

The Day I Meet My Grandparents

By: Robert Briggs

I think we were talking about my uncle. I don't know for sure, but something in our conversation brought the subject up. Over the years we had talked about them in some detail but never to any real depth. I do know that I asked a question about my grandparents which made my mother excuse herself; both of them had died before I was born. My grandfather died in Guadalcanal and my grandmother taken by cancer in the early 60's. My mother always seemed to get emotional when the subject of her parents was brought up but never like this.

When she returned I half expected to see her wiping her eyes, but there were no tears, no tissue – but there was a box. As far as boxes go it was pretty standard: just an old brown shoe box from some bygone era.

"I want you to have this" she said.

"Ok" was my reply "what is it"?

"I've had these since my mother died but I could never bring myself to read them" she said almost as if she did not hear my question.

My curiosity was peaked at this point so I asked her again "what is it mom"?

"These are all the letters that my mom and dad wrote to each other during the war" she said. "Uncle Bob put them into a sequential order by writer and the date of post mark but neither of us were ever able to read them they're just too emotional".

I couldn't believe my ears. "You've had these letters since before I was born"? My mind was racing, why hadn't I ever heard about them before. Then it hit me, she had kept them secret, at least I destroy them in my youth like so many of her other memories of her mother. I never intend to be destructive, only curious, but the outcome was still the same. But now I was 38, a far cry from the little boy I used to be.

"Yes" she said "in fact these letters are more than 60 years old and some of them have never been opened".

"Why?" I asked "why were they never opened?"

"Because grandpa's ship had been sunk; the war department took more than 2 months before they finally notified my mother of his death so all that time she was writing a letter a day like usual: sad really." She started to cry a little.

"But mom, why do you want me to have them? I really did want to know."

"I knew you would one day be interested in them. Maybe you can take your time and read them for me and let me know if there is anything in there that I should know about".

I was flabbergasted. I didn't know what to say, which is pretty significant when you consider that I make my living speaking to people. I did muster up a faint "Ok mom, I'll do it" before I got lost in my thoughts.

What would I find in those pages? I don't even think that I've ever seen a picture of either of my grandparents before. I did know some about my grandmother but my grandfather was more of an enigma. My mom really didn't even know him. She was only three when his ship the USS Wasp was torpedoed during the battle of Guadalcanal. But this was an opportunity to get to know them as people. To read some of their most intimate thoughts at a time that had to be the most stressful of all.

The box stayed in my room during the rest of my visit. I tried to start reading but you know how it is when you're visiting home after several years away. I would have more time at the airport, for now I would visit.

The day came though when I began my journey home to my wife and kids. I had a three hour wait in the Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport: I took out the box and opened the lid. Neatly rapped into four different groups where letters from my Grandmother to my grandfather, from my grandfather to my grandmother; letters from my grandfathers boss before the war and letters from my great-grandmother to my grandmother. "I didn't know these were in here". I called my mom.

"Did you know these letters were in here from Grandma Wooding and Grandpa's old boss at the warehouse he worked before the war?" I asked.

"Yes" she said "aren't the notes to Grandpa funny"?

I hadn't read them yet but I told her "I will read them when we get off the phone". We said our good byes again and I started to read. It seems my grandfather worked for a persnickety old man that enjoyed leaving type written notes on any type of scrap paper he could find to informing him of this detail or that detail that he felt my grandfather had neglected to do appropriately. "No wonder he went in the Navy" I thought "I would too!" I laughed to myself.

I then began to read the letters from my grandmother. I didn't get much done sitting there in the terminal but it was a start. Once I got home I spent the next three days pouring over the decaying paper. Time had aged them to a light brown and in some cases water had gotten into the box, but for the most part everything was legible. I did have some trouble reading my grandmothers writing at first. But as I got through the letters I found out why, she couldn't afford to get a pen and had no way to sharpen one of my uncles old school pencils so the writing was faint and somewhat distorted. She was so happy when she finally received a little money for some work she had done to buy herself a new pen.

"Wow can you imagine" I thought to myself. After all, pens are pretty common around my house.

Her letters were, as you would imagine, a compilation of “I miss you so much” to “I hope this war ends soon”. But there were also personal insights, verbal nick-knacks written down and long since forgotten. For example, I found out that my mother’s nick-name had been Lo-Lo and that she was a terror to her two older brothers. I also found out that she used to gallop around the house on an imaginary horse pretending to be the Lone Ranger after her favorite radio show.

“How funny” I thought. I mean, I’ve always known my mother was a little girl but I never grew up hearing any stories about this time. That’s usually the job of a grandparent to fill you in on those kinds of details but mine were not around. As far as I knew she had always been an adult. But now here was a picture of her forming in my mind trotting and prancing around shouting “hi-ho Silver” and then possibly whopping my uncles upside the head before she galloped off into the sunset.

She talked of the pride of my uncles at the thought of my grandpa serving his country and how thrilled they were when they finally were able to hang a service flag in their window. She told of my mom’s pink eye that took almost seven letters before it was finally gone.

But most of all she told about her love. Nothing passionate or x-rated like you might expect today if people actually still wrote letters. She wrote of things from the past when they lived in Michigan; how she always loved to meet his ship. Of the football games they went to at the high school and the fun they had. Of their plans for the future once this “terrible old war is over”. And every letter was signed the same way:

Love and Loads of Love,

Carmen and the boys and your little Lo-Lo

Love and Loads of Love! What a fantastic way to end a letter. She was sentimental. She and I had something in common. She was starting to become a person in my mind. I could see her in that hot Arizona Summer looking out the window she mentioned so often. I could hear the fear of the future that she so much tried to repress. After all she wanted to keep her chin up for her husband. But you could always tell when it dropped.

I think it’s important to note at this time that my Grandfather was forty three years old when he re-enlisted in the US Navy. A buddy of his had been killed on December 7th and he felt it his duty to go back to defend his country and serve in the place of his fallen friend. Can you imagine that? Here he was 43 yrs old, he has a wife, two young boys and a toddler for a daughter. He didn’t have to do what he did but he felt compelled. It was only four months after he went out to sea that his ship was sunk. For the first two months of that time my grandmother was trying to make ends meet on the little money she could take in doing odds and ends. The Navy had promised the men they would have an allotment to support their families but that was more than two months in coming. After the first few weeks her letters became more and more desperate when she talked about the money. But each time, she would try to bring it back to a positive by saying “Don’t worry about us, well be fine, we all have to do our part”. I found myself admiring her courage, while I pitied her loneliness. I actually began wishing I could reach out and hug her. I was actually starting to miss a woman I never got a chance to meet.

I think the most eerie thing that I found in reading her letters was a reference to a dream she had about my grandfather's ship going down. It was made more so by the fact that the dream was only three weeks before the actual sinking. I wonder if she knew?

When I got to my grandfathers letters I had more of a game plan. I started to understand more of what was going on. Many of my grandmother's letters answered questions or supplied facts for things I did not understand. But here were the questions... now I was getting a complete picture.

He started off writing from the San Diego Naval Base. He spoke of meeting a new friend but he assured her that this was a "happily married man, just like I am". I wondered why he felt he needed to say that, later on I would find out.

He told her to tell the boys to be men and help out around the house. He also feared more than anything else that his little "Lo-Lo" would forget him before he could return. There was also a humorous little plea that he made to her to get the barber to join up before "all the boys were gone and he was left behind reading the news".

In every letter though he tried to encourage and uplift her. It seems she always had a problem with depression and he wanted her to be at peace. He did, in a gentle way, try to assure her that "what I did years ago on the Huron will never happen again". When I read this I was shocked. "Did grandpa have an affair"? It sure seems like he did. Later, once all the letters were read I was talking to my dad about their contents and how I thought my mother should read them for herself to bring a sort of closure. I mentioned this letter as being the only thing that I didn't know if she would want to read it. And what do you think he told me?

"Well son" he said "even my dad had his indiscretion, that's why we moved to Phoenix when I was a kid".

Ok, that was more than I wanted to know. Some family memories are better off forgotten. Yet even with this little revelation about my mother's dad I couldn't help but get more and more proud when I thought of what he had done.

I wanted to read more about the battles he fought in and the things he was seeing around him but that was not to be. The war department would not allow any such information to be given for fear that it would give the enemy information and so it was strictly talk about home.

What I did find interesting was that, while my grandmother's letters referenced his questions and stories, my grandfather did not receive any of her mail. You could actually begin to hear the depression he was beginning to feel at not having received a single piece of information from home. There was a time he even wondered if she was writing at all. Yet of course she was. In fact she wrote one to two letters a day every day he was gone.

I began to think "How tragic, he never got anything from her before he died" but I was wrong. In a letter, the last from him in fact, that was dated just 3 days before the ship was sunk he mentioned receiving a stack of some 10 or 12 letters from his dear "wifey". He responded by

firing off a long five page answer to all of her questions and a sincere apology for ever doubting she had written.

That was the last letter her ever wrote. Or at least it was the last one she ever got. His ship was struck by three torpedoes on Tuesday, September 16th 1942. Though almost all of the crew got off safely one hundred and fifty were not so lucky. Archie Burlingame was among those who did not survive.

Those who were on the ship when it was torpedoed said that the area where my grandfather worked was the area most damaged. I spoke to one of the survivors the other day over the phone; his aging voice faltering in volume but not wavering in its certainty.

“Son” he said “there is no way anyone on that part of the ship could have survived”.

This made me feel better, but I knew it might at least take a bit of the burden from my mother’s shoulders.

My parents came to visit me about two months ago. We had such a wonderful time. I showed my mom the signed and numbered lithograph I bought that showed the Wasp about six months before she went down. I told her about some of the funny little things I found. I even showed her the picture of my great-great grandmother that had been sealed in one of the envelopes for the last 60 years.

“You can have it” she said. “That was my grandmother, she always loved my dad”.

“Mom” I said in a soft tone “I think you should read them”.

I explained how that I now knew who my grandparents were. I had a chance to walk with them through one of the toughest times in their lives. I felt close to them like I had known them.

“Maybe I should read them” and with that she asked for the box.

I brought it out to her and left her alone. I could hear the laughter, and more than once she had to stop. But by the time she went home she had read them all...and she was glad!

“Do you want to take them back home with you?” I asked her.

“No, I’ve read them now thanks to you. Do something with them. Maybe save them for your boy”.

It was a great experience the day I met my grandparents. But I think, more than anything, it was a great day when my mom, if only for an instance, got her parents back too.

** Note:*

Robert Briggs is the grandson of Archie W. Burlingame. Killed in action on the USS Wasp CV-7, Sept 15, 1942