The Journey of the Purple Heart

A First Infantry Division Soldier's Story from Stateside to North Africa, Sicily and Normandy during World War II

As Told for Him by

Robert W. Baumer

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THE JOURNEY OF THE PURPLE HEART
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In Memory of Mary Jane Kamerzel

Heroes have the whole earth for their tomb.
And in a land far from their own
Where the column with its epitaph declares it,
There is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten
With no tablet to preserve it except that of the heart.

—Pericles

AUTHOR'S NOTE

EVERY PERSON YOU WILL MEET in this book lived. Events described actually took place on the home front and on the battlefields of North Africa and Europe during World War II. In order to make the pages ahead more enjoyable for you to read, the dialogue created required some literary license, but I assure you that this is an honest representation of the individuals as I knew them, or as they were described to me.

Robert W. Baumer
January 2022

~PROLOGUE~

MY FATHER NEVER SAID HELLO when he called me. He usually didn't even say it was him. He always got right down to business.

"Robert, my Aunt Kathryn is in the hospital up in Waterbury. She's dying. We need to see her today. I'll meet you in the downstairs lobby at noontime."

I always got to where my father ordered me ahead of him. When he arrived at the hospital that gloomy March day back in 1990 all he did was nod. Then up the elevator we went, still saying nothing, until we reached the fifth floor when he just said to turn right. Seconds later we walked into his Aunt Kathryn's room.

She was conscious and sitting up. The years had certainly taken a toll on her health, but for a woman of ninety-nine years she didn't look too bad. Her white hair was combed. Her kid sister Mary Jane, not yet ninety, was standing beside her taking her pulse while watching the monitors hovering near her bed.

During her fifty-year education career Kathryn had been a beloved first-grade teacher and a school principal in nearby Naugatuck Connecticut. Mary Jane was a nurse. She served in both the European and Pacific Theaters during World War II, retiring as a 1st Lieutenant back in 1946. She and Kathryn had been living together for years; neither ever married. Another of their sisters had died back in 1973; her name was Viola and she was my father's mother, my grandmother.

We weren't in the room but for maybe fifteen seconds when Kathryn managed to tilt her head toward us. Neither my father nor I had said anything. Kathryn was the first to speak.

"Sonny, I know that's you. But Bobby, how can you be here? You were killed during the war."

Kathryn had mistaken me for my father's brother, who did die in World War II. It was the moment my life changed and gave me an important purpose.

My father had never talked to me about his brother Bob, who he and my mother named me after. The closest I ever came to his brother was the day he was buried in Naugatuck back in 1947; my mother was two-months pregnant with me at the time. My father had never taken me to see his brother's grave all through my childhood, nor to the World War II Memorial on the town green in Naugatuck where his brother is remembered, along with seventy other locals who were killed during the war.

My grandmother Viola, who had served for years as president of the local Gold Star Mothers chapter, hardly talked about him when she was alive. I had just two fuzzy recollections of the times when she did. I wasn't even a teenager; I was maybe twelve the first time. She showed me a picture of her handsome son, only adding "he fought in Africa and Europe with the toughest outfit in the Army, the First Division." The other time she opened her purse and pulled out an embroidered pouch, from which emerged what I thought to be a medal because it glittered from the sunlight coming into the window of her home.

She told me it was something called a Purple Heart. She let me hold it, but said nothing.

Now in my forties and with my father riding down the elevator after seeing Kathryn mistake me for his brother, something finally gave me the courage to speak up. We were back on the main floor when I did.

"Pop, you have never told me anything about your brother," I offered quietly. "What happened to him?"

It was pretty rare for my father to look me directly in the eye, but this time he did. "He was killed on the beachhead in Nor-

mandy," he told me before looking away. "What a waste. I don't want to talk about this. Ask Mary Jane if you have any more questions."

So I asked Mary Jane if she would take me to my uncle Bob's grave on Memorial Day that spring and she very willingly agreed to do so. I picked her up at her home near Naugatuck, and we then made our way down Route 8 towards Grove Cemetery. We turned right at the entrance and went through its stone wall-bordered gate, and then passed by the Tuttle Memorial Chapel. The narrow roadway quickly bore left, then right where we had to slow considerably to traverse the remaining rutted and non-paved surface through the cemetery's tranquil acreage. A final left turn and going down into a hollow got us to where my family's plot was located amongst several tall pine trees.

It was this first visit that awakened something else in me. It was a thirst for knowledge. I hadn't served in the military, but by now I knew I wanted to somehow figure out what had happened to my father's brother who did.

Private First Class Robert Arthur Baummer, who died when he was just twenty-three years old, lay beneath a simple flat stone marker next to his mother.

"Viola died from blood cancer," Mary Jane quietly told me as I stared at their gravestones. "Her boys couldn't have been more opposite. Your father was always serious; he was a straight-A student in high school. Bob was an easy going, happy-go -lucky kid who played hooky from school, and hung out in garages where older boys were always fixing automobiles and building race cars.

"Bob really had a big heart," Mary Jane added. "During the Depression he used to take food from the family larder and give it to less fortunate families. His father Henry was an accountant with a decent paying job at the Rubber Plant at the time. Viola was working in the factory. It was a source of friction between them, the fact that she was working rather than staying home to keep an eye on their Bob. Bob ended up at the Connecticut Junior Re-

public up near Litchfield. It was like a reform school is today. He went there after he got into trouble with his boyhood friend George Walker, who lived down the hill from the family's home on Oak Street."

"What did he do to end up in this reform school?" I asked Mary Jane.

"He shot out a streetlamp with his BB gun."

"Then, how did he end up in the Army? Did my father make him do this?" I wondered out loud.

"No," Mary Jane quickly answered. "Sonny assumed the role of Bob's father after Henry died, but Bob evidenced no resentment towards his brother; in fact, he worshipped Sonny. It was your uncle Bob's decision to enlist back in 1940, a year before Pearl Harbor was bombed. There is something you should know about those times. Your father was deferred during the war; he was working in the defense industry, and never had to serve. His guilt is about him not going off to war, while his brother did and was killed."

"Do you have any idea what happened to him?" I asked.

"No, Bobby, I don't. I was in an evacuation hospital in England when we invaded Normandy back in 1944, and I did ask any First Division soldier I treated if they happened to know Bob and what happened to him, but none knew him. I don't know that we'll ever know what happened."

Thus my journey began to find out what did happen to him. Staring at my uncle Bob's gravestone, I took out my notebook, and wrote down "18th Infantry Regiment 1st Infantry Division," and scribbled his date of death—June 9, 1944.

"He didn't die on D-Day after all," I then said, more as a question looking for Mary Jane to confirm that, since I remembered my father had told me he was killed on the beachhead.

"No, he did not die on D-Day," Mary Jane answered. "Bob got off the beach that day. That, in and of itself, was a miracle."

"I wonder why my father dropped one of the "m's" in our last name. Bob spelled his with two "m's. Do you know what that's all about?"

"No I don't know for sure," Mary Jane answered. "But I always suspected it was because your father wanted it to look less German."

I thought about that for a few seconds before deciding to shift the conversation in another direction. "Do you think they know we're here?" I awkwardly asked, knowing Mary Jane was deeply religious.

She just stared off into the distance, frowned in thought, and then she turned to me and whispered, "Yes, I believe they know we are here."

I said nothing; I didn't have religion like she did. We were just holding each other's hands when Mary Jane suddenly said, "I have something for you, Bobby. Your grandmother gave it to me just days before she died. Viola knew I was very fond of her son Bob. I was actually the last person to see him before he went overseas. I dropped him off at the train station in New Haven. Being an Army veteran she entrusted me with this Purple Heart. Sonny didn't want it, for reasons you'll better understand over time. But I'm giving it to you now, here in Viola's presence, knowing she'd be proud and happy that you've taken an interest in her Bob."

I was stunned. It was the same Purple Heart I had held back when I was a kid.

"Will you help me understand his life better?" I asked.

"Of course Bobby," Mary Jane answered. "As much as I can remember."

Finding out more about my uncle's time in the army proved to be fraught with one obstacle after another. First, the local Veterans Affairs Office advocated on my behalf in an attempt to get Bob's Army service records from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, but all that came back was a fire in 1973 had destroyed

all records "for the period 1912 through 1959." I was told complete service records could not be reconstructed, but I didn't give up and instead upped my game. I engaged my then United States Senator Christopher J. Dodd, hoping the weight of his office could pry any of my uncle's records that might have existed out of St. Louis, but that, too, resulted in nothing.

I even visited the National Archives near Washington D.C. hoping for leads. I was able to retrieve Bob's casualty file, and while it was loaded with copies of administrative paperwork about getting his body home after the war ended, the answer to what had happened to him was not there. But I did learn that he served with Company H of the First Division's 18th Infantry Regiment.

Over the next two years I went to a number of military history research centers and was able to put a timeline together which told me Bob had participated in the Invasions of North Africa and Sicily during 1942 and 1943 before he landed in Normandy in June of 1944. The record of his regiment was very impressive, but I was still unable to determine anything about his role in this, or even that of his company.

But I was still far from ready to give up.

Two things happened the following year. I was able to locate a man who lived in Goshen Connecticut, near what Mary Jane remembered as the reform school Bob was sent to when he was fifteen years old. His name was Tony Salcito, and he invited me to come to his home. He remembered Bob; quite fondly I should add. They were roommates. He regaled me with stories of the year and a half Bob spent there, and then took me over to "The Republic," as he called it, and gave me a tour of the place.

When Christmas came that year my mother surprised me with packages which very much aroused my curiosity as I stared at them under the tree in my parent's wood-stove warmed living room on Main Street in Newtown Connecticut.

I couldn't imagine what was inside them, but when I opened

each one more clues about Bob's life emerged. Pictures, letters he had sent home during the war, other correspondence related to his death, and one very moving framed tribute, "In Grateful Memory of Private First Class Robert A. Baummer," signed by President Franklin Roosevelt, fell into my hands. I never forgot the words Roosevelt wrote.

He stands in an unbroken line of patriots who have dared to die
That Freedom might live, and grow, and increase its blessings.
Freedom lives, and through it, he lives
In a way that humbles the undertakings of most men.

When my father asked to look at this he just stared at those words and said nothing. A minute or two later he glanced at my mother and said, "Laura Jean, where did you find this?"

My mother answered, "It was in the trunk at the foot of the bed in the upstairs front bedroom."

"I had completely forgotten I kept those things," was all my father said.

I had the nerve to say, "Pop, maybe your brother's life really wasn't a waste after all."

This time he said nothing.

By now Mary Jane had shared many stories about Bob with me, but I still had no idea how he died. I wanted to go to Normandy and see if I might be able to figure out that part of the mystery. Looking back, I was clearly delusional. But it was 1992 when I was given the opportunity to crew on a sixty-three-foot sailboat that was being delivered to its new owner in Oslo Norway. I worked out plans to fly to France and go to Normandy once the boat was safely in the hands of its new owner.

On Monday, June 14th of that year, I was sailing past Nomans Land Island off Martha's Vineyard in fifteen knots of wind; the boat was making 8.5 knots, and was headed on a course of 134

degrees for Nantucket Light Ship. Waypoints were laid in off Nova Scotia and Newfoundland that would get *Katya*, the boat I was helping deliver, into the Gulf Stream, across the Atlantic, and up the globe to 60 degrees-latitude. First landfall was charted to be the Fair Isle chain north of Scotland, then we would put into the Shetland Islands to re-provision before covering the last 360 nautical miles to reach Oslo.

My uncle Bob's Purple Heart made the voyage with me; *Katya* reached Oslo on July 7th after covering 2,800 nautical miles of open, and sometimes angry ocean. Four days later, I got a cab to the Oslo airport, and boarded what turned out to be an uneventful flight to Paris. A cab took me to the Saint-Lazare train station where I caught a high-speed train bound for Cherbourg. I rented a car here, and set out the next morning for Omaha Beach, the military designation for the landing zone that Bob had come into shore towards on the morning of D-Day back on June 6th of 1944.

My first stop was at a museum commemorating the landings. "I was very impressed, for this museum had much memorabilia, such as uniforms, weapons, cartons of cigarettes from the war, cards and other such things that a soldier had with him," my journal read. "Pictures depicted the landings, hour by hour. Music played; marches, hymns, and even our Star Spangled Banner. I was moved and took many pictures."

Then I drove towards the beach. At first I was confused by the absence of signs that would have helped me find my way around. The Omaha Beach area is now a quaint summer community, and I thought maybe the French people didn't want all these pesky tourists like me clogging up their roads. But I eventually found my way past several old stone Norman farmhouses, and started down a narrow road shaded by ancient hedgerows that brought me to the beach. One of the first things I saw here was a large, rusted landing craft some twenty feet from the water's edge. Children were crawling all over it, frolicking and playing, their laughter oblivious to what had happened here nearly fifty years earlier.

Next, I came to a monument; it was a large, pyramidal-shaped structure facing the English Channel. It sat on a heavy granite base in a park-like setting, alone in a triangular area surrounded by the roadway. My heart raced. Beneath a Big Red One shoulder patch emblem on one side of this monument was the First Division's motto: *No Mission Too Difficult, No Sacrifice Too Great, Duty First*. This was my uncle Bob's unit. I stepped back, and then took in the large raised-letter inscription facing the Channel; in both French and English it read: THE ALLIED FORCES LANDING ON THIS SHORE WHICH THEY CALL OMAHA BEACH LIBERATE EUROPE JUNE 6TH 1944.

Then I headed up the bluff to the United States Military Cemetery, and entered the gate. I consulted a map I had brought with me, which first led me to a colonnade overlooking the seemingly endless rows of graves. I stood in place, and took in this magnificent memorial. Centered in the open arc was a haunting, yet beautiful twenty-two-foot bronze statue which faced the simple crosses of the fallen champions who preserved our way of life. The statue represented "The Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves." I choked up when I saw this inscription encircling the pedestal: "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord."

My camera attempted to capture the solemn beauty of the statue, its arms reaching towards the sky, with its gazing eyes eternally fixed towards the heavens beyond. I struggled to keep control of my emotions as I thought about how young the men buried here were; they were half my age when they gave their lives for our country. I clutched my uncle Bob's Purple Heart, which I of course had brought with me, then stepped back far enough to read the inner face of the lintel. In the semicircle of this visage it read: "This Embattled Shore, Portal of Freedom, Is Forever Hallowed by The Ideals, The Valor and The Sacrifices of our Fellow Countrymen."

I then walked towards an area overlooking the beach, the same beach where I had stood before the monument with the Big Red

One shoulder patch on it. I was numb with humility by now. From this vantage point I was able to see a different Omaha Beach, the one the heavily-armed Germans saw on the morning of D-Day. A winding path lined with benches marked the advancement of the First Division up from the beach to where I now stood.

After studying this path for an hour I turned back and walked slowly through the graves, stopping frequently to read the names on the markers. This was important for me to do; they deserved to be remembered. I took the time to go down every row, along the beautifully manicured lawns, through the ten grave plots, all in rows and columns. One grave contained the remains of General Theodore Roosevelt Jr., who had been Bob's Assistant Division Commander in North Africa and Sicily. A father and a son were also buried side-by-side; there were thirty-three pairs of brothers.

Each of the graves was marked with a headstone, a Star of David for those of Jewish faith; a Latin Cross for others. The headstones were perfectly aligned. All of America was represented here; everything that made us right when we invaded Normandy. By the time I walked through the last row, the pouch that held my uncle Bob's Purple Heart was soaked through with sweat. It had never left my clutched palm the entire time I was in the cemetery.

Before I departed, I went into the chapel to say a prayer for Bob. This site of peaceful worship lay in the middle of the graves, and was surrounded by stoic columns supporting its structure. My journal said, "I approached the entry and silently watched other solemn, moist-eyed people who came here for the same reason I did. I spoke quietly to a woman from Ohio who was leaving the chapel; she told me her father died on Omaha Beach. She said she never knew him, that she was only two years old when the war took him away."

When I entered the chapel I faced the black and gold marble altar before placing my uncle Bob's Purple Heart on it. Then I stepped back, expecting to whisper the prayer I wanted to say for him. I failed to murmur any words; I just couldn't. The inscription

in the center of the altar said it all for me: "I Give unto Them Eternal Life and They Shall Never Perish."

Then I left to go back to Cherbourg, still not knowing what the circumstances of my uncle Bob's death were.

The next three years flew by quickly. My research continued. I happened to be at the Military History Institute in Carlisle Pennsylvania in the fall of 1995 when I got a big break. I had spent the day digging through boxes of old records and oral histories, desperately searching for anything that mentioned my uncle Bob; nothing I found did. It was nearing the end of the day. I was tired, but I shared my dilemma with one of the research assistants, and this woman offered that I might try to write the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis again, but to address my request to the "Morning Report Branch." She said if I was lucky and they had the pertinent morning reports for my uncle Bob's Company H, there could be names of those who served with him at the time of his death.

For some reason I sat on this, believing I'd hit another wall, and by now I was tired of hitting walls. It took until April of the following year before I decided to contact Senator Dodd's office again. The same woman who had helped me the last time was still there, and she cheerfully offered to assist me again.

A letter went out to St. Louis, and another polite response first came back using the 1973 fire excuse again, but it offered "a further response will be furnished as soon as possible." It gave me little reason to believe finding the Morning Reports would happen.

Then something incredible did happen. I received in the mail from the senator's office in early May an "Authorization for Issuance of Awards." I hadn't requested this; it turned out Senator Dodd's assistant had taken it upon herself to get all of my uncle Bob's earned medals finally awarded. I was shocked, pleased beyond my wildest expectations, and encouraged something could

actually happen because typed in the REMARKS section were the words: EXPEDITE/CONGRESSIONAL INTEREST.

A box arrived just before Memorial Day, and it contained the Bronze Star my uncle Bob had earned for meritorious achievement in ground combat against an armed enemy on D-Day, his theater ribbons and medals, his Combat Infantry Badge, and Good Conduct Medal. There was also another Purple Heart.

I had them all put on a dark green background in a box-framed display case, and took it to my parent's home in Newtown early on Memorial Day to give to my father. He wasn't home when I arrived, but my mother suggested we hang the medals over the chair my father sat in on the porch, where he spent a lot of time reading, napping, or just drinking coffee in the morning and watching the birds come to the feeders outside the windows. Once we did this, I left to go back to Naugatuck so Mary Jane and I could carry on with our Memorial Day tradition of visiting grave sites.

It wasn't until later in the day when I called my mother to ask her if Pop had seen the medals.

"Yes, Bobby honey, he did."

"Did he say anything, Mom?

"No Bobby. He didn't."

Summer months go by fast in New England, but before the leaves started changing their colors that fall I heard from Senator Dodd's office again. "Enclosed is a copy of the material sent to me by the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis," the cover letter began. I read little more, quickly turned to the Center's letter and about fainted.

"Enclosed are copies of all available Morning Report entries from June through August 1944, for Company H 18th Infantry, pertaining to Pfc. Baummer being Missing in Action (MIA) and Killed in Action (KIA). We regret the photocopies are of poor quality; however, they are the best obtainable."

Actually, in bright light with a magnifying glass I was able to

create a reliable accounting of the company personnel who were not just missing or killed, but also wounded during June, July and August of 1944.

After hours of studying the Morning Reports it dawned on me that the only Company H soldier that had been wounded during the period and returned to the company roster was a Paul E. Stegall; this was recorded on July 25th. But how would I find him? Did Paul Stegall even survive the war? If he did was it possible he's already died?

I knew of only one way at the time to find out. I had the name of an Albert Jacobs who served in Company H; he was one of the few in the company who had a recorded oral history at the Carlisle Barracks. I had his address. Jacobs lived in Connellsville, Pennsylvania. I used directory assistance to get his telephone number, and called him. Albert Jacobs remembered my uncle Bob. "Knew him in North Africa," he told me. "He was a real nice fellow; he was a live wire, actually pretty comical."

I asked him if he knew how my uncle was killed in Normandy; he didn't. Did he know how I might find Paul Stegall? Jacobs remembered him too, but no, I don't know where he is, he told me.

The Internet was something I knew little to nothing about at the time. But I knew someone who did know enough about it to look up names, and retrieve what were the equivalent of the white pages in phone books anywhere in the country. She was Judy Clark, a cousin's wife. I gave her Paul Stegall's name, she did her research, and mailed me the list of results she found in January of 1997.

There were coincidently eight Paul Stegall's. But there was only one with the middle initial "E" and just looking at this gave me goose bumps. Could it be that Paul Stegall? His address was in Greenville, South Carolina.

I finally got the nerve up two days later to put together a letter introducing myself; it was brief, less than a page, and I asked Mr.

Stegall if he would kindly contact me if, by chance, he was the same Paul E. Stegall who was a casualty in Company H on June 9, 1944 in Normandy France. Before sealing the envelope, I put my uncle Bob's Purple Heart next to the letter for good luck, said a prayer, then I took the letter to the post office and mailed it.

February 5th of 1997 was an unusually mild day in New England. I happen to call my office for messages right after lunch. My secretary read them to me, and then added I had received what the last caller identified as a personal call. She told me he had told her to "tell Mr. Baumer I'm the man he was looking for," and he wanted you to know that "he remembered everything from 6/9/44. His name is Paul Stegall, here's his number, and he asked that you call him tonight."

When I called Paul Stegall that night, a soft female voice greeted me with, "Hello, we were hoping you would call. Please understand that my husband has never talked about the war, but he has been looking forward to talking with you. Hold on, I'll put him on."

I started the conversation by telling Mr. Stegall I owed him an explanation as to how I found him, and he said he was obviously curious about that. "It's a long story," I told him, "but ……"

Then he put me immediately at ease. "You'll have to forgive me," he quietly interrupted. "It has indeed been a long time, fifty-three years by my count, but I would like to tell you what I can about June 9th of 1944. First, know your uncle Bob was my best friend."

I just listened as Mr. Stegall continued to talk; I wrote down everything he said. His voice was steady, with a sweet Southern accent. I didn't know it then, but we were eventually going to become close friends.

Another two years passed, and one afternoon in March I came across a new web site that was published by the 18th Infantry Regiment Association. It had a "guest book," and I about fell off my chair when I saw that one of its more recently signed guests was a Robert E. Murphy, Colonel US Army-Retired.

An email went to the webmaster, a Vietnam-era veteran, and I asked him if this Murphy was *the* World War II Captain Robert E. Murphy, who commanded Company H. It indeed was, so I asked if I could contact him; the answer came back essentially telling me that Murphy would be notified, and if he "invited" such, I would be given his email address.

I was granted the invitation, and in one of the more carefully prepared emails I ever wrote, I told Colonel Murphy who I was, that I had a rough manuscript completed about my uncle's time under his command, and anything he might be able to recall about the circumstance of his death would be vastly appreciated.

An email came back from Colonel Murphy that very same day. Amazingly, he was able to describe the situation that brought about his order that got my uncle Bob's squad into the situation that resulted in his death.

To my surprise, Colonel Murphy asked me if I would be willing to send him a copy of the manuscript I had put together about my uncle Bob's war. Of course I would, I answered, even though it made me quite nervous wondering what he'd think of it. So off it went, and a few weeks later Murphy sent me a letter that started with, "You thought I would never get around to returning your document, didn't you?" Then he added, "I found it interesting and I might even say enlightening," closing with "I thought you did one whale of a job on your uncle's war effort. I believe he would have been very pleased."

Colonel Murphy also mentioned two other things. First, he had composed his personal history about the D-Day landings "up to the action in which your uncle was killed." Entitled "That Day," it was three typewritten pages long and rich with detail. Now I had more first hand accounts! Could it get any better than this?

Actually, it could. The other thing Colonel Murphy did was invite me to attend the Annual Dinner Reunion of the Combat Officers of the First Division, to be held that May in Washington.

Another enduring friendship was about to be formed.

Colonel Murphy eventually provided me with a treasure trove of documents he had saved from the war. He also pointed me to numerous new sources and even gave me personal war memoirs he had in his files of others who had served under him.

I was now confident I really had something more to write about, and I dared think I could march with my uncle Bob through his entire war. But where to start again, I wondered.

Mary Jane and I got together for lunch a few weeks later; it was the year before she died.

"Bobby," she said right after we had cake for dessert. "Your grandmother once told me about what she went through the night she heard about the Normandy Invasion. Would you like me to tell you about this?"

"Oh God yes, please do. Tell me what you remember."

PRELUDE TO WAR

~ONE~

IT WAS THE LONGEST NIGHT OF HER LIFE.

Viola Baummer, a short widow in her mid-forties, first wondered who it could be when her telephone rang. It was Monday June 5th of 1944, and an unusually humid evening in the gritty factory town of Naugatuck Connecticut. Every window was open in her well-kept two-story wood-frame house, built alongside a steep hill on Oak Street.

She had just finished eating warmed up leftovers from her Sunday dinner after another long day of toiling at the rubber plant down on Elm Street; she had been working here for the past ten years. But Viola was now on the line that made the woven mesh ventilating insoles for the Jungle boots American forces were wearing in the tropical environments of New Guinea and the Philippines. It made her work a bit easier knowing she was supporting the war effort.

The telephone kept up its short rings before she finally picked up its heavy black handset. It was her oldest son. This surprised her. They had talked the night before, as had been their custom every Sunday—her only day off—for years. His given name was Edwin, but everyone in the family had been calling him Sonny since he was a boy.

Sonny was working as an industrial engineer at the U.S. Rubber Company plant in Institute, West Virginia, a sprawling complex near Charleston where synthetic rubber was being manufactured to support the war effort.

After she said hello, Viola asked, "Sonny, we just talked yesterday. Are you alright? Did you hear from Bob?"

Bob was over in England in the Army, presumably getting ready for the invasion of mainland Europe.

"No, I haven't received any letters since the one I got a few days ago, the one where he told me he was still on good terms with some blonde English girl, and was seeing her every weekend he was off."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," Viola chuckled. "He's got an advantage over there with those British lassies, his Gram Nellie being from London and a Goddard before she married a Baummer. Bob's sure got Nellie's charm, doesn't he?"

"He always had girls after him since he was a teenager Mother," Sonny gently kidded back. "I did tell you I sent a letter back to him, didn't I? Told him about having been up to see you in mid-May, finally getting the storm windows down and cutting the grass and trimming the hedges. Let him know a lot of people around town were asking about him, especially Gram. Also said I would get a box off with some cigarettes, a lighter, cards, a pair of dice, razor blades and other stuff. Will be doing that tomorrow."

"I wonder if Bob's seen Mary Jane?" Viola questioned. Mary Jane, still "Little Ma-wee" to her family since she was Viola's youngest sister, had recently left Ft. Devens—just outside of Boston—for England. A nurse by training, she had been commissioned a second lieutenant that past April and was now in charge of the orthopedic ward in an Army hospital outside of London, one sure to be populated with American soldiers when the invasion came.

"I have no idea, Mother," Sonny said. Just ten years separated Sonny from Mary Jane so he thought of her more as a big sister than an aunt. "Talked to a couple of people who knew her when I was up in Naugatuck and they said she was sorely missed, but that the Army was sure lucky to have her."

"Everyone who knows her around here adores her spontaneous and pleasing personality," Viola added.

"By the way," Sonny offered in a now more serious voice. "Bob didn't say anything at all in that letter of his about the invasion, but I sense it's coming soon."

"Why do you think that, Sonny?" Viola asked, her interest piqued.

"I just have a feeling it'll go off sooner than later," Sonny answered. "I read somewhere that the military could time the attack around a full moon period, and we have one right now."

"Something tells me you could be right," Viola said in a low, resigned voice; she dreaded thoughts of the invasion. "And the First Division is likely to be in the thick of it. They were in the invasions of North Africa and Sicily for sure. They are the best division in the Army, you know."

"Yes, Mother, I know," Sonny agreed. "It's a fine outfit and I'm proud Bob serves with them."

Viola believed this because she kept a copy of a *Time* magazine on the cluttered coffee table in her living room, right next to other magazines and several pictures of Bob and Sonny taken when they were little boys. *Time's* cover in that August 1943 edition had a picture of Bob's commanding general on it, a dashingly handsome man named Terry Allen. Inside, she had underlined the words: "There has fallen a special mark on war and history; a mark reserved for front-line fighting men, and esteemed by them. It is a mark of the greatest division in being, and the first of their kind to be publically recognized in the U.S. Army of World War II."

The Big Red One, as the division had come to be called, had stormed the beaches in Sicily and fought its way up to the steep hillside town of Troina in late July of that year. Now the entire division was back in England preparing for the invasion of mainland Europe.

Viola worried constantly about where Bob was, and what he was doing now, just like every other mother with a son fighting in the war. It had been a long year and a half since Bob first shipped

out to England after training state-side, but every letter he had written to her since said not to worry about him, and that he could take care of himself when he had to.

"Mother, the real reason I called was I heard President Roosevelt was going to be on the radio tonight," Sonny said to his mother to get her attention again. "I wanted you to know in case he says something about the invasion."

"Thank you, Sonny," Viola answered while wiping perspiration off her forehead. "I'll turn the radio on now so I don't miss it. I've got to wash the dishes. I'm dead tired from work, but somehow I'll manage."

"Bye for now. We'll talk next Sunday."

~TWO~

VIOLA KEPT HER PROMISE, WENT into her living room, turned on her ten-year old but still well-working Philco Baby Grand radio to near full volume, and listened to the NBC broadcast while she finished washing her dinner dishes. It was just before eight o'clock; the sun hadn't even set. A warm breeze moved through the house, and she could hear some neighborhood kids still playing outside.

Viola was just starting to dry the dishes when she heard scratchy static coming out of her radio, then a solemn voice broke in with, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States." Suddenly Viola was glad Sonny had called; maybe there would be some news about the invasion. She darted for the living room, sat down on her well worn couch, stuffed a pillow behind her back, put her feet up on the coffee table, and stared at the radio.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his familiar patrician voice, one that Viola felt sounded as if the president was right there in her living room, started his address with some big news: "Yesterday, on June 4, 1944, Rome fell to American and Allied troops. The first of the Axis capitols is now in our hands." Then raising his voice ever so slightly, the president announced "One up, and two to go."

Viola knew that meant Japan and Germany still had to be defeated.

Following with a brief history of the city of Rome, emphasizing that there were still monuments there reminding everyone that Rome had controlled the whole known world in ancient times, Roosevelt made it clear to his listeners that the United Nations of

today were now restoring Italy's freedom—even to the Pope. The president then credited by country the Allied forces which had been struggling across the globe to stamp out Nazism and Imperial Japan.

But the invasion of Europe was all Viola, perspiring again, could really think about. She continued listening intently, hoping Roosevelt would say something about that.

Alternately raising and lowering his voice for dramatic effect, Roosevelt instead went on to explain Italy's last twenty-five years under the dictatorial rule of the scoundrel Mussolini, then followed by saying something that finally made Viola think the president was reading her mind: "Our victory comes at an excellent time, while our Allied forces are poised for another strike at Western Europe, and while the armies of other Nazi soldiers nervously await our assault."

There it was. Something about the invasion. All Viola could now think about was just when would this strike at Western Europe begin.

She, too, was suddenly nervous.

But nothing was said about when the invasion would begin. Roosevelt instead praised Russia for its efforts on the Eastern Front before describing in simple terms how strategic islands and bases in the Mediterranean had come under Allied control before Rome fell. "But it would be unwise to inflate in our own minds the military capture of the city of Rome," Roosevelt again cautioned, then further warned, "We shall have to push through a long period of greater effort, and fiercer fighting before we get into Germany itself."

Those words made Viola shutter, and Roosevelt had still not said anything about the invasion's timing.

The president went on and explained how the Germans had been forced to retreat from countries in Africa, and through Sicily and Southern Italy, "thousands of miles" toward Germany itself. "They have suffered heavy losses, but not great enough yet to

collapse." Then raising his voice ever so slightly, Roosevelt admonished, "Germany has not been driven yet to surrender. Germany has not been driven yet to the point where she will be unable to recommence world conquests a generation hence. Therefore, victory still lies some distance ahead."

Then, again without the slightest hint of any specific timetable, Roosevelt promised, "That distance will be covered in due time. Have no fear of that," adding the warning "but it will be tough and it will be costly."

But not to Bob. Viola whispered this as if she were now talking directly to the president.

A deafening silence followed after Roosevelt extended his congratulations to the Allied commanders who had led the fight for Italy's freedom, and to all their brave officers and men.

So ended the news about the fall of Rome.

Disappointed there had been absolutely no information about when the invasion of Western Europe would start, Viola decided to forego listening to the music that followed and instead go outside, walk off her anxiety, and get some fresh air before going to bed.