

I Pray Hardest When I'm Being Shot At

KYLE GARRET



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I Pray Hardest When I'm Being Shot At

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For Papa

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PART ONE

Love & War

1

“Don’t You Know There’s a War On?”

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT LOVE AND WAR.

My grandparents had a love affair of over sixty years. Three generations of my family have served in the military, spanning Pancho Villa’s attack on U.S. soil to Vietnam. In my family, love and war were nearly inseparable.

This book is about two people who reconnected through chance, through the most impractical and romantic of ways, who took a lot of chances, and who tried to give up, but couldn’t. It’s about a man and a woman who lived through some of the most significant times in American history, yet always cared most about each other and the family they would bring into this world. This is a book about love and war, but it’s also about two singular people who played very small roles in a grand play, and who were just looking to find some happiness during turbulent times.

This is the story of my grandparents, one a three war veteran and retired major, the other an unsung, forerunner of a new generation of women. It’s the story of two extremes, love and war, and how it changed their lives, and how writing about their lives, in turn, changed mine.

“Your grandfather doesn’t talk about it much,” says my mom. I called her because I needed some background information on Papa’s military career. She tells me she has letters that Papa sent his sister while he was in basic training and that she’ll mail them to me.

My grandfather doesn’t talk about any of the wars he’s fought in and, according to my mom, he thinks that books about war are written by people who’ve never experienced them. Perhaps that’s just the stoicism of his generation, or perhaps it’s an internalization that can only come from experiencing war. Either way, it makes the path ahead of me fairly daunting.

“That makes it very hard to write a book about him,” I say.

My grandfather and I don’t have a lot in common, at least not on paper. He was born on February 17, 1924. I was born on October 3, 1975. He grew up in Warren, Ohio, the same town as my grandmother. I live in Los Angeles and my girlfriend has never set foot in the Buckeye state. My grandfather is a Lutheran and a Republican. I’m an agnostic and a Democrat. He’s short and rather stocky. I’m tall and incredibly thin. He subscribes to Omaha steaks. I’m a vegetarian. And, perhaps most importantly at this point, he’s a retired major and three war veteran. I’ve never even fired a gun.

Prior to the start of my research, my grandfather had only ever offered two anecdotes on his time at war. The first was an offhand, almost random comment he made to my dad, mentioning that South Vietnamese pilots always flew above the U.S. helicopters, even after being specifically told to fly below them. This meant the U.S. pilots, whose number included my grandfather, had to watch out for fire from both below and above.

I can’t imagine placing yourself in a position where you will not only lose your life, but more than likely do so in an extremely unpleasant way. Maybe your body will be recovered, maybe it won’t. And those people back home who love you will find out about it days later. Thousands of miles away and days later, they’ll get a knock on the door or a phone call telling them that you’re dead and that there was nothing they could do about it.

I imagine that's the hardest part: the feeling of helplessness.

Every day could be your last and my grandfather had entire years worth of those days. From high above the South Pacific, to the DMZ in Korea and the jungles of Vietnam, he continually put his life at risk, yet somehow he always came back.

"The best thing to do would be to go over there with a bottle of whiskey and just get him talking," says my mom, still on the phone.

She's right; that would be the best thing to do. Unfortunately, I live in Los Angeles, California and Papa currently resides in Huber Heights, Ohio. I won't see him again until sometime in July and I don't want to wait that long.

I've sent him e-mails for some basic information, like where he was stationed and when. I ask him what operations he went on. At this point I just want the bare bones. I know I'll need more and I suppose the most logical solution would be to call him, but the more I think about it the less helpful I think that would actually be. My grandfather has always kept to himself about pretty much everything, something I'm just now picking up on.

I don't see him opening up on the phone.

There are some nights that I lie in bed and think of all the friends my grandfather must have lost, all the people he saw die—all the people he had to kill just to survive. And I know that even when I start to get a few more pieces of this puzzle, that I won't be able to do justice to the scope and scale of war. I have no way to measure it. War is a language I don't speak and there is no translator.

Thankfully, while my grandfather might be hesitant to talk about his life, both in wartime and in peace, my grandmother has no such reservations.

During the summer of 2003 I sent my grandfather a tape recorder and a package of audio tapes. It was my hope that he would use these to record his history, that perhaps an oral retelling would be easier and faster for

him than a written one. But he would never use the machine or the tapes.

My grandmother, on the other hand, sent me two audio tapes that she'd filled with her memoirs. She'd already hand written and then typed them, so it was just a simple matter for her to sit down and read them aloud.

Being the technophile that I am, I actually had no way to listen to them. It wouldn't have been hard for me to find a way—a Walkman would be pretty cheap—but I let them sit on a shelf in my closet as I busied myself with another book, one that was more indicative of my life at that moment.

It took me two and a half years to get to those tapes.

By that time, my girlfriend Nicole and I had moved in together and she happened to actually own a Walkman. This began a string of days that involved me with headphones on, listening to my grandmother's tapes, and taking fairly extensive notes.

And by "fairly extensive" I mean pages upon pages, because my grandmother has a memory like an elephant. She can tell you what she had for dinner on the first night of the train ride she took from Warren, Ohio to El Centro California in June of 1945 (it was chicken). She can even tell you how much it cost (they bought a full meal for a dollar). And what song was popular on the radio ("Sentimental Journey").

My grandmother, Elizabeth Anne Davis, was born on May 3rd, 1926 in Lynchburg, Ohio to Griffith John Davis and Alta Elizabeth Green Davis. She was delivered by Dr. Tyler, who made a house call. She was the youngest of four children: her brothers Sheldon and Ned and her sister Eleanor.

Grandma's mom would die just six days shy of her daughter's eighteenth birthday. She'd had an enlarged thyroid for years, a condition which her father—my great-great-grandfather—had also had. He died during surgery to treat the problem, which made my grandmother's mom apprehensive about having it dealt with. That apprehension ultimately cost her much needed time and she would die before she even turned fifty.

Losing her mom at such a young age would be really hard for my grandmother, and as years went by that void in her life would show up at major crossroads, determining how she would choose to live her life. It would affect how her relationship with Papa played out, I think, as well as her relationship with her own daughter.

Griffith, grandma's father, would later remarry. His choice of second wife came as a bit of a surprise to me.

"Good god," I said aloud, even though no one was in the room with me.

I hit the "stop" button on the Walkman and took off my headphones. Nicole was in the shower, but I was so stunned by what I'd just heard I needed to tell her right away.

"Hey," I yelled from outside the bathroom. I didn't want to startle her. I'd done that before and she had the razor blade gash on her leg to prove it.

"Hey," she said.

"So get this," I said as I cracked the door open a bit so she could hear me better, "my grandma's father married his brother-in-law's widow."

"What?"

"That's what *I* said. Evidently my grandma's mom's brother Clarence had been gassed in World War I and left behind a widow named Eleanor—my grandma's aunt through marriage."

"Right," said Nicole.

"So a year and a half after his first wife died, my grandmother's dad married her aunt Eleanor."

"That's bizarre."

"Seriously. I have enough trouble trying to change the image Ohioans have. This isn't going to help things."

To be clear, the marriage actually made sense and wasn't really that creepy. Eleanor and Griffith weren't related by blood. In fact, I would imagine they had a lot in common, being part of the same family. They'd probably known each other for a long time.

But there's still something kind of strange about it.

"You're really jumping into this," said Nicole. This was perhaps the fourth time I'd interrupted her shower with some new insight into my family history.

"I know," I said as I headed back out to the living, back to the Walkman and the tapes. "It's weird."

He Said—She Said

He: We met in the West side park when you were ten and I was twelve.

She: I don't remember.

She: You sat behind me at a football game when I was a sophomore and you were a senior. You asked me out after the game.

He: I don't remember

This is the response I got from my grandparents when I asked them how they met. While I was initially frustrated that they didn't just send me a quick e-mail with the information, the letter I got was well worth the wait.

I love the fact that my grandfather remembers when they first met, yet has no recollection of asking her out that first time. Papa's memory seems to be strangely more romantic, while grandma's is more practical, which, really, is a great way to describe my grandparents' relationship.

My grandmother first mentions my grandfather in her memoirs in a chapter she calls "Don't You Know There's a War On?" She mentions that both of her older brothers were drafted when the U.S. entered WWII, although one didn't go to Europe until the post-war occupation and the other was blind in one eye, so he was never sent overseas. For her part, my grandmother decided to join other high school girls in writing letters to soldiers in Europe and the South Pacific. Grandma saw a familiar name of the list of soldiers to choose from: Robert M. Stuart.

The decision on whether or not to enlist was not an easy one for my grandfather. At the time, the draft stopped at twenty-one, which meant that if he were going to serve, he would have to do so voluntarily. And while he came from a military background, he found a good job at the local Copperweld steel mill as soon as he graduated from high school. He was even making enough money to take flying lessons, which was a dream come true.

But the call of duty was too strong for Papa to ignore for very long. He enlisted that fall, beginning basic training in September of 1942. My grandma began sending him letters in the spring of '43, when he was stationed in Florida for radar and gunnery training.

"At school, names of service men who would like to receive mail were available," wrote my grandma. "Since I had dated Robert M. Stuart when he was a senior and I was a sophomore, I began a correspondence with him. He was a gunner on a B-17 in the Marines. He caught me by surprise with so much interest. His Mother called me and invited me over and sent me flowers as often as Stu directed."

Papa's interest was so great that he spent his last night stateside not with his family, but with my grandmother. He went with her to the Friendship Club formal dance towards the end of December of 1943, just before he shipped out to the South Pacific.

At this point, however, I get the distinct impression that they're relationship wasn't really that serious and probably seemed more important to my grandfather than to my grandmother. And if it were important to him at this point, I could only imagine how much more valuable it would be while spending his nights flying over the Japanese occupied islands.

Grandma's only comment regarding Papa before he left for the South Pacific was that they'd dated when she was a sophomore. Honestly, I didn't know people did such things in the '40s. I thought it was sock hop, malt shop, Enchantment Under Sea, marriage. I didn't know it was possible to date someone and then stop dating them.

Then again, my grandparents would end up getting married twice; it's clear there's nothing ordinary about them.

It's occurred to me, as I try to piece together the story of my grandfather's life, that the frame of this house is going to end up being built by my grandmother. Papa didn't seem to fully understand the magnitude of the life he was leading, but I think my grandmother did. I think it's part of the reason their marriage was so successful, the fact that they viewed the world in differing, yet complimentary, ways.

But my grandmother doesn't know a lot of the details of Papa's military career aside from locations and dates. I have a letter from my grandfather chronicling his military career as far as where he was stationed, what he was training for, and what types of aircraft he flew, but I have little to no detail on the specifics of any of that. I know only the vaguest bits about what kinds of missions he was on, from bombing depots to maintaining supply lines, to search and destroy. Every single day that he was on duty there was the opportunity for any level of combat and I really don't know about any of it—but I've only just begun digging.

I can tell you where my grandparents were living on any given date of the past sixty years. I can tell you what rank my grandfather had attained by that point. I can tell you what kind of house they had and how much money they made. But I don't know how Papa felt. I don't know what it was like to fear for your life on a regular basis for days, weeks, months at a time.

I think, perhaps, the best way to start is to figure out why he decided to enlist.

2

Beginnings

IT GOT COLD AT NIGHT in Columbus, New Mexico. When the sun went down, the temperature would drop a good twenty degrees, and the small town just a few miles from the Mexico/United States border felt like it could have been anywhere in the Midwest. This probably gave Seth Robert Stuart some comfort. It was a little taste of his home, minus the snow that would invariably be falling this time of year back east.

Seth was asleep at two in the morning on March 9, 1916, as were most of the U.S. 13th Cavalry. They were all awoken the same way, by a clear, distinctive call to arms: gunfire.

Pancho Villa, the famed Mexican revolutionary, had launched an attack on American soil.

In September of 2004, my grandfather—Seth's son—sent me a manila envelope. This was a little surprising because, up until this point, my grandfather as been pretty slow as far as giving me material for the book. The envelope, however, wasn't about Papa; it was about his father.

Seth, who went by S. Robert Stuart, enlisted in the U.S. cavalry in 1912

at the age of twenty. He trained at a small facility in Columbus, Ohio and was later assigned to the 13th Cavalry, who were primarily assigned to patrol the U.S./Mexico border which included Columbus, New Mexico. At the time, though, the U.S. had a good relationship with Pancho Villa, and an attack on U.S. soil was unlikely.

The manila envelope contained pictures of my great grandfather: one by himself, one with his troop, and one with his horse "Rags." It came with a letter from my grandfather explaining what everything was, including two photocopied newspaper articles. One was written by my great grandfather for a regional newspaper in Warren, Ohio. It chronicled the battle at Columbus, New Mexico.

The second article was written by Papa, and appeared in a southwest regional magazine in the '50s. It also retold that battle at Columbus, although I think hindsight and research afforded my grandfather a little bit more detail in his version. He did say, however, that he wrote the article "for the magnificent sum of thirty bucks which made me decide to stay in the Army and not try to make a living as a writer."

To this day, historians disagree on why, exactly, Villa decided to invade the small town of Columbus, New Mexico. Ultimately, his motives didn't matter. All that mattered was that his forces outnumbered the American soldiers by two-to-one, as most accounts put the number of U.S. soldiers between 250-350, and the number of soldiers in Villa's force as 500-700. They had numbers, preparation, and the element of surprise on their side. But the U.S. had better weapons, dedicated soldiers, and a little bit of luck on theirs.

While the majority of the 13th Cavalry might have been asleep when Villa launched his attack, they knew better than to let their guard down.

"When they broke out of the ditch they were immediately discovered by the sentry on No. 3 post," wrote my great grandfather, "who gave the alarm as only a horse soldier knows how, by opening fire. When he was found his rifle was empty and three rounds fired from his pistol. Today he

would have been cited for a Congressional Medal of Honor. Then it was considered all in a day's work."

Villa had also underestimated the cavalry's ability to react quickly. They were up and armed in a matter of moments, "the most undressed army that ever fought a battle," said my great grandfather.

To make matters worse for Villa's troops, they had decided to set a three story hotel on fire. The blaze lit up the entire town, not only giving the U.S. soldiers light to aim by, but providing the smaller force shadows to use for cover. While the goal might have been the complete destruction of Columbus, New Mexico, Villa had only succeeded in leveling the battlefield and he was soon sounding the alarm to retreat.

My great grandfather added this bit to his story, a funny anecdote that's perhaps only truly funny to someone who had been through such a fight. One of the lieutenants had been wounded and had to drop to the back of the patrol. He picked out a target—a Mexican revolutionary on a big, white mule—and commanded three soldiers to "get the SOB on the white mule." My great grandfather was one of those three soldiers. The man fell off the mule after they'd fired ten or eleven rounds. The lieutenant then yelled at the cavalrymen for taking so many rounds to knock him off, since two of them were expert riflemen and one was a sharpshooter.

Seth would eventually switch from cavalry to field artillery, just so he could go to France to fight in WWI. He would leave the military in 1920, after meeting my great grandmother. As my grandfather said in the letter to me, "... Army pay, for the most part, was insufficient to marry (so) he left ..."

I never met my great grandfather and I don't know the type of relationship he had with Papa. I don't know that he ever put any kind of pressure on his son to enlist, either before or after Pearl Harbor. But I'm sure Seth's example must have made an impression on his son. While Seth spent his career leading and riding horses, Papa would take to the skies, first in planes, then in helicopters. And while Seth's time in the military lasted only eight years, Papa would make a life for himself in the armed services.

My grandfather's only son, my uncle Rob, spent a short time in the navy, perhaps completing some sort of military trinity of by land, by sea, and by air. His was a brief and tumultuous stay, however, and it was clear that the military, for him, was just one more attempt at finding his place. My brother and I really never showed any interest in serving our country and would be the generation to end our family's line of military service. I have to admit that I feel a little bad about that, as if I've failed to keep my family's legacy alive.

My great grandfather died of a heart attack on November 9, 1952, nearly twenty-three years before I'd be born. He passed on a desire to serve his country and a desire to write. It's nice to think that at least some part of him managed to make the long journey to his great grandson.

If my grandfather was persuaded to enlist in the U.S. military by anything other than a sense of patriotism, it might have been an opportunity to fly. It's not something I've ever really considered before, Papa's love of flying. I had seen the old pictures of him in the fashionable pilot's jackets. I knew that his hearing wasn't very good because of years spent near jet engines. And every single time I flew home for any reason, my grandfather would ask me what kind of plane I'd been on. But I never thought of Papa as a pilot and I'm not sure why. I think, perhaps, it was because when I finally knew him, he was too old to pilot a plane or a helicopter, and, during my lifetime, would soon be too old to even make it as a passenger.

Papa's first opportunity to fly came from his Uncle Frank Dewberry, who lived in New Castle, Pennsylvania. Uncle Frank bought a Piper Cub twin engine plane so his three boys could learn to fly and managed to introduce the flying bug to his nephew in Ohio. "Uncle Frank, by the way," wrote Papa in another letter he sent me, "was the 'better off' relative, winter home in Florida, etc."

Fortunately for Papa, he had an option closer to home for flying. The father of his friend "Chubby" Lyons had been an Air Force pilot until the

Great Depression, when he'd been let go to cut costs. "He owned and operated the Warren, Ohio airport and gave flying lessons there," wrote Papa. "Grass strip, hangars, etc."

Papa flew as often as he could afford to, which, after graduating and getting a job at the Copperweld Steel Company, was pretty often. But his sense of duty nagged at him, preventing him from truly enjoying his first summer as an adult.

"As the war really cranked up, I was torn to 'go' as opposed to making good bucks at Copperweld and flying when I could afford it. In those days the 'draft' only went down to twenty-one years old.

"By fall, I couldn't put it off any longer. Late September I enlisted in the Marine Corps..."

Papa's decision came with a little fanfare, courtesy of the local paper: "Robert Stuart, 18, son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Stuart, 1835 Front SW, has enlisted in the Marine Corps and gone to Parris Island, South Carolina, for training. He was graduated in the June 1942 class at Harding High School."

This wouldn't be my grandfather's first appearance in the local paper, both because of his achievements and because of a love of writing letters. Before my grandmother ever entered the picture, my grandfather was already maintaining correspondence with a number of people; he decided to add the *Warren Tribune Chronicle* to that list.

Papa's letter was a rebuttal to a previous letter regarding the draft, written by someone known only as "Fifteen." It's entitled "A Marine's View":

I'm a Marine in training at Parris [sic] Island, S.C. I was just reading in "Everybody's Say-So" "Fifteen's" view of the 18-19 draft (Sat., Oct. 31). I'm now 18, soon will be 19, and I hope to be in action before I'm 20.

She speaks of an over-age man without draft age children advocating

18-19 draft. I believe she was rather impolite but I'm an 18-year-old already in the service giving my views.

One of the first sensations I can remember was of being very proud of my father for being an overseas veteran of the last war. That is only a soldier's due. I come from a fighting family. When duty called, they never failed to answer. That may be a bit off the subject but it forms the background.

A noted militarist once said, "A war must be fought in two ways, the caution of older men and the courage of youth."

The Marine Corps of today is made up of a great many 18, 19, and 20 year olds. Look what those "kids" did in the Solomons!

Papa's referring to the Battle of Guadalcanal in August of '42, which saw the U.S. and Allied Forces engaged in intense fighting with the Japanese. The Marines landed on Guadalcanal and managed to hold out under constant Japanese attack for months. This gave the U.S. a foothold in the South Pacific, allowing them to launch their campaign against the Japanese.

Papa's letter in the newspaper continues:

It's the blind courage that overwhelms odds and wins battles. I don't expect to come back. If, in the line of duty, I must die, then I shall. I'm proud to fight for my country! That may seem brutal. Of course, parents hate to see their young sons going into the horrors of war. That's only natural; but if the President and the Army heads feel that to win the war they need the younger men, then they should be proud to go. This is war. We're not playing any more. It's either life or death for us or the enemy. Regardless of issues or views, it's our duty to win. Petty feelings must be put aside. This is not time for weak-kneed interference. I think "Fifteen" should go back to her school books and leave fighting to those who aren't afraid. I think the lowest form of man are those fellows of 18 and 19 who are afraid of the draft.

Some may call me a fanatic. I'm not really. I'm just saying what millions of my "buddies" think.

I'll admit I was a little shocked by the intensity of the letter. In fact, I had some reservations about even including it. This is not the Papa I know and I'm not sure that I want this side of him to be seen so early on in this book.

But I have to remember that he was only eighteen then and, even more importantly, that he'd yet to go to war. I would imagine you have to adopt a certain mentality when preparing for war. You can't allow yourself to let fear creep in and Papa, in all of his eighteen years, had taken that philosophy to the extreme, going so far as to blacklist anyone his age that wasn't eager to be drafted. Papa of sixty-four years later might still hold the same beliefs, but they've been tempered by time and experience.

During basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina, Papa went through the usual routine of tests that determine IQ, fitness, aptitudes, etc. The fact that he was in good shape, had perfect vision, and knew how to fly made Papa a perfect candidate for Marine Corps Aviation. He was then sent to Cherry Point, North Carolina for even more tests, these to determine exactly which aspect of aviation he'd be assigned.

After that, he was sent to Florida, first for radio/radar school at Cecil Field Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, then to aerial gunnery school in Hollywood, just north of Miami.

"Radio school was actually operated the same as radio for ship board use," wrote Papa. "More code, key operation, sending and receiving, etc. The only difference we did not get typewriter training. Shipboard operators typed incoming 'traffic.' Aviators took it by hand and printing, as I have done ever since. With incoming at about forty words a minute that's fast printing!"

Radar was a huge part of the U.S. success in World War II, allowing U.S. ships and planes to spot enemy forces hundreds of miles away. It made the bombing runs in the South Pacific all the more effective.

“At the time, radar was highly classified,” wrote Papa, “so the school was in a separate building, fenced, barbed wire topped. Guard at the door check to see you had been ‘cleared’ to go there, etc. Classes covered theory of radar, setting up equipment, interpreting incoming images, and a lot more stuff I have long forgotten.”

Gunnery training in Hollywood was much different. Papa said they did skeet shooting to practice. The airborne training would happen in Jacksonville, where they would perform actual aerial firing drills from operational PBY's. PBY's were naval flying boats that were used in the 30s and 40s. The PB stood for Patrol Bomber and the Y was the manufacturers' identification. The planes could be equipped with depth chargers, bombs, torpedoes, or .50 caliber machine guns.

“Targets were towed by an aircraft pulling long white canvas targets,” wrote Papa. “Each student had a can of ammo rolls with the nose of each round painted a different color. After a day's training these targets were examined back at Cecil to evaluate each student's performance. Each hole in the target would show the color of the bullet that had hit it. Neat, huh?”

But their duties didn't just consist of training. Cecil Field was an active Naval base, so while part of the day was spent training, the rest of the time was spent patrolling the shipping routes off the Florida coast for German submarines. “At the time, subs had to surface every so often to charge their batteries, change air for crew, etc. If a PBY could catch a sub on the surface it had hundred pound bombs in racks under each wing to drop on it.”

While they never spotted a sub, they had some run-ins with a few unfortunate whales, which looked like submarines when they were coming for air. Fortunately, the pilots realized they weren't Germans before they launched an attack. Still, being on high alert and having to suddenly call off an attack must have been excellent training in preparation for the real thing. It also makes me wonder how many whales must have died during World War II.

Papa finally graduated in the middle of 1943 and was sent back to Cherry Point, before moving on to Peter Field Point near Jacksonville,

North Carolina. He would spend the rest of the year in advanced training, preparing for his eventual assignment to the South Pacific.

“Oh, hey, let me check the mail,” I said as Nicole and I waited for the elevator up to our apartment. We’d just gotten home from dinner with some friends. We’d spent the day inside cleaning, so neither of us had gotten around to checking the mail.

I found the usual assortment of bills and credit card offers, but I also found a small, manila envelope from my mom.

We got into the elevator as I started opening the envelope. It was pretty tightly packed. My parents would occasionally send me newspaper clippings they thought I’d find interesting or letters from my alma mater that still went to my last known permanent address. But this envelope seemed far too full for that.

As we got off the elevator I pulled a stack of letters out of the envelope. “Oh, these are those letters Papa wrote to his sister!”

When we got into our apartment we both began looking them over. There were eleven letters in all, running from April to December of 1943, as well as a note from my mom saying that they led up to my grandfather’s deployment to the South Pacific.

“Look at the date on the postal stamp,” I said, “1943!”

“Smell them,” said Nicole as she moved one away from her nose and held it up to mine. They smelled old, like secret, ancient tomes known only to a few.

There were also four pictures: my great grandfather (looking dapper in a suit and hat), my great grandmother (a portrait shot from the ’60s), a second picture of my great grandmother (this from 1943, coincidentally the same year my grandfather wrote these letters), and a group shot of my great grandfather, great grandmother, her sister, my grandfather, his sister, and a neighbor. I actually mistook the picture of my great grandfather for my grandfather at first, the similarities were that striking.

This was it. This was what I was looking for. I was finally going to get a personal glimpse at what my grandfather's life was like during this pivotal time in his life.

This book was finally coming together.

Almost everything I know about my grandfather's sister, Betty, comes from the letters he wrote her when he was in basic training. My grandmother actually only mentions her three times in her memoirs. The first time is to mention that her prenatal doctor was Betty's boss, as Betty was a nurse. The second is that Betty helped give her mom support when Seth Stuart died. And the final mention is of her death, although my grandparents didn't go to her funeral.

I e-mailed my mom about this and she told me that she remembers her aunt being a "prickly pear." I realize that the sister-in-law is probably not a big part in the story of anyone's life, but it still seems odd that grandma only mentioned her three times. Even stranger is the fact that, given the stack of letters I now had, Papa seemed somewhat close to her, at least when he was younger.

But I don't have a sister, so I have no idea what that relationship might be like.

It's easy to imagine that Betty was just protective of her brother. Given the extremes of grandma and Papa's time together—particularly the first few years—it's easy to imagine that only my grandparents truly understood what their relationship was all about. From the outside, however, it might not have seemed very healthy.

The last letter is dated December 13, 1943, just ten days before Papa would head back to Warren, Ohio for his last leave of absence before heading off to the South Pacific. As I mentioned earlier, he would spend his last night stateside with my grandmother at the Friendship Club formal dance instead of spending it with his family, which could have marked the beginning of tension between grandma and her future sister-in-law.

My grandfather calls his sister “chum” a lot. And he signs his letters “Bob,” a name I don’t associate with him, even if his given name is Robert. My grandmother has always called him “Stu.”

It’s funny to read these letters having the knowledge that I do. In the first letter he talks about marriage: “Of course a wife has to be a guy’s pal, too. I know if I ever marry, I’ll want my wife to be a girl I can consider my best pal as well as the woman I love.”

My grandfather’s view on long distance relationships seems well laid out, too: “You know, you mentioned in your letter the fact that you wonder what I’m going to do about the girls I pal around with at different bases. Well, I’ll tell you, there’s no sense in writing, that only prolongs things. I think the best thing to do is just break things off completely when you leave. Perhaps it’s a little brutal, but it’s really the only solution.”

I wonder if Betty ever showed these letters to Papa years later. Her son gave them to my mom, who probably assumed that my grandmother had seen them, even though she hadn’t. I’m sure grandma would find it interesting that the man who so intently pursued her through letters thought that long distance relationships were a bad idea. Clearly, it just took the right girl to change his mind.

Girls were, of course, very much on Papa’s mind. He was in the Marines, after all. He was going to serve his country. Patriotism in 1943 was one heck of an aphrodisiac.

For example: “Believe it or not, but I’m a new man if you know what I mean. For the past month I have lived like an angel. I think it must be the heat. Mostly I guess because I’ve been getting fed up with the crowd I’ve been running with. That, however, is, personal problems.”

I’m not sure what “a new man” means entirely, but I get the impression that the “old man” was in direct opposition to living “like an angel.” This was in a letter dated September 16, 1943. By that time, he would have been exchanging letters with my grandmother on a regular basis. My grandfather was apparently getting more serious about that particular correspondence, to the point of changing his lifestyle.

To continue with a trend: “Pat wrote a very nice letter, she asked me to come and visit her and Ward if I should get home. She naturally didn’t mention the reason for her quick marriage. As she put it, she just ‘decided’ to get married. Ah, this strange world!”

I have no idea who Pat or Ward are, but this letter would end up being prophetic. While my grandmother would get pregnant not long after they got married, their daughter, my mom, would follow Pat and Ward’s route. Perhaps Papa should have passed this story on to his daughter. Then again, I suppose it’s good that he didn’t, or I might not be here right now, as my parents never would have gotten married.

As for downtime between training: “Went out on a bit of a tear last night, the first real outing I’ve had since I came back. Kentucky bourbon straight all night and without any chasers either. A wonderful time was had by all.” Living “like an angel,” might have steered Papa away from the ladies, but he was still a young man out to enjoy himself.

Funny enough, my first thought upon reading about Papa’s night out drinking, aside from the fact that I’m a Tennessee whiskey drinker myself, is that, for as long as I’ve known him, my grandfather has always drank Canadian whiskey. Now I’m wondering if perhaps that’s the real story here: the evolution of a man and his drink of choice.

There’s actually one letter written on the radio log sheet of a plane Papa was flying on one day. “If this letter is a bit jerky it’s because it’s extremely rough up here today.”

Papa mentions in one of his letters that he’s received notes from a number of people and that keeping up on his correspondences was somewhat taxing and often times boring. But he does it nonetheless, because he knows he won’t get new letters unless he answers the old ones.

The strange thing about the letters is the summer camp quality to them. Here he is, preparing to be sent to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese during World War II and my grandfather is writing about girls, drinking, and family gossip. The simple fact that he had the time and energy to write at all while undergoing Marine Corps training is astounding.

Beginnings

And as frustrating as it might be to wait for letters from my grandfather that answer questions that I've e-mailed to him, I suppose there's a certain symmetry to it, a certain appropriateness to it, as if this book couldn't be written in any other way.

3

World War II

ALL PAPA COULD DO WAS GRIT his teeth and hold on. All he could do was hope that his pilot, Ray Smith, had enough skill to make up for his bad luck, because they were hundreds of miles away from the air strip and they were down to one, barely functioning engine. They were in the skies above the Bismarck Archipelago, machine guns and anti-aircraft guns blazing away at them, just praying they could make it back without going down.

And that was just one of their thirty-five combat missions.

Just after Christmas, 1943, Papa was recalled early as his unit was moving to Marine Corps Air Station El Centro, CA. Papa had been assigned to a PBJ, the Navy designation for the Air Corps B-25, which was a medium bomber. He was part of the VMB 433 squadron, which stood for “heavier than air Marine bomber” (V meaning heavier than air, as opposed to L which meant lighter than air and signified balloons and the like). The squadron was known as the “Forked Tailed Devils.”

Papa was assigned to a flight crew made up of pilot Ray Smith, co-pilot Hugh Price, a navigator named Young (“later a fellow named Henry,”

although Papa never says what happened to Young), turret gunner Don Keefe, tail gunner David Cosby, and Papa, the radio/waist gunner.

“Each (PBJ) had two full crews assigned to it and moves like that the pilots flipped coins to see which crew got to fly the ‘bird’ and which one had to go with ground people by rail,” Papa said about the trip to El Centro. “Our pilot was a lousy gambler, we went to El Centro by rail, the other crew flew out.”

Unfortunately for Papa, his pilot’s bad luck continued, so he and his crew had to take a boat from San Diego. “The ship was the ‘HMS Brastogi,’ a Dutch freighter that had been in the Indonesian commercial business. When the Japanese were overrunning all the Pacific islands, the captain and crew sailed to our west coast and re-fitted as a troop carrier under contract to the U.S. Only memorable thing about it was we were the first ship leaving San Diego for the Pacific alone, not in a convoy.”

The trip took thirty days, but Papa and his crew finally arrived in the New Hebrides Group, a collection of islands in the South Pacific now known as Vanuatu. From there they flew north to Guadalcanal’s Henderson Field, as the Marines had taken control of Guadalcanal from the Japanese the year before. They again went north to a “dot” in the ocean called Green Island, a place I’m having absolutely no luck finding on a map. There Papa’s crew was operational for a few weeks, bombing various Japanese held positions. But they moved again rather quickly, this time past Japanese held New Ireland to Emirau Island, which is currently a part of New Ireland and a province of Papua New Guinea. Papa was stationed as close to a Japanese held island as possible.

I do my best to search the internet to find all of these locations. I pull maps of every cluster of islands in the South Pacific. Some are easy to find, like Guadalcanal. Some, like Green Island, are just impossible to find. Through a series of trial and error (and numerous spellings), I finally find Emirau Island, which is obviously the most important one.

I’m finally able to find a map that has both New Ireland and Emirau Island on it. And there’s a key. It shows distance in kilometers, so I do my best esti-

mation from the map and then head off in search of a metric converter.

In my head I'm picturing my grandfather, all of twenty years old, stationed at this small base on Emirau Island, away from his family and his friends, and less than thirty miles away from the enemy.

It's March 30th and my mom called today to tell me that yesterday my grandfather was taken to the emergency room.

According to my mom, he's fine now. She said he might even go home tomorrow. She said he had fluid in his lungs and between medications and a blood transfusion (something about iron), they were able to fix it. She made it seem like it was situation normal.

Acting like everything's fine when everything isn't is something of an art form in my family. We don't like to worry people and we never ask for help. So imagine something serious first being filtered through my grandmother (who no doubt called my mom) and then being filtered through my mom. I'm getting watered down news. I'm only getting one version of events: the one everyone considers easiest to deal with.

There's really no way for me to gauge the seriousness of the situation with any kind of certainty, but that doesn't stop me from becoming a bit freaked out by the timing.

Writing this book scares me. There's really only one definitive ending to the story of someone's life and there's a part of me deep down that honestly believes I've set things into motion by writing this book.

Fortunately, there's also a part of me who sees these events more as wake up calls than as life imitating art, or at least taking notes from it. There's a part of me who sees this as a very big, flashing neon sign that says "Get off your ass and write while you have time."

I've wasted so much time for so long. I've put this off forever. And now I feel like I'm fighting some clock.

Because tonight my grandfather is lying in a military hospital in Ohio and he's eighty-two and in this book he's on Emirau Island and he's only twenty.