

"First Platoon, First Squad...mount up!" Corporal Miller yelled. They climbed back aboard a truck and were taken deeper into the swamp. The place where they were dropped off had a narrow road, barely wide enough to accommodate the truck. It was surrounded on both sides by cypress and oak trees standing in deep water. A slimy green film covered the water making it impossible to see just how deep the water actually was or what might be lurking beneath the surface. The squad alit from the truck and the

driver sped away, leaving the 11 men standing on the road.

Private Digger was the first to speak, "Well, Web, what do we do now?" Austin had become known as "Web," short for Webster, to his fellow soldiers.

Austin looked into the pack, looked at his watch, thought for a moment, then gazed out into the swamp. "I reckon the first thing we should do is try to figure out where we are. Any ideas?"

No one spoke.

Looking into the sky, he said, "There's no sun today so we can't use that to tell us where west is."

Another private said, "I think we oughta head back down the road the way we came. At least we know we came from that way." He pointed down the road.

"No, I don't think that's such a good idea," Austin replied.

"Why not?"

"Surely this whole thing wouldn't be so easy that we could just walk down the road all the way to camp." Looking again at his watch he said, "It's 1100 hours. That leaves us 19 hours to get back to the barracks. We rode around for three hours. Will, didn't you say you overheard at chow one day that the speed limit on the whole base 40 miles an hour?"

"That's right," Will replied.

Silently calculating in his head, Austin looked into the sky as if he could actually see the numbers. "Three hours worth of ridin' would put us 120 miles away. Heck, the whole base ain't that big! Shoot, even if we only went 20 miles an hour, that'd put us 60 miles away. There's no way we could hike that far through a swamp in less than a day.

Fellas, I think they just rode us around in circles. I bet we're no more than three or four hours as the crow flies from the barracks. But hikin' through this swamp's gonna make it take all day."

"Well, that's all fine and dandy, Web. But we still don't know which direction to go. What do you suggest we do?" Digger said in a somewhat sarcastic and irritated voice.

Thinking aloud, Austin pointed to his left and said, "The road's too obvious. That rules out one direction." He paused to think silently. "We're the first group they dropped off. I'm figurin' that probably means we're either the closest to or farthest from the barracks. Somethin' tells me we're the farthest so we'd better get movin'."

Austin looked at the soldiers who comprised his platoon. "How many of y'all are from the city?" Five raised their hand.

"Any of you boys ever hike through a swamp?" he asked. All five shook their head.

"I'm afraid that's gonna slow us down." Sensing their apprehension at getting into the water, Austin said, "But Will and I used to wade through this stuff all the time when we was coon huntin' back home. Heck, there's nothin' to it. Yer feet'll feel heavy once yer shoes get good-n-wet, but you'll get the hang of it. Let's get a move on."

Suddenly, Digger said loudly, "I aint goin' in there. I don't look to be supper for no alligator today, boys."

Will spoke up, "Digger, you can stay here if you want to, or you can go down the road and get yerself caught. But I'm stickin' with him," he said, pointing to Austin.

"We're with you, Web. Let's go," the rest of the squad agreed.

Nine privates and the corporal waded into the swamp. By the time they were up to their armpits in green muck, Digger was bringing up the rear. The men held their rifles above their heads to prevent water from getting into them. The water did, however, soak into their uniforms, shoes, and packs, making them painfully heavy.

The sounds of the swamp spooked several of the men, the ones who were “city boys.” The wind whistled through the cypress trees, hawks were screeching, crickets were chirping, and an occasional broken tree limb would hit the water, keeping them on edge. The first few times time a frog croaked, one of them would yell, “Gator!” and start trying to run.

Just before dark, the squad emerged from the swamp into a large thicket. The sky was now clear and a few stars were visible. A crescent moon lit the swamp and cast a pale white glow on the water below. The men were anxious to get a fire started so that they could warm up and dry their sopping wet clothes. When Austin refused to give up the matches, many of the men were angry. He explained, however, that in war games surely there must be an enemy. That enemy would easily be able to see the light given off by the flames, as well as the white smoke plume which would be visible against the dark moonlit backdrop of the sky. Reluctantly, everyone agreed. Digger was given the first watch so that the others could get some sleep. After wading through the swamp all day, the sounds that surrounded them were ignored.

“Web! Wake up! Wake up!” Digger said as he nudged Austin from his slumber. Austin and Will were sleeping back-to-back with their elbows resting on their knees.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Austin replied. The sound of his voice startled Will, and he instinctively lifted the rifle he held between his legs.

“I hear something, but I can’t make out what it is,” Digger said. The three turned their heads so that one ear was in the direction of an odd, scratchy sound. At first, they thought it may have been an injured animal crying for help.

Austin stood and said, “That’s a voice, a human voice.” Pointing toward a group of tall trees in the distance, he said, “Look! There’s smoke. Somebody’s got ‘em a fire goin’.”

“Why don’t we go see what’s goin’ on?” Will said.

Austin thought for a moment, trying to decide if he should wake the others or if they should venture out on their own. He played the orders over in his head:

“The first squad to return to the barracks within 24 hours would be declared the winner. Any soldier who was caught would spend the remaining six weeks of basic training on KP duty. ”

Austin turned to Will and said, “All we need is one prisoner, right? Whoever’s makin’ that noise is either bein’ used as bait to catch somebody else, or he just don’t care if he gets caught. I think it’d be best if just the three of us went.” Turning to Digger, he said, “Wake somebody and put ‘em on guard duty, but don’t tell ‘em what we’re doin’.” Without hesitation, Digger followed the order.

When the guard was posted and given the password, the three soldiers silently slipped away. They crouched single-file through the swamp. The further they walked, the louder the sound became. Within minutes, Will whispered, “I don’t believe what I’m hearin’. Will, you hear that?” Austin turned his head so that his left ear was toward the sound. Will continued, “That fool’s sayin’ The Three Little Bears! Why would anybody be sittin’ in a swamp in the middle of the night sayin’ The Three Little Bears?”

“...and this porridge is toooooo cold...”

“I don’t know,” Austin whispered back, “but whatever the reason, he’s all but got himself caught.” The three emerged from the swamp onto the same road they’d been on the day before. As soon as they reached the bank, they saw the flames of a fire. Though it was a small fire, its flames were large enough to cast a shadow upon a tree limb 10 feet directly above it. On the limb sat a soldier whose voice was extremely hoarse. His face was red and he strained to speak. He’d been screaming the story of The Three Little Bears over and over for several hours. As the three soldiers hiding beside the road would find out later, he’d set the fire while the rest of the squad slept. They had not posted a guard so no one was aware of the fire until the corporal awoke to pee. So, as punishment for potentially giving away their position, he was ordered by the corporal to scale the tree, and bark the story as loudly as he could until someone captured him. The rest of his squad moved on to another part of the swamp without him.

Austin picked up a rock and threw it in the direction of the tree. Startled by the sound, the soldier stopped in mid-sentence, “...and this bed was just right, so she...”

Seeing that there was no other movement, the three moved in for the capture. They crouched as they ran, still uncertain if anyone else was around. They stopped once more, a few yards from the tree. The soldier on the limb resumed his story, fearing that the corporal who’d banished him may have returned. Still unnoticed, Will scurried forward on his belly. He noticed that there were many boot prints in the sand. He froze, thinking that he may be in a trap. His eyes cut from side to side. He noticed that a trail led away from the tree, and that there were two rows of evenly spaced boot prints, a sure sign that the squad had marched away in formation. He stood at the base of the tree,

lifted his rifle - which was empty, as was every soldier's – and said in calm voice, "Don't move."

The soldier in the tree said, "Thank God, somebody found me. I thought I was gonna have to spend the rest of my life in this doggone tree."

"Are you alone?" Will asked.

"You bet," he replied as he hopped out of the tree. "Been that way for hours."

"Where's your squad?"

"They left me here. Said I was gonna get 'em all caught so the corporal ordered me to climb this here tree and yell all night 'til somebody found me. Said I deserved to get caught and have six weeks of KP for settin' that fire and probably givin' away our position."

Austin ordered the prisoner to collect his belongings and douse the fire. The four of them hiked back for the camp as the sun was just beginning to rise. Upon reaching the camp, they were greeted by the sentry who said, "Halt! Who goes there?"

"It's Web," Austin replied.

"What's the password?"

"Greta Garbo."

Upon receiving the password, the sentry motioned his three men comrades and their prisoner into camp.

"Everybody up-n-at-em!" Will barked. A couple of the pairs who'd been sleeping back-to-back had fallen over during the night. They awoke to a cast of dried mud covering one side of their face. The others stood, stretched, and yawned. "We got us a prisoner, boys" Will continued. "The hard part's been done. Now let's figure out a way

to get back to the barracks in the next 10 hours.”

As the rising sun began to cast long shadows on the ground, Austin realized that they were being shown the way home. “City boys, where are the city boys?” he asked in a loud voice.

The five came running forward, saluted, and, out of habit, yelled, “Yes, sir!”

“At ease, boys. We’re all the same here,” Austin replied as he returned their salutes. “Any of you fellas from this part of the country?”

“I am,” one soldier said with a heavy accent.

“Where ya from?” Austin asked.

“Brooklyn, New York.”

“Do you know anything about the land around this part of Jersey?”

“A little. I know we’re south of Trenton – probably about 20 miles.”

Still listening, Austin made his way toward a small, straight creek that was on the opposite side of the thicket from the swamp. “Keep going,” he said. “Are there any cities due east of the base?”

“Silverton’s about 50 miles, I think,” he replied.

“Good,” Austin said. “What else?”

“The Pine Barrens are south of the base. But since none of these trees are pines, I don’t think we’re south.”

“What about west. Can we be on the western side of the base?”

“I don’t think so. If I remember right, there are some small towns near the west side – Lewistown, Jobstown.”

“That’s right!” another soldier interrupted. “I came through Lewistown on the

bus the morning we got here.”

“Well then,” Austin said, scratching his chin, “Sounds to me like our best bet is that we’re somewhere east of the barracks.” Pointing into the bright sunrise, he said, “If the sun’s over there, that’s the way we need to go.” He pointed toward the west. “Let’s go.”

At 1500 hours, First Platoon, First Squad emerged from the swamp. They’d followed the sound of automobiles on the highway for some time. Wary of being seen and captured, however, they were reluctant to walk along the road for a great distance. They walked through the brush along side the highway until they came to a road sign with the outline of the state of New Jersey and “545” on it. Just beneath the sign was a smaller one which read “North.”

The soldier from Brooklyn began to jump up and down and yell with excitement, for he knew that they need only follow the road straight into the fort. “Let’s go everybody! This is the way!” he screamed.

“Hang on, there, Brooklyn,” Austin said slyly as he spied the ground. “Somethin’s not right here. Will, what do you see?”

Will walked over to the sign post to see fresh dirt lying all around its base. He then walked across the road to another post with similar signs. “Dern if someboby ain’t switched these here posts! Somebody’s tryin’ to trick us!”

Austin stood silently for a few moments, trying to reason as a drill instructor might. In his mind, he put himself in the place of a trainer. He asked himself how he might fool a bunch of raw recruits into going the wrong way. Finally, he said, “Fellas, I

think we need to go that way.”

Brooklyn spoke up and said, “Web, haven’t you been listening? They switched the signs on us. If we go your way, we’ll be going south. The base is the other way.”

“I know they switched the signs, but I just have a feeling they dug up the posts and put ‘em right back in the same holes. Surely, they’d suspect at least one group would stumble on this and figure out they were switched. Look at all these footprints around here. They all lead off toward that way,” he said as he pointed south. “Those have to be from other squads ‘cause all the sarges have jeeps. Why would they be walking? I betcha another squad got here ahead of us and went the wrong way.”

Brooklyn and the others paused in silent thought. Their eyes looked the situation over, then someone blurted, “Take us home, Web!”

The rest of the soldiers gave a cheer as they held their rifles in the air. Only the prisoner stood quietly with a puzzled look on his face.

“First Squad, Attention!” Austin bellowed. “Quick time, march!” The soldiers fell into pairs as they jogged along the side of the road. No cadence was chanted for fear of attracting unwanted attention. Each man peered to the left and right to spot the enemy.

Promptly at 1545 hours First Squad, First Platoon marched triumphantly onto the yard of the barracks. Dumbfounded sergeants returned their salutes. “Private, how did you men make it back to my barracks so quickly?” Sergeant Love yelled as loudly as he could while standing nose to nose with Brooklyn.

“Sir, we traversed the swamp and followed the highway, sir!”

“Do you have a prisoner, private?”

“Yes, sir!” Brooklyn replied, as he nudged the captive forward.

Sergeant Love turned and stood motionless. The longer he stood, the more nervous First Platoon became, thinking they’d somehow done something wrong and were about to be punished. “Who is the leader of this squad?” he bellowed as he turned to face the frightened group.

Austin hesitated to answer, as he knew singling oneself from the group often led to swift and harsh punishment. He swallowed and said “I am, sir! “Private Web!”

The sergeant raised his chin, wheeled to his left, took four paces, and wheeled to his right so that he was face to face with Austin. In his frighteningly calm, almost sweet voice, the sergeant said, “Tell me, Private Web, how did you manage to lead this squad back to my barracks?”

Austin recounted the entire story as the sergeants gathered around and listened. When the story was complete, Sergeant Love did an about face, took three paces forward, and did another about face. “First Platoon, First Squad, I must inform you that you are the first squad to return to my barracks during this exercise. Not only are you the first to return today, you are the only squad that has returned within the allotted time in my fifteen years as a drill sergeant. As such, you most decidedly have earned a 48-hour pass off my base. Fall out to the showers, get cleaned up, and be back in formation in one hour. Turning toward another sergeant, he said, “Take the prisoner to the Mess!” Turning back to the squad, he yelled, “Dismissed!”

Exactly one hour later, the men were boarding a truck to be taken off the base. The ride was similar to the one they had taken only a day before, only this time the side flaps of the truck had been rolled up and tied back and they could see where they

would be headed. As they began the ride, one of the men jokingly said, "I sure hope they aren't taking us back into that swamp again." A chorus of "boos" followed amidst the many conversations.

Just before they reached the south gate which separated the town from the base, The driver honked the horn and pointed to his left as he laughed. Sitting on the side of the road were 20 other soldiers, all tired and filthy. They'd found the road sign, too. But, to their dismay, they followed the north sign south.

The men of First Platoon, First Squad had the time of their lives during their two-day break from the rigors of training. Several got drunk and forgot the whole weekend. A few, however, namely Austin, Will, and Digger, used the first day as an opportunity to check into a local inn and catch up on some much needed sleep. That night, they took in a movie, *Fantasia*. Neither Austin nor Will had ever been to movie. They'd heard of Mickey Mouse, but had never seen him.

At 1700 hours the following day, the men once again boarded the same truck to head back to the base. The truck was alive with the chatter of the tales that each man had experienced. Several sat quietly with their heads leaning on the shoulders of others, obviously feeling the effects of their hangovers. Just before they reached the gate, one of the men lurched forward and threw up on the side of the truck. Brooklyn pulled his head back in the truck and was immediately the target of another vomit projectile, which hit him squarely in the face. He could only be thankful that he had time to close his mouth.

When the truck pulled up in front of the barracks, the rest of the platoon (with the exception of the prisoner, Private Tater-Peeler) was standing at attention. The squad disembarked and took their places in formation. "First Platoon, immediately following

chow you will fall out to the obstacle course,” sergeant Love shouted. “First Squad, get out of those civilian clothes, and wear what real men wear, understood?”

“Yes, sir!” the platoon chorused in unison. This marked the first time the sergeant had referred to any of the recruits as men rather than ladies, and they felt a sense of accomplishment and pride for the honor that had been bestowed upon them by their hardened leader.

First Platoon reached the obstacle course just after dusk. The course, once an imposing impediment, was now merely just another hindrance that was to be conquered in a shorter amount of time each time it was encountered. But this run was to be different than the others. They had not yet run the course in the dark. Knowing that they were only a few days from graduation, a sense of invincibility kept the soldiers from feeling any fear.

Instinctively, the men paired up as they had always done before. Austin and Will stood fourth in line, awaiting the order to proceed. They envisioned what was before them in the dim, cloud-covered moonlight. Shouts and cheers filled the air as the men encouraged one another. They had truly become a cohesive team.

“Move out!” The order was given and Austin and Will sprang forward toward the barbed wire which they could now swiftly and almost effortlessly crawl under. They emerged without a shred of clothing having been ripped by the razor sharp wire. When they reached the water pit, they simultaneously jumped into the air and grabbed the ropes which would see them safely across. They landed in accord and without breaking their strides proceeded down the barely-visible path to the cargo net. As usual, they had to wait at the bottom of the cargo net since it was an obstacle which took much

longer than the others. A sergeant was stationed at the top of the 30-foot net, and when one group had successfully made it over the top and was beginning its descent, he would call down for the next pair.

“Next!”

Austin and Will, who’d climbed trees and ropes their whole lives were very adept at the cargo net, and they scaled it with ease. Austin was the first to reach the top and, as he liked to do, rather than climb back down, he would jump and land in the soft sand. This time, however, was different. One of the soldiers in the previous group had gotten one foot entangled in the bottom of the net. He lay on his back with one leg extended and the other with his knee up. When Austin plummeted from 30 feet above, he straddled the soldier’s knee which was driven hard into his groin.

Try as he might, Austin could not make even the slightest sound. He could only hold his groin and fall to the side. Will knew when he reached ground that something was wrong. He grabbed Austin’s arm, pulled him out of the pit, and yelled for a medic. Austin lay on the ground with his knees pulled to his chest and his hands between his legs. When a sound finally escaped his lips, it was only a hollow moan. Though he could not express it in words, he was glad to have Will at his side.

A stretcher was brought by jeep to carry Austin to the infirmary. The medics, however, would not allow Will to accompany him, and they had to forcibly remove him from the jeep. As the jeep pulled off into the darkness, Austin’s eyes were fixed upon his friend. The last sound he remembered hearing was that of Will shouting, “I’ll be there for you, buddy! I won’t leave you!”

The next morning, Austin awoke to see Will standing over him. “Hey, buddy. I

saw the Doc outside and he says you're gonna make it. Isn't that great news?" Will said.

Austin tried to reply, but the pain seemed to extend from his groin through his stomach, all the way into his throat. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but Will told him not to try to speak.

The doctor, a gray-haired middle-aged gentleman, entered the room with a stethoscope around his neck and wearing a white frock. He carried a clipboard in his right hand which he read as walked past Will, seemingly without noticing him.

"Private Webster," he said as he continued looking at the clipboard, "How are we feeling today?"

Unable to answer, Austin looked at Will with pining eyes. "Doc, can't ya see it hurts him to talk?" Will said.

"Hogwash!" the doctor muttered. Harshly, he said to Austin, "Look at me, boy! I'm still a captain in this Army. I asked you 'How are we feeling today?'"

Austin took in a deep breath. The expansion of his chest sent sharp pains throughout his entire body. Meekly, he whispered, "We hurt...real bad."

"Well, that's to be expected," the doctor said without any apparent concern. "We worked on you most of the night. One of your testicles has been completely crushed, and we had to take it."

Will cringed as he imagined the pain, both physical and emotional, that Austin must feel.

The doctor continued flippantly, "But, that's why the good Lord gives us two, I suppose. The other one has significant damage, too, but at least you get to keep it."

Seeing the questioning look on Austin's face and, as if he could read his mind, Will asked, "What does 'significant damage' mean, Doc?"

"He'll be in here for another couple of weeks. It'll still be mighty tender down there for a while, but he'll recover."

Austin, who'd been holding his breath, sighed with relief.

"But," the doctor continued, "He'll never be able to procreate."

Again, Will could see the beleaguered look on Austin's face. "What does..."

"It means he'll never be able to have children," the doctor said, then turned and left the room. Will sat in the chair between Austin's bed and the window. The light filtering in through the blinds cast stripes on the sheets.

"I'm sorry, Austin," Will said as he looked at the floor. When he looked up, he saw a solitary tear running down Austin's cheek as he stared out the window.

That evening, the corporals and drill sergeants for First Platoon convened a meeting to discuss Private Webster's status. Much of the discussion centered on his maturity and leadership ability. The only remotely-negative comment made was in reference to his very slim stature (he weighed only 110 pounds). All else that was said made it apparent that they were all extremely pleased with his abilities. At the conclusion of the meeting, it was unanimously agreed upon that Private Webster had distinguished himself as one of the best soldiers in the platoon. And although he would have to miss the remaining days of his training, he had certainly merited participation in the graduation ceremony.

As hard as Austin had tried to make himself blend in with those around him over the previous 11 weeks, he'd quietly singled himself out as an excellent all-around soldier.

He was by far the best shot in the platoon, routinely receiving the highest marks on the rifle range. He caught on very quickly when introduced to new equipment and knew just about everything there was to know about the new M4 Sherman tank. He could drive, navigate, load the guns, and fire them with precision.

The new state-of-the-art tanks were much faster and more maneuverable than their predecessor, the M3. They also had a much faster rate of fire. These tanks were not, however, without their weaknesses. In focusing upon speed, the designers were forced to use armor that was not as thick as desired, and its 75-millimeter main gun was small in comparison to German Panzers. This made the tank lighter, but vulnerable against tanks with larger guns. Its top speed was 25 to 30 miles per hour, but that certainly was not fast enough to outrun enemy shells.

Nearly two weeks had passed since the accident. Rugged and hardened Sergeant Love, the most feared and respected of all the Fort Dix drill instructors, slowly peered his eyes around the corner of Austin's slightly ajar infirmary room door. The stiff brim of his hat made a faint scraping noise as it ran along the door frame. Austin lay awake, looking out the window. Sergeant Love slowly pulled his head back outside the room, pulled on the hem of his dress green coat, ran his right index finger and thumb along the perimeter of the brim, snapped his heels together, and paced into the room. Jokingly, he said, "Lie at attention, Private," and let out a chuckle. Startled more by the chuckle than the order, he instinctively raised his right hand to his forehead. "At ease, soldier. I was only kidding." Austin looked at the sergeant who had a sheepish grin on his face.

"Permission to speak, Sergeant?" Austin asked as he lowered his arm.

"Speak freely, Webster," the sergeant replied in a lilting, soothing tone. His

normally brash and gruff voice sounded like the wind as it rustled the tops of the tall South Georgia pines. He placed his rough, calloused hand on Austin's forearm.

"Sir, I know I've missed graduation today. Does that mean I'll be sent back home? If the Army will let me, I'd like to go back through basic training so I can finish what I started. I need to stay in the Army." Austin's thoughts trailed to his family who were far from prosperous, but at least they were secure with the money he'd been sending home each month.

"No, Webster, that Army won't let you do that." As he paused, the sergeant could see the worry lines appear on Austin's forehead. "And there's no need. A few days ago we recommended to the base commander that you graduate with the rest of your platoon." Pulling out a patch, a set of stripes, and a piece of paper, he placed them on the bed, stepped back, pivoted around, placed his cupped fists on the stripe of his pants, and left the room with textbook roll steps, heel-to-toe, heel-to-toe...

Austin ran his fingers over the stripes and picked up the triangular patch. It was divided into three equal-sized sections. The top section was yellow and had a black 2 embroidered in the center of the field. The bottom right section was red and the bottom left was blue. The center of the patch held a cannon and tank track. Emblazoned across the cannon and track was a red lightning bolt. Austin felt the stiff newness of the patch and recalled times when his mother had sewn patches onto his shirts or pants. A small grin made its way to his face. He unfolded the piece of paper and read

PFC Webster,

It is my honor this day to inform you that you have completed all requirements of basic training at Fort Dix, NJ. I speak on behalf of all

the leaders of this platoon when I say we are inspired by your courage and determination. Your leadership abilities will be a tremendous asset to the United States Army.

Wear the patch you have earned with honor. Each part of it has a symbolic meaning. Its three torques are red, yellow, and blue. Red is for Artillery, blue is for Infantry, and yellow is for Cavalry. The 2 notes that you are a member of the 2d Armored Division. The tank track represents mobility and armored protection. The cannon stands for fire power. The lightning bolt is for shock power.

Upon your release from this infirmary in three days, you will take a two week furlough after which you will report for duty at Fort Benning, Georgia. You are now a Tank Commander in the Second Armored Division of the United States Army. Use your skills well, and make us proud. Give 'em hell, Armor!

- Sergeant James Love

United States Army

Austin carefully folded the letter and placed it on the table next to the bed. He kept his PFC stripes and patch in his hand and leaned back on the pillows that were up against the iron headboard. He realized then that the constant dull ache he'd felt in groin and abdomen for the last 12 days had subsided. He let out a deep sigh, closed his eyes, and said a prayer of thanks.

Three days later, with his duffle bag over his shoulder, he left the infirmary. Though eager to get home, he did not walk directly to the bus station. Instead, he went to

the public library in town. He spoke to the librarian briefly and was taken to the reference section. As he walked down the aisle, he turned the upper half of his body sideways so that he could read the book titles. He winced slightly as he stretched the still-tender muscles in his lower abdomen. When he came upon the book he was searching for, he pulled it from the shelf and went to the nearest table. The musky smell of the pages reminded him of the old books he used to read in the one room schoolhouse. It seemed so very long ago. In the table of contents he spotted the page he was looking for. He flipped pages until he came to pages 68 and 69. It was a map of the southeastern United States. He ran his finger along the words on the side of the page until he came to Ft. Benning, E1. He ran his left index finger along the top of the map until he came to the 1. Then he brought his finger down the map until he reached line indicating the E. At that point, he saw a large green section near the city of Columbus, GA. It read Ft. Benning.

Austin then looked for the city of Pavo, but it was not listed. He attributed its lack of inclusion on the map to its tiny size. So he decided to look for Thomasville instead. He found it to be at G2. Employing the map reading skills he'd recently acquired, he used the scale to determine that his home was approximately 140 miles. Calculating quickly in his head, he determined that the driving time at a leisurely 50 miles per hours would be two-and-a-half to three hours.

He returned the book to the shelf, thanked the librarian once again for her assistance, and headed for the bus station. He looked forward to seeing his family, and was pleased to know that he would be stationed only a couple of hours away from home. Or so he thought.

Interlude – Government Issue

All three gentlemen learned very quickly that from the time they stepped off the train for basic training the Uncle Sam owned them and was in complete charge of their bodies. Their experiences, however, were decidedly different.

Cranman

After being bused to the base, I was herded through various stations to receive clothing and supplies. I then stood naked for hours as I was poked, bent over, turned around, and stuck with needles. To ensure that the Army was not getting short-changed, every inch of me and several thousand other young men was thoroughly examined. I was classified for bombardier school and began the long training process. As class work began to give way to more hands-on activities, I began to gain more and more interest and excel. I have always preferred learning by doing and this was what advance training was all about. Our work day lasted about 14 hours, starting at 5:00A.M., and it became longer when we were doing our nighttime bomb drops which got us in bed well after 11:00P.M.

Baylor

Basic training was very interesting to me because, as I mentioned earlier, I did not get to travel much as a youngster. Still, from the earliest times in my youth, I have always had a fascination and love for nature, but particularly animal life, and even more particularly, reptiles and birds. So while I was in school I could only read about them, but going to a different part of the world was an eye opener for me because I was now able to identify the reptiles and birds I saw because I had already studied them in books. I actually got to see them and feel them so I really enjoyed my basic training, although it

was hard because in just thirteen weeks they put a man or boy in an intensive training because, as you would expect, you had to learn all the wiles you could muster just to stay alive in war. So it was pretty intense and quick as I remember, but I dearly loved the nature that surrounded me in the South. I think I may have surprised a sergeant or two with my knowledge of what was around me.

Waldrop

My basic training took place in Jeffersonburg, Missouri. It's kind of hard to believe, but I never once fired a rifle and I never once marched. I volunteered for aerial gunnery school and was shipped right out to Las Vegas, Nevada, without ever really breaking a sweat. It was pretty uneventful as far as I can remember. The highlight of the whole thing for me was when our troop train was going from Missouri to Las Vegas we were in a wreck with a freight train. Nobody was hurt as far as I know, thank goodness, but that sure was exciting for a 19-year old kid. Once we got to Las Vegas, and I hesitate to tell this to Marines, at least former Marines, we had the attraction of volunteering for gunnery school where we would actually get hazardous duty pay and a sergeant's rank and our crew member wings in just five weeks. Marines don't like to hear that. Our training was so accelerated that it was ridiculous. All the government wanted to do was get us trained as fast as possible and get us over to England. From Las Vegas, I went to Denver, Colorado, for heavy bombardment training. I stayed there just a few more weeks and was classified as an armor waist gunner. Looking back on it, I didn't really know a damn thing, but I thought I did. I found out much later that what we did in about eight weeks should have really taken about six months. But since we didn't know that at the time we thought we were ready. We just wanted to get into the action and do our part

for our country.

Due to the urgency associated with fighting a war on two fronts, all GIs who joined or were drafted into the military after 1941 were placed on greatly accelerated tracks through basic training. Both Mr. Cranman and Mr. Baylor, who were part of the Army Air Corps, breezed through basic training in a fraction of the time a man who joined the military a couple of years earlier would have. Only Mr. Baylor, an infantryman, experienced the representative boot camp-style basic training that has become the norm. But even his experience was far from typical. As he spoke to me of lizards and birds rather than of rifles and hand grenades, I found myself somewhat perplexed. Here was a man who in just a few weeks would be in the thick of a global war and here he was telling me how much he admired the scenery around him. From others I have spoken to throughout the years, basic training does not allow one much free time, so for him to have taken the time to notice such things amidst all that was going on around him is truly astounding. As I was listening to him I found myself imagining him on some ridge or hillside with shells exploding all around him while he set down his rifle to pick up a little lizard to admire its markings. I doubt that that ever happened but I wondered how his buddies in the heat of battle might have reacted had it transpired that way.

Interestingly, the air of invincibility Mr. Waldrop exuded as he discussed his high school days had dropped somewhat as he talked about basic training. He admitted that he did not know nearly what he should have known as he was going into battle. Surely, being rushed through the training had to weigh heavily on his mind the first time the engines on his plane revved up for a bomb drop somewhere over continental Europe.

(For Love)...and Money

When the Greyhound bus pulled into the Pavo bus station at 9:30A.M, no one was there to greet Austin. He'd written his mother a few days earlier, but he thought perhaps the mail had, for some reason, been delayed. And although he was somewhat disappointed, he reasoned in his mind that it would be even better this way – now he could walk in the front door and surprise everyone.

When he reached the winding dirt lane that led to his home, Austin stopped and sniffed as deeply as he could. 'Nothing smells as good as home,' he thought to himself. He looked down at his spit-shined patent leather dress shoes, and they were caked with dust. For a brief instance, he thought he may get in trouble for being "out of uniform." Repeatedly, the sergeants had told the recruits that, if any part of their uniform was in disarray, they were considered to be out of uniform, and would be severely reprimanded. Any soldier foolish enough to be seen with dirty shoes deserved to be punished. But, remembering where he now was, he deemed it safe to walk to the front porch then wipe the dust from his shoes.

He quietly approached the house, all the while looking to the left and right to spy Jeremiah, Daniel, or Caroline playing on this crisp, cloudless day. As his eyes cut left, then right, he found himself crouched over a little, as if he were stalking an unknown enemy. He smiled as he recalled having the same feeling while he trudged through the swamp a couple of months earlier. He straightened his back, ensured that his hat was on straight, and stepped onto the rickety wooden porch. The first step creaked as he shifted his weight, but it didn't buckle.

He pulled a clean, white handkerchief from his duffle bag, folded it in half, and

wiped the dust away from his shoes. He then folded it again, and spit on the toe of his left shoe, which was resting on a rocking chair which had only one rocker in tact. He shined the left shoe to a high gloss, and repeated the procedure for the right shoe. When he was satisfied with his appearance, he stood tall and knocked on the door. Silence. He knocked again. Silence. He began to play the days of the week in his mind to ensure that today was not a Sunday, when everyone would be at church. He looked up, pursed his lips, and remembered that it was, in fact, a Saturday. Everyone should be home today, he thought. He walked inside the house, and saw that everything was exactly as he remembered it. No furniture had been moved, which was no big surprise since everything had been stationary for as long as he could remember. This gave him a comforting sense of sturdiness, as if some things would be the same forever.

He stood alone in the center of the room. From behind the quilt-covered couch popped little Caroline with a loud “Surprise!” On her cue, dozens of people emerged from every room in the house. He was instantaneously swarmed with hugs and kisses. His mother flung her arms around his neck and refused to let go. Anyone else who wanted a hug would just have to work around her.

When all the hugging and kissing had subsided, a gray figure moved from within a shadow. Without seeing the face, Austin knew right away who it was – Will. Austin extended his hand for a handshake at the same time Will saluted. When Will lowered his hand to shake, Austin raised his to salute. Shake, salute, shake, salute. This continued until both of them burst into laughter and patted each other on the back as they shared a long embrace. The others began to mingle among themselves.

“I see you’re no worse for wear. Ya shore do look a whole lot better than the last

time I saw ya,” Will said.

“Yeah, I think I’ll make it. Still a little sore from time to time,” Austin replied. He leaned forward to whisper in Will’s ear. “Does Mama know about my accident?”

“Yeah, she knows. But I didn’t tell her. The Army wired her the day after it happened. That’s why she was huggin’ all on ya like that. She told me that when the Western Union fella came up to the house, she just knew you’d been killed. Boy, was she relieved to know you’d be alright.”

“Does she know the consequences?”

“No, it didn’t mention anything about that. It just said you’d had a fall, and would be laid up for a few weeks.”

Sarah walked over and hugged Austin again. Jokingly, she said to Will, “You’ve had him for 13 weeks. Now it’s my turn. Shoo, fly.” She waved her hand as if she were swatting him away.

The entire day was spent eating, drinking, and listening to Will and Austin recount their adventures in basic training. The onlookers, both young and old, sat with wide eyes as they listened to the story of the swamp. The boys only slightly embellished the tale. They added a couple of extra alligators here and poisonous snakes there to make it more suspenseful. At the best parts of the story, they would pause for dramatic affect and then say something loudly as they clapped their hands or stomped the wooden floor. The small children who were unaccustomed to wild tales would bury their faces in their parents’ laps whenever the boys would imitate the booms of a tank, the swooshing of a flame thrower, or the rat-a-tat-tat of a rifle. Sarah and Emily sat with their hands cupped over their mouths and gasped at each sound of danger. The children

especially loved the tale of the mosquito. With Will's knack for stretching the truth, mosquito was as tiny as a gnat, the hole was 20-feet deep, and the soldier was digging with a spoon.

All the company left the Webster farm just before dark. No one dared think of eating an evening meal as they were still stuffed from snacking on the various covered dishes that had been available throughout the day. Austin sat on the couch and watched the flame flickering in the fireplace. He was so glad to be home. Having been kept so busy during his training, he rarely had time to realize just how much he missed it. He'd not enjoyed a single sunset, rainbow, or taken the time to savor the smell of the soil. He walked out onto the porch and gazed at the red and orange sky. The trees at the skyline were merely black silhouettes. Austin reached down, scooped up some dirt, and took in a long, deep breath. He looked back out over the unplanted fields and caught sight of something that had always been there, but he'd never really noticed – the beauty of Spanish moss hanging from the massive oaks as it formed drapes that framed the entire farm. Then he realized he even missed something as simple as moss.

Upon returning to the house he said, "Caroline, you've gotten so tall while I was gone. I bet you've grown six inches!" He placed his palm on her head and brought it to his chest. She wriggled from under his hand and giggled with delight when she saw that she was almost to his shoulder. "Why don'tcha see if ya can drag my duffle bag in here. I have some surprises for everybody." Caroline sprinted to his old room. There was a loud thump as she dragged it off the bed and began lugging it into the living room.

"Boy, this thing's heavy!" she light-heartedly complained.

"Sure is. Try carrying it all the way from New Jersey," he replied.

A long, gasping “Whoa” trailed from her mouth. She had no idea where New Jersey was, but she knew it had to be a long way.

“Mama, Jeremiah, Daniel...ya’ll come here a minute. I got some things for ya,” he said. Sarah set the dish she was rinsing in the side of the sink for clean dishes and dried her hands on the towel she kept tucked into her apron strap. Jeremiah, who’d been reading the Bible at the kitchen table, replaced his bookmark and closed the book. He stood and stumbled forward, still wobbly at times from his mishap at the creek.

With the family gathered around, there was a feeling of Christmas in the air. Austin considered teasing Caroline by making her wait to receive her gift last, but when he saw her hopping up and down with her hands clasped together at her chin he didn’t have the heart to make her wait. He handed her a box wrapped with pink paper, pink ribbon, and a pink bow. She loved pink, but there was rarely anything pink in the general store in Pavo. She took the gift in her arms and sat in the floor. She carefully worked her fingernail under each piece of tape and meticulously pulled them loose so as to not tear the paper. She would cherish the paper for years to come. When she finally lifted the lid of the box, she screamed and dropped the box. Predicting her reaction, Austin had positioned himself on the floor, and was ready to catch the box before it hit the floor.

“Be careful, sweet girl. This’ll break,” he said.

“What on earth could it be that you’d do all this nonsense?” Mama asked her. Caroline reached both hands in the box and slowly pulled out a porcelain doll. The complexion and hair color of the doll was the same as hers. She had long eyelashes just like Caroline’s, too. She was wearing a pink, wide-brimmed hat, a pink sleeveless shirt,

and pink knee-length pants. She even had pink patent leather shoes. Caroline hugged the doll gently and kissed her brother on the cheek.

“I think you missed something, Caroliner,” Austin said as he lifted the tissue in the bottom of the box. Caroline stood motionless and began to cry as she looked into the box. She reached in once again and pulled out a pink hat, pink sleeveless shirt, pink shorts, and pink patent leather shoes. She immediately began stripping down to her underwear so she could try the clothes on.

“Caroline Webster,” Sarah said as she gasped. “What if company were to show up and here you were standing just as nekkid as a jay bird? What would they think of you?”

Disregarding her mother’s scolding questions, Caroline continued getting dressed. She tried buckling the shoes, but had too much difficulty and began to get flustered. Not wanting to have the moment spoiled by a potential tantrum, Austin reached over and easily put the thin silver stem in the last hole of the strap. Caroline jumped to her feet and stood before them all with her doll in hand.

Austin looked at her and said, “My, my. I have twin sisters.”

He reached into the duffle bag again and pulled out two rectangular packages wrapped in plain brown paper. “Sorry, fellas,” Austin said jokingly to Jeremiah and Daniel as he handed him the gift. “It was either this or pink paper.”

Taking the gift, Jeremiah said as he chuckled, “Oh, brown’s just fine, little brother. Just fine.” As he opened the lid of the box he found, wrapped in white tissue, a large, thick book entitled ‘King James Concordance.’ Beside it was a small brown case which Jeremiah opened to reveal a new pair of reading spectacles.

“Thought that you might need those seeing as how you’ve answered the Call,” Austin said as he placed his hand on Jeremiah’s back.

“Yep. You’re right. I shore can use ‘em. Thank ya, little brother,” he replied.

“You just preach it like is, okay? Oh, by the way, there’s one more thing for you out on the wood pile.” Jeremiah slowly eased his way toward the back porch.

Daniel had already torn into his box to reveal a brand new ivory-handled Buck knife. By the time Austin turned to speak to him, Daniel was already on the porch in search of a piece of wood suitable for whittling.

Standing and stretching his back, Austin said, “Well, I reckon that’s about it. I think I’ll turn in now.” He slowly paced toward the bedroom door as he looked sideways at his mother. She raised one eyebrow at him, stood and clapped her hands, and said decidedly, “Alright, everybody off to bed. Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

It was amazing how Sarah could always seem to steal Austin’s thunder. Here he was trying to get the best of her, and she played along in such a way that he had to back up and rethink. He walked back to his bag, picked it up, and announced loudly, “Hey, I think there may be something else in here after all!”

“I thought you might say that,” Sarah smirked.

He pulled out another rectangular box wrapped in white paper. “I hope this ain’t another ‘conquer-dance’,” she said with a small chuckle.

“No, Mama. It ain’t,” Austin said. “Hope ya like it.”

She lifted the lid and said, “Oh my. Look what you’ve done.” She stood up and the box fell from her lap. She held a long, pale yellow sundress against her shoulders. She extended one leg forward to see that the hem fell precisely at the top of her ankles.

The collar was trimmed with intricate lace. “Son, you didn’t have to do this.”

“Oh yes I did, Mama. You deserve the best, and I’m gonna do whatever I have to do to see that you get it.” Austin bent over and picked up a pair of white leather shoes. “Size 6, right?”

Sarah took the shoes in her hand as Jeremiah was entering the room. “Hey, Ma. Lookee here what I got. A brand new pair of Brogans.” He turned toward Austin. “Thanks again, buddy.”

Suddenly the door flung open and Daniel came running wearing the new pair of Brogans Austin had left sitting on the wood pile. He knew how his brother would react to the knife.

“You’re welcome. You’re all welcome,” Austin replied as he smiled. “We ain’t never goin’ without decent shoes again, for as long as I live, Mama. I promise.”

“Well, if you don’t beat all I ever seen,” Sarah said as Jeremiah, Daniel, and Caroline joined in for a long family embrace. “Boy, if you don’t beat all.”

CHAPTER FIVE – OVERTURE FOR WAR

Prelude – Eager to Hear More

As Daddy continued his story and the noonday sun stationed itself directly overhead, I kicked off my shoes and recalled that for years I had gotten into trouble for going outside without shoes. I chuckled inside as I remembered the day Daddy almost had a veritable conniption fit when I cut one of my big toes while riding my bike barefoot. He lit into me pretty heavily and I did not understand why I got into so much trouble for what I thought was such a minor thing. It was not until this moment that I realized why he was so adamant about us wearing shoes. But I now knew that it was a luxury he did not have as a child, and he vowed as a teenager that his loved ones would not hurt their feet on the ground ever again if he could prevent it. And although I could not fully comprehend the depth of all he was telling me, I was gaining a new sense of appreciation for what he had experienced as a young boy. He could tell by the expression on my face that I was paying attention to him but, nonetheless, he again wiped his brow and continued, stating, “Son, now listen real careful to what I’m tellin’ you, okay? This is real important.”

“Yes, sir. I like hearin’ about how it was when you were a boy!” I replied, eager to hear more.

THE Day of Infamy – Georgia Style

Rumors of the war in Europe abounded everywhere in and around little Pavo – in the barber shops, sewing circles, stores, even the church. Newspapers had been reporting for weeks that the Germans were preparing to launch a full offensive in an attempt to occupy all of Europe once they’d succeeded in taking away the Brits’ will to

fight (this was true). But somewhere along the line, someone started the rumor that the United States would be sending a million soldiers to assist England in fending off Hitler's nightly aerial bombardment of London. Supposedly leading the way would be the Hell on Wheels 2nd Armored Division from nearby Fort Benning. This turned out not to be true, but it deeply worried the mothers whose sons were now Government Issue.

There were also those who speculated that the 2nd would be headed to North Africa to fight Germany's Desert Fox, Irwin Rommel. Rommel had seized all of North Africa in February 1941 with his lightning-fast Panzer tank battalions after the British had successfully driven the Italian forces from their colonies. So Rommel was sent in to seize the land lost by their Axis partner, which he did with a vengeance.

Others believed that surely the United States would not get involved in a war which in no way concerned us. Sure, Hitler was marching across Europe, but that was no reason for us to worry ourselves. After all, we'd proven in The Great War that we were a force to be reckoned with. There was no way any enemy would be foolish enough to incite us to war.

Sunday, December 7, 1941

This sun-washed, serene South Georgia Sunday morning was to be the last of its kind for many years. A few automobiles scurried along the back roads on their way to church, but they were outnumbered by the scores of people who'd chosen to walk on this unseasonably comfortable early-December day.

Sunday School and the morning worship service went on as usual at Antioch Baptist Church. There was lots of singing, preaching, and praying. Today's sermon was entitled 'His Eye is on the Sparrow.' When the services had concluded, the bells in the

church belfry rang out for two minutes as they had every Sunday morning for nearly two hundred years (there were no evening services at Antioch). The ringing of the bells was symbolic of a triumphant Savior, and they were always rung to signify the joy that comes from being a part of God's family. They were the only things loud enough to be heard by nearly everyone throughout the entire community and their deep resounding tones were always associated with Good News.

The rest of the afternoon was quiet. People in this part of the country held fast to the belief that Sunday was for rest, not work. The only person who worked on this day was the Preacher. Most folks took afternoon naps or sat out on the front porch smoking and sipping apple cider. Children played in the yard or ventured to the creek when it wasn't too cold.

South Georgia days in December are short, getting dark around 6:00P.M. Most families were at the supper table when the first hollow drones were heard.

"Mama, what's that sound?" little Caroline asked.

Sarah turned her ear to get a better listen. Her eyebrows tightened and she said, "I think it's the church bells." Austin ran to open the door. The deep, slow 'kong, kong, kong' resonated throughout the tall green pines.

"Something's gotta be wrong for them to ring the bells this late. Everybody get dressed. Be sure to wear your coat. It'll get chilly now that it's dark. Austin, you get Old Tobe hitched," Sarah said. All the children immediately left the table without a word to do as they were told.

On the way to the church, Caroline took Sarah's hand and said, "Mama, what do ya think's wrong?"

“I don’t know, baby girl, but we’ll find out soon enough.” Sarah was afraid to tell Caroline what she felt in her heart.

When the Websters reached the church, it was abuzz with chatter. Everyone seemed to be talking to one person while trying to listen to another. The Preacher entered the room soon after the Websters did.

“May I have your attention, please,” he said. “Please, if everyone could be seated. I have some important information I feel I must pass on to you.” With this, everyone found a seat in the heart pine pews and waited with anticipation.

“Just over an hour ago, I received word that the United States has been attacked in a place called Pearl Harbor,” he said. Everyone in the room inhaled and held their breath.

Where’s that, Preacher?” a voice called from the back of the room.

“That’s in Hawaii, son. The Japanese attacked our Pacific fleet and destroyed a whole bunch of our ships as they sat right there in the harbor. Word has it that over a thousand of our boys were killed as they slept. They never had a chance.”

“The Japanese?” another voiced called out. Why would they be attackin’ us? We ain’t done nothing’ to them. I thought them Krauts was the ones we was gonna go after.”

“Well, I’m afraid we’re gonna have to contend with the Germans and the Japanese now,” the Preacher continued.

The feeling Sarah had felt earlier was right. It’s war. She looked up at Austin who was already looking at her. “Mama,” he said. “You know I gotta go.”

“Yes, son, I know,” she replied, bowing her head. “But you got two more days

'til you're due back. Can'tcha stay 'til then?"

"Not with the way things are now, Mama. I better take y'all on back home now and see if I can't find a ride tonight."

"Tonight?" she asked with disappointment in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am."

As the meeting disbursed, Will walked over to the Austin and said, "Well, buddy, I reckon this is what we been a-trainin' for, ain't it?"

"I reckon," Austin whispered as he brought his index finger to his lips to indicate lowering his voice. "Do you know of any way we can get back to the base tonight?"

Will shook his head. As they stood there and pondered their options, the Preacher walked between them and placed his arms around their shoulders. Always the observant one, he said, "Looks to me like you two soldiers got yourself a problem. Benning's a mighty long walk," he said as he chuckled. He pulled them over to the side of the church and said, "Either of you boys know how to drive a car?" Will nodded. "Good," he continued. "Take my key and get on home and get your belongings. I'll see to it that your families get home."

"What about your car?" Austin asked. "How are you gonna get it from the base?"

"Don't you worry about that. I got family in Columbus. They'll take care of it until they can get it back to me."

"We sure appreciate this, Preacher," Will said, as both boys hugged him.

"Now, you fellas just go and make all us country folk back here proud, ya hear?"

"Yes, sir," they replied together.

The boys returned to their families and said teary goodbyes. As they started to walk out of the church the Preacher said, "Boys, ya'll remember the miracle that happened with Jeremiah?" He pointed to where Jeremiah was sitting, reading the Bible. They looked and nodded. "No matter what happens when you boys are fightin' in this war just remember one thing. Now listen to me and listen good." The boys leaned forward. "God makes miracles happen every day."

Interlude – Sunday Afternoon Dates

As Mr. Cranman and I talked, one thing became very apparent – his love for his wife, Helen. We had to reschedule our interview a number of times due to her failing health and her need to see her physician. On the day I walked into his home, I was touched to see that, despite noticeable frailty, she still remained in her familiar surroundings under the care of a home nurse. It was refreshing to see that although Mr. Cranman was unable to care for her as he would like to, he refused to place her in a nursing home or other long-term facility, preferring instead to allow her to live her final days in the comforts of home amongst her family.

Throughout our conversation, which took place in his study that was adorned with World War II memorabilia, Mr. Cranman referred repeatedly to the impact Helen had on him while he was imprisoned. As he and I sat on his couch, directly behind him was a picture of Helen obviously taken during the 1940s as evidenced by her hairstyle and clothing. Next to it was a caricature of Mr. Cranman in his Army Air Corps uniform drawn at one of his basic training locales. His words, combined with those pictures, transported me six decades into the past. It was quite surreal and a wave of nostalgia swept over me. Helen, fragile and weak, lay in the adjoining room, yet as he spoke of

her and of his wartime experiences, all my mind saw was the vibrant, beautiful young woman Mr. Cranman fell in love with.

Though much ambiguity surrounded their relationship during the war years, Mr. Cranman credits his love for her and the hope of once again seeing her with getting him through the horrors of POW camp life.

Cranman

[Helen and I] have known each other since kindergarten. We played together for a short period until our families moved to different areas of town, and we saw no more of each other for a few years. But I noticed her again in junior high and asked her to an afternoon dance at the school. It was the first date for each of us but, unfortunately, it did not turn out well. I guess the after-effects of it lasted for a couple of years, because we saw very little of each other until the second year of high school. Helen permanently captured my heart then, and I began pursuing her on a permanent basis. By this time, however, she was dating four or five other boys who were interested in her. But very few kids in high school went steady as they do today. Even if you liked someone in particular, you still dated outside your circle of friends. It was a good system because it gave us a much better opportunity to compare and select personalities and other traits. This was the way things were on one of the many Sunday afternoon dates that Helen and I had. It was December 7, 1941, and we sat in shocked silence as we heard on the car radio that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor.

CHAPTER SIX – WAR

Prelude – I Should Have Died

“Son, do you believe that God really makes miracles happen every day?” Daddy asked me as a gentle breeze caused the Spanish moss to dance in the trees.

“Oh, yes sir, I sure do.” I replied. “Uncle Jeremiah makin’ it through the accident at the creek sure sounded like a miracle to me. And Mom tells me that every baby that’s born is a miracle. What do you think, Daddy?”

“Oh, I have no doubt that miracles happen all the time. There were many times in the war that I should have died, and the only explanation I’ve been able to come up with is that God was lookin’ out for me.”

“You shoulda died? Whatcha mean?” I asked.

Meeting the Enemy – An Introduction

From December 1941 through November 1942, the 2nd Armored Division trained under the command of General George S. Patton. A fierce and experienced warrior from the Great War, Patton had been given the nickname “Blood and Guts” after telling his junior officers that they would soon be up to their necks in blood and guts. Throughout the year, the 2nd took part in maneuvers in North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Texas. Hell on Wheels was prepared to face the enemy head on.

In November 1942, the order was given for the 2nd Armored Division to deploy. Their time had come and they were finally going to war. Many were eager to get into battle while others were less than excited. Newsreels and newspapers had painted a bleak outlook. Hitler’s blitzkrieg tactics of warfare had ensured that all of Europe, with

the exception of England, was essentially under his thumb. Nearly all of Northern Africa had been taken back under Rommel, allowing the Germans to control the Strait of Gibraltar, the narrow passage between Spain and Africa. This meant that Hitler, along with Italy's Benito Mussolini, now ruled all of the Mediterranean.

Interlude – The Media War

Wars are not fought with guns alone; they are also fought with information - Anonymous

News in the Deep South during the war years traveled painfully slow in comparison to other regions of the country. But even in major cities, news was rarely up-to-the-minute, as it had to make its way through various government censors which fell under the control of the newly-created Office of Censorship. Fashioned by Executive Order on December 19, 1941, the Office of Censorship was responsible for “censoring communications between the United States and foreign countries by mail, cable, radio, and other means” (Wagner, Osborne, & Reyburn, 2007, p. 214). “Other means,” in this instance, included information that Americans might receive via newspaper, magazine, newsreel, and film.

The world learned quickly and painfully how powerful the media can be in time of war when, on September 1, 1939, German newspapers ran front-page stories announcing that Polish volunteers had attacked a German transmitter. An attack did, indeed, take place, but it was German Secret Service dressed in Polish uniforms who carried it out. The Germans then announced over the transmitter that the Poles were on the verge of taking over the station. In retaliation, German infantry then invaded Poland to protect itself against such acts of terrorism, and a world war had begun (Wagner, Osborne, & Reyburn, 2007). This “black propaganda” - the intentional deceiving of its

intended audience - became a hallmark of the Axis during the war, and though it had been used by tyrants and conspirators for centuries, the new twentieth century technologies made it much easier and faster to disseminate.

As powerful as radio and print media were in the 1940s, they were not alone in their influence upon those on the battlefield and those waiting for them at home. Though film had been in existence for decades, World War II brought it into a new realm. As with radio, both the Allies and the Axis realized film's importance to winning the war, and went to extraordinary lengths to exploit its potential. Although the United States had formed the Office of War Information (OWI) to effectively putting Hollywood at the government's disposal early in the war, it was the Nazis who were the first to use its power and appeal to their advantage. Hitler and Goebbels, both well versed in film's power, were prepared to use it as a cultural means to their deceitful ends. "It is true that Hitler was a lover and manipulator of films...and all forms of popular media, especially radio, were used to sustain Nazi power in Europe. Fascism is the use of popular culture to glorify the state and its leaders" (Weaver, 2005, pp. 27-28). Reverberating this suggestion is McCarthy, who states that "Power exercised in culture takes devious routes" (McCarthy, 1998, p. 8). Mr. Cranman echoes these sentiments, exclaiming that "The world has always had bad guys to contend with, but great strides made in the fields of communication and transportation have provided the bad guys with the means to emerge from their isolated backyards into world prominence. It gave them the means to cause substantially more mischief."

The Germans had been using film to water the seeds of the impending fascist regime for many years prior to World War II. Siegfried Kracauer, who was amongst the

faculty of the Frankfurt School before being exiled from Germany, “believed that post-World War I films captured the anxieties that Germans harbored all through the Weimar period...These anxieties and the inability to act on them were two of the reasons why democratic roots never developed in Weimar Germany and why Hitler was able to gain power in 1933” (Weaver, 2005, pp. 53-54). In fact, according to Braverman (1996), the Nazis felt film to be so critical to their war effort that they assigned a cinematographer to every combat regiment for the purpose of showing the Motherland how dominant her sons were on the battlefield.

Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hollywood – although tentative at the notion of sacrificing profit for propaganda – slowly warmed to the idea of using film as a medium for fighting the war. “Pearl Harbor forced [President] Roosevelt to deal forthrightly with the propaganda situation...Motion pictures could be one of the most effective tools in ‘informing’ the public, FDR’s executive order read” (Koppes & Black, 1987, p. 56). The government needed Hollywood, but too much propaganda could wreck the movies’ entertainment appeal – the very thing that made the studios attractive to the propagandists” (Koppes & Black, 1987, pp. 57-58). Echoing these sentiments, Braverman states, “[H]ome front circumstances presented another element of the media – the film industry – with unique opportunities. In addition to entertaining troops and weary home front workers, the movies could further the war effort by providing information about the conflict, instructing Americans about the principles for which they were fighting, and helping Americans to maintain their morale” (Braverman, 1996, p. 137).

Anyone who has ever seen Hollywood's films produced during the war years can attest to their less-than-authentic portrayals of battle. But this problem was not unique to just the feature film; the newsreels, thought to be the most realistic portrayals of war life, were initially "cream puffed" as well. This was certainly, in part, due to the government's attempt to sanitize warfare for a nation which had not seen blood on its soil for more than 70 years. But, in 1943, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt "directed the military to cease its policy of withholding all but 'cream puff' pictures and permit the newsreels to record the realistic 'albeit harrowing' side of war, including images of American dead in battle" (Doherty, 1993, p. 239).

Newsreels were unique in that they descended from newspapers, yet they were also the predecessor to television with its transmission of both sight and sound (Weber, 1996), as well as treasured archives of the future. As they became more engrained in the American culture, film studies began to see their potential for profit, with Paramount, 20th Century Fox (Movietone), RKO-Pathé News, MGM, and Universal (Doherty, 1993) all competing for air time on the silver screen. At their height, newsreels were seen in more than two-thirds of the country's nearly 17,000 movie theaters, and were so popular at one point that "newsreel houses" began popping up in the train stations and bus depots of the nation's larger cities for the sole purpose of showing and re-showing the war's progress to the news hounds of the day. The *Motion Picture Herald* stated, "A man reads his paper or hears a broadcast about a great victory in Sicily, then he wants to see how it was done – so he goes to see it the newsreel" (as cited in Doherty, 1993, p. 239). The public did not seem to mind that newsreels offered somewhat current, but certainly not breaking, news. The appeal of newsreels for those who had a son, father, or husband

fighting overseas overflowed with duality – families desperately wanted to catch a glimpse of their loved one as affirmation that he was safe yet, at the same time, they were horrified at the prospects of seeing him lying dead on a beach or in a foxhole.

Suddenly, the wives, mothers, and daughters of America were flocking to movie houses to catch a glimpse of a loved one. As the days of the war trudged on and the images of the battles and their aftermath became more and more explicit, incidents of family members seeing their soldiers, airmen, seamen, and Marines dead on the theater screen increased. The entire nation was now exposed to the grizzly sights of warfare and, on occasion, theater managers would employ psychiatrists and counselors to be on the premises whenever newsreels were shown. Many times a mother or wife would have to be escorted from a theater in tears after seeing her son or husband lying dead on the battlefield. At its hesitant and timid beginnings in the early '40s, newsreels had been carefully censored to delete all images of Americans wounded or killed. At the war's onset, such censorship caused newsreels' releases to trail actual events by several months. As testimony to this fact, 20th Century Fox did not release its Pearl Harbor newsreel until late February 1942 and, due to the government's intervention via the Office of War Information (OWI), it was a highly sanitized depiction of the actual events.

But as the war progressed so, too, did the speed with which news was broadcast. By 1944, authentic footage of the Normandy invasion arrived in the United States a mere sixty hours after the invasion had ended. The newsreel, yet to be edited by censors, however, was not released to the public for eleven more days (Doherty, 1993).

By this time, millions of Americans were flocking to movie theaters daily to catch a glimpse of the “latest” news. Americans were enamored with the war and how they could watch in comfort battles that were fought thousands of miles away. But the nation’s curiosity and fascination with the war were firmly jolted when a newsreel entitled *Nazi Atrocities* was shown in May 1945. The Japanese had been depicted as barbarians throughout the war thanks to their unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor. The Germans, however, shared the same race as Americans. For that reason they were not portrayed as harshly on the screen. But that changed when Americans viewed for the first time the images of Jewish suffering in three concentration camps. They now saw for themselves the furnaces and half-cremated bodies while the commentator solemnly said, “Don’t turn away. Look” (Doherty, 1993, p. 247). Many theaters were forced to hire additional custodial workers to clean up vomit of those who had gotten sick at the terrible sights. In some cases, theater customers who tried to flee the building were stopped by American servicemen in attendance who thought the public should get a glimpse of what they had encountered firsthand. Some Americans were so appalled by what they saw they doubted its authenticity. So, to squelch any conjecture regarding just how cruel and inhumane the Nazis were, General Eisenhower ordered civilian camera crews into the camps to document and verify their findings. In what seemed to be an attempt to curry support for the waning war effort and to further unify the American public, the U.S. government utilized the newsreel as a tool for having Americans see exactly what the enemy had been doing to innocent civilians over the past years. Following this move, those who doubted why America could be involved in a war “over there” were increasingly harder to find.

Meeting the Enemy

Most of the 2nd Armored Division Hell on Wheels was eager to fight as they left Fort Benning en route to Fort Dix just after Thanksgiving 1942. The 78th Armored Regiment, Austin and Will's unit, was included in that deployment, and after several days of loading equipment onto the sea-going vessels, the men boarded the ships. A convoy of five ships would take the slow 12-day journey across the Atlantic. Austin and Will were aboard the Ancon AP 66 (AP denoted a ship as a transport vessel), a converted Panamanian cargo and passenger ship bought by the U.S. government. It had been previously used primarily to transport bananas from South America to the United States.

Most of the soldiers had never even seen a ship, much less ridden aboard one. When the ship weighed anchor to pull away from dock, a surge of adrenaline energized them and they enjoyed returning waves and blowing kisses to onlookers who were wishing them well from shore. But just 30 minutes later, that feeling of elation changed.

As soon as the trees on the horizon disappeared behind them, several of the men experienced a queasy sensation in their stomach. Having never been on the ocean, they did not know what to make of it. Austin and Will were among those who decided to go three decks below to the Head. They soon realized they had made a terrible mistake. Before they could reach the stairs leading from the second deck to the third, both of them hurled all they'd eaten onto the spotless silver deck. Chunks of potato and bread, mingled in with milk and coffee, littered the deck. They looked at each other to see that their complexions were pale green. Smaller pieces of potato and bread clung to their mouths. Seeing the refuse around Will's mouth, Austin deduced that his must be equally soiled, so he wiped face on the back of his sleeve. Will followed suit.

At first, they felt better after throwing up. The queasiness had subsided with the empty stomachs. But then they made another mistake - they walked over to the side of the ship and looked down at the waves. The sea was rough and the ship was constantly bobbing up and down, up and down. Immediately, they heaved again, sprinkling the surface below with food for the fish. Their muscles tightened again a third time, but almost nothing came out. Something wet hit Austin in the back of his head, and he assumed it was the spray from a high wave. He felt too weak to even lift his hand to see what it was. They slowly made their way back up the steps to the top deck only to discover scores of men hanging their heads over the side of the ship and vomit strewn everywhere. It was then that Austin realized someone had thrown up over the side of the top deck and the vomit had fallen onto his own head. He wanted to be angry, but simply felt too bad to do anything about it.

For the first two days, when the men of the 78th weren't trying to sleep, they were vomiting dry heaves. The only position in which they felt the least bit comfortable was lying flat on their backs. Their skin was clammy to the touch but they were sweating profusely. The Navy sailors accustomed to life at sea, took great joy in the misery of the land lovers and snickered as they would walk past them. The Mess Hall was empty except for the sailors. No soldier aboard the ship could even think of food without running to the head or the side of the ship. Many times a sailor would smuggle food from the Mess in order to slide it under the nose of an unsuspecting soldier. The sailors would then yell, "Make a hole!" and everyone knew to clear the way to the Head.

Each successive day was better for the soldiers as they became more acclimated to the incessant swaying of the ship. By the end of the first week the Mess was full at

every meal, and the soldiers ate all they were given without fear.

On day 11 of the voyage, General Patton stood atop one of the forward hoisting booms and announced, "Gentlemen, tomorrow we go ashore in Casablanca, Morocco." Rumors had swirled all around the ship as to their possible destination. Casablanca had been mentioned along with Liverpool, England, and Lisbon, Portugal. Soldiers had shared many stories they'd heard and made up about the exotic cities. Sounding the most intriguing, it was hoped by most that Casablanca would, indeed, be their target.

Several soldiers scurried below deck after being dismissed from formation to find Casablanca in an atlas that someone had brought aboard. The description they found read

Casablanca is a major port city in the northwest African nation of Morocco. Morocco is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea on the north and the Atlantic Ocean on the west. Lush green plains cover the coastal lands, and the heavily forested Atlas Mountains separate its western border from the Sahara Desert. The Sahara encompasses the nations of Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt further to the east.

One soldier placed his finger on the top left side of the page just below the word 'Morocco' on the map. His finger trailed to the right as another soldier read aloud. When his finger reached Sahara, he said, "So that's the home of that old Desert Fox, huh? We got something for him, don't we boys?" A chorus of cheers arose.

The next morning, someone yelled, "Land ho!" and everyone within earshot ran to look. Sure enough, the coast of Morocco lay dead ahead. Austin looked at Will and said, "Well, I reckon this is it. You ready to work on your tan?" With quiet confidence

Will nodded.

As they disembarked the Ancon AP-66 on Christmas Eve 1942, the men of the 78th had no idea how much the Sahara would change their lives in the weeks to come. In response to the massive American buildup of tanks and infantry in Morocco and Algeria in 1942, Hitler ordered hundreds of thousands of troops and tanks into nearby Tunisia in an attempt to halt the advance of the Allies. At this point in the war, Rommel still possessed the decision-making authority that had allowed him to rally the Italian and German forces and create a formidable fighting force. The German armament was far superior to any of the firepower the Allies employed.

Rommel had four models of Panzer tanks under his command, with Panzer IIIs and IVs being the most lethal. But the crown jewel of the Panzer tank division was the Panther. Weighing in at more than 45 tons, and sporting a 75mm gun, it could fire from well beyond the range of the Sherman tanks, making it virtually untouchable. Its armor was much thicker than its predecessors, which meant that even if it was hit by an Allied shell, it was likely not to be destroyed.

The men of the 2nd Armored Division had heard stories about the fighting abilities of the Panthers and their crews, and while they certainly did not fear the Germans, they had to respect their talents in regard to warfare. The Krauts, as they were called by the American soldiers, had dubious and ruthless reputations. But their ability to destroy an enemy seemingly without effort earned deference. Rarely did they take prisoners, and when they did, they often treated them poorly. Some of the men had heard stories from the Moroccan locals about how Rommel had vowed to destroy any enemy which dared to cross his path. The British soldiers who still remained in Morocco, many of whom were

former prisoners of war added to the grief by telling harrowing tales of how they were defeated by Rommel in battle after battle then subsequently sent to prison camps throughout northern Africa. Only a fortunate few were able to find their way to freedom. Many had actually escaped only to die in the desert. In response to the Brits, many of the soldiers in the 2nd joked lightheartedly about how they would rather be killed in battle than taken prisoner.

February 1943

A column of 30 Sherman tanks slowly churned its way through the desert night as countless stars dotted the night sky. The moon cast an eerie pale shade across the sand, occasionally blown from the tops of endless undulating dunes by early morning breezes. And though the Sahara is the largest and hottest desert in the world, the soldiers learned quickly that the desert is not always hot. Nighttime temperatures can often dip into the lower 40s and upper 30s. This, combined with daytime temperatures commonly peaking at 130 degrees, made for one of the most unforgiving environments on Earth.

Three hundred yards ahead of the convoy were three reconnaissance jeeps carrying heavily armed infantrymen. Also in the first jeep was a Moroccan guide who was extremely antsy. With his eyes closed he muttered words in an unfamiliar language as he prayed. He knew from experience that the convoy should not be moving on such a well-lit night. As the jeeps topped a large dune, he suddenly stopped praying and turned his ear toward a familiar sound. No one else in the jeep heard it. He heard it again and again. He knew the Sherman tanks were behind him so that could not be the noise.

“Go! Go! Go!” he shouted to the driver with an Arabic accent. “Now!”

“Go, where?” the driver asked.

“Back! Back! Turn! Turn!” His heavy accent made his words hard to understand, but the first shell that exploded less than 50 yards away made his words all too clear.

The lead driver veered to the left with the other jeeps right behind. As they approached the column they shouted for help, but the roaring sounds of the tanks made it impossible for them to be heard.

From the lead tank Austin held up his hands and ordered the driver to stop. He came close to ordering the engine be cut but then sensed that something must be terribly wrong for them to have come back in such a hurry. “What is it?” he asked hastily as the jeep slid to a stop in front of the tank.

“Krauts at twelve o’clock! Just over that dune,” one of the soldiers shouted. “We’re out of their range right now, but we won’t be for long if we just sit here.”

“Do you know how many?” Austin asked.

“No, sir. All I know is we almost bought the farm with the first shell that exploded!”

Austin thought for a moment then announced, “We have the advantage, boys. We know they’re there, right? But they think they’re only after some jeeps. They don’t know we’re here. I say we take it to ‘em.”

The soldiers from the second and third jeeps dismounted, and the lieutenant ordered the soldier carrying the radio to come to him. Before he could make his call to request instructions Austin said, “Excuse me, sir. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, sir, but I don’t think we have time to be talkin’ on that there radio. Surely, if those tanks saw those jeeps well enough to fire at ‘em, they’d have had to seen them comin’ this way.

Without knowin' it, the jeeps have brought 'em right to us."

"What do you propose we do, Sergeant Web?" the lieutenant asked.

"Well, sir, we need a scout to find out how many tanks are out there. I say we send a couple of men to the top of that dune with binoculars to see what we're up against. In the meantime, we need to get our tanks back a ways just in case."

The lieutenant ordered two infantrymen to the top of the dune. They scanned the horizon but saw nothing. Suddenly, a flash of fire lit up the night sky. A tank had fired a shell, but in a different direction. The scouts were puzzled by this since they, too, had heard about how precise these Germans were in combat. Then, from the corner of his eye, one of the soldiers saw a jeep 500 hundred yards to his left. The German gunner had seen him, too, and was firing a shot to determine his range from the jeep. The shell fell well short of its target, so the scouts knew the jeep was safe. The jeep continued on its heading away from the American position, and the German tank turned to continue its pursuit. As it made its turn, 12 other tanks followed suit. They, too, traveled in columns to mask their numbers.

The scouts returned to the bottom of the dune and gave their report. The lieutenant surveyed the land for a moment, then radioed the jeep and gave orders to return as soon as possible. He then used his finger to simulate cutting his throat, the signal for cutting the engines, and all tanks became silent. He gave his instructions over the radio, and within minutes, the tanks had re-fired the engines and were in place, awaiting the attack.

As the jeep approached, it was in the bottom of a valley between two high, steep dunes. The night breeze had erased all remnants of tread tracks left in the sand. The

driver slammed the brakes, and the jeep slid to a halt. The three men leapt out and ran up the sides of the dune until they were out of sight. The night was filled with an eerie silence. No engines, no gun fire, no animals, nothing. Then the ground began to tremble. Sand from the tops of the dunes began to trickle down toward the solitary jeep. Then, a thundering boom and explosion rocked the stillness. The lead tank had made a direct hit on the jeep, and it was now in flames, lying on its side. Moments later, the tanks entered the valley. They had assumed that the three jeeps had split up, and they would be able to make only one kill on this night.

From the top of one dune, the lieutenant whispered into the radio, "Not yet. I count only ten. I repeat, I count only ten." Then, from the other side of the valley appeared the other two. Feeling confident in their victory, the tank crews popped their hatches to better survey the destruction they had caused.

"Commanders, are all targets acquired?" The lieutenant whispered.

After a few seconds of receiving signals from the other tank commanders on his dune, Austin replied, "We are go, sir." From the opposite dune, the report was the same.

"Let's show these Krauts what Hell on Wheels is all about, gentlemen. "Fire at will!" the lieutenant ordered.

Each American tank driver revved the engine and exhaust poured from the pipes into the night sky. The sound startled the Krauts, but they did not hesitate. Their desert warfare experience instantly told them that they knew they were in a trap. They immediately ducked back inside the turrets and started their engines. As all 60 Sherman tanks appeared over the horizon simultaneously, they had their sights fixed on their

targets, and in a thundering chorus of round after round being fired, thick smoke filled the air. Explosions echoed throughout the desert until, finally, there was silence. The furious exchange had lasted only a few short minutes, but the devastation was immense. As the sun began to rise and the smoke began to clear, all 12 Panzers lay in ruins. But they were not alone. Before they had been destroyed, several Panzers had managed to get off clean shots and take out four American tanks.

The men of the 2nd felt confused. They were, of course, joyous at their victory yet they grieved over the loss of their fallen brothers. Austin and Will stood quietly, side by side, as they surveyed the destruction. The stench of burning hair and flesh permeated the air and many of the soldiers vomited at the odor as it crept its way onto their taste buds. Understanding the magnitude of what they had done, the reality of death slowly seeped into their minds.

Austin stood thinking as he looked at a dead German soldier hanging out of a turret. 'A soldier's death not only affected himself. This man had a family. He was someone's son. He was perhaps someone's brother or father. How many people would never be born because I killed this man?'

Sensing his grief and pain, Will walked over to Austin, put his arm around his shoulders, and said, "I know it's hard, Austin. But this is war...better them than us, right, buddy?"

"I reckon."

Accustomed to seeing only live oaks and pines, Austin and Will had been enthralled at the sight of tall date palm trees which were so prevalent in the coastal regions of northern Africa. The desert nomads, with their colorful garb, had always

been so thankful whenever they saw soldiers. They selflessly gave water and other supplies in gratitude for aiding in liberating their countries. The one- and two-hump camels were found to be odd yet interesting creatures. They spat profusely and smelled terrible, but their tan fur was soft, and the two boys loved to run their hands down the camels' sides as they walked past. Their hooves were thick and triangular, perfectly adapted to walking on the hot desert sand.

But the novelty of being in an exotic land soon wore off, particularly after the battle at the dunes. The men no longer noticed the little details of the desert that had astonished them only a few months earlier. As if the dunes were perpetual waves, they seemed to be on an ocean of sand, with no end in sight. The long, sweltering days began to play tricks on some of the men. As the column moved throughout the desert, a soldier would occasionally yell "Oasis!" and everyone would rush to look for it and ask "Where? Where?"

"Right there in front of us," the soldier would say, pointing toward what only he saw.

After looking carefully and finding nothing, another soldier would say, "Aw, there's nothing there. It's just another mirage," and everyone would disband in disappointment. Eventually, this happened so often that the men would not even respond when 'oasis' was shouted.

April 22, 1943

After 24 consecutive days without seeing a single sign of life, Will spied what he thought was a palm tree protruding from the sand in the distance. Before announcing his discovery, he rubbed his eyes and shook his head. He looked up again and the tree was

still there, only this time it was accompanied by several others. He thought to himself, 'I wonder if this is real.' Then he called his commander to the top of the tank so he could verify the vision, and as soon as he spotted the small clump of trees, he screamed, "Trees! We got trees!" When no one responded, he ordered his tank to change direction and head directly toward it.

It had been more than three agonizing weeks since the men of the 2nd had seen the last oasis. When someone in another tank spotted the trees on the horizon and shouted "Oasis!" everyone gave a loud cheer for they knew what lay ahead – cool, clear water and shade. Their eyes stung constantly from the relentless pounding of sand grains. They would finally be able to bathe, a pleasure they had not experienced since the last oasis. No matter how close you become to the other men in a tank and how much you come to depend on them, it was impossible to get past the body odor that permeated the small cubby area of the tank. It was common to see men stick their head out of the tank whenever possible just to get a breath of fresh air.

When the mini-convoy reached the oasis Austin ordered everyone to stay put until it could be properly scouted. Several soldiers were ordered to recon the area. They disembarked, patrolled the vicinity, and reported seeing nothing. Austin gave the order to clear the tanks, and immediately 23 dusty, smelly soldiers ran across the hot sand and dived into the fresh water. One of the men pulled a rope from a tank and looped it around a palm tree that arched its way over the pool. Soldiers took turns running and swinging out as far as they could before splashing down. Only Austin sat and watched, his thoughts returning to the day his brother, Jeremiah, had gotten hurt doing the very same thing. It seemed as though, looking back, that day was a turning point in his life.

One day he was a boy without a care in the world, playing in a creek. The next day he was a grown-up, responsible for the well-being of an entire family. It didn't really seem fair.

Will, emerging from the pool, saw the distant look on Austin's face, and walked toward him. "Thinkin' 'bout home, huh?" he asked.

Startled by the voice, Austin replied, "How can you tell that?"

"Oh, I've seen that look on the faces of just about everybody here at one time or another. But, up until now, you've been so busy you haven't had much time to think about home. Whatcha miss most of all?"

Austin paused and looked into the deep orange sunset. A myriad of images ran through his mind. He saw Mama, Jeremiah, Daniel, Caroline, and the farm. He saw Diddy-by-cha and Old Tobe. He saw tall, straight pines and majestic, gnarled oaks. He saw the old rickety schoolhouse and small children running during recess. He saw Doc Smith and the folks from church. Then, looking around to ensure no one was watching, he allowed a solitary tear to run down his cheek. The water carved a straight line through the dirt on his face. He leaned over to Will, swallowed hard, and said in a quavering voice, "I miss everything, Will. I wanna go home."

"Me, too, buddy. Me, too. But there's not a whole lot we can do about it right now. Besides, I know something that'll cheer ya up." Will then picked Austin up in a fireman's carry (not to be the last time) and threw him belly-first into the water. They splashed and yelled and had a grand old time, reminiscent of days gone by. For a few brief hours, they were able to forget that they were at war.

Not knowing how long it may be until they saw fresh water again, the soldiers

filled every conceivable container to capacity before moving the convoy eastward. Just west of Oran, Algeria, the convoy rendezvoused with numerous other American tank battalions. They met little opposition from the Axis, and the liberation of the city was relatively easy, so they continued on to Constantine, some 450 miles to the east. As in Oran, they encountered little resistance from the Germans who, as it turned out, had their hands full with the British Eighth Army at Gazala. With the Germans concentrating solely on the British, the U.S. forces now had an unobstructed path to Tunis, Tunisia, where they would board ships for the Mediterranean island of Sicily.

Despite numerous brilliant retreating maneuvers which saved nearly his entire Panzer and Tiger forces, Rommel was losing ground fast in Africa. Supply shortages continued to hamper his efforts, and finally, the Afrika Korps was cornered at Fuka in November 1943. Sensing defeat, Hitler sent orders to the Korps to stand its ground or die. For more than a day-and-a-half, Rommel's men stood firm, but finally succumbed to the massive British forces. And with that, Rommel was pushed from the continent, never to return.

On July 10, 1943, the entire 2nd Armored Division, accompanied by seven other Allied divisions, arrived on Sicily, the largest of the Mediterranean islands - covering approximately 26,000 square mile - to begin Operation Husky. This operation was designed to free the island from German and Italian occupation in only a few days, thus preventing them from using it as a shipping and aircraft base.

Despite extremely high seas and choppy waters, a total of 160,000 men and 600 tanks rolled onto shore in a matter of hours to face more than 300,000 Axis soldiers. Though the rough conditions made landing difficult, it also guaranteed the element of

surprise. The night before the invasion, American paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division had landed on the island to thwart Axis resistance. Due to high winds, however, many of the parachutes were blown off course, and the paratroopers were unable to reach their destinations in time to soften the Axis defenses. As a result, the American landing forces encountered moderate resistance, losing only a few soldiers and tanks.

All U.S. forces on Sicily, now under the command of the 2nd Armored Division's General George S. Patton, began making preparations for the march toward and capture of the capital city of Palermo. Although it would be noble to think that the Americans were going to free Palermo for the sake of the poor civilians who were under Mussolini's thumb, that was simply not the case. Patton's motivation for capturing the city was no grander than the fact that he wanted to beat his Allied rival, British Field Marshall Montgomery to the city gates, securing the glory for himself. As a result, the city fell to the Americans in only 12 days. And, certainly not one to be satisfied with a victory and to allow his men and equipment to sit idly by, Patton promptly ordered his forces to march eastward to Sicily's third largest city, Messina, where they took it with relative ease. Three weeks later, the Germans evacuated the island, taking the majority of their armor and other equipment with them.

With each successive victory, the confidence of the 2nd Armored Division continued to grow as it had in the deserts of North Africa. The feeling of invincibility began to saturate everyone, and they began to feel as though they were superhuman. Their heads swelled with pride as they began to believe they could not be defeated in battle.

On November 4, 1943, the 2nd left Sicily, bound for England. They were to be but

a small part of a massive Allied invasionary force which would liberate all of Europe from Hitler's merciless control.

Interlude – Ports of Call

Cranman

Airmen had been briefed not to go into certain areas of the city as well as to guard their personal possessions whenever they engaged the local Arabs. My stay in Casablanca was very short, lasting only three days. My group of ten bombardiers and thirty gunners received orders to proceed around the North African coastline from the Atlantic coast to the Mediterranean coast, then proceed to Italy. The last leg of our trip via a C-47 cargo plane was across the Mediterranean near Sicily to Foggia, Italy, for refueling, and then on to Bari, Italy. The air base at Foggia was packed with B-24s and B-17s, and we were in an area that was surrounded by four or five other Bomb Groups. It was my first view of a bomber base in a war zone, and it was then that the war began to take on a new meaning for me. It hit me then and there like a bolt of lightning that I was becoming personally involved. Up until then it hadn't been real to me.

Baylor

Before leaving the states, I ultimately landed in a camp called Patrick Henry which was near Newport News and Norfolk, in that area of Virginia. That camp, like Camp Croft, doesn't exist anymore. I was there waiting on a boat and I knew I was going to the European theater, but I did not know where until it was very close to the time to disembark. It turned out to be Italy, and it turned out to be Anzio...I don't know if that name means anything to you, but it was one of the beachheads established in the war. It doesn't get too much notoriety in comparison to Normandy. I mean, everybody

looks to that as the big push that ended the war with Germany, and rightly so, but some of the other important strategic battles get lost in the shadow of the Normandy invasion. But that's neither here nor there. So I went to Italy and ended up receiving several weeks of training in the countryside. But it was then, right before we landed, that we were told of the ultimate destination. When we finished our training there, we were done with that place. We boarded another ship and pulled up the coast of Italy until we got close to Anzio. Then we boarded landing craft and went onto the beautiful beach at Anzio. But from there it was all pushing. We were actually part of a spearhead that was going to take Rome itself. We already occupied all of the southern half of the boot and with taking Rome, we, I mean the Allies, would own the whole peninsula.

Note: When I revealed that my father entered the theater of warfare at North Africa, then went across the desert and up to Sicily, and then on to Italy, Mr. Baylor straightened his back and proudly proclaimed, "Well, then, your father and I certainly chewed on some of the same dirt, didn't we?"

Waldrop

I arrived in England in November of 1943. My first mission wasn't until January of '44 so we trained for about two months before we got to fly over the mainland. The training was exactly what we'd been doing back in Colorado, only the terrain looked different. That's really about all we did...eat, bomb, and sleep. I guess what that prepared us most for was getting acclimated to the weather. I think it rained just about every day and it was real cold. At first it was real aggravating to have bombing runs delayed because of cloud cover but, looking back on it, it sure did teach us patience for when our real bomb runs would get delayed. And that happened a lot in those winter

months. Waiting around with nothing to do was the worst part. I learned how to become a good card player because that's really about all there was to do in the hangars while we waited for the weather to cooperate.

To my surprise, none of the three gentlemen expressed any noticeable anxiety as they discussed the oncoming battles they faced. Going into the interviews, I expected that this would perhaps be a painful time to recall. But this is a lesson learned in carrying preconceived notions into the interview.

Mr. Waldrop's account was draped with more of the mundane routine he had experienced in basic training. He seemed to express that he, like many others in his position, was ready to fight, wanted it to happen, but wasn't quite sure if that is what he really wanted. No doubt the impatience of youth was hard at work in this case.

Mr. Cranman's expression of the surrealism of first seeing a battle zone intrigued me. He, too, felt that he was ready to fight, at least until he saw firsthand the tools of warfare in context. It is one thing to train in a plane, but it is something entirely different to know the next time you go up, people, perhaps even you and your crew, will die. Mr. Cranman seemed to grasp that notion very well. It was clear that he has a love for life and that the thought of killing gnawed at him.

No Time for Tea

November 26, 1943

The men of the 2nd arrived in England with mixed feelings. They were certainly glad to be in a safe country, but they'd become so accustomed to deserts and rocky terrains that they felt somewhat out of place among the beautiful, green rolling hills and waving grain fields. A random backfire would, at times, send men scrambling for cover,

as it reminded them of a Nazi shell hitting its target. On one occasion, when Austin, Will, and a few other men were on liberty in London, a crying baby sent one soldier running and yelling, "Incoming!" as the shrill, high-pitched squeal from the infant resembled the scream emitted from missile racing overhead, bound for some distant objective. The young woman holding the baby and the soldiers stood by and watched with compassion for they knew the poor soul suffered from shell shock. Austin and Will squatted next to the trembling, sweating soldier who had sought shelter underneath an automobile. They extended their hands as if to say, 'It's okay now. Everything's okay. Come on out. The battle's over.' They never once mentioned to the soldier that it was only a baby's cry that had set him into his tirade. With one on each side and holding him under the arms, they gently walked him toward the base. Will looked back and motioned with his eyes for the others to go on ahead. The three passed by the woman and the baby, who was now silently sucking on the nipple of a bottle. The weary soldier hung his head low, and mumbled to himself as he walked. Will smiled at the woman and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Think nothing of it, kind sir," she replied in a soft voice. Her regal-sounding English accent shot arrows through his heart for it was the first time he'd heard a female Brit speak. All Will could do was stand and look at her with his mouth gaping. He was in love.

"Is-is-is-is the baby okay, ma'am?" he stammered as he left his comrades and walked closer to her, removing his hat as he spoke.

"Oh, my brother is quite fine," she replied. "I do apologize if tiny William gave that poor gentleman a fright."

“Oh, no, ma’am. I think he’ll be okay once we get him back to the base. Sudden, loud noises like that sometimes set him off,” he said. Changing the subject rather abruptly, he continued, “Did you say the baby’s name is William?” He peeked into the blanket to see the baby’s plump face.

“That’s right.”

“What a coincidence. That’s my name, too. William Thomas.” Having been taught by his mother that a true gentleman never extends his hand to a lady until she does so first, he waited in hopes that she would reveal her name.

She grinned, displaying a perfect smile, and said, “I’m Abigail Winchester. It’s indeed a pleasure to meet you.” She extended her hand, and Will took it into his own and squeezed gently.

“The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Winchester,” he said as he bowed his head.

“It’s Miss Winchester, and please call me Abbey.” Will could not force himself to let go of her hand.

Knowing full well what was running through Will’s mind, Austin spoke up, “Will, we’re gonna be headin’ on back to the base now. We’ll see ya later, okay?” He winked and nodded, signaling that he knew Will wanted to stay with her.

“Abbey,” Will said. “Would you like to join me for a bite to eat?”

“I’d like that,” she said. “But first I must take young William home. We’ve been out for our daily walk. Would you care to walk with us?”

Will smiled and nodded. The two turned and headed down the street, both of them too much in love to realize that they were still holding hands.

“Tell us what happened!”

“What did ya’ll do?”

“Was she pretty?”

“Has she got a friend or sister for me?”

The barrage of questions hit Will the instant he walked into the barracks later that night. It was obvious that Austin had already informed the whole squad that Will had found himself a girlfriend.

“I’ll answer one question, and that’s it. As a matter of fact, no, she’s not pretty,” Will said. “She’s beautiful. That’s it. You guys hit the bunks,” he ordered. The soldiers, disappointed, moped back to their bunks. After lights out, Will tapped the top bunk where Austin was lying, still awake. “Austin,” he whispered, “You awake?”

“Yeah.” Austin rolled over and leaned his head down so that he could see Will.

“Do you think it’s wrong for somebody to be happy in the middle of all this pain and death?” Will asked.

“No. Why?”

“’Cause I just found the girl I’m gonna marry.”

Not surprised after witnessing how smitten Will was earlier in the day, Austin joked, “Are we gonna hear wedding bells anytime soon?”

“Course not. But when this here war’s over, I’m takin’ her home with me.”

“Good,” Austin replied, “’Cause it’s gonna take somethin’ as pretty as her to make a dog-ugly fella like you look good.”

Interlude – War and Sex

Mr. Baylor and Mr. Waldrop made no mention of any intimate pursuits during the

war. Of course, that does not mean that none existed for them. One can only speculate that they may have been embarrassed to make mention of it, or perhaps they did not think it noteworthy to reveal. Nostalgic sentiment begs me to believe that they, and all men who were far from home, were moral champions who abstained from sexual activity in the absence of their sweethearts who faithfully waited for them back home. But realistically, many of these men were away from home for a number of years and urges, no doubt, were ubiquitous.

Though he admittedly relished the company of women during the war, Mr. Cranman was adamant that he remained true to his Helen. Though he enjoyed being around women, they served only as reminders of the one he hoped was awaiting him when he returned home. Many American servicemen, however, used female (and sometimes male) companionship in a much more intimate manner.

Those who contend that these GIs “were all God-fearing, true to my wife/sweetheart/husband heterosexual down home innocents” (Mabry, 1990) are doing a disservice to the legacy of these men. They were warriors, not saints. Many of them were, in fact, adulterers. Of the some eighty percent of the military personnel away from home for two or more years who admitted to regular sexual intercourse, nearly a third had wives (Mabry, 1990). This was true, of course, for both men and women in foreign lands as well as those left on the home front. Though they have received very little attention in historical writings, gays and lesbians were present in the military during World War II. Homosexuality was not allowed in the military at that time, but homosexuals were often difficult to identify. According to May (1996, p. 134), one lesbian, Phyllis Abry, admitted that she “quit her job as a lab technician to join the

WACs because she ‘wanted to be with all those women.’” Abry continued, stating, ‘I remember being very nervous about them asking me if I had any homosexual feelings or attitudes...I just smiled and was sweet and feminine’ (May, 1996, p. 134).

Civilian men, particularly those working in factories, took advantage of the absence of millions of American men by exploiting the patriotism and loneliness of women who worked side by side with them. Women on the home front were urged by the government, their churches, and their families to stay “pure” for their fighting man, but often the temptation was simply too much to bear. Even the fear of catching venereal diseases was not enough to deter the sexual promiscuity. One teenage factory worker describes wartime as “a real sex paradise” (May, 1996, p. 134).

The nature of war lends itself to sexual promiscuity. Newly-found sexual freedom and loneliness, combined with no fear of consequences from family, wives, or girlfriends, makes moving from one bed to another extremely easy. All one had to worry about was contracting VD, and that threat was virtually eliminated with the advent of the wonder drug, penicillin. Soldiers’ sexual exploits, if not their infidelity, was a major concern for military leaders as evidenced by the fact that each soldier in the European theater was given four condoms per month – a number medical officers deemed to be quite inadequate (Leder, 2006). GIs received mixed signals, however, when they were given officially-endorsed warnings such as, “Any woman who can be ‘picked up’ or ‘made’ by an American soldier can be, almost certainly has been, ‘picked up’ or ‘made’ by countless others” (Longmate, 1975, p. 284). Soldiers behind the lines viewed receiving condoms as permission to get laid whenever and wherever they could while those at the front, where women were much more scarce, thought it to be a cruel joke.

Condoms there were most commonly used for the reason the Army told both Congress and the American public they were originally intended – to keep water out of gun barrels. The Army wanted to curb GIs' sexual contact as much as possible for one primary reason – to lessen the spiraling VD rate.

Throughout the war – no matter where it was fought – the military's emphasis on safe sex was never intended as a deterrent against unwanted pregnancies. Its sole focus was the prevention of VD. But wherever GIs fought, there were illegitimate children left in their wake (Leder, 2006, p. 123).

Those in power in government censorship were well aware that men were going to have sex. Their job was to downplay the existence of promiscuity as much as possible. Their task was made even more difficult by the blatant sexual overtones of song lyrics that GIs listened to at every opportunity on Armed Forces Radio. Songs such as the Andrews Sisters' rendition of the calypso-style number one hit *Rum and Coca-Cola* (1942) kept GIs' libidos piqued. The open glorification of what many GIs interpreted to be tag-team prostitution in the lyrics "Drinkin' rum and Coca-Cola...Go down to Point Cumana... Both mother and daughter...Workin' for the Yankee dollar," and the prospect of having sex with two women at once, fueled many GIs' sexual fantasies.

In an effort to diminish sexual promiscuity as much as possible, orders were given by government censors to publishers throughout the country not to print any photographs that showed the slightest hint of sexuality. Popular public opinion at the time was that only the enemy engaged in perversion and adultery, and the Army was determined to promulgate that misconception.

This concern led the army to censor photographs that recorded sexual energies unleashed by the American war effort. In addition to their discomfort with documentation of wartime disruptions of conventional patterns of sexual identity, officials recognized that any sexually charged photograph could subvert the illusion of control. The government was also unwilling to alarm spouses, lovers, and parents waiting at home (Roeder, 1996, p. 61).

Despite the government's censorship efforts to keep the sexual exploits of GIs out of the media, "some photographic documentation of GI sexuality appeared in nonofficial sources, especially near the war's end" (Roeder, 1996, p. 61).

If the definition of *addiction* can be said to include the notion that an object of desire occupies one's thoughts constantly (whether it is alcohol, drugs, or women), then many of the servicemen on both the Allied and Axis sides of the war were addicted to sex. Interestingly, the Army used, for a short time, sex as a tool to assist in identifying soldiers suspected of having addictions to morphine since, as Burroughs (1953, p. 104) states, "Junk short-circuits sex. The drive to non-sexual sociability comes from the same place sex comes from, so when I have an H or M shooting habit I am non-sociable."

Since military life means spending long periods of time exclusively with members of the same sex most men, when they were not fighting, training to fight, or perhaps even using cocaine to battling morphine addictions (Freud, 2003), were on the prowl for female companionship. In the case of American GIs in England prior to the D-Day landing, the English women had heard rumors that the Yanks were "near-rapists or irresistibly skilled seducers." Dispelling the first notion was easy enough, but many GIs had a difficult time

living up to the expectations of some of the under-sexed English lasses whose men had either died or had gone to mainland Europe months or years earlier. Recalling a passionate encounter on a train, one U.S. pilot states,

The girls were pretty and friendly...Once on the night train up from Bury I was able to have intercourse in a crowded compartment with a girl whose name I didn't know and who didn't know mine...the English girls were very generous with sex. [But] in plain language, they were a lousy lay. They would lay just like a board and not move at all (Longmate, 1975, p. 272, pp. 275-276).

An army nurse stationed at a hospital in England recalls the regularity of sex despite the lack of bedroom accommodations:

There were several haystacks near our hospital [and] the GIs gave me reports on their experiences in a haystack. It was warm, dry, and private... I noticed bicycles parked by them. One time a little canvas tarpaulin was attached, like a porch. One saw lots of hay on the uniform after a date in the country. One always thought about the British being prim and proper – and now it wasn't true (Longmate, 1975, p. 272).

Much to the surprise and delight of many a wide-eyed virgin GI who thought that all English women were prim and proper, prostitution was rampant, particularly in London's Piccadilly Circus:

The good-time girls of London – dubbed 'Piccadilly commandos' because of the speed with which they served their customers – set the stage for the women who were to greet American GIs wherever they landed (Leder, 2006,

p. 116).

British women certainly wanted sex, but some refused to “lay.” They preferred, instead, to copulate in a standing position, believing that this would prevent them from getting pregnant. This belief, combined with the greater speed at which the acts could be accomplished, made Wall Jobs very popular. Picadilly whores’ favorite line was “Hey, Yank, quick Marble Arch style” (Longmate, 1975, p. 276).

But not every American GI had the freedom to pursue his sexual desires. Black soldiers dubbed “Tan Yanks” experienced much of the racial prejudice in England that they had known their whole lives in the States. Though they were welcomed and respected by their British hosts, it was the U.S. Congress which shipped racial baggage across the Atlantic by

passing the United States of America Visiting Forces Act in August 1942.

This act stipulated that black soldiers abroad were to be subjected to the same restrictions and racial segregation that they were back home (Leder, 2006, p. 119).

While white American GIs were allowed to marry British women, black soldiers had to obtain permission from their commanding officers. Permission was almost always refused. Despite the regulations forbidding sexual contact between black soldiers and British women,

an estimated 2,000 illegitimate mixed-race babies [were] born in England during World War II. Not only were these children illegitimate, but they were also ‘coffee-coloured,’ making their absorption into society even more complicated (Leder, 2006, p. 119).

American soldiers' sexual experiences in England only were only prelude to what awaited them after D-Day. They soon learned that the women of France were much more adept at sex than their British counterparts. After many years of Nazi occupation, French women were ecstatic to finally see Americans and willing to do anything to express their gratitude for having saved their lives. One American seaman recounts his experiences with French girls:

French girls were ready to have fun...that's when I learned that there were respectable girls who wanted to know everything about making love. They trained for sex like our girls trained for...playing bridge or something like that. It was marvelous. I had a girl there, and that was an experience. That was my graduate school in sex (Leder, 2006, p. 120).

Feeling as though they practically owed their sexual prowess to their rescuers, French women set up brothels in almost any building still standing, and long lines of soldiers formed around the clock. Many a time "freebies" were given to soldiers who lacked money, cigarettes, or some other valuable asset to offer for services rendered. In fact, within a mere two hours of capturing the city of Cherbourg, two brothels – one for whites and one for blacks – had opened for business.

But perhaps the most intriguing sexual "conquest" for the American GI was the German woman. Seen as both the ultimate reward for Americans and ultimate insult to Hitler, German maidens were, for many, even more prized than the French belles they had encountered weeks and months earlier. Starved for affection, companionship, and romance, and more often than not, totally disinterested in the political nuances of war, the German women were eager to do whatever American servicemen asked of them.

Invasion

“Daddy” I interrupted, “ I’ve never heard of anyone falling in love in a war.”

Not at all upset by my interjection, he replied, “Yeah, son, that was a first for me, too. But it was meant to be. Will and Abbey were a good couple and they really loved each other.”

“Well, what happened to ‘em?” I asked.

Daddy’s lips tightened and his brow wrinkled as his face grew much more serious. There was a long silent pause before he spoke...

Throughout the next six months, the men of the 2nd trained everyday along side hundreds of thousands of other American and Allied troops. They knew they were preparing for a major invasion to free Europe, but no one knew when they would depart. As a result of the uncertainty, Will spent all of his free time with Abbey. They grew closer and closer with each passing day. Will shared details about life in Georgia while Abbey would describe the days in England before Hitler’s bombing campaigns reduced the large cities to rubble. They learned that they had much in common. As it turned out, they were the same age, born only 3 days apart, though Abbey looked somewhat older because she always dressed so nicely. The two had particular fun trying to teach each other to talk like themselves. Abbey could manage a Southern drawl fairly well, but Will was hopeless when it came to speaking with an English accent. Most importantly, though, by the time spring had rolled around, they both knew they wanted to get married.

Rumors had swirled for months throughout the base and surrounding boroughs that the invasion would take place in the late spring to take advantage of the relatively few good days of weather in England. So as the spring days began to fade away, more

and more soldiers began writing letters home as well as their wills. Though the soldiers were writing thousands of letters everyday, orders had been given that none were to be delivered until after the invasion for fear of alerting the Germans as to their whereabouts.

The rumors of impending departure only strengthened Will's and Abbey's resolve to get married, and with her parents' blessings, they were married on the morning June 1, 1944.

At 6:00A.M., the next day, a sharp knock on the door of the Winchesters' home broke the morning serenity. Mr. Winchester opened the door to see Austin gasping for air.

"Sir," Austin said to Abbey's father, "I'm sorry to disturb you so early in the morning, but I've got to speak to Will."

"It's time, isn't it, lad?" Mr. Winchester replied, referring to the imminent invasion.

"Yes, sir. It's time. We gotta go, now," Austin replied, his hands on his knees, still trying to catch his breath.

Hearing the commotion, Will ran down the stairs to the open door. "What is it, Austin?"

"We're leaving for France, soon. The base is being locked down in two hours," Austin said.

Without hesitation, Will ran up the stairs to find Abbey crying at the foot of the bed. She'd overheard the conversation. Will walked over, knelt down beside her, and cradled her chin in his hand. "Abbey, I gotta go. It's time."

When she looked up, tears flowed down her cheeks and she flung her arms around his neck. In a perfect, yet quavering, Southern Belle voice she said, “Y’all came back now, ya hear?”

June 6, 1944, is one of the single most important days in history. Officially titled Operation Overlord, it is known better by only four letters – D-Day. As armored personnel, the soldiers of the 2nd were not present at D-Day. Instead, they remained in lock down as 175,000 Allied troops and their equipment were carried across the rough seas of the English Channel toward the heavily defended beaches of Normandy, France. In a fierce infantry battle that, in actuality, lasted only just over an hour, the Allies breached Hitler’s vaunted Atlantic Wall, and the liberation of Europe had begun. By the end of the day, the Germans had been pushed inland as far as five miles in some places.

Three days later (D+3), Hell on Wheels was the first full Armored Division to touch Omaha Beach on the northern coast of France. As the tanks rolled off the Rhino ferries and onto shore, cheers went up from the infantry soldiers who’d fought so hard days earlier to secure the beach.

Sitting atop his Sherman tank as it climbed the gently sloping beach, Austin returned waves to some of the men who greeted him. He could see that the men were exhausted, yet they were in good spirits. None of the corpses remained from the battles that had taken place three days earlier. Austin looked out over the ocean, then closed his eyes and tried to imagine the beach as if were an undiscovered, pristine land. With no childhood memories of the beach, the crashing of the waves and the smell of the salty air reminded him only of his previous landings in North Africa and Sicily. A pleasant memory it was not. Suddenly a voice shouting, “Move it out!” woke him from his

daydream, and the tank driver pulled into a long convoy headed inland.

July 26, 1944

For nearly three weeks, not a single soldier in the 78th Field Artillery heard a shot fired in anger. From the time they'd landed on the beach until they reached the small town of St. Lo, they'd not taken part in any battles. They had assisted other regiments in the securing of a number of bridges, but by the time they had arrived, the Germans were long gone. All of that was about to change.

Having received orders to move westward, to the town of St. Denis le Gast, Austin gathered his tank crew together. "Fellas," he began, "I just want y'all to know that we're headin' into some fierce fightin' today. The Lieutenant tells me we're walkin' right into the teeth of the Kraut forces. If we're gonna make it out of this thing, we're gonna have to be at our best." He extended his right hand, palm down. Each man placed a hand on top of his. "Let's take it to 'em today and talk about it tomorrow," they said in unison.

"Hell on Wheels, mount up and prepare to move out!" a scratchy, deep voice called from a distance, and men scrambled immediately to take their positions in the tanks. The convoy roared to life as exhaust fumes filled the air. Austin always had mixed emotions at the smell of diesel exhaust. On the one hand, the roar of the engines and the rumble of the tank filled him with a sense of awe at the astounding power at his command. But, then again, diesel was also the aroma of death, for practically every time the engines had roared in Africa and Sicily, people had died.

Word was passed down that a Panzer column of more than 2,000 Germans had just broken through an American line and were in a position to inflict even greater

damage if not stopped. True to their name, Hell on Wheels was lightning-fast in responding, and within minutes, the 78th was engaged a battle so fierce that every second that passed was filled with the sound of tank shells being hurled across the sky. The enemy was engaged at pointblank range, which nullified the slower Panzers' advantage of firing shells greater distances. For five hours, the tanks maneuvered and the guns bellowed, spitting smoke and fire with each shot. When the smoke finally settled, it was only the American soldiers who were able to climb from their tanks to survey the devastation. Not a single Panzer escaped, and not a single German survived. The men were elated at their victory, but the constant ringing in the ears from shell fire was deafening. They removed their earplugs and wiggled their fingers in their ears to make the ringing cease, but it was to no avail. (This, as it turned out, was why some of the Webster brothers at the family reunion were so hard-of-hearing.)

Later that evening, in the long, dark shadows just before sunset, a stocky, imposing-looking man visited the 78th at St. Denis le Gast. Behind him was a shorter, skinnier man who was carrying a camera. The soldiers, who were still eating their chow, fell quickly into formation when a Captain jumped up at the sight of the man and stood at attention. The imposing man, wearing dark glasses (despite the almost complete absence of light) and a helmet with three silver stars on it walked up one rank and down another before stopping directly in front of Austin. He removed his glasses and looked Austin over with steely eyes, before saying in a gruff voice, "Fine job today, soldier. Damn fine job." When the man nodded, Austin saluted, and the man returned the gesture. At that moment, the camera flashed, capturing three men in a forever-frozen image. The man replaced his glasses, hurriedly turned, and walked away without another word. He and

the cameraman departed in a jeep and, when the formation was dismissed, the men went back to their chow as if nothing had ever happened. Because of the darkness, only the Captain realized that a three-star General had just left the camp. Like all the men who were a part of the battle that day, he hadn't heard a word the General said. All he heard was the ever-present ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER SEVEN – THE WRONG SIDE OF THE BARBED WIRE

Prelude – Bridging the Disconnect

The events that took place on the wrong side of the barbed wire are at the heart of this narrative. The lived experiences of the four men discussed in these pages inspire me to learn as much as I can about World War II POWs and drive my efforts to do so. There is no possible way I can fully understand all they endured. I can listen, I can empathize, but I cannot truly identify. Their captivity, my freedom, and the passage of more than 60 years has created a disconnect that cannot be completely bridged. But that does not deter me from seeking to know all I can about the lives of my father and those who both fought with him and were captured with him.

From Warriors to Captives

October 28, 1944

With the entire German Army on the retreat, the 2nd Armored Division set out to chase them all the way back to Berlin. When they crossed over the Seine River in France, the men figured it would only be a matter of days before the Germans were completely routed or they would, at the very least, surrender.

As they traversed the picturesque river, Will shouted from his tank, which was directly behind Austin's, "Happy Birthday, Web. All I could getcha was this here river. Hope ya like it!"

"Yeah. I reckon it'll do. But, all things bein' equal, I'd rather be lookin' at the creek back home." Both laughed in agreement.

A few days later, the 2nd moved into Belgium. Hot on the heels of the still-retreating Germans, the men grew evermore confident with each successive victorious

battle. The Germans had been decisively defeated at the Belgian towns of Tournai, Braine le Compte, Wavre, and St. Trond. On the offensive since landing at Normandy, orders finally came in December for the 2nd and its allies to halt progress and take defensive positions just west of the German border. The 78th Field Artillery Regiment stopped between the towns of Samree and Houffalize, in the heavily-wooded and snow-covered Ardennes Forest. Most of the men interpreted this move as simply a period of rest before moving on to Hitler's headquarters in Berlin. They were wrong.

December 16, 1944

In the early morning darkness, the cold silence was broken by a barrage of enemy artillery. Accustomed to being awakened by occasional gunfire, the soldiers thought it to be nothing unusual. The guns were being fired from quite some distance away but, for some reason, none of the shells were hitting nearby. Nevertheless, they hurried to seek shelter in foxholes. Soldiers sat hunched in the tight quarters, looking at their watches. They were listening for the sounds of the guns and then for the explosions in an attempt to determine if the guns were getting any closer. But the guns were being fired in such rapid succession, it was nearly impossible. When, after several minutes, it was decided that the enemy was indeed approaching simply by the vibrations of the ground increasing, the order was given for the soldiers to take the positions in their tanks and engage the enemy. Will and Austin, in separate foxholes, passed the word down the line and took off running for their tanks. When they reached the tanks, the crews were already aboard making preparations to do battle. But before the commanders could give the word to proceed, two shells exploded between the tanks which were parked beside each other. The force of the shell rocked both tanks, sending the men inside

sprawling. No one was injured, but both tanks had incurred minor damage to the tracks and they were unable to move forward and take part in the battle.

The soldiers were unaware that the Germans had assembled 11 tank divisions to smash into the four American divisions protecting the area. Complicating the Americans' efforts was multitude of English-speaking Germans who'd dressed in American uniforms to infiltrate the units and create chaos in the midst of the battle. This German offensive had truly been well-planned and well-executed.

With nearly two German Tiger and Panzer tanks for every one American Sherman tank, the German forces had little trouble in forcing the Americans to retreat. Although the soldiers of the 2nd fought valiantly, they were simply overmatched. They were pushed back, thus creating a bulge in the line they were defending. This clash later became known to Americans as the Battle of the Bulge.

Though the Sherman tanks were slowly retreating, they did not give up the ground they'd fought so hard to get without a fight. Many tanks stood their ground for as long as they could before relenting. As Austin's tank slowly inched westward with guns firing, a German anti-tank shell found its mark at the base of his track, knocking it out of position. All Austin could do was move in a circle with one track operating. Knowing he and his men were a prime target, Austin ordered that the engine be silenced, and they would essentially "play dead" until they had the opportunity to exit the tank and make the needed repairs. Moments later, they could hear the deafening rumble and feel the vibrations as hundreds of German tanks passed them, leaving them untouched. When the noise had finally faded and they were certain they were now safe, Austin popped the hatch only to find the barrel of a Tiger tank pointed directly at his turret.

“Evyvun out! Now!” a man standing in the icy slush beside the tank ordered in a heavy German accent.

Austin raised his hands above his head, peered down into the tank, and said, “Damn! They got us, boys. There’s nothin’ more we can do. Let’s go.”

As each man disembarked, he was treated roughly and thrown into a formation where German soldiers held rifles on them. Before long, the formation had grown into dozens of American soldiers, all dejected with heads hung low.

As the men were searched, they were ordered to keep their hands on their heads. When one man’s arms grew weary and lowered them, he was shot in the forehead at point blank range. His lifeless body slumped to the ground, but no one dared move for fear of receiving the same punishment.

“Let zat be a lesson to ze rest of you. Do exactly as ve say or you vill be executed immediately,” a man in a black uniform ordered as he waved the smoking pistol under the noses of several prisoners.

Several jeeps appeared through the clearing smoke and fog, and the German officers climbed aboard. They barked orders to the enlisted men who then yelled at the prisoners and pushed them in the direction the jeeps were headed. Austin turned to follow the man next to him and slipped in the slush. His stomach hit the ground hard, and he could feel the air leave his lungs. He kept his fingers locked together atop his head, but struggled to get back to his feet. As he struggled to his knees, a German soldier hit him just above his left eye with the butt of his rifle. Blood poured freely down his face and he fell back to the ground. The German soldier grabbed another prisoner by the arm and ordered him to help Austin up. The man placed Austin’s arm

around his shoulder and aided him in walking. Due to the blood, which was pooling in his eyes, Austin could see nothing.

The prisoners marched all day and were taken to a temporary makeshift camp for the night. Lying in the frigid, open air all night, the only sound to be heard was the barking of the numerous German Shepherds which patrolled the perimeter of the camp with their masters. Austin, his sight beginning to clear, evidenced by the fact that he could see the moon as it glowed between the trees, simply stared into the sky. Aside from the snow, he thought, this place looked a lot like south Georgia. He longed to go home, but the Germans had other plans for him.

Interlude – Captured

Cranman

On a bombing run to Budapest, Hungary, my plane was struck by German fighters and disabled. As the plane descended to the Hungarian countryside, the crew began bailing out. Jumping out one of the side doors, my thoughts were at first filled not with pulling the chute, but with what awaited me on the ground. Our escape and evasion briefings always advised that while we were hanging there in the parachute with nothing to do, we should try to open our escape kit and hide some of the contents in our clothing before hitting the ground. This would keep the Nazis from finding it all bundled up in a neat package, which would make it too easy for them. I pulled the rip cord just a few thousand feet from the ground and worried that I would become entangled in trees and present an easy target for an angry passer-by. I began crashing through the trees and hit the ground hard, but because I was high on adrenaline, I felt no pain when I landed. My chute canopy was entangled but I didn't have to cope with it so I was able to conceal

myself quickly. I soon heard shouts and gunfire coming my way. I took off running, but was soon discovered by some local indigenous personnel. I learned quickly that these people had been told repeatedly by the Nazi propaganda machine that the Allies had recruited Jews to fly and drop bombs on their women and children in order to create terror. They called the airmen *terrorfleegers*, and the Jewish *terrorfleegers* were the absolute worst sort in their eyes. Prior to capture, it occurred to me that it would not bode well for me if the Nazis found me wearing the mezuzah I had attached to his my tags. When I reached to remove it, there was no sign of it even though my dog tags and chain were still in tact. I wondered if this might be divine protection. The local villagers who captured me, abused me with repeated blows to my face, head, neck, and back. Only one man, perhaps a local official who called for the beating to cease, and his wife, who offered me several glasses of water, showed me any measure of kindness. They kept me in their home until German officials arrived to take me away. I've often wondered if anything bad happened to those people for being nice to me. I was given no food from the morning of my flight to Budapest until the day after I arrived at a temporary camp in Budapest, some four days later. I was, however, reunited with some of my crew and I was thrilled to learn that all but one had survived. My journey to Stalag Luft III took several days by train and included several stops at which I was ridiculed, spat on, and beaten by many of the locals. The Germans did nothing to prevent it and, as I suspect, they relished in seeing it take place. I was interrogated by the Nazis twice, but I gave them no information other than what was mandated by the Geneva Convention: name, rank, and serial number. The Nazis never suspected they had a Jew in their midst.

Baylor

Well, after we got in Anzio, we worked our way inland and got good and dug in. Then we were told what we were doing there and what the goals were. We learned where the Germans were and where they had a stronghold. The rest was just your regular infantry work. You know, shooting and getting shot at. We began to work our way eastward very slowly. Later we turned and moved north. This was, I believe, in January of '44. On May 28th of '44, I celebrated my birthday by sitting in a foxhole the whole day. Two days later I was captured. I had this sergeant named Sergeant Hill. He and I were designated as scouts for this big operation. We had to take a hill that was said to contain a very light German force. At least that's what Intelligence told us... (laughter from both of us). Well, scouts go up a considerable distance ahead of the platoon. I crossed this open area and didn't draw any fire so we started to ascend this hill. At the foot of the hill we were supposed to overcome a few Germans, but there was an ambush up there. Instead of a token force of Germans, I believe half the German Army was waiting up there for us. They were hoping Sergeant Hill and I would lead our whole platoon up that hill and into their trap. Of course, we did not know they were there so we continued on and eventually the platoon closed ranks behind us. By the time we realized what had happened, the Germans had created a front and started firing on the platoon. The long and short of it is we were overcome. But neither Sergeant Hill nor I were wounded. I found out much later, many years after the war, that my platoon took an awful loss that day... almost fifty percent. I cannot fault Intelligence for that because so many times the very same thing happened to the German Army, too. Things were really different with intelligence back then. In this case, they had quite a force up there. I later

learned that our boys had two companies up there, too, at flanks on both sides of us. They heard the fighting, but they didn't get into the thick of it right away. They also got some radio messages from us. Eventually, they closed in and the hill was taken after a couple of days of fighting. It was mostly Americans in that group, but I think there was a small British contingent that was in on it, too. Anyway, Sergeant Hill and I were cut off from the rest of the platoon since we were so far in advance of the main push. It was easy for the Germans to capture us because we had no reinforcement. When we ran out of ammo, all we could do was hide since we were caught in the crossfire. We stayed low until two German soldiers yelled, 'Get up!' I swear that guy spoke such good English, I actually got up thinking it was one of my buddies telling me to get up. Right there on the front were taken prisoner, but it turned out to be the only time the Germans got real physical with me and Sergeant Hill. They knocked us around a little bit, but nothing too bad. They even allowed us to stay together, except for the time we were interrogated, of course. We were allowed to sleep in the same room in this old makeshift stockade they had. Then we were taken to a German captain a little behind the front lines but still mighty close to it. They knocked us around a little bit, but it didn't take them long, I believe, to realize that, as young as I was, I knew very little about what was going on. But now, I later talked to Sergeant Hill and learned that they didn't get much out of him either. Even with the information he knew, he did a good job of not divulging any of it. He was bruised a little bit but, from that point on, we never had anymore abuse from German guards at all. The big abuse we encountered was lack of food, clothing, and that sort of thing.

Waldrop

My crew and I were part of the 306th Bomb Group. In fact, we were part of the first bomb group to actually bomb Germany-proper. My crew and I were shot down on our fifth mission on a beautiful sunny afternoon in February of '44. The target for that day was Frankfurt, Germany. We bombed the absolute hell out of it, but we got shot down coming off the target. We were out of formation, way out by ourselves. The German Luftwaffe liked to knock planes out of formation so they could swing around and finish you off one-on-one. After getting hit, we were losing altitude coming off the target, you know, just limping along. Somebody yelled that bandits were coming in at twelve o'clock high or something like that and they turned out to be ME-109s. The first one flew by us and never got off a shot. The second one, he kept on going, too. Apparently, they were both out of ammo because they could have easily picked us off if they'd wanted to. We were in sight of the English Channel, but still over occupied France since this was before the [D-Day] invasion. All along the French coast, the Germans had set up flak guns to try and get you on the way to the target and they were waiting for you to shoot back across the Channel on the way home. That's what finished us off. I came down close to the Dunkirk-Calais area. And the great thing, if there was one, was that all ten of us got out of that thing alive. The plane was shot all to pieces, but nobody was killed. That was the first time I'd heard that a crew had to bail and all ten crew members got out. So we were real fortunate. I was unconscious when I hit the ground. There was a couple of inches of snow on the ground. I guess the wind caught my chute and dragged me a ways. I was fortunate to not come down in the trees or woods. Anyway, when I started getting my senses back I could hear the shouting and yelling all around me. I

think sometimes the louder you could shout in the German Army, the higher rank you were. These guys, I think they were called field police, found me. They wore brown uniforms and they all carried binoculars. Their main job was to watch for parachutes. I remember this one field police guy who wanted my helmet and goggles. I was lying on my back and he tried to rip my helmet off without loosening the strap and he almost pulled my head off. Other than that, I wasn't mistreated at all. In fact, those Germans picked me up and took me to a hospital since I got a broken leg when I hit the ground. I thought I broke my back but I didn't. It still hurt a lot, though. There were a few Americans in it but it was mostly German patients. They told me I was going to be taken to a German POW camp and two guards had to help me walk. We got on a train which took me right back to Frankfurt, the target we'd bombed. The main interrogation center for captured flyers was there. That was interesting. They took me into this German major's office. The German Luftwaffe, especially the officers, were highly polished from head to foot. They really went for the uniform. Of course, he spoke better English than I ever will speak. They were so expert at their job that I'm sure they could tell after five minutes if they were going to be able to get any information out of you. They were really pros. His first words to me were, something like, 'I see that one of your Hollywood celebrities is flying with you guys.' He meant Clark Gable. We talked for a few more minutes and never asked me a single question. Maybe I looked dumb or something, but he never even asked me my name, rank, or anything. I was sent back to my cell again. After they accumulated enough POWs they loaded us onto boxcars and took us to the camp.

It was evident to me from listening to Mr. Baylor's description of his capture that my worries of him admiring the scenery during battle were for naught. He was clearly well-trained and ready for battle. He had done much more than look at lizards and birds back at Camp Croft. It is interesting to note that he did not place blame for being captured on anyone. It is human nature to place blame for one's troubles, but he was adamant that, despite the inadequate intelligence that led him and Sergeant Hill up that hillside, the reasons for his captivity did not rest upon the shoulders of anyone other than himself.

Mr. Waldrop expressed two sentiments I certainly did not expect from one describing his captors: gratitude and admiration. If I were to place myself in his shoes, I do not know that I could have been grateful to an enemy who had shot me down and was about to place me in a prison camp. But upon further thought, I suppose I would have to have at least been somewhat thankful to have been taken to a hospital with a broken leg. After all, the Nazis could have just taken him straight to the camp with that broken leg. "Compassion" and "Nazis" are two words that are rarely used in conjunction with one another.

Mr. Waldrop also expressed admiration at the appearance of the German Luftwaffe officers, how "spit-shined" they were. Again, with the benefit of retrospect, it would be hard to imagine oneself thinking how well-dressed an enemy is when one is just a step away from imprisonment.

This leads me to wonder if, although the Nazis were truly a heinous enemy, there may not have been just a trace of respect for them on the part of the American GIs. After all, they shared a common race, whereas the Japanese were construed as savage

barbarians. I know for certain that there was, at the very least, a respect for the Germans' technological prowess and military expertise. On many occasions, my father regaled me with tales of how powerful the Panzer, Panther, Tiger, and Tiger-Elephant tanks were. As a Sherman tank commander, he recognized and respected the power at the hands of his enemy. But not only was there power – the Germans knew how to use it. They were, in my father's own words, "a superior fighting force." They were well-trained and motivated, though their motivation turned out to be misguided. Their biggest mistake was trying to fight a war on what turned out to be three fronts. The first two were against ground forces (primarily the Americans and especially the Russians) who greatly outnumbered them. The third, and most unexpected front from the Nazis' perspective, was in the air, where the Allied air superiority incessantly bombed and strafed the Germans into submission.

Life Inside the Perimeter

As many children do, I did not think before I asked my questions. "Daddy, that man really hit you with his gun? Did it hurt a lot?"

"Yeah, son, it hurt a lot. I had headaches for a long time after that. And I didn't think it was ever gonna stop bleeding. But one of the other guys who got caught that day made some bandages out of an old shirt and he wrapped my head for me. That was one of the weird things about the whole situation. I hated being captured but, looking back on it now, I really do miss some of the fellas I met there."

The next morning, after a night of practically no sleep due to the bitter cold, the prisoners were lined up side-by-side. While snarling, snapping dogs pulled their leashes taut, the German soldiers mumbled to each other and pointed at the prisoners. They

seemed to know something the captives did not.

The same officer who'd shot the man in the forehead the day earlier stepped out of a tent and approached the line of prisoners. He muttered to one of his subordinates who approached the line and began pointing and numbering the soldiers as he walked past them. Each soldier had a number of one, two, or three.

The officer then stood in a jeep and announced, "Today you will be relocated to your new home, Oflag Six." Smugly he proceeded, "I apologize for ze rather primitive conditions you ver forced to endure as you valked yesterday and slept during ze night. Most of you vill be able to ride in a truck today. However, due to overcrowding in ze camp, many of you vill not be making ze trip. Some of you vill be staying here...forever."

At that word, a young German soldier calmly walked down the line, shooting every soldier who'd been identified as a number three. The remaining soldiers desperately wanted to help their comrades, but were powerless against the Germans' weapons and dogs.

When the sound of the rifles had faded into the forest, the officer said, "Now, zat wasn't so bad, vuz it? At least for you." He turned and sat in the jeep which then pulled away.

Though heartbroken at watching his fellow soldiers die such a horrid and cruel death, Austin was indeed thankful that he was a number two and not a three. He stood motionless, but the stress he felt at coming so close to dying had caused his heart to pound like the galloping of horses' hooves. The sudden surge of blood caused the wound on his head to reopen, sending a fresh red stream trickling down his forehead. As much as it burned when it reached his eye and as bad as it tasted when it seeped in through the

corner of his mouth, he dared not wipe it away.

The prisoners were herded into the canvas-covered trucks, with three guards and their demon-dogs accompanying them. As the truck pulled away, Austin gazed to his left without turning his head to see the lifeless bodies lying on the ground, being covered by falling snow. He said a silent prayer for them as the truck rounded a bend and the corpses were no longer in sight.

The convoy rode for hours, stopping several times for the Germans to relieve themselves on the side of the road. But the prisoners were not allowed that luxury, and many of them had no choice but to urinate or defecate on themselves. By the time the truck reached its destination, Oflag Six, nearly twelve hours later, the trucked wreaked of urine and feces. As punishment for creating such a foul odor, all of these new arrivals were forced to sleep in their soiled clothing the first night.

Early the next morning, before light, the door was flung open, and the men instinctively sought refuge by curling up in a defenseless fetal-like position. "You vill all shower and be in ze yard in 10 minutes. Move!" The German left the small cabin and a tall man with an English accent emerged from behind a bunk at the far end of the cabin.

"Tally-ho gentlemen. Since you were all brought in last night after lights out, we've not yet had the pleasure of being introduced. I am Colonel Lexington, the senior officer here." Seeing the new prisoners' apprehension at arising from their bunks and looking at his watch, he continued, "I see that you are enlisted men and since this is an officers' camp, you will not likely be here long. But you would do well to do as the goons say while you are here. They can be bloody cruel if they take a turn to be. So, everyone up, and let us start the day out right. You'll find plenty of soap and a change of

clothing in the shower house. Off you go now.” The men pulled themselves up at the prospects of a clean body and clothing to match.

The jolliness in his voice seemed out of place, Austin thought. It was almost if he were an English Lord preparing for afternoon tea rather a prisoner of war. But Austin took solace in the fact that this Englishman was in good spirits. Perhaps, he reasoned, life in a POW camp would not be as bad as he'd heard after all.

The men soon realized, however, that though they did not have to perform hard labor, life was by no means easy for them. They had roll call every hour from sunrise to sunset, were given rotten vegetables and rancid, maggot-filled meat to eat (the dogs would not even touch it), and were forced to listen to propaganda messages and the Nazis' national anthem over the public address system for hours at a time.

The cabins had no heat, but each man was given a blanket and pillow. Even with nighttime temperatures routinely in single digits, the close quarters afforded them the advantage of shared body heat. Nighttime was the only time the men could speak openly without fear of reprisal from the guards.

Aachen, Day 12, 9:50 P.M.

The sound of sirens, the panning of spotlights through cabin windows, and the barking of dogs awoke the prisoners. Even without ever having heard the sirens before, all the prisoners from the 2nd Armored knew that a prison escape had been detected. Men sprang from their bunks to get a look outside. After a few moments, the wailing sirens gave way to the growling and snarling of dogs. Men struggled in the cabins to see what was happening, and then they saw him. A French soldier, known only as Philippe, had become entangled in the razor wire at the bottom of the fourth and outermost fence.

The dogs had picked up his scent and led the Germans directly to him before he could cut his way through. With spotlights locked on him, the dogs were released, and were given free reign to annihilate him. In a matter of minutes Philippe was dead and the dogs were satisfied. The next morning, several prisoners were ordered to collect the remaining pieces of his body and bury them. A small sliver of paper, with no writing on it, was found still clenched between two fingers on a dismembered hand. As Austin walked with his group toward the chow hall, he saw one of the dogs on guard licking his teeth which were still stained pink from Philippe's blood. The Germans had purposefully placed the dogs in full view as a message to any prisoner who may consider escaping.

Later that afternoon, sirens wailed again, but this was no escape attempt. An Allied bomber had been spotted. Knowing that the Allies would never risk killing their own soldiers in a bombing run, the Germans made no attempt to scurry for cover. Without anti-aircraft artillery, they simply stood with eyes skyward as they watched it fly out of sight. Assuming it was merely a plane returning to its base after hitting another target, no more thought was given to it.

Aachen, Day 21, 5:30P.M.

Following the evening meal, the prisoners were ordered to fall into formation for the customary roll call. They waited in place silently as they were all accounted for when a large, canvas-covered truck approached the outer gates. The guards opened the large double gates and the truck pulled far enough forward for the outer gates to be secured. When they were locked another set of guards opened the inner gates and the truck pulled into the compound directly in front of the formation.

Austin counted silently as 16 soldiers, all wearing American insignia, hopped

from the back. The last to hit the ground had a familiar face. It was Will. Elated at the sight of his best friend and comforted to know he was alive, Austin also felt sad at knowing he had been captured. Still, he did not look injured, so Austin was relieved and could not wait to speak to him.

Their eyes met as Will passed by on his way to the cabin, but he showed no sign of recognizing Austin. Austin felt disappointed at being spurned, but then he realized that Will, too, must still remember the first rule they learned in basic training – never bring attention to oneself.

As Austin's cabin was the only one of the 12 in the camp that had any open bunks, the new prisoners were placed there. When the final formation of the day was dismissed, they calmly and quietly returned to their cabins. But when Austin walked through the door, he was tackled by his buddy. They hugged and rolled on the floor until they were ordered up by Colonel Lexington.

"I take it you know this man, Webster," he said.

"Oh, yes, sir," Austin replied. "This is Sergeant Will Thomas, sir. We grew up together."

Flippantly, the colonel raised one eyebrow and said, "I see." He looked Will up and down and continued, "Well then, I suppose you two have a lot to talk about. Carry on."

With lights out time (8:00P.M.) approaching quickly, the men made preparations to hit the bunks. The next five hours were filled with the newcomers' stories and updates about how the fighting had gone since the capture of Austin's group. They told how the Germans had sent 11 armored divisions to break the Allied line in the Ardennes and how

the line had indeed bulged but hadn't broken. As the men grew weary and the talk became more sporadic, Will asked Colonel Lexington, "Sir, I hope you don't mind me asking, but how long have you been here?"

"Lad, I believe next month will make a year. I pray you and these other fine gentlemen will not be here that long," he replied.

Will, with only Austin and the Colonel still awake to hear his reply, whispered, "Me, too, sir." Taking a pencil and notepad from the floor nearby, he scribbled the words 'To grandmother's house we go. I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down. Goodnight, Irene.' Will handed the paper to the Colonel, who held it up to the moonlight to read. Not another word was spoken, and the men drifted off to sleep.

Interlude – Ennui and Academe

It was education – belated, but education nonetheless (Halmos, Jr., 1996, 85).

The three former POWs' tone changed somewhat as they discussed their experiences in the various camps where they had been detained. The confident tones that had been prevalent in our discussions were now replaced with a more reserved, almost reverent, mood.

Baylor

We were moved around a lot, from camp to camp, because at this stage of the war the Allies were hot on the heels of the Germans so they were doing everything they could to keep us away from our buddies. Mainly, it was the Russians who were moving in from the east, moving west. The Germans were scared to death of those Russians. I was sent first to a camp near Munich, Germany. I spent the Christmas of '44 there. The goons even allowed us to have a little Christmas pageant there. As a matter of fact, the Germans

even attended it without their rifles. I guess they were starved for a return to some normalcy like we were, though certainly not as much as us. Of course there were guards still outside the pageant hall, but I think they came to join the entertainment themselves. From that point on I was moved four other times. A typical day in all of the camps would start around 6:30 in the morning. Someone would yell for soup carriers to warm up the soup. The carriers knew where to report and what to do. They would carry a big wooden barrel, like the old-fashioned wine barrels that were made out of wood, on their shoulders into the barracks. Most of the time it would be potato soup...weak. A lot of soup...very few potatoes. Sometimes there would be some cabbage in it, but still it was very thin soup. The same thing occurred around noon time. They brought in more soup and then in the evening we were supposed to get a Red Cross parcel. One parcel a week for every man. That didn't exactly turn out that way because as time went on, you understand this was late '44, things were very bad for the Germans. We could tell, we could see that the goons were moving everything by horse and wagon instead of using vehicles. We knew this was a sign that they were losing the war because they were now having to take even the most rickety of equipment and move it to the front. Old Hitler thought he was going to take over the world and he thought little Germany would be able to fight on two fronts...Russians on one and all the other Allies on another. It didn't work because the Russians really started moving. I guess the thing I recall most deeply from the time I enlisted until I was discharged is a camp that was near Auschwitz. I confess I didn't know, and most of my buddies in the camp didn't know, about what was going on with Hitler's final solution, about ridding Europe of all the Jews. But I noticed the first couple of days at this camp...we all noticed this wreaking odor in the air, and the rations were

even more meager than at Munich, in the camp near Munich. Incidentally, at Munich, we worked on a railroad during the day. The British would come and bomb it at night and we would get sent back out to prepare the railroad. But then at this camp near Auschwitz we all noticed this odor, but as time went on we quit talking about it because it didn't enter our mind what it really was. But after I'd been there about two to three months, I was over in the Serbian compound. Germans kept prisoners separated to the extent that they tried to keep British isles, and all Irish, English, Welsh together... Americans sometimes mixed with Canadians. Russians were kept separate. Serbians...all the nationalities of Eastern Europe were kept together. The Russians got horrible treatment. I witnessed several being shot right there in the compound. The German guard was coming up and telling them to get back when they were throwing bread over the fence. They had wheelbarrows of bread and they would push it along and throw bread over the fence. And there were several incidences where the prisoners for one reason or another didn't do what the guards wanted them to do and they just shot them. But one day, when I was in the Serbian compound – that was in the back of the camp – I saw this column of walking skeletons dressed in white and black striped suits. Some of them were so weak they could hardly stand. They put them in a compound and locked them up before marching them to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. The Germans were running out of mostly fuel so they were marching their prisoners there on foot. The next day I went back to the Serbian compound and there were rows of corpses stacked about 10 high. That certainly made a lasting impression on me. And every once in a while, when some American is unhappy with this free land we live in...comes out and says the Holocaust was perpetuated by those who experienced it, I say that is a damn lie because I saw with

my own eyes what was going on. Life every day in the camp was tedious because of the stress you were under when all you could do was think and not do much else. If you were fortunate enough to come up on a book to read, you could escape in those pages for a little while but, in my camp at least, there were far too many prisoners and far too few books to go around. I will say, however, that I feel so fortunate that I ended up in the European theater rather than the Oriental theater because America knows how POWs there were treated since there are so many films that document things like building the railroads and bridges. The brutality was barbaric. I'm so thankful that I was a POW [of the Germans] as opposed to the Japanese where the chances of getting out of a Japanese prison camp if you were out on a work detail, which I served on work details, was very slim.

Upon entering Stalag Luft III in August 1944, Mr. Cranman joined dozens of new *Kriegies* who took "mug shots" and were issued identification cards and German dog tags. They were given summer and winter clothing and a few basic amenities which included a toothbrush, shaving razor, fork and spoon, bowl, dish, and cup. He was now among the more than 5,000 American Army Air Corps officers to whom the Germans repeatedly declared, "For you, ze war is over." To that statement, Mr. Cranman believes that although POWs were no longer in combat, they were still a force to be reckoned with if, for no other reason, than their presence made it necessary for the Germans to pull valuable manpower off the front lines to serve as guards and other support personnel. He stated, "If they were guarding us, they could not be on the front lines fighting our troops. That was our contribution to the continuing war effort." And despite the fact that they were cut off from the rest of the Allied force, they still used their ingenuity to keep up on

current events related to the war.

Cranman

There wasn't a whole lot to enjoy in place like a POW camp, but we relished in two things: tormenting the guards and keeping up with the news through our own secret news service. Some of the guys in the camp were real good at electronics. They were able to bribe or black-mail the goons to get some parts to build very small crystal radio receivers. This enabled us to get the Allied version of how the war was going. Up until that point, all we knew was what the goons told us. Surprisingly, a lot of what they told us turned out to be true, but it was often watered down. They might admit losing a particular battle, but they might say that 500 Germans were killed when the BBC was reporting two or three thousand were killed. The goons were also reporting information that was maybe a week or two old whereas the BBC was reporting information within a day or two. By listening to those reports we were actually aware of things the goons didn't know. Of course, we never let on that we knew anything. On a daily basis several men who had already been cleared and deemed trustworthy would memorize the news and then tell it to representatives from each barracks. They then memorized it and repeated it to the representatives from each room who then shared the handed-down versions with their roommates. When we first got into the camp, nobody would share news with us until someone attested to the fact that we were who we said we were, or until we received mail from home. The Germans were real good at planting spies in the barracks so we had to be very careful about who we shared information with. I was soon okayed by my friend from bombardier school. Up until that point, all the guys in our room would meet while I was out of the room.

Realizing that Stalag Luft III was the camp that was later glorified in the film *The Great Escape*, I asked Mr. Cranman if he ever entertained thoughts of escaping.

Without hesitation he continued,

I had already experienced what a daunting task it was to evade capture on the outside, and had already made up my mind that it was safer to become lost among large groups and not call attention to myself. Even with the insecurity we faced as POWs, I believe that it was safer inside the camp than outside of it. Escape was never in my plans, even though were we told it was our duty to escape if given the opportunity.

The day-to-day life in camp centered around the morning and evening roll call. The only reason any of us looked forward to that was it gave us a chance to screw with the guards. They would always have to count then recount us. Invariably, a few of the guys would move around after getting counted to make them get numbers that didn't match. They'd get pretty frustrated and aggravated which was hilarious to us. I tried it a couple of times, but when the guards would click their guns to put a round in the chamber and point them at us everybody stopped moving around.

Believe it or not, clothes washing was a very interesting activity. There were two methods. The first was the pogo stick method where you would use a broom handle that was attached to a tin can with holes punched in one end. Water would be put in the bucket with a few soap shavings. Then you just plunged the stick up and down. The second method was the one I used since I didn't have a handle. I had to use a brush and go to the latrine where there was cold running water. I'd wet down my clothes and then spread them on a stone table near the faucet. Then I'd soap up the brush and scrub them with the wet soap lather. Both methods got the dirt out, but either way your clothes came

out wrinkled as hell. After a couple of days the wrinkles would fall out. Hey, we were being inspected on cleanliness, not neatness. To say that activities like that were interesting is a testament to just how boring camp life was. The afternoons were usually spent visiting, walking, reading, and whatever else each person had to do for that day. Six guys in our room were hot on cribbage, and they usually had a game going just about everyday. I thought it was a dumb game and never got interested in it. After the afternoon roll call, the room cooks would get started on the evening meal which was really the highlight of the day. The evening meal was important for two reasons: it was the biggest meal and it also was the time we would discuss the BBC news which included the location of battle lines on all three fronts, France, Italy, and the Russians to our east. There was lots of speculation as to who would reach us first. After all the dishes were removed and cleaned, the goons came around to lock each barracks, and we had to close our blackout shutters until lights out, when they could be opened, weather permitting. As the day's activities came to a close and we prepared for bed, things quieted down. My bunk was at the top of a triple-decker, about three feet from the ceiling. Once I got there I was there so I had to always make sure I used the latrine before going to bed. Once I was in my bunk, I would think, 'Well, there goes another day,' and then I would wonder how many more I would have to endure before I would get out of there, or if I ever would. I felt helpless, but not hopeless, and I experienced loneliness I cannot express in words. My thoughts were always of home and of the ones I loved. I desperately loved Helen, but I did not know what my future would be, or if she would be there for me if I ever got home.

Waldrop

I was taken to Stalag Luft VI, the most northern of all German World War II POW camps. You know, the biggest horror of all was you never really knew what they were going to do next. The camp when I was there consisted of just one large building with, believe it or not, a dirt floor. Food rations were very poor. We'd get Red Cross parcels every once in a while, I think they were actually supposed to give one parcel to each man per week, but that never happened. They were always tore through by the time we got them, especially cigarettes. I was real fortunate because I didn't smoke so I could use them to trade for other things. It was just like having money in your pocket. The routine procedure was to get us out in the open and count us twice a day. When that happened the German sergeant came in with a couple of other guys carrying machine pistols, I think they called them. We'd harass the guards to a point. This German sergeant would go up and down the ranks counting, but he'd never get the same count twice because some of the fellas in the back would keep moving around a lot. Oh, it would piss him off something fierce. Then he'd order the guards to fix bayonets, and when that happened, everybody stayed in their spot. I saw a couple get shot once for breaking a rule everybody knew they shouldn't have but, other than that, I never saw any real acts of cruelty. While we were out getting counted, some of the goons, we called them, who were dressed in blue overalls, would carry steel rods into the barracks and poke around to see if they could find anything illegal. A lot of times you'd go back in and the place would be torn apart. Boy, you sure didn't want the goons to find anything they could tie to you. We learned real quick how to hide things good. You could walk around the perimeter of the fence. There was this rail that was about 20 yards from the

fence, about knee high. You could walk on the inside of that rail, but you knew better than to go beyond that rail. There were even signs posted in English that warned us to stay on the inside of the rail. That's why the guys I mentioned got shot. It wasn't like they were just going after a ball or something. They just defiantly walked past the rail and each got two bullets in the chest for it. Those goons in the towers were crack shots. They fired just the four shots between the two of them. One shot to stop each of them and a second to finish them off. It was damn scary to watch but, of course, there wasn't a thing we could do about it. We weren't allowed to gather up outside in groups of more than three at a time. I guess the goons didn't want us making any plans as a group but, hell, there wasn't whole we could plan anyway. Even though the barracks had dirt floors there was pretty much no way anybody could escape. The camp sat in a wide open field about a half mile from the nearest tree line. Had we had wooden floors, we could have maybe concealed a tunnel. But with just dirt, there was no way to hide any digging. Plus, in that part of Europe, the soil deep down a couple or three feet, from what I heard, was a much different color from that on top. We couldn't hide soil that was a different color. We were just there until somebody came to get us. We sure as hell learned how to be patient! One day in Six we heard a lot of commotion outside. You have to realize that the tree line there was about three-quarters of a mile from the fence. We heard this whistling out in the trees. Pretty soon we found it to be a Messerschmitt 262 twin engine jet, the first jet ever in combat. They had to have known we were all airmen so they flew that sucker over the camp three or four times. Man, we thought to ourselves, 'If they have many of those damn things, we'll never get home.' It was pretty depressing. Camp Six was way up in Lithuania, on the Baltic Sea. We got word pretty soon after

getting there that the Russians had gone on the offensive. We knew it was true when we could see the sky to the east light up at night. A rumor came swirling throughout the camp that we were going to be evacuated pretty soon. This turned out not to be true. The Germans did not want to leave anything for the oncoming Russians so our rations increased a little bit and we started to get more from the Red Cross parcels. We were glad as hell to see that. The Germans took all our wounded out by train, I have no idea where they went or if they were ever okay. The Germans then ended up taking rest of us to a Baltic seaport and loaded us down into an old oar ship, one ladder down in the hold. That was like a bunch of slaves down in there, it was crowded in there. You had your knees up under your chin and it was hot as blazes in there. I was on that thing for three days, I believe. Rumor was we were being moved to Stalag Luft IV, an escape-proof camp. All the buildings there were up off the ground so the dogs could get under the buildings and look for tunnels. Incidentally, I never saw a single German Shepherd the whole time I was a prisoner, all I ever saw was Dobermans. One interesting thing I learned about those dogs was if the trainer of a particular dog was ever killed, they had to shoot his dog. Those things would respond to only one person. Anyway, Camp IV was in Tychowo, Poland, on the German border. Most POW camps were divided into four compounds, but this one had a guard tower in the center of the compound. It was so big and high that there was actually a road underneath it. And, of course there were towers at each corner of the camp. They all had machine guns and search lights. Since it was a fairly new camp some of the guards would put cardboard up on the fence and use it for target practice. It scared the hell out of me at first because there was no warning. I thought for sure someone was begin shot to pieces. But it also showed us that those

goons meant business. Just like the guys back at Camp Six, they could hit anything they wanted. Well, I ended up staying in Four about eight weeks, too. Then, of course, the Russians kept their offensive going so we had to evacuate Camp Four. As we were leaving Camp Four to get away from the Russians who were really bearing down on us by this time, I learned where all our Red Cross parcels were. There was about a foot of snow on the ground as we were marching out and I saw this German sergeant waving a pistol at us, yelling for us to come to him. Around the corner were stacks and stacks of unopened Red Cross parcels. He was yelling for us to take them with us. That joy was short-lived, though. We were just beginning a three-month march in the snow that would take us about 500 miles. Every POW I've ever spoken to who was in the Black March said that was the most miserable thing he'd ever gone through. It was unbearable conditions. I have no idea where we were going, and I really don't know if the Germans even knew. I think they were just trying to keep us ahead of the Russians. They kept telling us we were going to a better place, but we never found that to be true. Nobody was properly dressed and it was one of the coldest winters that area had ever had. Frostbite caused us to lose a lot of guys on that trip. That's what I think about whenever I see that POW memorial. That statue is wearing a heavy coat. You gotta be kidding me! If they wanted to show what it was really like, he'd have been wearing a light coat at best and he'd be marching in boots that had holes or no boots at all!

In recalling the tales of my father, through interviewing three former POWs, and by reading the accounts of various American POWs in Europe (*Kriegies*), I have found five common threads amongst this brotherhood: the fence, malnutrition, escaping (both emotionally and physically), hope, and, surprisingly, education. To varying degrees, all

of these were under control of the Nazi goons.

Whoever said “good fences make good neighbors” was obviously never a prisoner of war. What was perhaps most disheartening about the fence was that, at certain camps, it was not all that difficult to get through it. Its simplicity seemed to beckon its involuntary inhabitants to breach it. Getting out of the camp was not the hard part for some POWs. The two main obstacles to overcome were the dogs (German Shepherds and, more commonly, Dobermans) and the goons. And of these two, the dogs were by far worse. The goons could be negotiated with, bribed, or blackmailed, but the dogs were ruthless. The soldiers would often purposely deprive the dogs of food for days at a time to increase their hunger. And rather than giving them water, they would occasionally give them human blood so that they would crave it and want to mangle prisoners when given the opportunity. As Private First Class Arnold F. Franke tells, “They had a guard on a tower with a machine gun guarding us; in the yard they had dogs guarding us. If one of us got close to the fence, those dogs would come after us” (Franke, 1998, p. 168).

But whereas the dogs could be avoided, the food could not. The staple “food” the POWs were given was far from desirable. It consisted of “one thick, almost unchewable slice of black bread which seem[ed] to be made of large amounts of sawdust and little else, and a mug of what the Germans insisted was coffee” (Halmos, Jr., 1996, p. 9). This single slice - which had to last all day - often had to be divided among four or five soldiers, and as bad as it tasted, food was at such a premium, that not a single crumb ever went to waste (McCullen, 1997, p. 77). The ersatz coffee, made of parched grain, was so bad that even starving soldiers frowned on drinking it unless it was their last option.

States one soldier, “The coffee was too nasty to steal” (Westheimer, 1992, p. 46). On the few days there were multiple meals, lunch or supper usually consisted of soup, containing either trace amounts of onions, potatoes, or rice. On all-too-sparse good days, the soup might have a hint of antipasto or dates. But more often than not, it was simply an unrecognizable broth. Occasionally POWs were given a pat of ersatz oleo or a teaspoon of coarse sugar. Lucky POWs might be able to steal a potato from time to time. Most notably absent from their diets was meat. But even the goons went without this luxury. Westheimer (1992, p. 47) says that “[we had] sustenance four times a day and all we thought about was food. Well, girls, too, and maybe home. But mostly food.” The saving grace for the prisoners came in the form of Red Cross packages. Each country was responsible for packing and shipping these packages so the POWs would receive different “treats,” depending on which camp they were in. British parcels routinely contained large amounts of foods (powdered eggs and hot cereals) which had to be cooked. Unfortunately, however, only one package - containing enough food for a week’s sustenance for one man – had to be shared by four or five soldiers (McCullen, 1997), and they were doled out usually only once per month. American Red Cross packages had cans of meat, but the German guards would routinely “punch holes in every can of meat we would receive which caused the meat to spoil” (McLaughlin, 1998, p. 37). The packages also contained a D-ration bar (chocolate bar), Klim (a milk substitute), cheese, coffee, vegetables, and cigarettes (Roberts, 1998). And while the food was greatly appreciated, the D-bars and cigarettes were pure gold. POWs routinely used them to bribe guards to acquire everything from blankets and extra food to more shower time and radio parts. But, to many soldiers, perhaps the most important items in

Red Cross packages were books. The key to surviving in a POW camp, as Halmos, Jr. (1996) states, is to keep yourself busy. And this the prisoners did with remarkable deftness. They may not have been able to escape physically, but many chose to leave reality behind in the comforting pages of a book which allowed them to daydream their way into the woods beyond the fence. “It is not at all forbidden to use a text for daydreaming, and we do this frequently, but daydreaming is not a public affair; it leads us to move within the narrative wood as if it were our own private garden” (Eco, 2001, p. 10). Almost as if she were a prisoner as well, Lessing states, “But I was reading and re-reading the same books: I was reading as an aid to daydreaming...I dreamed of glamorous futures” (1994, p. 160).

What keeps a man going through his darkest hours? A POW will tell you it is hope – hope for a better day, hope of seeing loved ones again, hope for a return to normalcy. In World War II, a yet unnamed phenomenon – the Stockdale Paradox – was at work in POW camps (Collins, 2001). Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranking United States military officer imprisoned in Vietnam. He spent eight tortuous years in the infamous Hanoi Hilton. The paradox that bears his name offers an explanation as to why he was able to survive eight years in such horrid conditions when many POWs around him died after just weeks or months in captivity.

Stockdale credits never losing faith in the *end* of the story as his saving grace. He never doubted that he would make it out and that he would eventually prevail. He realized from the start of his captivity that he would need to maintain the attitude that he would make his experience a defining, but not condemning, moment in his life.

So why exactly did so many men die when he did not? How were they different from him? According to Stockdale, the men who died were optimists. They were the ones who would say things like, “We’ll be home by Christmas.” Then Christmas would pass and they would say, “We’ll be home by Easter,” and so on. They literally died of a broken heart. That, according to Stockdale, is why it is so vital to look at the *end* of the story rather than at chapters along the way. Setting milestones and benchmarks can be and has been fatal. It is okay to hope, but one has to hope for the right thing.

Only Mr. Baylor made mention of any milestone event that took place during his captivity, that being his birthday, but he never stated anything like, “I wished I could have been home by my birthday.” Neither Cranman nor Waldrop ever mentioned having missed any holiday or special event. Perhaps it was their attitude of looking for hope in the end of the story, albeit unbeknownst to them at the time, that kept them alive. Mr. Cranman’s longing to see Helen again, Mr. Baylor’s love for and call to study nature, and Mr. Waldrop’s sheer determination to triumph over his captors kept them focused on the end of the story.

POW Eugene Halmos, Jr., like my father, was indicative of thousands of soldiers who were sorely lacking in formal education at the time they enlisted or were drafted. But they are among just a scant few who expressed any positive thoughts at all when reflecting on their time as POWs. In describing his time in a camp, Halmos, states that “[captivity] is the first chance many of us have had in years (me included) to do any serious reading, catch up on ourselves mentally. And, thanks to the Red Cross and the YMCA, we have a pretty fair library here, containing some 2000 volumes of all kinds” (Halmos, Jr., 1996, p. 25).

The POWs were not reading merely dime store novels. Among the books I have found that were available to POWs include *Ivanhoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *David Copperfield*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Moby Dick*, *Jane Eyre*, *Dombey and Son*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Return of the Native*, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, *There Goes the Queen*, *The Great Escape* (ironically), *Mathematics for the Millions*, *Music for All of Us*, English and Spanish grammar books, French language textbooks, westerns, and mystery novels. The goons were surprisingly cordial when it came to allowing the POWs to read. One humorous account is told by the author of *Von Ryan's Express*, which later became an acclaimed movie: "On occasion a guard we learned to call "Changadabook" would come to our room and exchange books for us. We called him Changadabook because " Changa da book" is what he always said" (Westheimer, 1992, p. 33). Mr. Cranman recalled Changadabook, stating that he had good sense of humor and would converse with the POWs and trade cigarettes and other items he'd gotten from Red Cross parcels.

Nearly every soldier who was to see combat, was given a Testament, "furnished by the Army and there was a version for Protestant, Catholic, and Jew" (McCullen, 1997, p. 81). Private First Class Melvin W. Zerkel stated, "While I was a prisoner, I was able to keep my New Testament and Psalms with me, I read from it for devotions. The comfort and encouragement I received from reading the Psalms was especially helpful to me" (Zerkel, 1998, pp. 161-162). Even German magazines and newspapers, loaded with Nazi propaganda, were read by American POWs. But the mere presence of literature does not a school make. These resourceful and inventive prisoners actually managed to create their own war prisoner school, *Kriegsgefangen Schule*.

Stalag Luft III (Mr. Cranman's home for nearly 10 months), which is translated as Air Camp Three, was located near a small town of Sagan (now in Poland) in the Lower Silesia region of Germany, about 100 miles southeast of Berlin and 75 miles northwest of Breslau. The topography of the land was relatively flat but was also heavily forested. The camp was constructed on a partially cleared tract southeast of town and was divided into four compounds.

With the aid of the American Red Cross, Stalag Luft III was transformed into Sagan University, a setting which allowed many of its inhabitants the opportunity to grow intellectually. These clever and imaginative men took whatever meager academic resources they were given and were able to make the most of it, in some instances even offering coursework that was deemed worthy of college credit after the war, hence the name Sagan University. In just this one camp there were 1,500 prisoners hailing from varied professional and educational backgrounds. But they came together to conduct courses within their own areas of expertise and, as a result, 27 courses were held every day. Teachers provided vocabulary words by dictation, and the POWs would copy their words on notebooks provided by the Red Cross.

David Westheimer, an American POW who was confined with several British troops recalled one British POW who knew French, German, and Italian. He was also quite adept at playing both popular and classical music, and would even lead small groups in skits to entertain the troops. Even the goons would sometimes laugh at the comical routines he would create. He told of how all of the prisoners, but particularly the British, liked to keep busy. To do so, they started a "university" in which they offered courses in French, German, English, literature, military history, economics, and

philosophy. In fact, several of the prisoners had been professors before the war, with one attaining full professor status at the University of Calcutta and another having taught military history in London. For some reason he still cannot attest to, at one point it became en vogue to learn about South America, so prisoners began writing home for books about South American countries. When the books finally arrived, a waiting list had to be initiated because the largest room in the camp was too small to accommodate all of the prisoners who wanted to take the course. He states, "I'd majored in chemistry at Rice and now, with so much spare time, I'd be able to round out my education" (Westheimer, 1992, p. 56). The love of learning had become so great in that particular camp that when the POWs were told they would be leaving on a march to a town forty kilometers away, many cherished items were left behind but the books and the toilet paper found their way into every available knapsack. (Hopefully, they were not going to be used for the same purpose!)

But not every POW shared the love of learning that these men did. In fact, in almost every camp, the "book worms" were in the minority. And, just like in American schools, those who were thought to be the "brains" were sometimes treated with contempt by their peers. I can envision my father as one of those who were probably leading the chorus of jeers. One particular POW – Buckner was his name – had a healthy disdain for anything cultural, and he made no attempts to hide his disgust with those who wanted to waste time reading. He had dropped out of school to join the military and he had no intentions of returning to the boring setting of the classroom (like my father). Yet Buckner went on to serve twenty years in the military, obtain two advanced degrees, and become an English professor at the University of Louisiana in Shreveport. Here was a

man who had absolutely no desire for formal education, and yet it took the confinement of a POW camp for him to discover the works of “Dickens, Thackeray, and French and Russian novelists” (Westheimer, 1992, p. 185).

For many POWs, the seeds of academia which were planted in the camps bloomed years later in the University. One such man, who still carries on the academic tradition today, is Sam Higgins. “After his release [from the military], Higgins returned to the United States and attended the University of Alabama. He received his J.D. in 1949 and his M.B.A. in Labor Economics in 1950. In 1972, he received a M.Ed. in education from West Chester State College. In 1982, he received his Ph.D. in Philosophy with a major in Education from Florida State University” (Higgins, 1999, pp. 215-216).

These men were in an impossible situation yet they found a way to educate themselves. Without being cognizant, they were the embodiment of Pinar’s *currere*, the running of the course, the lived experiences, and it is here that we discover an intersection between POWs and curriculum studies. Their experiences took them to a place in academe that no one could have foreseen. Before joining or being drafted into the military, essentially all servicemen learned in the classroom in a traditional school setting. Once in the military, many like Mr. Cranman (a bombardier), Mr. Waldrop (a waste gunner), and my father (a tank commander) received specialized training that required even more learning. Even the grunts on the ground (like Mr. Baylor) without whom no war can be won, had to learn how to become infantrymen. But once they were behind the barbed wire, learning did not cease. For some it was a continuation of the education they received as children. For others, it was a new journey into academe. Some learned from books, but certainly all had to learn to cope – cope with confinement,

loneliness, pain, and deprivation.

The field of curriculum studies “is preoccupied with *understanding*” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996, p. 6). These men sought understanding on many levels – understanding of the war, understanding of their captivity, understanding of themselves. My purpose in curriculum studies is to also find understanding on multiple levels: understanding of the men who fought, understanding of my father, and understanding of myself. This narrative inquiry approach also provides an avenue for former POWs’ understanding of themselves and the forces that impacted their lives.

CHAPTER EIGHT – THREE F’S OF LIBERATION

Prelude – Fortitude and Fortune

As we have recounted, not all POWS who lived in the camps had the opportunity to live on the other side of the barbed wire. Some died of disease, some died of exposure, and some were killed by the enemy. Still others died of a broken spirit. This chapter is dedicated to those who had the fortitude and, in some cases, just good fortune, to live to see liberation. For them, freedom came without pomp and circumstance, but they did not mind. They were simply thankful to once again have a measure of self-determination.

Freedom

At 3:00A.M., the prisoners were awakened by the squeaking of hinges. In the doorway stood an immense figure with a rifle pointed upward in one hand as the butt rested on his left hip and a large silver knife, dripping blood, at his side in his right hand. As before, the men instinctively sought protection until the voice whispered, “It’s okay, gentlemen. It’s time to leave this God-forsaken place. Let’s move out.” The accent was as English as Colonel Lexington’s.

British paratroopers, Colonel Lexington’s own men, had landed in the woods surrounding the camp 12 days earlier. They were merely awaiting word from the crew of the Allied bomber that everything was in order before attacking the camp. The plane the Germans had seen the day before was actually flying a reconnaissance mission rather than dropping bombs. When word was received that everything was a go, the Brits waited for the cover of darkness to move in. But one question still remained – with dozens of POW camps scattered throughout Germany, how had they known which camp Colonel Lexington was in?

As it turned out, Philippe's escape attempt was really not an attempt at all. He was, instead, sending a message to one of the Brits waiting in the woods. A paratrooper met him at the fence and received a hand-written message only moments before the dogs were released. The trooper grabbed the message and ran so quickly, he left the corner of the page still in Philippe's fingers. But, as if it were a blessing from God, the dogs were on the inside of the fence and could not reach the paratrooper who scrambled back to safety in the snow-covered woods. The hungry dogs were so intent on killing Philippe that they ignored the scent and footprints the paratrooper left behind.

Philippe's message read 'Old Mother Hubbard is in the cupboard (3). Stick a feather in his cap. Blackjack.' This coded message meant that Colonel Lexington was in the camp (he was Old Mother Hubbard), and that he was in cabin three. The second line was from the song "Yankee Doodle Dandy," and let the rescuers know that Americans (Yanks, as the Brits called them) were also in the camp, and had been there 21 days.

But what of the coincidence that Will had brought to the same camp in which Austin was being held? It was really no coincidence at all. When Will's tank was hit in the Ardennes Forest, he and his crew managed to make it to safety. But without rifles, they could only watch from nearby as Austin's crew, and many others, were taken prisoner. After learning the general direction the POW truck was headed, Will reported his observations to his superior who, in turn, relayed them up the chain of command. The decision was then made to conduct a rescue attempt at the Aachen. The best-trained force for this was the British paratroopers.

After the reconnaissance flight had returned, and messages had been received

from four other camps, it was determined that only Aachen had received Americans in the previous few weeks. The rest of the Americans captured at the Battle of the Bulge were sent to camps further east and would be the recipients of liberation courtesy of the oncoming Russians.

Will volunteered to allow himself to be captured close to Aachen so he would be taken there and could relay the rescue message to the Colonel. 'To grandmother's house we go.' Grandmother's house was the camp. 'I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down.' The wolf, or Brits, would huff and puff, invade the camp. 'Goodnight, Irene.' A popular song from the 1930s, it meant that the rescue would take place that very night. But only Will and the Colonel knew.

The prisoners had to be awakened once the Brits came into camp simply because they were so good at their jobs. They had made their way into camp, killing dogs and Germans, without firing a single shot. Every paratrooper carried a long knife which dripped blood, some of it still steaming in the frosty January air from the slashing of throats.

All the prisoners grabbed as many blankets and coats as they could. As they walked from camp, a few took the coats off the dead Germans and ripped the insignia patches from them. Several of the more veteran prisoners, bitter from the harsh treatment they'd received throughout their months of incarceration, kicked the corpses and spat in anger as they passed by.

The prisoners were divided into groups of four once they'd crossed the German border into Belgium, only a few miles from camp. They were still in enemy territory, but the wilderness of the forest afforded some measure of protection. Each group was

escorted by a paratrooper to a safe house before daybreak. Austin, Will, and two Frenchmen were taken to a small farmhouse just as the sun began to peek through the snow-laden evergreens. Smoke billowed from the chimney, but there were no lights. The five approached the door and the paratrooper gave three quick knocks and then another. Footsteps were heard and a male's voice behind the door said, "Who is there?"

The paratrooper replied, "Two orders of apple pie and two croissants." Immediately, the door swung open and the five men rushed inside. The Belgian man, whose family had given other soldiers safe haven, knew that apple pies were American and croissants were French.

The paratrooper said, "Sir, these men need care for three days after which they will move on. Can you do this?"

"Of course," the man replied, and the paratrooper promptly left the house without another word.

"I wish we could have thanked him," a Frenchman said to Austin.

"Me, too," Austin said.

"Not to worry," the Belgian man spoke up. "Believe me, he knows you are grateful. Let's get you to safety."

Just as the man bent down to pull back a large rug to expose a trap door, a young girl tip-toed down the stairs.

"Who was at the door, father?" she said in a tender, sweet voice as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Not to worry, Amelia," he said calmly, as he looked up toward her. "We have just received an order of pies and pastries."

The five-year old little girl, knowing full well that real food had not been delivered, walked across the floor to Austin, extended her tiny hand, and said, "Good morning, sir. I am Amelia." Having already been taught to read by her mother, she squinted in the dim morning light to see Webster printed on Austin's uniform. "Mr. Webster," she continued, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"And it's a pleasure to meet you, young lady. Thank you to you and your family for allowing us to stay here." Austin replied as he shook her hand.

"You're very welcome," she said politely, and then turned to go back upstairs.

The man introduced himself as Franz and quickly ushered them through the trap door. The room underneath the house was surprisingly large, but quite damp and dusty.

"I apologize, gentlemen, for the crudeness of the accommodations, but it is the best we can do. My wife will have breakfast ready in an hour or so. Just rest down here as best you can until it's time to eat."

The four men spread the blankets that were waiting for them on beds of soft hay and, feeling safe for the first time in weeks, drifted off to sleep.

Austin was the first to be awakened by the aroma of eggs scrambling. For a moment, he believed he was back at home and his mother was standing over the stove, whistling as she cooked. When the trap door opened, he squinted at the bright light that shone through and cupped his hand over his eyes. Little Amelia and her twin brother, Franz, Jr., were each carrying a tray with two plates and glasses on them. Amelia handed her tray to Austin and Franz placed his on the floor beside one of the sleeping Frenchmen.

"Enjoy your breakfast, Mr. Webster," Amelia said.

“Why, thank you, Amelia,” Austin replied. “You and your family are so nice to share your breakfast with us.”

Amelia smiled, and she and Franz turned to walk up the steps to the family room. Austin removed the napkin that was covering the plate to reveal a hearty portion of scrambled eggs, sausage, and a cup of steaming coffee.

Franz, his wife (Maria), Amelia, and Franz, Jr. would have no breakfast this morning. But they weren't angry. They were glad to share with those who needed it more.

Since the four soldiers were unable to leave the hidden room beneath the house, Amelia and Franz, Jr. visited them throughout the days they were there. The men shared stories of their homes and families, and the children told stories about life in Belgium. Austin told tales of South Georgia, peanuts, and warm summer days spent frolicking in the creek. He was careful not to share the horrors he'd encountered during the war for fear of scaring her. Innocent Amelia told of cool autumn evenings spent walking through the forest and fishing in the nearby brook which ran through the hills. In her, Austin could see his own little sister, and he longed to be with her and the rest of his family.

On the third night, it was Franz, Sr. who came down through the trap door. It was the first time the soldiers had seen him since the morning they'd been brought and they knew his purpose even before he said, “Gentlemen, it's time to move on. Frederick will see you safely to your next location.”

“We're ready,” Will replied. The men climbed from the secret room to see a short, pudgy man in a heavy coat and Franz's family awaiting them. Amelia and Franz, Jr. held out knapsacks full of food which the two Frenchmen took, and Franz stood by his

wife with his arm around her waist.

“We sure do ‘preciate you folks lettin’ us stay here,” Austin said. “We’ll never forgetcha for this.” As each man filed past the family, he shook Franz’s hand and thanked him. Austin, the last one to leave the humble stone and wooden home, paused to hug Amelia and thank her for her companionship.

“You’re a special little girl, Amelia. You take good care of your family,” he said as he kneeled down.

“I will,” she replied, “And you take good care of your family when you get home, Austin Webster”

“I will, too.”

Once outside the house, Frederick whispered, “We must move quickly and quietly. Follow me.”

The night was bitterly cold, even colder than the nights the soldiers had experienced in the POW camp. Fresh snow had fallen each of the previous three nights, making walking very difficult. It was particularly difficult for Austin, whose boot soles were practically gone from months of constant wear. With each step, he could feel his socks getting more and more cold and wet.

Four hours into the hike, Frederick stopped at a split-rail fence in a clearing and said, “Gentlemen, this is as far as I can take you. Stay in the trees, but keep this fence in sight. It will lead you to another farm house. When you reach it, knock three times quickly and then once more. Tell the man at the door ‘As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.’

To Frederick’s surprise, Austin said, “Proverbs 25:25.”

“That’s right,” Frederick replied. “God be with you.”

On his way to aid in the relocation of still more soldiers, Frederick disappeared into the hazy winter night.

The men did as they were instructed, following the fence for several hundred yards before reaching the farm house. Austin ordered the other three to stay behind while he delivered the message. He cautiously approached the house alone and knocked on the door. A gruff voice barked, “Who’s there? What do you want?”

Austin replied, “As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.”

An inside latch snapped and the man, standing behind the door, said, “Come in, quickly.” Austin motioned for his friends to come forward and they scurried in as quickly as they could. As they ran through the door the snow that had accumulated on their heads and shoulders fluttered to the floor and melted.

“You are the Americans and French, no?” he asked.

“Yes, we are,” Austin said between deep coughs.

“We have been expecting you. There is hot tea, coffee, and cheese waiting for you in the barn. Come quickly and we’ll get you squared away before sunrise.”

The soldiers followed the man to his barn and were instructed to climb into the loft and stay there. The sweet aroma of tea and coffee led their noses up the steps. They each ate a small wedge of cheese and drank one cup of coffee and one cup of tea which seemed to warm them to their very bones. With full bellies and a sense of security, the men nestled deep into the hay for a well-earned rest.

Bam-bam-bam. The pounding on the barn door startled the soldiers, but they did

not utter a sound. "Ve are sirsty. Ve vant milk. Ve know you have cows in zare. Open ze door or ve vill break it down! Now!"

As the farmer stalled for time by fumbling with the bar holding the door in place, Austin motioned for Will to hand him the coffee pot which still had a couple of cups in it. He removed the top and poured the coffee directly behind the closest cow. He then dropped the coffee pot and one cup onto the hay.

The instant the door swung open, the aroma of coffee rushed out. The German soldier said suspiciously, "Why is zare coffee in ze barn, I vunder?"

Seeing the pot and cup on the hay, the farmer said, "Because I always drink a few cups of coffee while I milk my cows. I milk at 4:30 every morning, you know, and it helps to keep me awake. It's obvious that this cow knocked over the pot when you banged on the door."

The German slowly scanned the interior of the barn as if he were looking for something specific. His eyes lit up when he saw the steps to the loft. "Vot is up zare, I vunder?"

"That's the hay loft, of course. What do you think is up there, apple pie...?" The man caught himself before he could finish his sentence.

"I do not care for zat insolent tone you have. Perhaps I should see for myself what is up zare."

Realizing that if he tried to stop the German from climbing the steps, he would give himself and the soldiers away, he said, "By all means, I have nothing to hide."

Overhearing the conversation, the four soldiers began to silently throw hay over themselves in hopes it would disguise their whereabouts. Austin's coughs were coming

more frequently now, and he prayed he could stifle them if needed.

The German continued to look toward the loft and took three steps forward, but his third step found a pile of fresh manure that the cow had just dropped. In disgust, he raised his foot and tried to shake the steamy manure loose, but it held fast. He picked up the coffee cup and began to scrape the sole of his shiny, but soiled boot. "He muttered under his breath while he worked, "Even ze animals in zis country are impudent." After scraping the manure away, he barked a few words in German and he and his two comrades left the barn.

The farmer followed behind with a half-hearted effort, and sarcastically yelled, "But don't you want your milk?"

"Certainly not," the German yelled back. "Who knows vot might be in it?" He spat on the ground in disgust.

When he felt it was safe, the farmer returned to the barn. He called up to the soldiers and said, "It's okay. The Germans are gone. You can come out now."

Austin emerged from the haystack looking like a scarecrow. He slowly inched his way on his belly toward the edge of the loft and peered over the side. The farmer looked up and said, "That was quick thinking with the coffee. I knew he'd smell it when he walked in and I was afraid he'd follow the aroma up there. I was glad to see that you'd thrown the pot down here."

Turning toward the cow and placing his hand on her wide nose, he said, "But the award has to go Ingrid, here. I've always told my wife that those Germans weren't worth a pile of manure, but Ingrid she proved me wrong. The pile we gave one today was worth everything." For the first time in a long time everyone had a good laugh.

Later that evening, the farmer returned to the barn with a few vegetables, more cheese, some water, a box of waterproof matches, and a small knapsack. "Tonight, you will be moving on again. But this journey will be different than the others. You will travel many kilometers and you will not have a guide. You will be on your own for many days and nights."

He unfolded a map of Europe, pointed, and said, "You are here, about 5 kilometers southeast of Spa. Do you know where that is?" As Austin nodded, he ran his finger southward and continued, "You will head south for approximately 250 kilometers toward the city of Bastogne. The Germans have pushed the Allies far to the west, but we have received word that reinforcements have aided in pushing the Germans eastward again. We know they are on their way, and that is why we cannot offer you guides. We need every available man to assist in sabotaging the Germans' efforts as they retreat through the forest. But the city of Bastogne has never fallen. There the Allies have held fast. You have two options: one, you can attempt to make it all the way to Bastogne which will take many days, especially in the deep snow, or two, you can hope that the Allied forces will reach you before you get to Bastogne."

"How long before the Allies are expected to make it back this far?" Austin asked.

"Anywhere from six to ten days," the farmer replied. "I wish I could allow you to stay here until then, but I must see that my family and those nearby are taken to safety. There will be no food left here, and you would likely starve. At least in the forest you will occasionally come upon a house and be well-fed."

Will looked up at Austin and said, "Well, buddy, it looks any way you slice it, we're walkin'." Austin nodded in agreement and coughed several times. He hated the

idea of having to walk 250 kilometers in boots that had no soles, but he had no other choice. The men gathered their food, gear, and the map and left the barn.

“Godspeed to you,” the farmer said as they disappeared into the night.

The soldiers hiked for two hours when the sound of breaking ice ripped through the stillness of the night. First in line, Austin had stepped onto the snow-covered ice of a small pond. Before the others could reach him, he’d fallen in the water up to his shoulders.

When he was safely retrieved from the icy pool, he was shaking profusely. The temperature was continually dropping and Austin’s coughing steadily worsened.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he said to Will.

“Don’t wanna hear any talk like that now, ya hear?” Will replied. “We’re all gonna make it, you just wait and see.”

“It’s my feet, Will. I can’t feel ‘em.”

Will picked up Austin’s leg and saw that only the boot’s heel was there. He raised the other leg to discover that that boot, too, had no sole. He removed Austin’s boots and socks to see that his toes were beginning to blacken, a sure sign of impending frostbite.

“I tell ya what we’re gonna do,” Will said calmly as he removed his coat.

“We’re first gonna get you out of these wet clothes and into some dry ones. In the meantime, we’ll make us a fire and warm up, whatcha say?” Will pulled out a set of wool pants and a flannel shirt the farmer had stuffed into the knapsack.

“Sounds...ugh, ugh... good...ugh, ugh, ugh...good to me,” Austin replied through several more deep and painful coughs. He reached into his coat pocket for the matches,

but found that they'd fallen out when he broke through the ice. "Fellas, I hate to say this, but we ain't got no matches. They're somewhere in the bottom of that pond."

Will paused to think. "Okay then, instead of the fire we're gonna wrap your feet up and I'm gonna carry ya."

"You can't carry me, Will."

"And why not?"

"I'm as big as you are. You'll be wore out before you walk a mile."

"Hey, when I get tired, I'll stop and rest."

"What about your coat. You'll freeze without it."

"I'll be fine. You don't worry about me."

Will picked up Austin in the fireman's carry position just as he'd done at the Saharan oasis and they began their trek again. A couple of hours later, Will, exhausted, said, "Austin, I hate to admit it, but you were right. This ain't gonna work. But I got an idea." He set Austin on a fallen log.

"Why don't we cut some limbs and make a sled. I can drag ya a whole lot easier than I can carry ya." Turning to the Frenchmen, who spoke little English, he said, "How 'bout it Frenchies, give me a hand."

In a short time the sled was completed and they were on their way again. The traveling was quicker but it wasn't much easier – at least for Will. The effects of not wearing a coat were taking their toll on him. The snow began to fall harder, and pretty soon, the men could see only a few feet in front of them. They desperately searched for shelter, any shelter. The last thing Austin heard before he blacked out was Will saying, "Everything's gonna be okay, buddy. We'll make it."

Austin awoke to the warm glow of a fire. He looked around to see where he was, seeing the charred walls of a burned out house. The house had no roof, but its creaky walls offered some protection from the howling wind.

“Will?” he called out.

One of the Frenchmen, who was lying by the fire, pulled himself up to rest on his elbow and said, “Will...what is word? Gone.”

“Gone?” Austin asked. “Gone where?”

The Frenchman’s limited English vocabulary would not allow him to put his thoughts into words. Instead, he picked up a pack of matches and showed it to Austin. Austin took it in his hand and recognized it as the pack he’d lost in the pond the night before.

Again, the Frenchman said, “Will gone. Marcelle gone, too.”

“Gone. What do you mean ‘gone’? You mean ‘dead’?”

“Oui, dead.” The Frenchman again picked up the matches to show that Will and Marcelle had gone back to find the matches during the night. Both men decided to face the fury of the blizzard after reaching the house and had dived into the icy water to search. It was Will who came up with the matches after several trips down. When he climbed out onto the ice, he waited for Marcelle, who never resurfaced. He’d swum too far underneath the ice and was unable to break through when he needed to come up for air.

Will started back for the house, but the combination of the wind, the water freezing on his body, along with the lack of a coat all contributed to his collapse in the snow. Although he made it all the way to within sight of the abandoned house, he just

could not bring himself to go any further. He managed to yell loudly enough that the second Frenchman could hear him. Much smaller than Will, the best he could do was drag Will to the house, and by the time they reached it, Will was gone. The box of matches he was bringing to save his friends was still clutched in his hand.

With a language barrier hindering their communication, the two remaining men spent most of the day sitting by the fire as they silently recalled memories and cried.

By the next morning, the blizzard had blown itself out and the sun cast a brilliant sheen on the snowy forest. The two soldiers packed their gear and went outside to find Will's body covered with snow.

Austin said, "I'm not leavin' my best friend here," and he picked Will up and gently placed him on the sled Will had built for him. The Frenchman (Jean-Claude was his name, but Austin refused to listen) reached down and removed Will's boots and handed them to Austin.

"You take, oui?"

Austin looked at the absent sole of each of his boots and sighed. "Oui. Merci."

The trek through the Ardennes was arduous. For five days the two soldiers dragged the sled through the snow. On the sixth day, the Frenchman stopped and raised his fist in the air. Austin recognized the signal and stopped silently in his tracks. The Frenchman lowered his hand and both of the soldiers slowly squatted. Voices could be heard in the distance.

Austin turned his ear to listen. "Americans. I think those are Americans. Listen." he whispered.

"Stay where you are and identify yourself," a loud voice called from a distance.

“I am Sergeant Austin Webster, United States Army.”

“Private Jean-Claude Le Clerk, Army of France.”

“Stand and be recognized,” the distant voice shouted.

As the two men stood, 60 men in white camouflage uniforms arose in a large circle around them. Austin and Jean-Claude had walked into the center of an American infantry unit without realizing.

A captain emerged from the ranks and both men saluted him. “What unit are you with, soldier?” he said to Austin, returning their salute..

“I’m a tank commander in the 2nd Armored Division, 78th Field Artillery, sir.”
Austin replied.

“The 2nd is over a hundred miles away. How did you get here?”

“I was captured and taken to Aachen, sir. British paratroopers rescued us a few weeks ago and we hiked through the blizzard to try and reach the Allies at Bastogne, sir. But my buddy here didn’t make it. He died during the night from exposure.”

“Damn shame,” he replied. “Corporal,” he yelled to another soldier, “Get these men some food and more clothes. And let’s take proper care of this fallen man,” he continued as he pointed toward the sled.

“Yes, sir,” the corporal replied, and ran to follow the orders.

Looking back at Austin, he said, “Hell, son, there’s no need to go all the way to Bastogne to get to the good guys. You’re in American-occupied territory right now. If you hiked through that storm, you walked right through four divisions of retreating Krauts. How they didn’t see you is beyond me,” he chuckled. He walked away shaking his head, repeating, “It’s beyond me.”

Later that day, Jean-Claude was given transportation to a French unit stationed a few miles away. Will's body was sent home. With tears warming his cheeks, Austin saluted his best friend as the body bag was loaded onto a truck which slowly drove away.

Interlude – Goons Gone

Cranman

I did not spend all of my imprisonment on Stalag Luft III. As the tide of battle turned against the Germans due to American air superiority and the oncoming Russians, the Germans marched us from camp to camp in an attempt to keep us away from the Russians. We marched for several weeks in sub-freezing temperatures across snow-covered fields. We went first to Nuremburg, then on to Muskau, Graustein, Spremburg, and finally on to Stalag Luft VII-A at Moosburg. I could feel my feet getting colder, but there was nothing I could do about it except hope for the best. At least I knew that they were dry, which would help against frostbite. I worked my hands and fingers to keep the blood circulating, and from time to time, covered my ears and nose with my hands. At Moosburg, we were housed in giant tents that accommodated 300 men. News of the Allies' advancement on the radio, combined with the unhindered daytime flights of American fighters and bombers near the camp, offered tremendous encouragement to all of us. We knew the end of the war and the end of our captivity was close. Late one afternoon just before dusk, when we had been in the camp about two weeks, the old goon who drove the honey wagon came driving through the front gates with his horse almost at a trot. This was very much out of the ordinary because that horse looked older than the driver. The goon had been outside the camp emptying his cargo when he came face to face with an American tank. Naturally, he turned tail and got out of there as fast as he

could get his horse to move, feeling very lucky that he did not get shot or captured. I saw the honey wagon driver talking very animatedly to a gathering of *Kriegies* circled around his wagon. I doubted the story because there had been so many prior disappointments, and maybe this story would set me up for another. If the story really was true, it would mean that the American Army was outside the camp's perimeter fence. Everybody knew they were very close, but this was ahead of schedule, several days earlier than our rumor mongers had predicted. It was no big deal, just another rumor. In the meantime it had become dark, and with no lights, it was time to sleep. Just another night spent in a prison camp. The next morning the rumor had been forgotten, but sudden machine gun fire outside the perimeter reminded me that there was someone other than Germans in the nearby woods. The rumble of big guns soon followed from nearby hillside and all the *Kriegies* were filled with excitement despite some of the bullets having found their way into the camp. Yes, we were scared, but there was still a big grin on every face.

Liberation day was finally at hand, and if we survived the battle nearby, we would soon be free. Then, all of a sudden, the sound of thousands of cheering *Kriegies* signaled that it was all over. Lying right there in that dirt I cried tears of joy and thanked God for helping me survive. The cheering turned out to be for General Patton who was riding atop the first tank that smashed down the camp gates. Patton was soon surrounded by a cheering throng of *Kriegies* when he ordered the Nazi flag removed and the American flag raised in its place. He made a brief speech then ordered that every POW be given white GI bread, which brought yet another chorus of cheers. Even with all [the Army's] rules, regulations, and foul-ups, it was like coming home to Mama. Every last one of us had a belly full of the goons and everything German, and we thanked God we were no

longer in their bloody hands. We spent one more night in the camp before being lined up to march out. The thought of spending any time walking, especially after having marched so far in the bitter cold, brought sneers and jeers from many until we realized that we would be walking only about 20 minutes to a nearby convoy of GI trucks. The sight of those trucks parked bumper to bumper and stretching to the horizon was just beautiful. To me that line of trucks symbolized the might and power of my country. What a contrast it made to a Germany that had been beaten to a bloody pulp, whose industries and transportation system were completely demolished, and whose cities lay in rubble. The trucks took all of us to an airstrip in an open field where C-47s awaited to transport loads of us to Le Havre, France, every three minutes day and night for three straight days. At Camp Lucky Strike, a tent city in France, Army personnel were processed and given hot showers and clean uniforms. After physical exams and medical attention, if needed, we were allowed to send a telegram home to our families. While at Lucky Strike, I learned that the Russians and Americans had taken Berlin and it was announced that Hitler had committed suicide. A couple of days later, Germany surrendered. But thoughts of going home for good were put on hold with the realization that many GIs would be given a short period of rest and then be retrained for the war in the Pacific. *Kriegies* were to be no exception, and this greatly worried me. But this was not a time for worry because the trip home was soon to be underway. We were trucked to a dock where we boarded a ship for the States. Rank still had its privileges and I was quartered in a large dormitory-style room on one of the upper decks. It was the first time in more than a year that I had slept on an actual mattress.

Baylor

My liberation from the Nazis finally came in April of '45. I think the Germans capitulated in May of '45 so this was only about a month from the German surrender. Of course, we had no way of knowing that, but I left with a bang, so to speak. The Welsh Guard, which was a crack outfit in the British Army were advancing, so we heard, right fast. Well, the Germans moved whatever big heavy tanks they had – those things were awesome. I actually witnessed one of them pick off a single man in a 10-acre field that had nothing on it but grass. How they did that with no point of reference is beyond me. They were truly exceptional weapons. Anyhow, they moved four of them up behind our compound. When the Welch Guard got to a certain place they opened fire. Before they got any intelligence information, they fired back so there we were trapped in a cage and shells were falling. They [the British] lost about six men out of all that, which was really fortunate. Eventually, the Germans shelled all day long and then move out at night. So the next morning we got no artillery fire. At that same time, the British got a report that there was a prison camp right there so they knew that and came in and liberated us. The Germans in the camp were just gone. They had abandoned us during the night. I never saw another German in uniform after that.

Waldrop

A good friend of mine, a retired colonel from Beaufort, was a tank commander with Patton. I said, 'Jimmy, I waited for a year for you to come busting through the main gate with your tank.' We were on that long Death March, and as we progressed we started having fewer and fewer guards. Sometimes you wouldn't even see any guards the whole day. They just took off through the woods and we never saw them again.

Anyway, there were six or eight of us who were just so weak, we just dropped from the column along the side of the road. Dysentery and lice and the fact that we hadn't had a decent bath in months just finally took their toll on us. Doing something like that would normally mean you'd shot or get the hell beaten out of you, but since there were so few guards, we were allowed to stop for a while. We couldn't have escaped if we'd wanted to. There was a foot of snow on the ground and we had no idea where we were. We were better off staying with the pack. Safety in numbers, I suppose. The column kept marching, but we stopped for a few minutes and pretty soon there was an old oxen pulling a car that stopped at the end of the column. Two German guards motioned for us to climb on board so we all crawled on and enjoyed the ride as best we could. After about a mile, mile-and-a-half, we turned off the main road and the area opened up into the large open field. There was a prison camp there for Italian officers. That place was deplorable. We were in there for a few days and we kept hearing small arms fire off in the distance. We learned that there were pockets of resistance all around us. Well, one day it was just quiet as could be and this vehicle that looked kind of like one of our jeeps came around the bend toward the camp and it had a big white flag on it. There were two English commandos on it. I've seen some rough looking guys in my day, but these guys looked like they'd slit your throat if you blinked your eyes. I'm glad they're on our side! They took us out of there but, of course, they didn't give a darn about the Italians. Down the road there was some kind of command car. The officer stood up and motioned us on by. I don't know who he was, but he had some kind of plaid cover on his head. He must have been Scottish. Anyway, there were some trucks waiting for us. They loaded us on the trucks and took us to Calle, which was a former SS training barracks. I finally started

thinking that I might make it home alive. It was a happy day. They deloused us and I was issued a British uniform. A few days later a C-47 came in and took us to France. One of the big transition camps that would get us ready for going home was Camp Lucky Strike. We had to answer questions and fill out a bunch of forms, but the thing I remember most was that they had fried chicken! I couldn't eat it, though. All you could stand was just a couple of bites because your stomach was so shrunken. They had a doughnut trailer there, too, and one of the guys stuffed himself with doughnuts, one right after the other, and he had some kind of seizure and died. Anyway, we got on a hospital ship in the harbor and went across the Channel to pick up some more wounded and started coming home.

The connections between the three men and my father takes an uncanny turn at this point. Only Mr. Cranman and my father, at the time of their liberation, were under the control of German goons. My father was liberated in the dead of night by British Commandos. Whereas he and his fellow POWs had to be awakened, the camp at Moosburg was overcome by Patton and his tanks. My father, a commander in Patton's 2nd Armored Division had been returned to active duty after a brief period of recuperation and was riding atop one of the Sherman tanks in the column that rode through the camp at Moosburg on its way to Berlin. The British unit, the Welsh Guard, which liberated Mr. Cranman from his camp was the same group that liberated my father at Oflag VI-H. They had a decidedly easier time of it at Mr. Cranman's camp, however, since the goons had abandoned the camp during the night. The final thread that connects this "band of brothers" is Mr. Waldrop's friend Jimmy, the retired colonel who served as a tank commander with Patton. Though he was also a part of Patton's larger Third Army he,

too, was a member of the 2nd Armored Division. Since both he and my father are now deceased, I can only speculate that they might have known one another. Whether they did or not, they certainly served, trained, and fought side by side.

CHAPTER NINE – THE WOMEN LEFT BEHIND

And so it went load after load, day after day, until I have now hauled 10,000 bushels of corn. Tired? Of course I get tired, but so does that boy in the foxhole.

That boy, whose place I'm trying so hard to fill (Tresham, 1997, p. 201).

Prelude – Sweethearts and Mama's Boys

One common thread running throughout the comments of all three gentlemen I spoke with is their gratitude for the women who remained on the home front during the war. And no look into history of World War II can even approach completeness if it does not recognize the contributions of the women who kept an entire nation running during the absence of millions of its men. Mr. Baylor, Mr. Cranman, and Mr. Waldrop spoke fondly of the devotion of their girlfriends and how thoughts of returning home to them kept them focused on returning home while they were in the camps. My father's gratitude extended not to a sweetheart, but instead to his mother who managed to hold her family together and keep foreclosure of the family farm at bay during very difficult circumstances. A self-proclaimed "Mama's Boy," my father cared about no one more than his mother, and it was thoughts of her that gave him the resolve and determination to stay alive in dark times.

Rosie, Winnie, Patsy, and Fannie

Although World War II took some sixteen million American men to various military installations, ports of call, battlefields, and prison camps throughout the world, the war certainly could not have been counted a victory without the women who remained behind, particularly those who transitioned into the civilian workforce, either by finding jobs or maintaining family farms. Their contributions were so vital to the war

effort that even Russian premier Josef Stalin offered a toast in honor of America's women during a meeting of Allied leaders in 1943, proclaiming, "To American production, without which this war would have been lost" (Wise & Wise, 2000, p. 178). Several iconic female symbols of World War II American women's fortitude, determination, and patriotism – Rosie the Riveter, Winnie the Welder, and Patsy the Paster – have received a great deal of attention throughout the last 60+ years. Rosie was so revered that she even had her own song to laud her accomplishments:

All day long Whether rain or shine
 She's part of the assembly line
 She's making history Working for victory
 Rosie, the Riveter (Evans & Loeb, 1942)

She even graced the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943 and had her own B-movie, *1944* (Holsinger, 1999). "Between 1941 and 1945, 6.5 million women entered the workforce" (Gerdes, 2000, p. 25), with the vast majority of these women working in plants scattered across the country. Most were women who had never worked outside the home. But some were women who, just a few weeks or months earlier, were working as waitresses or hotel maids. Now they were creating the armaments of warfare. Their role in the production of tanks, airplanes, guns, and munitions is truly staggering and should certainly not be underestimated. But it is the contributions and experiences of a largely forgotten woman that deserve long overdue recognition. Without her, Rosie's rivets would have simply remained in the bucket, Winnie's torch would have remained unlit, G.I. Joe's body would have wilted in the heat of battle on a foreign continent, and an entire nation would have gone hungry. The forgotten hero I speak of is Fannie the

Farmer. With all the attention that accompanies victory going to those in much more glamorous, high profile professions such as tank builders, her contributions, her sacrifices, and her way of life have principally fallen by the wayside.

The early years of World War II saw the largest civilian migration in U.S. history (Litoff & Smith, 1997, p. 128), with millions of women dubbed “camp followers” trailing their husbands to various military bases throughout the country. Some had no other option than to move back in with their parents or in-laws for financial stability. Those who could not afford to make the move to locations perhaps hundreds or even thousands of miles away either stayed home and absorbed the loss of income or did the unthinkable prior to that time – joined the workforce. With the economy just beginning to bustle after the Depression and with millions of jobs becoming available now that throngs of men were fighting overseas, many women felt it their patriotic duty to step forward and offer their talents and abilities to their nation. And while that sounds like a noble and patriotic effort, most women did so simply to ensure their survival. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in the rural South where the lingering effects from the Depression still remained.

In the late ‘30s, with market forces rendering agricultural jobs practically useless, millions of rural Southern men joined the armed forces in order to support themselves and their families. When the war ensued and the demand for food production increased, women donned their boots, overalls, and gloves and answered the call.

Women came to the rescue of the nation’s crops as the percentage of women employed in agriculture rose from 8 percent in 1940 to 22.4 percent in 1945.

These workers included farm wives driving tractors, college women milking

cows, housewives picking fruit, and secretaries harvesting vegetables during their summer vacations (Litoff & Smith, 1997, p. 167).

But it was not just a random scattering of women who impacted the nation in such a dramatic fashion. To better organize their efforts and maximize their contributions, the government created in 1943 the U.S. Crop Corps under the umbrella of the Department of Agriculture. From this organization came the Women's Land Army, comprised of more than 1.5 million women (Litoff & Smith, 1997, p. 201). Some women chose to go on "working vacations" on farms or labor camps throughout the South and Midwest, but the vast majority preferred to do their farm work close to home. They eagerly listened to the radio for hour after hour in hopes of hearing directions on when and where they should go. In the bucolic South, these women were "managing farm operations; marketing the produce; driving tractors, combines, and trucks; plowing; raking hay; shaking and stacking peanuts; picking cotton; harvesting and curing tobacco; and riding the range" (Tresham, 1997, p. 205). History tends to paint a one-sided portrait of the 1940s working woman. There was more to this woman than simply working in the field, much more.

In the early morning hours just before 6:00A.M., a rural South Georgia woman might hear a familiar scratchy voice say, "Good morning, all. This is Hoyt Wimpy welcoming you to another broadcast day at CBS-affiliate WPAX in Thomasville, Georgia. We begin this beautiful Sunday morning with that favorite old hymn, *Amazing Grace*." If they continued working inside until 7:30, they might hear the previous night's episode of *The Lone Ranger*, preceded by a commercial from its traditional sponsor,

Beeman's Chewing Gum, a fairly new product billing itself not only as an item for pleasure, but also as a medicinal digestive aid.

In the days leading up to America's involvement in the war thought, in particular, in the mid-afternoon hours of December 7, 1941, she would hear

The world today...by shortwave radio, Columbia now brings you reports from its foreign correspondents overseas with summaries of the latest world news presented over these news stations by Golden Eagle Gasoline...go ahead New York...[fifteen second delay to allow west coast stations to join in]...the details are not available, they will be in a few minutes...the White House is now giving out a statement...the attack apparently was made on all naval and military activities on the principal island of Oahu...The President's brief statement was read to reporters by Steven Early, the President's secretary...a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor naturally would mean war... (Unknown CBS speaker, 1941).

Having missed a significant portion of the report, she might slowly spin the radio dial until she comes to the only other station she can pick up clearly, an NBC station out of Valdosta that has been playing *The Inspector General*.

We interrupt this program to take you to the NBC newsroom...from the NBC newsroom in New York...President Roosevelt said in a statement today that the Japanese have attacked the Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, from the air...this bulletin came to you from the NBC newsroom in New York...now back to our regularly scheduled program (Unknown NBC speaker, 1941).

With perhaps no perspective on the magnitude of the events, some women might shrug off the comment as insignificant while others might hardly believe that such an important

announcement would be given so little attention and that it did not warrant the cancellation of the “regularly scheduled program” for more extensive coverage. But, what most Americans did not know at the time was that there simply was no more information to pass on. Radio stations across the country were scrambling to find credible information to share with the listening audience. It would be nearly two agonizing hours before more information would arrive on the airways.

Desperate to hear more information, women on the home front would keep the radio on the entire afternoon in hopes that they might learn more about what has taken place. Depression years had etched into their minds the importance of saving electricity, but they knew that the day’s events were more important. They would continue to surf the radio dial between the CBS and NBC affiliates, but they both played their regular schedules until the late afternoon. The regional NBC station out of Valdosta was the first to break with regular programming when it joined in on a broadcast from WCAE in Pittsburgh, PA, carrying a brief news bulletin from eyewitnesses in Hawaii:

We have heard this morning the attack of Pearl Harbor as a severe bombing of Pearl Harbor by army planes, undoubtedly Japanese. The city of Honolulu has been attacked and considerable damage done. The battle has been going on nearly three hours. One of the bombs dropped within 50 feet of

[indistinguishable]...It’s no joke. It’s a real war (Unknown NBC speaker, 1941).

Succinct though it was, it was confirmation of the terrible act they had hoped was not true. Silence filled the airwaves as local stations broke away from the Pittsburgh flagship station. Mothers, wives, and daughters turned off the radio and contemplated what had just occurred. They knew that many of the able-bodied men from the surrounding farms

and towns who had not already joined the service would be joining the military the next day and in the days to come. They would ponder for hours what they might do to aid the war effort that was imminent. Aside from saving a few scraps, they may feel as though there is little they can do. As they sit alone or with their children in the early evening darkness, they turned the radio back on in time to hear the announcer sign off the air and close with a rendition of Kate Smith's *God Bless America*, which would soon become the anthem of World War II (Heide & Gilman, 1995).

Prior to the onset of World War II, life in the pastoral South offered continuity with routine as the order of the day. Chores were carried out at specific times of day with little variation. As radio became more and more popular, however, the daily routine was altered to fit in harmony with certain radio broadcasts. The day begins much as it had for many years, with the milking of the cows. But this new idea of "war time," setting clocks back one hour, instituted by President Roosevelt in February, has upset the cows' milking schedule and their yield is only half what it had been just a few months earlier. Among the new changes in women's lives are the radio news broadcasts that now come at the top of each hour. Prior to the war, radio stations in the South dispensed news only at noon and 7:00P.M. to accommodate farmers' work routines. They know that most farmers are in their houses for lunch at noon and for dinner after dark. But since December of '41, the news was now offered at the top of every hour, beginning at the 6:00A.M. sign-on, as well as when any noteworthy event warrants interruption of other programs. A huge battle between newscasters and advertisers has ensued in recent months after Pearl Harbor over the interruption of scheduled programs, with companies feeling slighted whenever the news cut them out of their advertising time slot. A happy

medium is reached when news executives at the networks agree to allow advertisers to sponsor hourly news broadcasts.

Having put back a few cents each month, some women were able to purchase a second radio which they kept in the barn so that they could hear the news as they milked the cows or did other outdoor chores. They would now be among the fifty percent of Americans who own two radios and among the ninety percent who own one (Horten, 2002, p. 2). The lead story on the news might have been the U.S. Forces' sinking of the Japanese aircraft carrier *Ryuhō* in the Battle of the East Solomon Islands. Listeners could learn of the capture and execution of eight Nazi spies and saboteurs in Jacksonville, Florida (Braverman, 1996, p. 20), and might be startled by how close to home that is. Despite the changes that the bombing of Pearl Harbor has brought to the entire nation, this is the first time the war has really hit home for women of South Georgia, with Jacksonville being only a few hours from home.

With the morning chores completed, the ladies might spend the hot afternoon hours listening to several new songs on the radio. The new musical genre of swing has become very popular, and in catering to the growing number of women who are joining the work force in large cities and coastal shipyards, many radio stations now play four full hours of swing music from 8:00A.M. until noon. Employers have recently divided work days into three eight-hour shifts in order to maximize production. The first shift, from 8:00A.M. until 4:00P.M., is the most desired and competitive of all shifts since it offers a workday comparable to what most people are accustomed to. But a new shift – the swing shift – from 4:00 p.m. to midnight is rapidly growing in popularity, particularly with young, single women eager to pursue a social life in the late night hours after their

work was complete. These women, mostly in their late teens and early twenties are eager to find late night clubs that have either live bands or even an all-night diner that has one of the nation's 400,000 jukeboxes (Erenberg, 1996). But seemingly indelibly tied as they are to their farms, many women in the South have little to worry about when it comes to working shifts but, still, they find enjoyment in the benefits they bring. They spend much of the morning listening to songs such as *Don't Get Around Much Anymore*, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, *I've Heard That Song Before*, and a new favorite – *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*, a song inspired by a Navy chaplain who had loaded guns during the attack on Pearl Harbor while saying, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition" each time a gun was fired. Raised in the Bible Belt and accustomed to sacred music for most of their lives, many women may feel as though this new music may, for the most part, lack the spirituality they are accustomed to hearing in their favorite old hymns. But they may also realize that the music of the day is much less rambunctious than it had been during Depression years when the overpowering voices and instruments of Black singers and band leaders such as Count Basie, King Oliver, Fletcher Henderson, and Duke Ellington shook listeners from within. Nineteen-forties swing was smoother and more mellow. "Sweeter bands and singers [such as Frank Sinatra, Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, and the Glenn Miller and Harry James Orchestras] are able to express the pain of separation and the dream of future togetherness increase[ing] in popularity, especially with young women, who dominate the audience now that young men [are] away" (Erenberg, 1996, p. 195).

WPAX, along with many other local radio affiliates, had been experimenting with another novel concept in radio, local news. “While news programs – news, commentary, and political talk shows – took up just over 5 percent of the program schedule in the late 1930s, their share had increased to almost 20 percent by the mid-1940s” (Horten, 2002, p. 13). Despite the sluggish local economy, stations throughout the nation have relished in the boon of advertisers eager to get their name on the airwaves. Companies from the nearby cities of Moultrie, Albany, and Valdosta provide more than adequate funding for two local news broadcasts, one following the national news at noon and one at 8:55P.M., just prior to the national news and sign-off.

In the early days of the war, women learned via the local radio news that the government would soon begin issuing gas ration tickets. Sacrifice was nothing new to women of the South who had learned to stretch even the most meager of provisions over recent years so the restriction of gasoline was expected if not welcome. But when they arrived at the local school to receive their tickets, they learned that the radio had not prepared them for perhaps their first encounter with social injustice. The news had mentioned nothing of different stickers which would allow citizens to receive different levels of gasoline based on their professions. They learn quickly that five classes of stickers – A, B, C, T, and X – were effectively dividing the nation by social class. An A sticker recipient such as the small farmer, deemed as having no profession or one which was not crucial, received the lowest gas allocation of three gallons per week. This would allow for approximately 60 miles of driving per month (Lingeman, 2000, p. 169), and since many women lived five, ten, or twenty miles from town, they would be greatly hampered by the limited amount of fuel with which to work, including plowing,

harvesting, and marketing their produce.

Holders of the B card were people whose work is deemed “essential” to the war effort (factory workers) so they received an extra allotment of fuel. Holders of the C card were those considered to be members of vital professions such as doctors, teachers, etc., but were not directly related to the war effort. They received an even larger allotment each month. The largest allotments went to T card holders – truckers – and X card holders – members of Congress. There was no limit on how much fuel they could purchase. Many women had long known that they were poor, but they now realized that they were at the bottom of a social caste system with little hope of climbing out. They took their A stickers, drove their tractors home, and let them sit in the barn for three weeks so that they would have enough fuel to finish their plowing. The last week of month (and at the end of each subsequent month for four more years) they would ride the horse or mule into town.

During the few weeks of the year in which there was little planting and harvesting to be done, women on the home front found other activities to fill their days. A few months earlier they could be found outside perhaps chopping firewood, hanging laundry, working on the tractor, or cleaning the barn. Those activities still got done, but they had now been moved to either the early morning or late afternoon hours to make way for a radio genre that was new to many but not to broadcasting, the soap opera. These radio dramas had been around since the 1930s, but with their recent storylines weaving in wartime issues that were important to women, they were experiencing a rebirth as many women on the home front sought to find someone, even if they were fictional, who could identify with the troubles they faced each day. Presented in 15-minute increments each

weekday from 9:00A.M. to 6:00P.M., soap operas comprised seventy-five percent of all radio broadcasting programs and boasted an audience of 20 million women (Horten, 2002, p.147). Daytime radio dramas were big business, raking in one-third of the total radio revenue primarily from companies offering household cleaning products (hence the name *soap* operas). Favorite shows include *The Guiding Light*, set in the small rural community of Five-Points; *The Road of Life*, portraying the life of Dr. Jim Brent, a surgeon at City Hospital; *Woman in White*, centering on the life and career of nurse Karen Adams; *Lonely Women*, portraying the lives of various single women; and the newest drama *Today's Children*, a story about a large family (Horten, 2002, p. 151). But as much as some women enjoyed listening to these daytime dramas, this would all change for some of them.

The Office of War Administration (OWI), realizing that there was a huge shortage of labor in service industries throughout the country conducted, via radio and other media, a major campaign to recruit women. The campaign, under the acronym WINS – Women in Necessary Services, was designed to “keep the civilian economy working during the war” (Blue, 2002, p. 297). Earlier in the year, many women in the South submitted applications to join the newly-created Women’s Land Army, an agency of the U.S Department of Agriculture. Those who were chosen were thrilled with their new jobs and the prospect of serving their country. But millions now had a problem they had never encountered – what to do with their children while they worked? Some had been advised repeatedly by their friends and family not to seek employment, but they felt as though they were obligated to support their husband, sons, and brothers in any way they could. They were torn, however, between their duty to support their men and their

obligation to rear their children. But their decision made, they now faced the problem of child care (Duis, 1996, p. 32). It was during this era that the term “day care” was first coined (Kundanis, 1992, p. 138), but unlike their peers who lived in cities where day care was a new alternative, rural women’s only option was to rely on friends or family to help them. As difficult as it was for them to do, they decided to swallow their pride and ask their mothers, grandmothers, aunt, and even neighbors to move in to their homes with them while they worked the fields throughout South Georgia. At the end of a long day in the fields, they sat in the darkness and pondered if they made the right decision.

The Toughest Woman I Ever Knew

The Depression years had taken their toll on many women. The following depiction of a typical South Georgia woman of the early 1940s is based largely upon my grandmother, Autrey Burgess, who had to find work outside the home in order to keep creditors at bay. “Grandmother Burgess,” as I knew her, died when I was 11-years old and since I saw her only once each year, I had to piece together her experiences from conversations with my father and his siblings.

June 6, 1944

The late-afternoon summer sun is scorching, and the field hands take a short break from planting peanuts and stretch their back. Although the scores of women working with her are simple farmers they, like their husbands and brothers overseas, are wearing uniforms issued by their government. Specially designed for women, their uniforms consists of

dark-blue overalls a choice of long-sleeved or short-sleeved light blue shirt;

a short, dark-blue jacket; and a hat of the two shades of blue, with a visor to

shade the face from the sun. The W.L.A. insignia in red, white, and blue are on the overalls and hat (Tresham, 1997, p. 208).

More than a year has passed since women began to toil in the fields and the days have become very predictable. Arriving in the field long before the sun rises, they use the pre-dawn hours to get to know their fellow workers and they have learned that they have much in common. On average, eight of the ten girls on the crew have children who are being taken care of by their mothers or mothers-in-law, and all of their husbands and sons are fighting in Europe or in the Pacific. Several weeks have passed since any of them have gotten a letter from their husbands or sons and they are beginning to worry more and more with each passing day. Rumors have swirled for months that an Allied invasion of Europe would soon take place so, with batteries strictly rationed, one of the young women suggested a few weeks ago that they each take turns bringing a battery-powered radio to listen to while they work. They work in harmony throughout the day as they listen to the music, pausing only for lunch, restroom breaks, and the occasional news bulletin, when they all stand in anticipation. The women, planting peanuts with precision timing as they listen to the Andrews Sisters' *(I'll Be With You) In Apple Blossom Time*, stop when they hear the long air of radio silence that always precedes a big announcement. Having learned that program interruptions have gotten more sparse as the news of small Allied victories have become more frequent in favor of the drama associated with the "big story," the women drop their seed bags to the ground as the news bulletin interrupts and they offer a silent prayer for the safety of their husbands. Through crackling airways a voice states,

The Allied invasion has started. The news to this moment at this time is all supplied by the enemy. The Germans, through the Berlin radio, tell us that the invasion – that’s the enemy’s word for it – has started. There is no Allied confirmation. Shortly after 1:00A.M. eastern war time, Columbia shortwave listening station heard the Berlin radio make this announcement...quote, ‘Here is a special bulletin...Early this morning, the long-awaited British and American invasion began when paratroops landed in the area of the Seine estuary. The harbor of Le Havre,’ the Berlin broadcast went on, ‘is being fiercely bombarded at this moment’ (Darlington, 1944).

Despite their relief that the invasion has finally come and their hope that the war might soon be over, the women cannot bring themselves to be joyous. Their thoughts turn to their husbands and sons as they try not to imagine them lying dead on a beach somewhere in Europe. The swinging trumpet fanfare at the beginning of *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* snaps them from their daydreams while a few reach into their pocket to pull out photos of their men.

One woman’s thoughts trail to how the extra income she’s been getting, 50 cents per hour (Tresham, 1997, p. 208), combined with her mother’s continued help at home, has brought financial stability to her family yet she still feels as though she is torn. She sees her child only on weekends since she leaves each morning before he awakens and returns too late for him to still be up. She reaches to put the pictures back in her pocket and notices that a piece of paper has fallen out. She reaches down, picks it up, and reads the words of popular actress Ann Sothern in an article she had clipped a few weeks earlier, entitled “What Kind of Woman Will Your Husband Come Home To?:

I know that a lot of men are dreaming of coming back not only to those girls who waved good-by [sic] to them. They are dreaming of coming back to the mothers of their children (as cited in May, 1996, p. 139).

She carries her seed bag to the boss and tells her, “Thank you for all you’ve done for me, but I’m going home to my son.” Just that quickly, her days in service to her country come to an end. She wants to once again be the mother of her husband’s child.

Another woman, a close friend, sees what takes place. Autrey, who has worked on the farm crew since its inception, decides that she, too, has had enough of separation from her children and makes the tough decision to voluntarily give up her “essential” job with a fairly good and steady income. She now faces the realization that she may have to give up her recently purchased 1938 Nash and B card. Her new status is not as important to her as her children. In the long evening shadows of the drive home, she turns on the car radio and listen to one of the nation’s most popular shows, *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*. One of the first radio shows to offer realistic sound effects combined with a mix of comedy, terror, mystery, and suspense, it gives its listeners thirty minutes in which to escape the brutalities associated with the war. As she rounds the bend and pulls the car into her yard, she turns off the radio and finds herself thankful for the half-hour break from reality. She walks into the house, wakes up her children – Jeremiah, Daniel, and Caroline and says, “Mama’s home, babies...for good.

August 6, 1945

More than a year after leaving the Women’s Land Army, Autrey still has regrets at times, but she is much happier at home with her children. The morning begins as most had back in the early days of the war, only now Caroline is once again “helping” her

mother milk the cows as they listen to the radio in the barn. Autrey's mother is in the house cooking breakfast as she sings to the year's most popular song, *Sentimental Journey*, on the radio. But before the song can end, silence interrupts and the ladies know a news bulletin is forthcoming. Autrey looks toward the house to see her mother looking back at her in anticipation with her fingers crossed. They hope it is the announcement they have been waiting five years for.

From the Mutual news room in New York...San Francisco...the International News Service...FCC quotes [indistinguishable first name] Mize saying, 'Japan accepts Allied terms'...this is not official...it is from Tokyo radio (Widner, 1945).

Buckets of milk and joyous screams fly from the barn while Autrey's mother rushes out to greet her family. It does not matter to them that the announcement is not official for they know, as do all Americans, that Tokyo radio would not have admitted to it if it were not true. As if the radio disc jockey could foresee the announcement, the very next song is the unofficial anthem of families whose soldiers will soon be returning – Bing Crosby's *I'll Be Home for Christmas*. It does not matter that Christmas is more than five months away. They just know that the entire family will be together again soon. The rest of the day is a blur with practically all scheduled radio programming upset in favor of songs of homecoming and victory.

The contributions of America's home front women during World War II are immeasurable. They came forward during a time when their country could least afford to do without them. The war machine could not have run throughout North Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe and the Pacific had it not been for the millions of women in the

factories and fields. Whether for excitement, for profit, or out of a sense of duty, women were just as responsible for ultimate victory as the men who fought the battles. “The manpower of the war cannot prevail without the womanpower of the war behind it” (Litoff & Smith, 1997, p. xiii).

On October 14, 2000, “*The Rosie the Riveter Memorial: Honoring American Women's Labor During WWII*” became the first monument in the nation to honor and interpret” the work of the 18 million women who “worked in WWII defense industries and support services including steel mills, foundries, lumber mills, aircraft factories, offices, hospitals and daycare centers” (Richmond, 2006). While this memorial is certainly needed, it brings into sharp focus the lack of any recognition for the women who provided food for three continents as they labored in America’s fields from 1942-1945.

CHAPTER TEN – GOING HOME

Prelude – War’s Not Exciting After All

“Daddy, I can’t believe Will died!” I said. “ All this time you’ve been talking, I was thinking about how exciting it would be to be in a war. You know, shooting guns, driving tanks, and stuff. And it was awesome the way the British commandos went in and got you out of the POW camp without ever firing a shot.” I paused to grasp the reality of death. “But then when you said Will drowned while he was trying to save you, I decided war’s not as exciting as I thought it was after all.”

“What do you mean son?” Daddy asked.

“I mean, nobody thinks about a soldier drowning in a war. I always imagined people dying from bombs and bullets, but not from water. It just doesn’t seem right.”

“Son, believe it or not, I’ve seen people die in the war from something as simple as eating just a doughnut. And you’re right...it’s mighty hard to make sense of. I had a hard time with that for a long time. But you remember what we said about miracles?” I nodded. “God sent Will here to perform a miracle for me.”

Daddy’s thoughts trailed away as he continued...

A Real Family Reunion

Austin was safely returned to his unit in early February 1945, and for most of that month the 2nd experienced a lull in the fighting. The last German offensive of the war had been repelled after more than a month of fighting, and the line that had bulged for nearly 200 miles was now restored just west of the Belgian-German border.

Although the German high command in Berlin refused to admit defeat, the soldiers on the front lines were a different story. They were surrendering so quickly that

overcrowding in temporary camps became a problem. On several occasions, fanatical German soldiers pretended to surrender, approaching with their hands held high. But they would often have grenades hidden in their clothing which would kill themselves and five or six Americans as well. Seeing this caused the American soldiers to grow hard-hearted. As a result, many American soldiers refused to take prisoners. Instead, they began to shoot every German on sight, whether he was surrendering or not.

When word of this reached the American high command, orders were sent back to the front lines that no man was to shoot another who was attempting to surrender. Subsequently, American tank crews decided to aim their flame throwers at surrendering Germans rather than shoot them. Though it was perhaps not a moral thing to do, they were following orders to the letter and still accomplishing their goal.

The 2nd crossed into Germany in late February. With Tiger and Panzer divisions still on the run, the move toward Berlin was swift, and by April, the 2nd was perched on the outskirts of the German capital.

Germany officially surrendered to the Allied forces on May 9, 1945. Nine days earlier, Adolf Hitler, sensing the end of the Nazi regime was near, learned of the death of Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini. He locked himself and his girlfriend in an underground bunker, and the two supposedly committed suicide. No one knows for certain how they died, but none of the Allies really cared how – they were just glad he was dead.

On July 4, ironically enough, the 2nd was the first American division to enter the once-proud Nazi capital of Berlin. British and French divisions soon followed from the west and the Russians entered from the east. The remaining officers of the Nazi Party

who had not fled the city were imprisoned, and the war – at least in Europe – was over.

Austin returned home to Pavo on January 19, 1946. That glorious afternoon, Sarah and Jeremiah were splitting wood while Daniel and Caroline were playing in the yard. The first to notice him walking up the path was Caroline. She dashed down the path shouting, “Mama, Mama, he’s home, he’s home!” Sarah sank the axe into the stump and stood to flex her back.

“My baby’s home!” she cried out as she, Jeremiah, and Daniel joined Caroline in the rush.

Austin dropped his duffle bag just before Caroline leapt into his arms. “Oh, I missed you so much,” he said as he kissed the side of her head. “And I brought you some presents all the way from Europe.”

Her eyes lit up at the prospects of getting back her brother and some gifts all in the same day.

Sarah, Jeremiah, and Daniel joined in on the hugs as the four of them stood arm-in-arm underneath a giant, moss-draped, yellow-ribboned live oak tree. It was the day that Sarah had prayed for every day for the past five years and yet it seemed too good to be true. Austin picked up his duffle bag and, with Caroline on his shoulders, the reunited family headed to the house. Jeremiah entered first and paused just long enough to flip a switch. Electric lights illuminated the room and Austin gasped. Candles and the fireplace had been the only sources of light when he left.

“I must call Emily to let her know you’re home,” Sarah said. She walked to the small black box hanging on the wall, lifted a black handle from a silver holder, and began to speak. “Good afternoon, Mabel. Could you please ring Emily’s house? Thank

you.”

“When did we get a telephone?” Austin asked Jeremiah.

“Oh, that’s new. We got it just before Christmas. As Sarah spoke in the background, Jeremiah continued, “I gotta tell ya, little brother, I don’t know how we woulda made it without yer help. Mama made a little extra to get us food and all, but it was what you sent that kept the bank from takin’ the farm.”

“Okay, Emily. See y’all soon,” Sarah said as she hung up the phone.

Austin said sarcastically, “A fella leaves a farm for a while, and comes back to New York City.” Everyone laughed.

“Well, I don’t know about all that,” Sarah said. “We’ll meet Emily in about an hour.”

“Meet her where?”

“You’ll see. I gotta tell ya somethin’, son. When Emily got that telegram saying that Will was dead, she took it mighty hard. She shut out just about everybody and everything. But then God brought her the most wonderful blessing.”

“What was it, Mama?”

“Oh, you’ll see, son. That’s where we’re headed now. Let’s go.”

Austin had nearly forgotten how it felt to drive the wagon pulled by Old Tobe. As they strolled through the woods, he admired the beauty of the tall, straight pines and the majestic live oaks. “Mama,” he said, “You may need to let me know where we’re a-goin’ seein’ as how I’m the one who’s drivin.”

“You’re headin’ in the right direction. I’ll letcha know when it changes,” she replied playfully. As they rounded a bend in the path and approached a fork, Sarah said,

“Left,” and Austin tightened the rein in his left hand to gently guide Old Tobe.

“We must be headin’ into town,” Austin said.

“Nope,” she replied.

“Then where?” he asked, curiosity eating him up.

“We’re goin’ to the church, if you must know.”

“All ya had to do was say so. I’ll hush now.”

“Good,” she said teasingly, and they both chuckled.

The modest white-steepled church was a welcome sight. Austin had seen some of Europe’s grandest cathedrals, though mostly in ruins, but his small, simple clapboard church was grand in his eyes.

He tugged on both reins and Old Tobe stopped right on cue next to the church.

“Are we goin’ in, Mama?” Austin asked.

“No, Emily’ll meet us in back.”

“In back? That’s the cemetery.”

“That’s right, son. We wanted you to see where Will is buried.”

A large lump grew in Austin’s throat. In all the excitement of coming home, he’d not even thought about seeing Will’s grave sight.

“Will you be okay to see it?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be okay.”

When they rounded the corner of the church, Emily was already kneeling over the grave, placing flowers and a new American flag next to the headstone. When her silent meditation was broken by the sound of the grass crunching beneath footsteps, Emily was startled and she gasped as she stood.

Sarah hugged her neck and apologized for scaring her. "Is everything ready?" Sarah asked, and Emily nodded.

Austin, trailing a few yards behind, neared the grave. The two ladies took a few steps back, and Austin removed his hat as he knelt down. He reached out and touched the marker with his fingertips. 'William Christian Thomas, Spec. 4, US. Army, Born December 22, 1923, Died January 11, 1945.'

Though sad, Austin had to chuckle at the sight of the date of birth. His thoughts turned back to family Bibles they'd brought home four years earlier. He knew Will was only 17-years old when he died, not 21 as the marker suggested.

"Austin," his mother whispered as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know it must have been hard for you when Will died. But look at it this way - ya can't say that you've lost someone if ya know where they are. We know Will's in heaven and we'll see him again one day. And besides, there's still a part of him here."

"Whatcha mean, Mama?" he asked.

"Look behind you."

Austin arose and turned to see a young woman approaching. The sun was in his eyes, and he strained to see who she was and what she was carrying. As she came closer he realized who it was - Abbey Winchester Thomas. In her arms was 14-month old William Christian Thomas, Jr.

Austin could not believe his eyes. "Abbey, what are you doing here?" he said excitedly as he hugged her.

"The night before your unit left for France, Will asked me if I wanted to come to the States with him once the war was over. Of course, I said 'yes'. When I received

word he'd died I was already pregnant. I told my parents that I still wanted to live in America so that we could keep Will's memory alive here. The day after VE Day little Will and I boarded a ship, and here we are."

She held out the sleeping baby and said, "Austin, this is baby Will."

Austin took the tiny infant in his arms. He tilted his head and smiled as the baby yawned and cooed. Little Will's eyes opened slightly and again he was fast asleep.

"He sure does look like his daddy, only a lot more handsome," Austin kidded.

"Yes, he is lovely child," Abbey said. "But of course he gets that from me."

*When the giggling subsided, Abbey said, "And there's one more thing I wanted to show you, Austin." She reached into her purse and handed him a newspaper clipping with a photograph. In the picture were Will, General Patton, and himself. It was the photograph that had been taken the evening after the 78th had engaged 2,000 Germans at pointblank range and defeated them. The Associated Press had circulated the picture to newspapers all over the Europe and the United States. And it was also the only picture Abbey had of her husband. The top right corner read 'London Free Press, August 14, 1944,' and the headline was '**Patton Congratulates Yank Soldiers.**'*

*Sarah pulled a similar article with the same photograph from her dress pocket and handed it to him. 'Thomasville Times-Enterprise, August 14, 1944. **Georgia Boys Earn Victory in Europe.**'*

Interlude – Back at the Old Schoolhouse

The passing shadow of hawk flying overhead snapped me from my dream-like state. The story my father had been telling had mesmerized me. The bird screeched and my dad looked skyward and said, "Boy, he sure is a big one. Wonder if he's the same

one that got that rabbit..."

"Dad, whatever happened to Miss Abbey and little Will, Jr.?" I interrupted..

"Oh, they're still around. In fact, you'll see 'em later today when mom and Josh pick us up to go back to the reunion.

"Why would they be at our family reunion?"

"Because they're family, son. You see, my mother and Will's mother are sisters. That makes Will and me first cousins. Aunt Emily's the only one who doesn't pinch your cheeks and call you 'Precious.' She also has red hair."

"Oh, I remember her." I said as I cupped my left cheek.

"Abbey's about my age and Will, Jr.'s probably 33 or 34 by now. You've seen them every year at the reunion, but you've never really met them. Would you like to meet 'em?"

I hopped off the stump I'd been sitting on and walked toward the old school house. "I sure would!" I said as I quickly turned around.

"Great!" he replied. "Whatcha say we start walkin' on down the road and save yer mom a few miles of drivin'?"

We meandered down the dusty dirt road and my father reached into his pocket. "Oh, by the way, son, this is for you."

*I unfolded the yellowed, wrinkled, time-worn paper to see a photo of my father and Uncle Will saluting General Patton. **'Georgia Boys Earn Victory in Europe.'***

I looked up to see my father smiling at me. "It was my mother's. She gave it to me, and now I'm giving it to you. How 'bout you give it your son one day, okay?"

I took my father's hand and said, "I will, Daddy. Can you tell me some more?"

More Family Reunions

Cranman

I was fortunate to meet up with a young man I grew up with, Arthur (Bubba) Horowitz, on the way home. The trip was uneventful except for one life-changing event: I learned from Bubba that I was engaged to be married to Helen! The news came as quite a shock since I had not any correspondence with Helen since before I left for Europe more than a year earlier. As far as I knew, Helen was still living in Beverly Hills and had no intention of returning to Savannah. I still had no idea that she was interested in me romantically. The idea of Helen announcing our engagement without my knowledge seemed unreal to me. I thought that Bubba must surely have gotten names mixed up and this caused a bit of uneasy tension between us for the remainder of the voyage. As it turned out, my uncle had visited Helen's family in California and simply asked the question 'Would you marry Herman if he gets back?' Helen's one word response was 'Yes,' and the engagement was on, all without my knowledge. When I was finally in a position to call her, I was reluctant to ask questions about the engagement. I asked no questions because Helen and her family could well have gotten the notion that I had my brain damaged in the war! My homecoming was almost everything I hoped it would be. My family and many of my friends, though mostly girls since the boys were still scattered across the globe, were there. I spent a lot of time on the beach at Tybee, went fishing, and just enjoyed everyone around me. But, still, Helen was not there. I pined for her for two weeks and when she finally arrived, we began making wedding plans and I felt as though my life had come full circle. When the Japanese surrendered and the war was finally over, I wanted out of the Army, but there were a million others who also wanted

out. As a former POW, however, I learned that I had high priority for being released from active duty. My orders placing me in the reserves came down in October 1945. When my time in the reserves expired, I decided I had done my duty for my country so I did not reenlist.

Baylor

We were first sent to Brussels, Belgium, and I think they call it 'reconditioned.' You know, scrubbed down and we went on a diet that enabled us to eat most anything we wanted to later. I didn't realize it, but when your stomach has shrunk and you've maybe been on the verge of starvation and then maybe get food it does something to you. You think you're going to sit down and eat steaks and all that. If you try you end up really sick so they put us through that course. We had a few days in Brussels then got on a plane to Le Havre, France, which was a point of debarkation to America. I came down with pneumonia about three days before I was supposed to get on the ship so I missed that ship. I stayed in the hospital for two weeks and in two weeks they had me feeling good. I don't know what they shot me with but it was about every hour on the hour. Whatever it was it got me out of bed in a hurry. We went into the Brooklyn Navy Yard and there was this white orchestra and young women and young men jitterbugging to swing and I thought, 'Hot dog, we're back home!' But you now what was really strange to me? It was as though the States hadn't changed at all. I knew I had been gone a long time, but it really felt as if I was coming back to the same place I'd left. I can truthfully say in my case it hadn't changed at all. Once I got home, it was like I was stepping back into the same town, the same people, the same activities, the same regimen that I left. No kidding, it really was. But there was one big difference that showed itself later, when I

was on a date at the movies about a month after getting home. I had thought that the war didn't really effect me negatively, but then while watching a war movie I realized I was wrong. All prisoners of war were given a one month furlough when we got to Camp Gilmer. Since Eggerstown wasn't that far from New Jersey, it wasn't much of a trip for me. I think I might have had two days there. I found some girls that I left behind and I asked them out. Of course, all the girls were patriotic and wanted to go out with returning soldiers. I made the mistake of taking one girl to a war movie. I had to apologize to her because I just couldn't make it through that movie. Watching it and remembering some of the ones who didn't make it... That lasted three, four, five months. I might see a movie a year and it eventually got to be pretty routine after a while. But I think when you've actually been through combat every time you see it for the rest of your life, it makes an impression upon you that probably the average person does not understand. It's bound to do something to your mind and your memory.

Waldrop

It was April of '45 when we spotted land from the hospital ship. It's hard to describe the feeling when you were coming into New York Harbor and saw the Statue of Liberty. There were times, doubtful times, when I thought I was never going to make it. There were a lot of near-death situations and any one of them could have kept me from ever stepping on American soil again. I was anxious to get back to civilian life but the military had some kind of weird point system. Everybody in my group got sent to Miami Beach, Florida, for a time of rehab. The Army Air Corps took over all the neat hotels for us. It was while I was there that I learned POWs were going to have first choice of where they wanted to be reassigned so we could get enough points to be discharged. Of course,

I chose Fort Wayne, Indiana, because there was a big air base there and it was so close to Indianapolis. My wife, who I'd dated for quite a while before enlisting, and I got married then and we've pretty much lived happily ever after.

All three men had a girl waiting for them when they returned home, and they each married the girlfriend who they had dated prior to leaving to fight in the war. My father also had females waiting to see come around the bend, albeit his mother and little sister. I recall my father mentioning that, when he was in school, there was a girl in his class he liked, although I do not remember her name. In any event, he hardly spoke of her, at least to me, so I gathered that there was never anything more than distant admiration on his part. Quizzing of my aunts and uncles revealed little in the way of my father's romantic pursuits. To hear them tell it, he was much more interested in fighting than in romance, hence his nickname growing up, Spat. He had a terrible temper, so as a young child he enjoyed trying to chop others down to make himself look bigger. As he got older, however, his thoughts turned to farming and keeping his family fed. School took a backseat and, as a result, the only girl to whom he had showed any interest was no longer within his circle.

There is little doubt in my mind that from 1966 onward, my father lived his life for me. His two previous marriages failed and he was convinced that he would never have a child. He married my mother in 1965, just ten weeks after having first seen her. Twenty years and four days separated them in age. Well, actually sixteen years and one month, officially. If you do the math, that means my father was already a soldier in the United States Army when she was born. But the age difference was an easy hurdle to overcome. My mother's failed marriage in 1960 that left her with a young son in need of

a father, my father's apparent inability to produce offspring, and of course their newfound love for one another, combined to make the marriage a good endeavor. The two married on June 27, 1965, and I was born nine months and four days later. My father threatened to divorce my mother when she announced that she was pregnant because he knew he could not procreate. The only logical explanation for her pregnancy, at least in his mind, was her infidelity. My mother assured him that he was, indeed, my father, and they weathered the storm to create a thirty-six year marriage. There's no doubt I am his – I look just like him, except I still have my hair! He went bald during the war years.

I suppose I get my passion for telling stories from hearing my father tell his. He was a master of spinning yarns like *The Three Little Pigs* in inventive new ways. He would start with "Once upon a time..." but from that point on the story was all his own. I was enamored by his ability to think quickly and make up such interesting tales. But, as expected, there was always a different tone in his voice when he told war stories. I could tell these were not made up. Edited perhaps, but not made up. And there was never a time when I asked him to tell me something about the war that he refused. I said the last line of the narrative, "*Can you tell me some more?*" probably hundreds of times as a child and it was always followed by, "Well, let me see..." I missed a lot of my mother's bedtime deadlines, but I sure learned a lot about who my father was.

CHAPTER ELEVEN –

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES: REMEMBERING WAR EXPERIENCES

We are not just shaped by memories; we ourselves shape the memories that shape us

(Volf, 2006, p. 25).

What has astounded and intrigued me perhaps more than anything else I encountered while talking with Mr. Baylor, Mr. Cranman, And Mr. Waldrop is their memory. I sat listening to men who are in their mid- to late-80s and was absolutely amazed by the vividness and accuracy with which they remembered their experiences. I confess that, going into the first interview with Mr. Baylor, I wondered whether what I would be told would validate or contradict the research I had done.

Certainly, the older one gets, the more difficult it is to remember. With age comes more and more to remember and our minds become clouded with the daily busyness that seeks to bog us down. The way in which we perceive ourselves and how we desire to be seen by others is impossible to be separated from the stories we convey about our past. Therefore, all memory can be seen as in crisis, pulled between conflicting purposes of historical reflection, political usefulness, and personal or collective imagination.

Memory has been a vital aspect of this endeavor into the life histories of these men. As I prepared to interview them, I expected I might possibly encounter two negative responses to my questions: (1) they may unintentionally alter the events of the past due to memory loss, or (2) they may intentionally embellish the events of the past. With all people the passage of time causes details to fade and the opportunities for

distortion of events increase. I expected my challenge to lie in distinguishing between the two and authenticating the men's statements. But that problem never surfaced.

Since the gentlemen I spoke with will were decidedly up in years, I was prepared to recognize the possibility that I might encounter false memory – also called the sin of transience (Schacter, 2001) – the unintentional blurring of events that takes place because of the passage of time. I knew going in that there was a very real possibility that, at least for some of the men I would meet, their memory may have faded with the passage of time. According to Schacter (2001), one's level of education plays a significant role in what one loses to transience. There is an inverse relationship between the level of one's education and one's susceptibility to transience. Although the men I met varied in their levels of formal education from high school graduate to college graduate, I did not notice a significant difference in their abilities to recall the events of more than sixty years ago. Both Mr. Waldrop and Mr. Cranman had no formal education beyond high school, but they have aligned themselves with the Mighty Eighth Air Museum which has afforded them the opportunity to share their experiences, and thus keep them fresh in their minds. Mr. Baylor and my father both used the GI Bill to attend college. Both spent time in graduate school and, if Schacter's proposal is valid, their educational levels may have, indeed, played a role in their ability to remember and convey their experiences.

I found, for the most part, that the memories of all these men were as keen as if the events they described had taken place yesterday. Minor details, such as names of cities, may have been forgotten with the passage of time, but the facts they shared were indisputable. The biographical research I conducted on POWs fell directly in line with the accounts of these three men as well as that of my father. A child believes what his

parent tells him. There is no reason to believe otherwise. Subsequently, I believed my father's war stories. It is refreshing and invigorating to know that through research and through conversing with these three men what my father shared with me was, indeed, true. There was little doubt to begin with, but the validation I discovered allows me to move a step beyond where I was prior to this exploration.

I never expected to encounter all-out lies from those I interviewed, and I do not believe I was given any. The men I met were forthright in all they shared. At times, such as when Mr. Cranman mentioned the companionship of women while he was overseas and when Mr. Waldrop mentioned having to stop on the side of the road during the Black March to relieve himself due to dysentery, I could sense that what they were sharing was highly personal, yet they did not hide behind their words.

All three men made comments along the lines of "No one can fully understand what I went through." Mr. Cranman stated it best when he said, "Words do not give the feeling of being there. But since words are all I have, I knew it would take me sharing my words to adequately cover the experience." These men opened their lives to me and gave me at least a glimpse of what both they and my father experienced.

The interviews never reached a point at which I felt like the gentlemen were using them as an opportunity to present what they *should* have done rather than what they *actually* did. Nor did they offer descriptions of what *should* have happened to them rather than what *actually* happened. Nor did I find that they exaggerated their experiences in captivity in order to make their captors appear worse than they truly were. I took painstaking effort to weigh the responses I received in interviews against previously documented statements in order to add validation to them. I discovered that

just as an automobile accident witnessed by four people from four different perspectives might yield four different, yet accurate accounts of what took place, these veterans' accounts of their experiences fit together in the same manner. They were merely different pieces to the same puzzle.

CHAPTER TWELVE – FACT, FICTION, AND CURRICULUM THEORY

One way to slow down, reflect, and feed the inner self is through engagement with fiction. Perhaps our hunger will help us find our own words to express our own selves and our own stories

(Doll, 2000, p. xvii).

Fact ~~vs.~~ and Fiction

The first draft of this dissertation was very traditional in its format, quite standard and rigid. But there was one problem – it did not represent me. My writing throughout the entire doctoral program had been that of a style that suited me. When I reached the dissertation stage, however, I thought I had better do something a little more conventional to impress my committee. But through the urging and direction of Dr. John Weaver and Dr. Ming Fang He, I took a step back and conducted a little re-think. I took a few weeks to look deep inside myself and discover what type of writing I do best and exactly what it is I enjoy most about writing. I found that to be a combination of history – particularly World War II – and fiction so I set about creating an amalgamation of the two. I count myself as extremely fortunate to have been in a curriculum studies program that would not only allow me, but encourage me, to explore my passions. I was very pleased to find that curriculum theory would give me the forum in which to do what I love. “Curriculum theorists have long called for what writers do best: create fictions” (Doll, 2000, p. x).

But once I decided what I wanted to do, I found myself at somewhat of an impasse. *How* was I going to write the truth of history in a fictional manner and still remain true to the facts? The answer came to me on an evening in which I was watching a movie rather than doing what I should have been – writing. My wife and children were

at my mother-in-law's house so I had our home all to myself. Having read numerous books about and by POWs, World War II filled my thoughts, but writing about it held no allure at that particular moment. So, I popped one of my favorite films, *Saving Private Ryan*, into the DVD player, and before the powerful beach landing sequence was complete, I knew that I could write my father's true stories on a fictional backdrop in an inverse manner from the way in which Spielberg showed his. He placed fictional characters in a factual setting on the big screen, but I would place both real and fictional people on both factual and fictional backdrops.

The early twentieth century American educator John Dewey stated, "Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (1938/1997, p. 38). The experience of combining my fictional narrative with the historical accounts of other POWs has, indeed, been a moving force for me. Reading fiction and, even more so, watching fiction (on television or in theaters), has always intrigued me, though writing it never appealed to me up until the moment I began this experience. Combining fiction with fact has been tremendously liberating, affording me the opportunity to merge writing fiction's freedom of creation with the resoluteness of writing historical biography. Ursula Le Guin (1989, pp. 44-45) states,

A totally factual narrative, were there such a thing, would be passive: a mirror reflecting all without distortion...but fiction does not reflect, nor is the narrator's eye that of a camera...Fiction connects possibilities... and by doing so it is useful to us.

The more fiction I wrote, the more I began to read, and I soon found that I was able to enter lives that were not my own (Dillard, 1982). I noted earlier that a disconnect

exists between my live and those of the POWs I met in the course of this study. The breach between our lives cannot be fully bridged, but fictional writing has truly afforded me the opportunity to enter lives I may have otherwise never encountered.

Much thought went into the naming of characters for the fictional portion of this narrative. With the exception of Austin, every character has a pseudonym. Dillard (1982) points out that

A writer may comment on his characters or, as Barth does, mock them. He may give them funny names which call attention to the artificiality of the whole business: Humbert Humbert, Betty Bliss, Word Smith. He may give them names which call attention to ideas, either ironically or in earnest: Oedipa Maas, Benny Profane, and J. Henry Waugh (= JHVH, Jahweh).

As I named my characters, I used primarily names that were already a part of my family. For instance, little Caroline in the narrative is my daughter's name. As noted earlier, Austin was actually my father's name, but it was not the name others knew him by. My son's name is Austin and I chose to call the main character in the narrative by that name in honor of both my father and him.

The one name that holds particular significance, I must admit, was chosen to also honor my father, whose name was William Austin Burgess. *Will* was selected merely as an abbreviation of William. But the character's name hold much more symbolism and meaning. Upon reflection, I find that the character Will represents displays an admirable and unrelenting will to live and keep others around him alive. His gesture to return to the pond to retrieve the matches and hike back to the abandoned house through the blizzard

is symbolic of all POWs resilience, stamina, and desire to cheat death. Dillard (1982) contends, “The writer’s materials are real or imagined phenomena” (p. 69). Will, the character, never existed, except in my mind. He is, however, based upon an anonymous man who gave his life for my father. Will, the character, is imagined - he lives only in my words. Will, the desire to live, is present in all POWs who endured life on the wrong side of the fence.

If the definition of a novel can be said to be a written, fictional, prose narrative, then the narrative that fills these pages should seem to qualify. One of America’s most prolific authors, Henry James, asserts that “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (James, 2007, p. 17). The purpose of my narrative writing is to truly represent the lives and lived experiences of four men who sacrificed years of their lives in service to their country. Their willingness to serve took them to a defining moment that saw them rise above the conditions that were thrust upon them. They overcame the circumstances that could have easily mired them down to eventually lead successful and productive lives that were blessed with family and friends.

As I recently sat in a hospital waiting room in anticipation of the birth of a friend’s first child, I scanned through a magazine and found the following quote: “Historic preservation...[provides] a sense of place and teaches lessons from the past that may be essential if we are to prosper rather than simply exist” (Thompson, 2008, pp. 42-48). Clearly this is intended for those whose interests lie in the art of restoring old homes, but it is equally applicable to the art of writing historical fiction. I have approached this art with the intent of creating for myself and others an appreciation for the past and the people who shaped it. I hope that, through my research and writing, I

have accomplished my goal of prospering the voices of those who may soon vanish.

The Ties that Bind: Fictional Narratives and Curriculum Theory

*It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth,
for a fictional discourse to induce the effects of truth (Foucault, 1980, p. 193).*

As a young boy, I was often confused by the phrase “telling stories.” My mother would tell me it’s wrong to tell stories, meaning, of course, to lie. But when I crawled in bed at night, it was the time for either my mother or father to tell me stories. I wondered if all stories, not just fairy tales and such, were lies. For a relatively shallow thinker at the age of six or eight, that was pretty perplexing. But, eventually, I came to learn that not all stories are falsehoods. Some stories, like those war tales my father told of, were true, but possibly embellished or edited. Still other stories were just hard, cold facts, and it was those that interested me the least. This thought process eventually brought me to the question “Does fiction have to be a lie?” Rob Walker (Walker, 1981) pondered the same thoughts, asking the question “is fiction the only route to some kinds of truth?” Barone (1992, p. 143) offers a powerful assertion that leads me to believe that fiction can be and, indeed, is often factual:

Like all good art, honest stories are powerfully observed, carefully detailed.

They must tend to generate in the reader awareness of the locations of (actual or fictitious) characters’ thoughts, beliefs, desires, and habits, in the webs of contingencies that constitute their life-worlds.

Barone (1992, p. 145) contends that critical stories *par excellence* include the fictional works of Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* (1968) and novels such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Citing Steinbeck’s classic work that he

dubs “realist fiction,” Barone (1992, p. 146) comes to the conclusion that

Does it matter that this story is fictional? Hardly. I would argue that the ultimate purpose of critical storytelling...can be served equally well through journalistic or novelistic modes. In that sense, critical storytelling moves qualitative researchers and readers not only beyond theory but beyond genre as well.

My assertion in linking reconceptualized curriculum studies to fictional narrative inquiry is that there is no better means of telling of storied lives than via narrative writing. The life courses of four World War II POWs – their *currere* – are shared here through personal reflection on their part and through fictional-factual writing on my part.

Both *currere* and narrative inquiry seek to understand and question the ways in which curriculum is constituted in the subjectivities of teachers and other curriculum workers by encouraging personal (and sometimes collaborative) reflection on stories generated through such procedures as autobiographical writing and journal-keeping (Gough, 1998, p. 122).

So, we now know that fiction can be both a truth and a lie concurrently. This dissertation tells the life-stories of four men from both perspectives. Much like Mary Doll’s *Like Letters in Running Water: A Mythopoetics of Curriculum* (2000), the words in these pages avow that “fiction is not only necessary for pedagogy, fiction is the lie that pedagogy needs in order to uncover the truths that make us human” (p. xii). Factual writing merely tells it like it is, but fictional narrative opens up countless possibilities for telling life stories truthfully and creatively.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – THE REST OF MY LIFE

Much of what is presented in this narrative is factual, but depicted in a fictional manner for the sake of telling the story. Here are the facts as they relate to my father:

My father did lie about his age to get into the Army. He had just turned fifteen when he visited an Army M.D. to take a physical. However, the Bible he was provided was my grandmother's idea. She knew he looked far too young to be considered for military service. She made all of her children born at that time older for the sake of one.

My father was seriously injured in a fall during basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. In 1941, doctors told him that he would never be able to have children. He was given the option to receive \$44 per month for the rest of his life as compensation. He negotiated with the government to have that sum of money paid to his survivor for the rest of her life, whomever she may be. At first, it was his mother, then each of his first two wives, and eventually my mother. I was born 25 years later, in 1966, when he was 44-years old. The house my parents bought in Hinesville, Georgia, was a Veterans Administration repossession. They financed the house for twenty years and the house payment was, you guessed it, \$44 per month. The house has long since been paid off and my mother still receives that amount every month to this day.

My father did see battle in North Africa, Sicily, France, Belgium, and Germany. He was captured during the Battle of the Bulge and taken to Oflag VI, the Aachen POW camp where he received the three-inch jagged scar on his forehead from the butt of a German rifle. That scar remained with him as a constant reminder of his experiences until the day he died, March 12, 2002.

Meteorologists tell us that the Belgian winter of 1944 was the coldest since 1869.

An anonymous American soldier who did not even know my father's name did, in fact, wrap Daddy's frostbitten feet with his only coat and carried him several miles through several feet of snow in the Ardennes Forest. That soldier died of exposure while saving the life of a compatriot. He remains nameless to this day, but he and his family, whoever they are, have my deepest respect and admiration.

Finally, on a crisp autumn Friday in 1984, the telephone rang at our home in Hinesville, Georgia. A lady's voice asked to speak to Austin Burgess. I found it odd that someone would ask for 'Austin' when everyone knew him as 'Bill.' But, nevertheless, I explained to her that he was not at home and offered to take a message. The name she gave me was Amelia Landegham. I wrote down her name and telephone number - it was a strange number, having more digits than I was accustomed to. When my father came home he saw the note and was literally speechless. He immediately recognized the name as the little Belgian girl whose house he and three other men hid in forty years earlier. We later learned that she had spent more than twenty years of her life searching for, contacting, and thanking forty-eight surviving American soldiers who had stayed in her basement over the three-year period of 1943-1945.

Baylor

Once I had time to get settled in, I had to decide what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Of course, I still had my love of nature so I decided to take advantage of the GI Bill and let Uncle Sam pay for my college education. I went to the University of West Virginia and got my Bachelor of Science degree in Forestry and that's what my life's work was. That's what brought me to Georgia because back then most of the opportunities in forestry were in the South because of all the paper companies. As a

matter of fact, I was driving through Spartanburg where I went to basic training at Camp Kroft. They told me that Camp Kroft is now high-rise apartments and concrete parking lots. What's the old expression?... 'things they are a-changing.'

In yet another twist of fate embedded in this inquiry, Mr. Baylor came to South Georgia, specifically Richmond Hill, to work in the field of ornithology. After a number of years of working in the private sector, he secured a position on Fort Stewart as Director of Land Management and Conservation in March 1982. The person he replaced was my father who had retired due to poor health in December 1981. They never knew each other, but it is remarkable that they are linked in such a way.

Waldrop

(A long pause of silence filled the air as he carefully searched for his words.)

You know, the more I think about it, the more I realize that not everything about being a POW was negative. I was very fortunate to meet some really great guys in those camps. You also learn how to conserve and you really learn how to keep your mouth shut at times. Of course, my mouth has gotten me into some interesting situations. There was one guy in our barracks who loved to carve and he was really good at it. For weeks he worked on a carving on the last three or four inches of a broom handle in our barracks. When he was done we saw that it was an absolutely beautiful set of airmen's wings. The details of it were tremendous, and he and all of us in the barracks were proud as hell of it. Well, one day a goon comes through the barracks and decides he's gonna sweep. He took the end of the broom and put it on the table and snapped it off and then crushed it. I've always been a pretty nice guy, but you wouldn't believe the string of profanity I let out on that goon. I called him just about every name in the book. Well, then it took my

buddies telling me what happened next because everything went black. I woke up in the middle of the compound in the middle of the night, some six hours later. One of the other goons had come up behind me popped me in the back of the neck with the butt of his rifle. I had a headache for three days after that. Another time my mouth got me noticed was after the war when a bunch of guys from a POW chapter in Indianapolis came up to Fort Wayne to talk to some of us and get a POW chapter started there. One of them gave a speech on democracy in action and then I asked a bunch of questions. I guess I talked so much that when it came time to decide who was going to be the chapter commander, a lady in the back of the room yelled, 'I vote for the guy in the red sweater!' Anyway, we started a chapter and that's when a lot of the guys started loosening up. Man, I wish I would have had a recorder back then. There were so many stories that needed to be told, but now most of those guys are dead and their stories died with them. That's why I agreed to talk with you. Other people need to know what really happened. Anyhow, I stayed there in Fort Wayne as the chapter commander from the early '50s until I moved down here to Beaufort just a few months back. I really enjoyed spending time with all those guys and they really mean a lot to me. At first, I had a real hard time talking about what I'd been through. My dad even got upset with me because I wouldn't talk to some of his business groups. He didn't understand that it wasn't that I wouldn't, it was that I couldn't. I was just still too fresh. But, eventually, I got to where it didn't bother me. I used to speak to school groups a lot, too. I haven't thought about this for years. I was in a class of seventh graders back in Indianapolis in the mid '80s and this little girl asked me if I hated Germans. I had never really thought about it so I had to think on my feet real quick in front of those kids. It was right then and there that I realized something and I

said it just like this... 'I don't hate Germans, but I do have trouble forgiving the ones who mistreated me.' Here it was forty years later and I had just come to grips with that. It's amazing. When you think about all the atrocities that were pulled [a long pause while Mr. Waldrop composes himself], I was fortunate to even get out of there like I did. Too bad more guys weren't as lucky as I was. You know, looking back on all that, you start to realize that there isn't anything I should complain about. I've had a good life and wouldn't change anything about it. I wouldn't even change having gotten caught by the Germans. The way I look at it is if I hadn't gotten caught and gone through all I did, I wouldn't be the person I am today. I'm content with who I am. I can truthfully say now that I don't think I'd want to do it again, but I'm thankful I was a POW.

Cranman

As Helen and I age, we begin to perceive a difference about our future. In other words, if we are fortunate enough to have a long past, it stands to reason that the future can no longer hold as much as it once did. Many of us are shocked when we find that we have reached such an age. We reflect on how time passed so rapidly, and we wonder what we actually accomplished in all that time.

As for me, I spent every minute of those years exercising my freedom, enjoying the privileges our great country gives us, and pursuing as much happiness for my family as providence would allow. After living the hard time POW days where every month seemed like a decade, it is only natural that freedom and happiness would make a decade seem like a month. What did I accomplish? All I ever really wanted was Helen as my wife and a family we could both love and be proud of, and that we have. I am surrounded by them.

Voices Quieted, But Not Yet Vanished

After reading a number of sources on World War II POWs and their experiences with education while in the camps, it was my intent at the onset of my research to find a landmark correlation between the gentlemen I encountered and how much they learned while in captivity. To my initial disappointment, none of the men I met mentioned anything of formal education while held as prisoners of the Nazis. But as I studied their comments more and more, I came to realize that education in the camps was remarkably indicative of education today. As much as teachers would like to believe they are the primary conveyers of wisdom and knowledge for young people, it just is not so. Students may spend seven hours each day in the classroom in academic pursuits, but that pales in comparison to what they learn from other sources. Educators are forced to compete with a host of other pursuits that distract students. All three gentlemen I interviewed spoke of learning a wealth of information, but the vast majority was not academic in nature. Their focus was on staying alive. They learned, but rather than spending time reading or attending classes, they learned to cope. They picked up skills that enabled them not to prosper, but instead, to see light in a desperate situation.

My father was a unwavering advocate of education, at least where my brother and I were concerned. Staying home from school, unless we were “bleeding from the eyes” (see Chapter One) was not an option. In my father’s eyes, if we were well enough to hold our up head, we were well enough to go to school. I know from speaking with aunts and uncles that Daddy was not an ideal student. If there was such a thing as ADHD in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he most likely had it. He had immense trouble sitting still, focusing on his work, and staying on task. It was not until he returned home from World

War II that he truly realized the value of an education. Only the GI Bill made it possible for a man with essentially a middle grades education to attend an institution of higher learning. He overcame his learning deficits to graduate from the University of Georgia and even attend a year of graduate school at Perdue University.

My father's health began to decline in 2000, just about the time I completed my Masters program at Mercer University. He was unable to attend my graduation, but when I told him that I completed Masters work, he was genuinely proud that I was the first in our family to attain that level of education. He passed away in 2002 so, of course, he had no knowledge of my doctoral pursuits. I like to think that he would be equally proud when this endeavor is conquered as well. But I must take a moment to stop and reflect...what makes my wishes, desires, and studies possible? One man – a man who refused to give up more than 60 years ago when the course of his life was not in his own hands. I was not able to meet the children of Mr. Baylor, Mr. Cranman, and Mr. Waldrop, but I feel certain they share my sentiments of gratitude. They have been told the stories and are aware of the sacrifices that made their life-pursuits possible. We owe these men our lives.

As I closed each interview, I made sure to ask each gentleman that if there was one thing he would like to pass on to the next generation, what would it be? Two of them, Mr. Baylor and Mr. Waldrop expressed, with almost no hesitation, sentiments that were strikingly similar. Mr. Baylor stated, "It really upsets me when some American is unhappy with the free land we live in." Mr. Waldrop stated a month later, "Life is pretty damn good and I hate to see people whining about piddly stuff when they have no idea what some people have been through so they can enjoy the rights they have. You have to

catch yourself and stop and think, ‘This is really nothing to complain about.’

I believe it would be safe to generalize to most, if not all veterans, from comments such as these that it is evident these that they feel as though much of the general populous of the nation is unappreciative of the freedoms we have. Many, to be sure, do not know and have not been taught the history that would allow them to appreciate the sacrifices that have been made on their behalf. Thankfully, for these men and for all of us, as Dowswell (2005) states, “[World War II] is not some distant history – it is within graspable, living memory. (p. 7) and, I was able to meet these gentlemen and share their life stories while the memories were still alive and graspable. Hopefully, through this endeavor, I will have opened the lines of communication to future generations so that they can hear the voices of those who were there before they vanish.

The Future

“I believe the children are our future.” – (Masser & Creed, 1985, track 9)

The tales I write and tell of my father I write for my children. It is immeasurably important that they know all they can of not only me, but of those who came before me. I know practically nothing of my father’s father. He died long before I was born and I never asked anything about him. All I know is that he is my namesake. This point was eerily driven home on a family reunion trip when we visited a family cemetery and I saw his name (my name) on a tombstone. My passion for history and my desire to know all I can about my family is something I hope I can instill in my children. There is much to know and pass on to future generations before voices fall forever silent.

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