

OUT OF THE ATTIC, OR WHAT PRICE MEMORABILIA?

*A Minnesota
Couple's World
War II Letters*



JOHN S. SONNEN

Late in the autumn of 1987, while engaged in the vexing annual chore of bringing some semblance of order to the congested contents of the cramped attic of our modest home, Georgiana and I decided it was show-down time regarding the final disposition of accumulated memorabilia. Stuff we had bumped into, stumbled over, and shunted about in that slant-ceilinged, tucked-away space for the forty-eight years of our marriage. Most of it was mine.

There were two cartons of 78 rpm records from the 1920s and 1930s, a seventy-seven-copy collection of original *Life* magazines, an antique shotgun from my grandfather's days on the Minnesota frontier, a German army rifle and Luger pistol that were surrendered to me on the Westphalian plain the first week of April 1945. Our children, long gone from under this same roof, would be given one more opportunity to claim these artifacts. If refused, off the items would go to the first interested collector, historical society, or library. However, also stashed away with this unwanted memorabilia were "those letters"—as in our annual question, "What shall we do about *those letters* we wrote to each other during World War II?"

There were hundreds and hundreds of them. We wrote almost every day throughout the two miserable years we were apart: March 27, 1944, to March 27, 1946. Contained in a heavy corrugated carton with a substantial cover, they had been serving as a platform for our boxes of records. Letters of mine were in their original mailing envelopes, which Georgiana had kept in three groupings: those I wrote from basic training (Camp Stewart, Georgia), from advanced training (Fort Bliss, Texas), and from overseas (Europe). Letters from her were more jumbled because I would squirrel them away in foot lockers, duffel bags, or knapsacks. The first lot I brought home in August 1944 when furloughed after basic training. The next arrived in an army-ordered shipment of personal effects when I was alerted for overseas duty a few months later. The balance came home in March 1946. Now here they were, more than forty years later, confronting us once again and awaiting a final reckoning. What to do? Keep them another year? Throw them out?

"What do you think?" Georgiana asked.

"I—well, I just don't know. They'll have to go some day. I suppose it might as well be now."

"Tell you what," I was told. "Take them down to your den. That's where they belong anyway—with those snapshots and maps you brought home from the war. Then, as a winter project you can peruse them. Maybe by springtime a decision will come easier."

I carried the carton down to my den.

After the holidays, when winter really set in, I started that project. The first task was to assemble the letters in chronological order. While arranging the ones from overseas, a small magazine clipping fell from the folds of a letter dated April 2, 1945. That would have been, I told myself, nine days after my combat intelligence squad had stormed across the lower Rhine River in the U.S. Ninth Army's final assault against Germany. Now why in blue blazes, I wondered, would I have been snipping out a magazine item to mail home during such turbulent days? I read the clipping.

It was printed in small type on thin, lightweight paper, for it came from an overseas G.I. digest of the *New Yorker* magazine. Cut from the "Talk of the Town" pages, the item announced, "Psychiatrists and rehabilitation experts are busy setting the stage for the returning veteran." It reported that these professionals all agreed that when he gets home, "the fighting man will require special handling." After listing some of the abnormalities the experts expected, the writer (would it have been E. B. White?) observed, "The rehabilitation people are frightening thousands of girls with these warnings and unfitting them to be the wives of returning soldiers. Girls are receiving so many instructions about pulling a man through the postwar marital adjustment period that they are going to be something of a domestic problem themselves." The advice to wives who had husbands in the war was simply to relax. "It's all right to mix the old warrior a drink," the columnist wrote, "but our advice is to mix yourself one first—you probably need it quite as much as he does."

Mr. Sonnen, a retired real estate appraiser and longtime member of the Minnesota Historical Society, writes as an avocation. He still lives in St. Paul where, in 1931, he was graduated from Mechanic Arts High School. He has recently remarried—a class of '31 acquaintance with whom he became reacquainted in 1991 at dedication ceremonies of their school's memorial drinking fountain in the lobby of the new State of Minnesota Judicial Center.

Sonnen with his jeep, "my constant companion since England," 1945; Georgiana and Stuart Sonnen, 1943

Finished with the clipping, I turned to the letter, searching for my reason for slipping it in. I found it in the last paragraph: "The enclosed item from my overseas *New Yorker* is sent along for a laugh. We'll be so busy just having fun and loving each other that I doubt if either of us will give 'rehabilitation' a thought!"

How true that was! Five years after my army discharge, our first-born son, who was eighteen months old when I enlisted, had two sisters and a brother. Shaking off memories of the verbal lambastings I suffered from my mother and mother-in-law for taking such a fast-lane, procreant route back to civilian life, I returned to the letter. Its opening paragraph piqued my interest further: "Dearest: Our same nanny goat came again this evening to poke its head in our front gate, and it seemed to ask the same question: 'Where is my master?' Each night it gets a bit more friendly and each night it smells a little worse."

The letter had six other paragraphs, but nowhere was there a further explanation of that evening visitor. Searching through a few previous days' letters, I found the answer at the end of one dated March 30: "Another day has passed. The nights fall awfully fast, but they are not so noisy anymore. There is a wooly old sheep peering in the front gate at me now. It seems confused and lost. The poor thing is no doubt wondering what has happened to all the people who always looked out for him (her?). Now it is ambling down the road wondering and wandering. I see things like this all the time, making me more anxious than ever for peace and a normal world in which to live."

A letter dated March 26, two days after our Rhine River crossing at Wesel, jogged loose more dormant memories of those hectic days. "We are set up in a rather fine German home furnished with modern furniture. It was abandoned in a hurry. . . . I found clothes piled in a wash tub ready to be laundered, sliced bread set on the kitchen table ready to be served, linens, bedding, clothes and dishes—all in their accustomed places awaiting daily use."

The brick house, located just east of a smashed village we had found our way through, was in a countryside setting. It had three bedrooms. In its front yard, a bit of a formal garden arrangement was set off from the road by a wrought-iron fence. In back of the house was a small barn, a chicken coop, several fruit trees, and a large garden plot, tilled and awaiting its spring planting. Greening acreage and meadowland lay beyond.

Contributing to the great pleasantness of the place, beside the fact that it was undamaged, were its beds with white sheets and its chicken coop, accommodating four hens and a rooster. The chickens came and went as they pleased until Marshall, my squad's self-appointed chef, locked them in the coop. On his off-duty hours he would capture chickens wandering



*Sonnen
with his son on his
only furlough, 1944*

nearby and add them to our flock. Thus he was assured of a fairly stable inventory from which to choose a fried, roasted, or stewed dinner. Good laying hens, however, were spared. He depended on them for the fresh eggs that always livened up our C-ration breakfasts. The resourcefulness of Pete, another member of our four-man crew, became evident early one evening when he managed to make friends with a sad, bellowing cow out in the meadow and succeeded in milking her. Marshall was jubilant. The next morning we were treated to the best pancake breakfast I had had since leaving England. Fresh milk blended much, much better than water with our G.I. dehydrated pancake mix!

These were experiences never mentioned in any letters, for once any mail-censoring officer let the word out that our observation post (O.P.) was living "high on the hog," we would have had to field questions regarding our tending-to-business attitude. I dared not take the chance.

Going through the letters, I found little evidence of censor snipping. My first one home from England had two or three holes in it, but that is understandable. Crossing the Atlantic from New York to Scotland's Firth of Clyde in five December days aboard that great, fast, unescorted liner, *Queen Mary*, in the company of 14,999 other military personnel proved a bit heady for my pen. So I learned. There were enough

experiences to tell that would not give the censor fits. We O.P. soldiers—while carrying out duties far beyond the gun batteries and headquarters—had a rather freelance type of existence. Our days and nights were bound to be eventful. A four-page letter to Georgiana on March 18, 1945, reminded me of one such experience in Holland.

We had been ordered out into the Dutch lowlands well east of Venlo, very near the German border. Throughout the day we were engaged in our usual activity of scouting and transmitting early-warning alarms of enemy aircraft and buzz bombs, a kind of pilotless aircraft. We were also expected to report on any civilians in the area. Coming upon a few tending their farms gave us concern. Andy, our squad's prime radio operator and at eighteen, the youngest, spit out this mature observation: "These stoic Dutchmen! Look at 'em! No goddamn war is going to disrupt their springtime duties to their land!"

One such family—an elderly couple, their son, and his wife—gave us shelter from the cold, raw, drizzly night in a storage area that led to the pump and laundry room at the rear of their house. We were worn out from our day's activity. After setting up four-hour guard stints, three of us folded into our bedrolls by nine o'clock. Two hours later I was awakened by the commotion of the elderly farmer, holding an oil lamp over his head, picking his way between us to get to the pump room. I awoke enough to keep an eye on him until he departed with a pitcher of water. A few minutes later he and his son returned for more water. The old fellow, while holding his oil lamp in one hand, gestured wildly at me with two fingers of the other, as his son feverishly pumped water into a very large pitcher. I let them use my flashlight, for which they were most grateful. Then, as they rushed out with the water, some key words in the son's excited Dutch fell back on my ears. His wife must be having a baby! Within a few minutes they were back for more water. The old man with more smiles and chuckles and still waving two fingers, the son now a bit calmer and deliberately speaking slower so I would understand. His wife had given birth to twins—a boy and a girl! The next morning the proud father invited us in to see his new family. My letter recounted:

Darling you should have seen them! The two filled the small crib (built for one) completely. and this tickled the proud father more than anything. "Yal Yal" he laughed while spreading his arms wide over the crib. "Full—gross full!" We all laughed, even the mother lying in bed seemingly very healthy. We broke out some of our concentrated cereal rations and brewed some hot porridge for her. Later in the day we'll give her some bouillon.

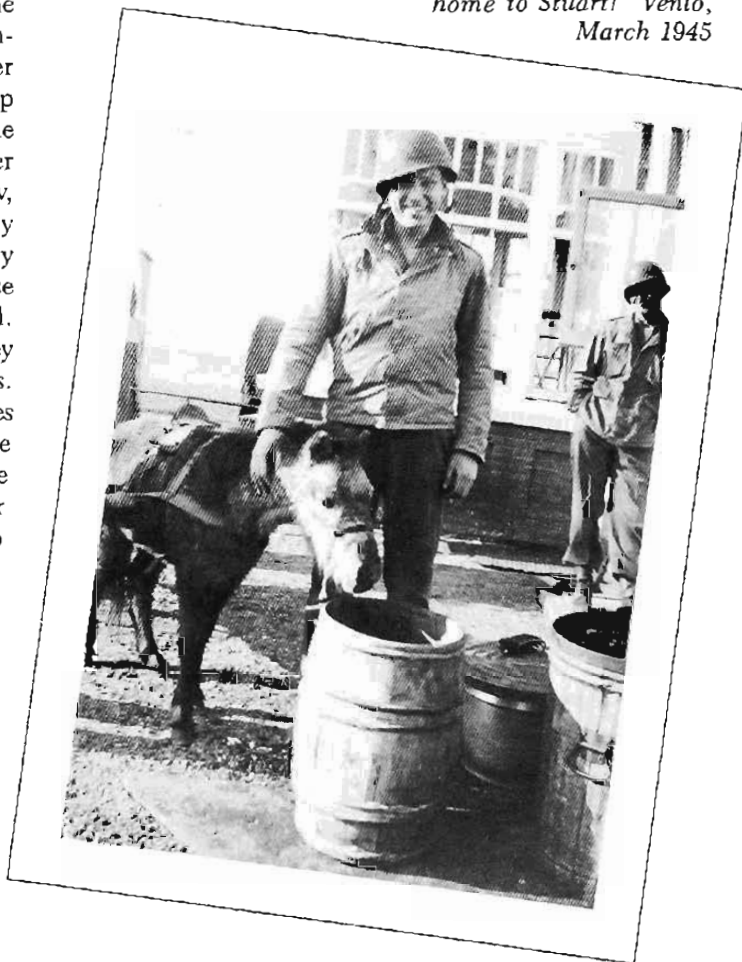
But the war goes on. . . . As yet I have not had any mail since leaving England, but one of these days it should find me. Don't worry about me. Things could always be worse. . . .

All my love, John

PERUSAL of "those letters," while reviving memories of my soldiering days, did much to emphasize what suffering, disrupted lives loved ones back home were enduring. For everyone, it was the lousiest of times.

In 1944 when I left home and our family's grocery business for army duty, I was thirty-one years old. My father, then seventy, took leave of his retirement days' pleasures of gardening and enjoying his northern Minnesota lake home to supervise the business until my return. Six years earlier, when Georgiana's parents announced our engagement, he had raised my salary to \$125 a month and granted me a junior partnership in the firm: C. J. Sonnen Co.—Groceries & Meats. He also offered to sell me a house he owned in the same neighborhood as our store: Merriam Park in St. Paul. Geor-

"How I wished I could have sent the pony home to Stuart!" Venlo, March 1945





*A gathering
outside of Sonnen
Pharmacy, about 1929*

giana was ecstatic, I was happy, he was pleased. "Maybe," he said, "this will help compensate for your leaving college to help out at the store."

"Oh, Dad," Georgiana quipped, "think how I'm compensated for whispering my telephone number to John the night I met him in Carl's drug store!" Carl, one of my many cousins, was managing A. H. Sonnen-Pharmacy, his father's store at 574 Rice Street. During the late 1920s and through the 1930s it was a haunt for the young and restless as well as the old and lonesome. That whispered happening occurred one evening during the winter of 1936-37. After Carl introduced us, we both, out of deference to her evening date, feigned little interest. I, bending over by the soda-fountain chair she was sitting on, mumbled my question while fiddling with my overshoe zippers. She slowly whispered the answer, as I scratched the numbers on the lining of one of the boots. The die was cast.

We were married June 27, 1939. Sixty-five days later Germany invaded Poland. Two years later Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Our first born, a strapping eight-pound boy we named Stuart, arrived on August 8, 1942. I thought: What a wretched world to present to a first-born son.

Early in 1944, while I was finishing basic training in Georgia, Georgiana and our toddler did quite well, but the temper of the times eventually dictated a change in living arrangements. Loneliness, economics, plus urgings by her parents and sister to come "back home" (a physical move of only two and one-half miles) finally prevailed. Then came Georgiana's task of renting out our furnished home. She struggled through procuring and interpreting the proper rent-control forms

before suffering through the screening of dozens of possible tenants. The packing and moving of clothing, blankets, linens, personal valuables, and our son's junior furniture followed. She was good enough to leave unwritten all the sad and aggravating happenings the uprooting from our once-happy household caused, but on occasion the message got through. An excerpt from a five-page letter to me at Fort Bliss on October 1, 1944, her twenty-ninth birthday: "We're getting along pretty well, but quite frequently Stuart gets the family nervous. Many things irk them and vice versa. . . . It's a difficult adjustment for all concerned. I've been warned by other girls in the same position and I try awfully hard to say nothing."

Two weeks later she wrote of further disappointments: "Dad informed me last night in strong tones that I can't go to work while I live here. The kid is too difficult for mother to take care of. My hoped-for office career has gone poof! This will be a long war indeed. I intend to see how far I can get with him about doing any type of voluntary service."

I suspect that, during those weeks of adjustment, my letters did little to relieve the family's anxieties about me. On arriving at Fort Bliss, I was assigned to a veteran antiaircraft mobile battalion returned from the Aleutian islands for a twenty-two-week retraining cycle. Destined for another overseas mission, the men were in their eighteenth week and suffering through a schedule of maneuvers in the desert outwash area of the Franklin Mountains north of El Paso and the fort. Life in the desert, though educational, was not fun.

It gets awfully hot in the middle of the day but late at night it cools off about 2 A.M. becoming almost an unbearable cold temperature. . . . We sleep right on the sand. Over me I had two blankets and my shelter half (pup-tent) rolling myself in them like a shroud. The only clothes removed are my leggings and shoes. . . . You should hear these Aleutian island vets kick and moan about Texas! They insist Attu was heaven compared to this desert "hell-hole." If they are having trouble getting through this—I cannot imagine where I will end up!

I should not have fretted over their aggravations. As events unfolded I ended up quite all right. Once out of the desert and back in camp, the intelligence-section sergeant informed me that I was "officially on their team." Now there were hours of training at the aircraft operation room, plotting incoming and outgoing air traffic at nearby Biggs Field; there were lengthy classes in aircraft target recognition; there were the usual inspections, standing of retreats, orientation classes, and

"overnights" at the firing ranges. To me, fresh out of basic training, the schedule seemed far from taxing. To the Aleutian vets at my side, however, the program was an abomination.

Through the last autumn days of 1944, before our battalion shipped out, my letters recorded activities in preparing for, then suffering through, grueling Inspector General examinations.¹ Letters from Georgiana continued being newsy and comforting, but occasionally sad and worrisome paragraphs slipped in, exposing some fears. On November 5, 1944, after we had visited via long-distance telephone for the wartime allowable duration of three minutes, she wrote:

The entire morning I waited for your call and I was so happy, but just to hear you say "Hello Georgie" tore my heart out. I'm more lonely now than I've ever been and so disgusted with myself for being that way. My folks said I sounded like I was talking to a stranger instead of my husband, but if I let myself go I know exactly what would happen. Thus, I have a strong fortification built all around my heart. No emotion can come in and none can go out. I can't reconcile myself to the fact that you're going overseas. I fight it out within myself a hundred times a day. . . . How long this war has to go on. . . . I'm terrified enough while you're being trained, with you overseas—well, it's indescribable.

I did my best to put her at ease. I wrote that being fortified with her love and having that love actually living in the person of our son, Stuart, put all thoughts of danger out of my mind. I told her that our battalion would probably be assigned to protecting railroad junctions or marshaling yards miles back in the rear areas, "and rear areas today are safer than crossing University Avenue. Here's a kiss: X—X. Now stop worrying!"

As cavalier as I was about my battalion's future, there were days and nights a few months later when I wished I were back in St. Paul crossing University Avenue. Detailing such experiences, because of common sense and censoring, was taboo, but general phrases dealing with location and well-being were allowed. A V-mail note of March 8, 1945, is an example:

I am now somewhere in Germany. Don't let this excite or disturb you too much, but I know you'll feel better knowing rather than wondering. My feelings are very mixed. I am excited, scared and very tired. This idea of now being the news rather than

wondering what the news is, well—it's disquieting. That news should be all good from now on because I am in the 9th Army.² I love you very much. It's the only feeling stronger tonight than fatigue.

LETTERS from home, when they reached me during those harrowing early months of 1945, came spasmodically in batches and in no sequence whatsoever. One with a cancellation date of December 23, 1944, for instance, found me on February 22. Letters I sent during that time carry postmarks two weeks later than the dates inside. Everyone, at home and abroad, was wondering what loved ones were putting up with at the given moment. Everyone lived on stale news. For example, the V-mail of March 8 reached Georgiana on March 22, while she was writing her daily letter to me. This is the third paragraph from her letter, which I received on April 6:

Darling! A letter from you! I've been calling everybody and telling them to watch that 9th Army. All those knots in my tummy are loosening. I'm so glad you're not in the southern sectors for fear of that expected "bloody mountainous fighting" we've been told to expect. If it's any consolation—we all are extremely proud of you. For this V-mail written March 8th—what a relief it has brought!

On the day she wrote, I doubt if I was harboring such great relief, but by the time I read her reaction the worst was behind me. Since leaving Holland and our Dutch twins, we made three or four ordered moves along the west bank of the Rhine. I particularly remember the village of Orsoy, directly across the river from the Ruhr industrial area, because it was there that I saw my first jet plane: a converted JU-88 screaming in low over the river, laying floating mines. In midafternoon of March 24 our group was recalled to headquarters battalion. By the coordinates transmitted we knew it was north of us, across from the town of Wesel. We found our comrades dug in along the shore below the west bank.

The battalion's mission was to provide antiaircraft cover for the Ninth Army bridgehead at Wesel. The city, a trans-Rhine communication center, had a peacetime population of twenty-four thousand—just slightly less than Winona. There, however, the similarity ended. Unlike the Mississippi River, which seems to spread around and meander into back bays and inlets as it finds its way past Winona, the Rhine at Wesel was a determined force rushing by the town's high bank in a deep and clear-cut channel. The scene reminded me more of the topography at New Ulm on the Minnesota River. Seen through my field binoculars, Wesel, like New Ulm, developed on three terraced levels rising from the river.

¹These were the U.S. Army's system of thorough inspections and oral examinations targeted at units scheduled for overseas duty.

²A subliminal reference, no doubt, to assure those at home that I was still functioning in the U.S. Army despite our assignment to the British Twenty-first Army Group commanded by Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery.

After being briefed we serviced our jeep, trailer, and weapons and drew C-rations for a week. Then, because night had fallen, we were told to dig in and leave at first light for our new assignment—the high countryside twenty miles east of Wesel. Because of nightfall, combat engineers had put restrictions on the pontoon bridge completed late that afternoon. In the morning, with priority orders in hand, we were in line at the bridge's shoreline take-off point.

"O.P. guys, eh?" an engineer M.P. said as he read the orders. "O.K. You're light. We'll swing you in between that half-track and Sherman tank over there—just to break the weight load. Maintain fifty-foot intervals. And for chrissake don't kill your engine! Ever been aboard a pontoon crossing?"

"Back on the Roer," I answered. "But that was just after the front moved on."

"Yeh. Well, you sure are in it now! O.K. Here we go. Good luck."

We took our position behind the half-track, and after it got fifty feet out on the bridge we started our crossing. Andy shouted at me: "John, how much does a Sherman tank weigh?"

"Slightly over thirty-seven tons," I called back.

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed. "Why did I ever ask that question?"

The velocity of the rushing Rhine underneath us and the scream of outgoing artillery overhead were my concern. I was worrying about how securely the engineers had anchored the pontoons and how long a range the field artillery had calculated for the barrages. After all, our assigned area was only twenty miles east of Wesel. As we neared the last section of the pontoon bridge, I had to concentrate on other matters.

The half-track ahead of us, upon reaching the shoreline, was directed off to our left. We were waved onto a meshed metal apron stretched across the beach leading to a rutted trail that climbed the bank at an oblique angle. The town was a shambles. We slow-gearred our way up to, then beyond, the business section, which was on the second level above the river. Winding our way up through rubble, we got to the town's third level, suddenly coming upon a cemetery. Ravaged by the previous night's artillery barrage, the small, consecrated acreage had the appearance of some macabre stage set—a ghoulish scene of unearthed corpses flung helter-skelter out of shattered coffins. The bodies lay in grotesque, unshapely positions among, over, and under blasted, upended headstones and tangled remnants of the cemetery's wrought-iron fencing. It was awful. It became one of those tucked-away memories. I recalled the scene, however, while engaged in genealogical research in the 1980s. My paternal great-grandfather's final resting place was the town cemetery of Duisberg on the Rhine—just fourteen



*"Looking across the Rhine,"
April 1945*

miles upstream from Wesel.

Following that unforgettable assault crossing, my letter of April 5, 1945, hints at my real feelings. Inserted in the letter was a clipping from the *Stars & Stripes*, the daily newspaper of U.S. Armed Forces in the European theater of operations. This clipping was a concise reprint of General Dwight D. Eisenhower's April 3 Order of the Day, only the fourth issued since D-Day. He praised the Ninth and First U.S. armies for "yesterday's magnificent feat of arms" and declared that the encirclement of the Ruhr "will bring the war more rapidly to a close." My one-sentence comment about it was: "All of us get depressed, exasperated, worn out and into a plain don't-give-a-damn mood, but recognition from our Theater commander fills us with new spirit."

The letter then shifts to how "pressing business" during the previous night's radio transmissions led to hilarious situations involving a delightful fellow at another observation post, nicknamed "Tall-in-the-Saddle"—he was from New Mexico. Two weeks passed before Georgiana received the letter, and it pretty well confirmed the feelings she had of where I was and what I had been doing. In her answering letter, which I received in the middle of May, she wrote, "That letter on April 5th, the day you had so much fun with 'Tall-

in-the-Saddle,' and (do you remember?) the one year anniversary of your leaving St. Paul. . . . I want you to go on laughing and having fun, but everything seems so mixed up. You are shielding me from the bad spots aren't you?"

Through those weeks of April 1945, my letters relate the changes taking place as we moved eastward toward the Elbe River. With the collapse of the Third Reich, mobile antiaircraft battalions such as ours were assigned policing and transportation missions. The battalion's rolling stock became a provisional trucking company. Observation post personnel served as police-patrol teams and checkpoint operators. O.P. noncommissioned officers (non-coms), if not on police duty, were chauffeuring commanders of truck convoys moving Displaced Persons (DPs) to railheads or camps.

As the tempo and tenor of those 1945 spring days changed for me, so did they for Georgiana. After V-E Day her letters take on a less worrisome tone. On May 9 she wrote, "We celebrated your victory on Monday as the authentic day and Tuesday as the official day! . . . around town there was nothing hilarious or boisterous, not even like the Saturday nights of yore. . . . The best ever though, was an agreement of the Twin Cities that all bars would be closed. Lo and behold, St. Paul double-crossed Minneapolis and remained open. Good! Good!" Her letter then went on telling of farewell parties for Eleanor, a lifelong friend who was marrying a Navy man, and the trousseau-shopping arguments the women got into. "I've seen to it that she will have oomphy clothes, and for my choices Ed will thank me. . . . We must have behaved badly in the stores . . . she'd lean to conservative styles and prices. I would go the opposite. We'd exchange words. Who won? Guess. She has a screaming swim suit and several voluptuous dresses. Ed sent the money with warnings to buy glamorously. And did I!"

When I read the letter I thought to myself: Is this the College of St. Catherine girl I married and the mother of my son? What has God—and the war—wrought? The next surprise was her announcement that she was working afternoon hours at my family's grocery store. She would be away from her parents' home only during our son's nap time. Evidently, she had negotiated her way through her father's objections. She wrote, "The work is very interesting, but, Lordy, how is it possible to keep all details clear in one's head? Let's get a farm so you only have to make hay and children. . . . this grocery work, at times, gives me the urge to start reeling like a ballerina."

Judging by my letters those April and May days of 1945, I too had my "reeling" urges. Checkpoint incidents, policing problems, and convoy-trip experiences all demanded that one be a sociologist rather than a soldier. Everywhere there were refugees plus confused



*"All the comforts of home!
Electric shaving at Cologne," March 1945*

*"Bill Cook [left] and I with my most
prized souvenir," May 1945*



and surrendering Germans. At one checkpoint a one-horse wagon with four unarmed, bareheaded Nazi officers and three refugees aboard was being shepherded along by two nuns. Because of the heavy flow of refugee traffic, I quickly checked them out, casually mentioning to Andy that the nuns were in charge.

"Well, by God!" he stormed. "This war has deteriorated into a hell of a condition when they let damn enemy officers wagon through the countryside under the charge of nuns!"

A late April letter tells of a three-year-old Russian boy clinging to me at a DP camp and then four adults almost crushing my ribs with hugs when I related the news of their armies encircling Berlin: "The Russians are marvellous people. . . . It is not too difficult to talk to them. A confused and cluttered German seems to help, and gestures plus sand drawings solve some of the more complex statements."

My chauffeuring duties that memorable month of May included an assignment to a brigade captain ordered to search out and inspect a rumored German airplane assembly plant in our sector. We found the plant but no assembled planes. A letter from May 22 tells about a two-day convoy trip covering more than seven hundred miles of Germany, moving 1,500 Russian DPs one way, then 1,330 French and 250 Belgians another way. All went to railheads to board trains (box-cars) for their countries.

But all was not drudgery. A letter on May 28 details the experience of a trip to the Elbe River. An O.P. friend, Bob Mahen ("Tall-in-the-Saddle"), had permission to visit his brother Carl, who was with an anti-aircraft unit on the Elbe. Through some off-the-record finagling, I got to go along. In February Carl had been wounded but had been discharged from the hospital in Paris on May 1. We found him quartered with a gun battery in the town of Gardelegen, thirty miles west of the river. For the brothers it was a joyous reunion, and all of us, including Carl's buddies and I, got caught up in an evening of wine and song.

The next morning, under Carl's guidance, the three of us drove to the Elbe River. I wanted to get some pictures of the damaged bridge beyond the village of Tagermunde. Through the blown-apart, tumbled-down wreckage of the bridge, engineers had built a narrow wooden walk—up, over, and through the wreckage—allowing at least a pedestrian crossing. It was the U.S. Army's farthest "Eastern Allowable Penetration" point. While we were up on the first planking, a Russian guard, from his post down in the middle of the wreckage, motioned vigorously for us to join him. We scurried down that rickety walkway and soon were shaking hands, laughingly conversing with gestures and my fractured high and low German while snapping pictures of him and us.

WITH THE ARRIVAL of summer came the movement of all American troops into the southern sector of Germany. My letters of the first weeks of June originated from a variety of one-night stands, as the battalion meandered down into Bavaria. A letter dated June 8 from Landau on the Danube reports a new A.P.O. (mailing address) number and the news that the battalion is now in the Third Army. That letter, which Georgiana received ten days later, triggered mixed feelings in her: "If you were slated for the Japanese Empire at least I'd have you for 30 days. If it's definite you're occupational your folks and mine are happy. Seeing all the servicemen in town and listening to Ike's homecoming didn't help any today."

That letter did not find me until July 27. In the interim, we O.P. non-coms had been quite busy with delivering messages and chauffeuring not only battalions but also such units as military government and investigative staffs of the Counter Intelligence Corps and Office of Strategic Services. Through that summer my letters read like a travelog of battered western Eu-

Bob Mahen, the Russian guard, and Carl Mahen on the Elbe bridge, May 1945



rope. From the Austrian border in the Salzburg area: "Now I've seen some real mountains. It's amazing I've seen the Alps before the Rockies!" Then from the Oberammergau area: "Occasionally a real lake would appear, and this, plus the thick pine woods gave me a twinge of lonesomeness for our cabin up at Trout Lake." As expected, I found a sad paragraph in my letter of June 27, 1945—our sixth wedding anniversary—sent from Luxembourg, where I had gone on a mission.

I shall probably drag myself through the day wondering more than ever just when it will be that I will again be in your arms. The minutes will struggle into hours and the hours will somehow, over a thousand obstacles, make themselves into the day. And suddenly our sixth anniversary will be gone—our second one apart from each other. I hope to God it will be our last separated one.

And it was.

There remained, however, a separation of nine more months through which we anguished our way trying to maintain an optimistic, cheery attitude. It was not easy. Two or three times during July my letters noted that the battalion's status remained as Cat. II (category 2: bound for the Pacific). What sustained both of us was my thought in one letter of a "great possibility of a 30 day furlough at home before being sent on to the Pacific, but what month (Sept., Oct., Nov.) remains unknown." On August 1 Georgiana was cheered by the delivery of four of my letters that were three and four weeks old. In her three-page answer that day, there is a melancholy tone in her description of "lots of G.I.'s in the store with their mothers or wives to pick out special food they've done without while overseas. We have no news of you later than July 15, so maybe—I'm just dreaming again."

On that first day of August 1945, Georgiana and I appear to have been enveloped in the same melancholy mood, for while she was writing me that Wednesday evening, I, in my own time zone, seven or eight hours earlier, had apologized for the shortness of my letters "because there's nothing to write about except the continuous odor of manure in this village, my inactivity and horrible heart-tearing rumors of our battalion not getting home this year." What sparked the similarity of our moods that same day could well have been thoughts of our son's approaching fourth birthday on August 8. Thankfully, the

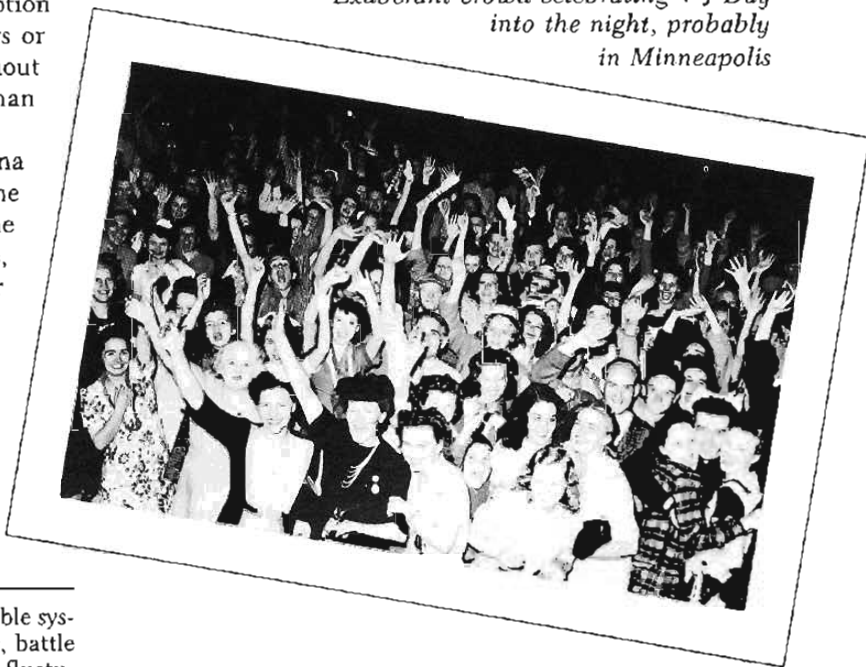
immediacy of these melancholy moods, whether indicated or openly confessed, was gone by the time we received each other's letter. Weeks would have passed, as well as yesterday's dispositions. It was the golden age before direct dialing. Even as I wrote another blue note on August 7 the *Enola Gay* B-29 had returned to base on Tinian Island after completing its mission over Hiroshima. By the time Georgiana received my letter, it was V-J Day and the war was over.

The V-J Day letter I wrote the night of August 15 is a pack of seven pages that outweighed its airmail envelope and arrived with six cents postage due. At the letter's end I put the question that would be on all of our minds: "When do we get out? Well, you and everyone at home know as much about it as we do. If you could see the thousands of 85 or higher pointers still over here you would understand who must be moved first. It looks like a long, tough sweat for my 49 point rank."³

In her V-J Day letter to me that day, Georgiana reported, "Stuart got to see all there was to see of Victory Day, but nothing was as impressive as the little kids in the block. They formed a parade of their own and, with regret, I took him out of the ranks to see mediocre sights downtown!"

Ten days later, upon receiving my first postwar letter, she wrote further reflections of that memorable V-J Day. This time all the bars were closed—in both cities! There was "lots of laughing and shouting, but everyone knew somebody who was never coming home. . . . At

*Exuberant crowd celebrating V-J Day
into the night, probably
in Minneapolis*



³The War Department's discharge plan was a flexible system of points gained by time in service, time overseas, battle zones experienced, age, and dependents. Point value fluctuated as political winds back home kept changing directions.



V-J Day antics at the intersection of Seventh Street and Nicollet Avenue, Minneapolis

first I thought it was just me," she wrote. "Then the next day at the store everybody said they felt that way. It must have been universal."

She informed me that she had not, as yet, "filled the car's tank with gasoline. Now that rationing is over it doesn't seem to dwindle away so fast! I read in the paper that a man went one better on 'fill 'er up' command at a station. He called out: 'Splash 'er over!' Another motorist had a fill and the tank, not used to the weight, dropped off."

The euphoric mood of V-J Day was enhanced for me on August 17, when I received temporary duty at two hotels in Berchtesgaden that the U.S. Army had taken over to serve as rest and relaxation centers. I had, to say the least, a plush assignment. All I had to do was drive my jeep on errands for the hotel staff and perform small supply and marketing runs for the chef. Judging by my letter home announcing the assignment, the best perks were "no guard duty, no reveille, no aggravating detail duty and—thank God!—no more manure-filled streets of Waging village! The war is certainly over!"

DURING the remaining months of 1945 our letters, while still newsy accounts of our day's happenings, tend to reflect more and more what was really gnawing at us—War Department vacillations in carrying out discharge plans. Every third or fourth letter through those months contains a comment or two about some rumor, rumble, or argument concerning the latest "point spread" between duty-bound and home-bound G.I.s. On September 21 I wrote: "Whenever soldiers meet the conversation is 'points' along with Congress' pending action regarding two year men and fathers."

Then in next day's letter I report: "According to today's news I again have 49 points. This point system is getting laughable. Up, down, in and out we go!"

From Georgiana came worrisome questions and wondering comments that were prevailing on the home front. October 17: "We read and hear much about the E.T.O. men with 44 points being replaced after the first of the year. Haven't you heard that?" October 19: "Does that softly whispered change of 50 points discharge by December mean anything to us?" November 9: "G.I.s with 45 points and over are being discharged in the U.S. Will you tell me why so much legislation has been put across to soothe the brows of those 'unfortunate' ones who have never been overseas?" December 16: "There has been a complete blackout as to change in point scores from the War Department. That's no help! As an added attraction hardly any mail is getting through. I should get first prize for grumbling, shouldn't I?"

What she wrote about the mail was factual, but nominating herself for the grumbling award was erroneous. Nobody could outgrumble the G.I. combat veteran. What had contributed to the foul-up of our personal mail delivery was the deactivation of the battalion that had brought me overseas. Then, from October on, the unit I was transferred into had four A.P.O. address changes. In addition, I was sent on assignments in five different localities: Berchtesgaden and Munich, Germany; and Salzburg, Wels, and Linz, Austria.

With the dawn of 1946 our worries and frustrations escalated almost into despair with the War Department's devastating announcement that the point system of discharging would be abandoned. Deployment and discharge would be accomplished "only at the Army's pleasure." At the time I was on duty in the security section of the Transportation Corps at Linz. When the *Stars & Stripes* broke the story on January 5, tempers of the thousands of G.I.s billeted in the city rose almost to flashpoint. Tempers were short not only about the point-system abandonment, but also Secretary of War Robert Patterson's admitted ignorance of the system and how it worked. Every "pipeline-bound" soldier was a bundle of nerves awaiting the *Stars & Stripes* of the day. In one letter I reported, "And when the paper hits the street murmurs and vocal abuse crescendo into roars as we read another asinine statement by some character in a supposedly responsible position. For example: General Collins, Public Relations Officer of the General Staff: 'There are few, if any men who are left in Europe that ever heard a shot fired in this war!'"

That irrational action by the War Department not only alienated we moldering warriors overseas but was most distressing to loved ones awaiting us at home. "All the announcements coming from the War Department about demobilization have me frightened no end," Georgiana wrote. A later letter of hers pronounced, "It's getting impossible to wait for War Department announcements, letters or word from you if you are needed or not in Europe. And wouldn't this last hurdle be the most confused one!"

During the last days of January my letters, however, exhibit a growing conviction that within a few weeks my forty-nine points would qualify me for discharge. Throughout the month, despite all the nerve-wracking press releases from posturing officials and misguided editorialists back home insisting that deployment was "now at too rapid a pace," men with fifty-two to fifty-five points continued to be transferred into home-bound units. In a January 22 letter I mentioned that "if I were in Italy I'd be on my way home or, at least ready to ship. Maybe V-Me Day is pretty close at that." Then there is my January 31 letter:

I met a new "stateside" replacement last night. He's a new kid that came up from Salzburg as courier from headquarters. We have over a hundred such replacements and more due in. The outfit will soon be a "young" unit. My day for transferring must be getting close. Yesterday the battalion executive officer offered me a couple of promotions if I would sign up for 60 or 90 more days. It's nice to know that I had the privilege of refusing.

It was February 8, 1946, that the long-awaited news of my "particular day of transferring" burst upon me. Orders were that on the following Thursday—February 14—I would be transferred into the Eighty-third Division, which was scheduled to sail early in March. How absolutely appropriate, I thought, to start the journey home to my love on St. Valentine's Day!

By February 16 I was in the pipeline with dozens of other home-bound soldiers from the Linz area. Trucked up into the small resort village of Bad Aussee in Austria's highland and lake district southeast of Salzburg,

we remained packed inside two or three local inns of that snow-engulfed village for a week. There was no incoming mail, for on my last day in Linz, post-office forwarding cards had been filed. Georgiana would be getting back her letters—to be followed shortly, we trusted, by her husband. The last dispatch, the end-most communication in our collection of 1,116 letters, is a Western Union NLT cable night letter dated March 2, 1946. BUY THAT BEEF ROAST AM NOW IN LEHAVRE SHOULD SAIL WITHIN TEN DAYS ALL MY LOVE — JOHN

THUS IT ENDED—my winter project of perusing our wartime letters: 1,116 of them unfolded, read, refolded. Sorted, bundled, accompanied by forty-five pages of notes on legal-pad paper and now assembled into four conveniently sized boxes, properly labeled. They rest atop a low-legged console table in my den. It is early spring of 1988. Ringing in my ears is Georgiana's premise: "Maybe by springtime a decision will come easier."

It does not. I am no longer noncommittal about the letters. We should keep them. Georgiana insists hers should be thrown away—only mine should be saved. This is ludicrous. The collection becomes meaningless, I tell her, if one-half of the whole is destroyed. The argumentative banter continues until all we do is agree to disagree. Through the spring days of 1988 I conclude that, because the letters are out of the attic, no longer a part of its tucked-away jumble, now arranged and cataloged in sensible order, the major condition of "doing something about them" has been met. I will hold the collection in my den, and on occasion, when the signs are right and moods in sync, reopen the subject about its final disposition.

But it was not to be. As spring evolved into summer Georgiana's health began to deteriorate, and for the next eighteen months the battle was fought to save her from that most insidious of all diseases—cancer. The matter of our letters never again was raised. She died on the Sunday evening of December 3, 1989. Down in my den our wartime letter collection remains neatly boxed and undisturbed. The same cannot be written about my memories or emotions.⁴

⁴The author has agreed to donate the correspondence to the Minnesota Historical Society.

The photos on p. 65 and 66 are from the MHS collections; all others are the author's.



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