

THE HEART OF A SOLDIER

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This book is dedicated with much love and gratitude to my parents, George and Christine Donald. To Dad for his service and for writing these letters that gave me a small window into his life as an American soldier during World War II. And to my dear Mother, for saving these letters and wanting to share them with me. Together they left me a legacy of love, strength and bravery.

I also am thankful to my uncles for putting to paper their thoughts and experiences during the war. I have loved getting to know them a little better through their letters. Here's hoping that as I share these letters beyond our family, in Heaven, I wasn't just grounded for eternity by my parents. Although in my heart, I think my parents know that like them, I did it for love – for their love story and my love for them – and as a way to honor my father and mother...and all those who lived during World War II.

The Heart of a Soldier

**Letters from 1st Sergeant George Donald
of the “Super Sixth” Armored Division (1941-45)**

**Co-Written and Edited by his daughter
Eleanor D. Alspaugh**

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First, my sincere gratitude goes to my mentor and now dear friend, Retired United States Army Colonel, Military Historian and author David M. Glantz who graciously wrote the foreword to this book. Long before I ever darkened his doorstep, David excelled in both his military and author careers. In 2020, David was very deservedly honored when selected as the 14th recipient of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing. I always enjoyed and even teased David as the number of his completed books and projects increased as I continued to work on this one book! I sincerely thank David for all his time and willingness to become an incredibly encouraging mentor who provided wonderful suggestions and guidance as this book was initially drafted through its completion and beyond.

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my concept for this book. Without hesitation, Steve approached David about my project, opening the door for me to meet and discuss my vision for *The Heart of a Soldier* with David. Steve created our initial vision for a book cover, and later, helped me collaborate to blend our concept with the publisher's cover. He tirelessly (well, most of the time—xoxo!) scanned countless photos in the event we might use them. (Trust me, there may be many pictures in this book but truly there are many more that didn't make the cut! The consolation now being ready-made website materials!) I can never thank Steve or David enough for their encouragement, interest, and the support they both gave me.

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Thank you all for your time, assistance and encouragement as I worked on *The Heart of a Soldier*.

FOREWORD

CONSTRUCTED AROUND A NUCLEUS OF letters he wrote to his wife virtually every day, this is the tale of an American soldier, George Donald, who served in the United States Army during World War II. As a charter member of the so-called “greatest generation,” George was drafted into the U. S. Army in November 1941 and discharged in September 1945. During his nearly four years of continuous service, he trained in South Carolina, Louisiana, and California for more than two years, deployed to England with the 6th Armored Division in February 1944, landed in France in late July 1944, and, after joining General George C. Patton’s Third Army, fought in the 6th Armored Division until war’s end in May 1945. In short, after three years of individual and unit training, he saw combat for more than ten months in Europe before U. S. victory restored peace. Seriously wounded in combat once, George Donald rose in rank from private in November 1941 to platoon (Technical) Sergeant in late August 1944 and to the position of 1st Sergeant in an armored infantry company in one of the U.S. Army’s crack armored divisions in May 1945.

In an age when PTSD (post traumatic shock disorder), the modern equivalent of combat fatigue, dominates the post-service life of many more recent American combat veterans, the content of these letters provide vivid evidence indicating how and perhaps why U. S. Army servicemen who served during World War II endured years of absence from their families and months of heavy combat without suffering severe psychological damage other than a lingering guilt over their survival when so many others did not. The letters

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themselves are keenly personal messages from a man to his wife written within the constraints of stringent wartime censorship. As such, George carefully follows the censors' instructions to write nothing at all about the identity or location of his unit or the nature of combat he experienced. Instead, George provides interesting general information about his service life and poignant personal comments about his situation, morale, and love for those he left behind. In short, while obfuscating his combat experiences, George describes the circumstances and feelings that kept him going as he experienced the rigors of years of training and months of combat.

Although the real value of these letters rests in George's description of his daily life, feelings, and longings, the editor of this book, George's daughter Eleanor, has carefully researched the military experiences of her father's unit to provide essential context for these letters. This context includes details about the training program that transformed George from an untutored civilian draftee into a well-trained soldier and the combat he experienced while serving in Company A, 44th Armored Infantry Battalion of 6th Armored Division. Shifted periodically between 6th Armored Division's Combat Commands A, B, and Reserve, his armored infantry battalion took part in the pursuit of German forces across France during the breakout from the Normandy bridgehead from late August through September 1944, the heavy and often frustrating fighting in the Lorraine region of eastern France during October and November 1944, the division's dramatic northward turn to help rescue 82nd Airborne Division encircled in Bastogne by the attacking Germans during the battle of the Bulge in December 1944, and the thrust by General Patton's Third Army to and across the Rhine River into the heart of Hitler's Third Reich from January through May 1945. Using letters from other relatives

fighting in the Pacific theater, she forms a global mosaic within which her father fought and survived his war.

Without stealing this book's thunder, these letters clearly reveal the values that motivated him and preserved his ability to function, persevere, become a Silver Star recipient, and survive the ever-dangerous and challenging rigors of war. Foremost among these values were his love for his wife, family, fellow soldiers, and country and, most of all, faith in a God whose work he perceived he was pursuing. George displays these values repeatedly, simply, and honestly in virtually every one of his letters.

I will leave it to expert sociologists and psychologists to explain why soldiers such as George managed to serve "for the duration" without suffering lasting or even short-term psychological damage. What is clear is that many did so by enduring years of training and combat seemingly without end. It is also clear that this book is a primary source for further study of this matter. Whatever the explanation, I have no doubt but that the contents of these letters provide ample fodder for pondering or even answering that question. This book is a must-read for veterans and their families and anyone else who ponder the nature and effects of long-term military service on the American soldier.

—*David M. Glantz*
Ret. Colonel, U.S. Army and Military Historian
Carlisle, PA

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INTRODUCTION

Searching the Heart

AS LONG AS I CAN remember, there was an old panoramic-style photograph that hung above my parents' bed, stretching what seemed then to be almost the length of their bedroom wall. It held a place of honor through more than 50 years of marriage and remained in that spot for the rest of both of their lives. But it was not a photograph of some exotic honeymoon location, or a beautiful beach scene stretching from one end of the frame to the other. No, in my parents' world, it was a part of my father's past when he eventually was known as 1st Sergeant George Donald. Caught in a moment of time were the faces of many of the men who served alongside my Dad. It was a photo that was taken at the beginning of their training, at a point where they had little inkling of where they would go together, what they would experience, and, sadly, who would be one of the lucky ones to eventually return home.

Although not a soldier myself, I believe there is an undeniably strong bond that exists between soldiers. I suspect it even extends beyond those they knew or with whom they served. In my Dad's case, this photo held the faces of friends to whom he never wanted to say goodbye,

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especially during battle. One of the few times he spoke about the war, he painfully recalled a close friend who died in battle right beside him. It was one of the very rare moments I saw tears in his eyes. World War II, in general, was something he rarely spoke of in civilian life. When he did, the memories and emotions proved overwhelming. We did not ask much about the war for that reason. Nevertheless, the ghosts of his past would eventually reappear as his Alzheimer's progressed. My mother once told me how he seemed transported back to the fields of Germany as they drove home on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The woods along the road put him back on the battlefield again, and the anxiety and readiness he experienced was enough to end his trips to visit us.

As proud as I am to be my father's daughter, I confess that I sometimes feel like I have spent my life being too busy to even acknowledge it. First, so busy as a child, at least in my eyes, then as a student, progressing to a working adult, and eventually as a parent myself.

Somehow through a lifetime, I had taken for granted or simply given too little thought to the influence my parents had on my life, my values, my goals. I also confess that for many years I gave very little thought to what occurred in their lives before our home and family came along. And then it happened. While out in the big, sometimes bad world, I looked back. I saw an intact home and family with loving parents, something that still exists but is no longer a given. I knew I was happy then, but in those days, I simply assumed every home was like that. I know now that is not the case. My parents were never rich but through perseverance, they bought a home, offered college to each of their children, and in my case, paid for it entirely by themselves. They helped their children as they each started out their adult lives, and were truly, loving and supportive parents until they were

gone. To me, they had always been there, Mom and Dad. I loved them, but like most kids, I had things to do, places to go, friends to be with, and I thought they would always be there.

Grief has a funny way of turning back the pages of your life. Perhaps it was the loss of my mother and with that, the loss of sharing our love and memories of my father that drove me to his letters. My mother told me she had saved them. She had even suggested I read some but usually I was just too busy chasing a toddler or catching up with her to take time out to read while we were together. Then, ready or not, my parents were gone, first him, then her. And once again, my father's letters written to my mom while he was away, serving his country during World War II, were found. At the time, I started reading them to feel closer to my parents now that that was no longer physically possible. I knew Mom had done so occasionally after my Dad passed on. Now it was my turn.

So caught up in my own whirling state of working mother "busyness," this wife, mother, Assistant Vice President, and yes, daughter, really had not fully realized just how much I valued and still counted on our chats, our visits, our family times together. I would like to think my mother understood since she lived the working-mother role herself. So even though I thought I knew "Mom and Dad," reading the letters opened up another lifetime to me, one that shared their hopes, their dreams, their life before marriage, before children, and before their own state of life's busyness that had all but hidden their years of separation during World War II. Now, with them both gone, every little thing that was a part of them meant something to me. What appeared on the outside to be nothing but a tattered old brown bag filled with some dusty old letters, something most people probably would have tossed without giving it a second thought,

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opened up a legacy to me of my father's time away and my parents' love at its beginning. The letters became my own private lifeline, restoring the cherished link I felt had been lost once they both had passed on.

Despite what these letters may reflect, my father really was a quiet man, taking a quiet "behind the scenes" role in our family's life. Perhaps when you are finally in the life you have been longing for, you really do not feel the need to speak or write about it anymore, even to your own family. Regardless, Dad loved with his actions and quietly went about life as a hardworking family man. He routinely made sure cars were cared for, worked 12-hour days 6 days a week and sometimes more to provide for us, shoveled snow, mowed lawns, and like many dads, moms and even his own daughter, kept his own long, busy days, yet I do not recall him ever complaining. Maybe like his service time, he knew he had a job to do, raising and supporting his family, and he simply did it with no regrets, and no whining... He was a man's man and by that, I mean he got the job done, regardless of what the job was at any given moment. That kind of dependability reflected throughout his life, in his service to his country (Exhibit A: Awarded the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart), his employers, and always to his family. For all the "I love you's" written in these letters, all the devotion proclaimed, when he returned to civilian life, his love for the most part was demonstrated without words, but by actions. I don't recall him saying he loved me, but I have no doubt that he did, as a child and later as an adult. I do recall my mom asking him now and then if he still loved her and he always had the same answer. He would smile, kind of laugh as if a little embarrassed, and say, "I'm still here, aren't I?" I think that may be how many men demonstrate their love, maybe without their own words (unless aided a little by Hallmark), but always with their

deeds. My dad treated my mother and I as if she were the queen and I, their princess, caring for us in big and small ways, quietly without our even needing to ask. I guess it really does pay to be the youngest and the only daughter. He may not have been too talkative like his wife and daughter, but for the first time, through his letters, I was getting to know the man behind “the Dad.” His hopes, his dreams meshed with things I had known about all my life, his role in the war, the courage he must have had, all seemed to come alive to me. He was not just Dad anymore, and it means so much to finally understand a little more about the heart of this soldier and the day to day life my father and many other soldiers lead. My father’s letters let me see a part of his life that he rarely spoke of to his children. It was in his past and he rarely looked back beyond the reunions of his division, known as the ‘Super Sixth.’

So you may be wondering why I would share these letters beyond my immediate family. I have debated with myself that very question. To me, the letters are enlightening on several levels, including understanding the time period during which they were written and in understanding a World War II soldier’s daily life. They may even be applicable to a soldier’s life and heart today. For example, if there is ever any doubt in a young woman’s heart of the love of her soldier, the letters reveal how their every off-duty thought is of their loved ones. Clearly soldiers are grounded, encouraged, lifted up by that one special love and the love of their family and friends. They live and die by the letter. Translate that today to phone calls, email, Skype, texting, if possible, etc. Silence is not golden to a soldier stationed away from their loved ones. From my father’s and a few of my uncles’ letters, I can see that they are truly driven, motivated and in some cases, are determined to survive, for the love of those they left behind and to whom they long to return.

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The letters also reflect the mixed emotions which a soldier experiences, from sense of duty and determination to feelings of boredom, monotony and loneliness that a soldier can experience while away training, deployed, etc. They find themselves doing the same things over and over, and hoping for a break, better yet a furlough. It was surprising to me to realize that in some cases, at least during World War II, the food gifts that had been sent as a gift or only to supplement actually provided meals for a group of soldiers where, otherwise, one would not have existed. It also gave me a perspective as I realized that unlike my own childhood (and dare I admit, adult life?) whining which might be heard if we ran out of milk, bread, etc. which could so easily be rectified, differed greatly from a soldier's perspective. In their case, even the condition of the food they received really did not seem to matter much. They adapted and made the best of things.

During World War II, even money sent to a soldier was used to buy necessities such as a bed roll to keep that soldier warm, that is, IF there was somewhere nearby to purchase items (another one of those things we often take for granted). I do not suppose the mountains of Afghanistan have all the amenities that we enjoy on a regular basis either. It is eye opening to realize what soldiers experience while in training or on active duty. It gave me personal perspective on the blessings I enjoy on a daily basis, food (absent a layer of mold), a roof over my head (no fear of it being blown away by a sandstorm), not to mention the availability of a shower whenever it is desired, not ten days or a month from now – if I am lucky! And I do not have to walk numerous miles just to take that shower either! It's certainly the little things that mean a lot and often those are just the things a soldier may be doing without!

So with that said, I think we can all benefit by understanding

the sacrifices that have been and continue to be made for us, not just by my dad many years ago, but timelessly by our soldiers in general and to understand what a day in their lives times four or more years of service can be like for a soldier.

Then, finally tucked within these letters, is a beautiful love story. I know if my parents were alive today, I would not be sharing these letters, but truly, these letters profess a love that should not be lost or forgotten. Within the letters, my father insists he is not much of a writer, but I think I may have to disagree. Their devotion to one another, their hopes and dreams for their future make this one incredible love story which was perhaps sealed on their first date to the 1940 World's Fair. I know in my heart, especially after reading these letters, that this love they shared continues to this day and will last forever, just as he professed so many times in these letters written so many years ago.

I know I will never fully comprehend all that my dad lived through during World War II, but I know he lived through things that were far more trying, more difficult than anything I will likely experience in life. Knowing that actually helped me face some difficult times, like labor for one, no, make it three times. Knowing the trials that my father experienced on the battlefield and during his time away was a true reality check. Surviving labor pain for what would surely be less than 24 hours certainly shrank in comparison with my father's experiences. Frankly, what I knew of his service only made me stronger in approaching something that would be so brief in the overall scheme of my life and end with the blessing of a new life. Actually, if you think about it, both my brief labor and Dad's long one ended with the start of a new life. In my case, a new baby to love; in my dad's, the chance to start his married life with my mother.

As I read my father's letters, I also had a new-found interest

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in understanding the events of World War II as the letters were being written. With that in mind, it's also appropriate to share some true confessions from this author. I am a non-historian (gasp!), and frankly, was a less than an A student when it came to high school history. I seem to recall more note passing than note taking going on in American History 101. I must also confess that researching the history of World War II to better understand the timeline, the United States involvement and my father and his division's role was, to say the least, extremely eye opening, enough to cause some sleepless nights. While doing my research, I also took a hard look at my attention span in high school and thought seriously, "What happened?" How did I simply dismiss all of this once the test was done? A world war that involved so many countries and took the lives of more than 60 million people!¹ Certainly not one of my finest moments as a teen and not an approach I would recommend. So, let us just view this as my second chance at retaining at least some of the World War II chapters taught in American History 101.

CHAPTER 1

Context and a Chronology

Just Around the World's Corner...

TRULY, YOU NEVER REALLY KNOW when something is going to happen that will eventually have a tremendous impact on your life. That applies even more so when that something is happening very far away. Call this the understatement of the war but Hitler's plans and actions would stretch far beyond Germany and its people. Although unfolding more than an ocean away from my parents, who were then just children growing up in a faraway neutral country, Hitler's actions would eventually escalate to affect so many people's lives, near and far, and the lives of their loved ones; with little regard to one's nationality or neutrality. Although he seemed to wear a mask for the benefit of the youth of Germany, Hitler's lack of respect for life even extended to the lives of German children. Through the education system and exposure to abuse of Jewish students and in the early years, the Nazi "outreach" to children volunteering to be part of clubs, he reached into their souls to propagate hatred and prejudice towards the Jewish people. They were also taught

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drills to prepare for the day that they too would defend Hitler's vision for a superior Third Reich of Germany. This was further supported by the law established in December, 1936 that forced the German boys to join "Hitler's Youth," which was overseen by and reported directly to Hitler and the youth leaders. Eventually he would even call on children to be soldiers. To do my best to cause Hitler to roll over in his grave or at least have his keeper turn up the heat a bit in his final resting place, I will add that both German and Jewish children, and so many others, seemed so easily disposable to Hitler. Instead of living the lives of children, the German children were candidates for brainwashing as well as trainees for future military service. In 1938, it was documented in a Reich report that Hitler Youth were assisting the SA (*Sturmabteilung*-Storm Troopers) and SS (*Schutzstaffel*) militia and Nazi party officials in carrying out directed political attacks. Eventually Hitler's Youth "graduates," some just teenagers, would serve as a feed for Camp SS, the guard training camps, where they received a safe taste of war, complete with training, before this war had even started.² There would be no age discrimination when it came to those who would pay the ultimate price for Hitler's narcissistic dreams or his perspectives and eventual directives which supported the contempt he held towards anyone outside his definition of Germany's proclaimed master race.

My father, George Donald, was born December 20, 1914 in Glasgow, Scotland. An only child, in July 1920, he immigrated with his parents to the United States. Although the exact reason was never shared with me, I do know others in their family also emigrated from Europe. Following World War I which ended in 1918, the strength of traditional industries in Scotland declined significantly. Industries such as the fishing, coal and steel industries were significantly impacted. Scotland's employment opportunities in the shipbuilding industry declined 50 percent by 1925 and by

1930, had plummeted by a total of 90 percent. Between the start of World War I and 1930, the number of automobile companies located in Scotland dropped from seven existing companies to just one lone company. The resulting unemployment from these declines inspired 400,000 Scots to emigrate beyond Scotland's southern border.³ Certainly, this downward turn in the economy may have spurred the Donalds to look beyond Scotland for better opportunities and their own new beginning. I was told that it was with just the flip of a coin, that they chose the United States, quite a bit further than Scotland's southern border. However, having already served in the Royal Air Force (RAF) during World War I, perhaps my grandfather (and grandmother) also did not like the rumblings going on in Europe following the end of World War I. Adolf Hitler resented the demilitarization of Germany and was already making plans to restore Germany to its pre-war status or better, not to mention his plans for his own glorification.⁴

* * * *



Robert, Alice and
George Donald,
circa 1918.

On November 24, 1923, my mother, Christine Eleanor Jones, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Christine was the youngest of nine and was raised in North Willow Grove or NWG as my Dad would later refer to it in his letters. Before she was born, Hitler was already known as the *Führer* (meaning 'The Leader') and had started dabbling with his plans to overthrow governments. His first attempt directed at the German Bavarian government failed. As my mother turned just four months old, Hitler was found guilty of treason and

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was imprisoned in a German prison, but only remained incarcerated for less than a year of the five-year sentence. During his brief prison stay, Hitler managed to spend his time contemplating his plans for Germany's future. It was there that he rambled away in writing his first volume of his memoir, *Mein Kampf*, which translates to "My Struggle." Having written an entire book while imprisoned, the world might have benefited had he experienced less free time and more hard labor.⁵ Notably in years ahead, he certainly would not be one to spare others a sentence of hard labor and regrettably far worse. Death was often what he served to his prisoners.

Before Mom was a year-and-a-half old, Hitler was released and Germany's SS was formed, first serving as Hitler's bodyguards and eventually as Germany's militia. He managed to go from being imprisoned to having bodyguards for his own protection in a very short time.⁶ He certainly had a way of working the system to his favor.

Christine's older brothers also served during World War II. Robert or Reds, as he was known, was born on May 30, 1921 and Havard, also known as Hass, was born September 20, 1922. Both were also born in Philadelphia. My uncle, Ward Heckler, married to mom's sister Grace, also served. I have included several of their letters in this book. As the war ended, mom's brother Howard, born January 20, 1920 also in Philadelphia, was also called to serve. Like so many families, World War II was a family affair.

By the time the depression hit in 1929, my father had no choice but to drop out of high school in 11th grade and help support his family. While my dad was working and my mom playing with dolls, the Nazi Party was gaining power in Germany, a power that would eventually impact their lives and love greatly. By 1933, Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany and was actively looking to "expand their living



My parents Christine Eleanor Jones and George Donald, both about six years old.

space.”⁷ The Nazis were having a booming year. They took over local government and created their own secret police, known as the *Gestapo*.⁸ I suppose it made Hitler’s life easier to stay on the right side of the law when you have the police and local government safely in your back pocket.

Perhaps in an effort to stay warm during those cold winters, the Nazis took up book burning, burning at least 20,000 books that apparently did not sufficiently hail Hitler and Germany and, therefore, were considered worthless. Also, no longer a favorite, printing of the Bible ceased and church copies were replaced with Hitler’s ever popular memoir entitled *Mein Kampf*. I have a feeling that many Bibles ultimately cast quite a glow on Germany in the 1930’s.⁹ Germany then chose to withdraw from the League of Nations. I suppose Hitler realized that you cannot steal your neighbors’ land and expect to remain friends. Thus,

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Germany decided to “politely excuse” themselves (OK, flat out withdrew) from the constraints and influences of the League of Nations.¹⁰ Hitler was sweet dreaming of Germany’s expansion beyond the confines placed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles.¹¹ Step by step, those opposing Hitler’s plans were removed at any price. With a slight variance, imagine the background music to be, “It’s my party, you can cry if you want to,” as Germany eliminated all political parties, with the exception of course of his favorite Nazi Party. Following the death of Germany’s President Hindenburg, Hitler (apparently being his own Human Resource advocate) created a new and improved job description for himself. Being Chancellor already, he conveniently combined his current job with the wearing of the hat of the late German President, resulting in a nice little promotion in August 1934.¹² The job qualifications had been met. Hitler liked what he saw in the mirror, a new leader for his “master race,” and accepted the position. It was the 1930’s and regardless of the obstacles or price, Hitler was determined to expand his German living space not to mention the level of worship flowing in his direction.¹³

To bring us up time-wise to the start of my father’s letters and refresh my memory and maybe even yours, here are some additional highlights from the World War II timeline. Let us call it Hitler’s “Been there, Done that” list. Brace yourself for the evil and please forgive my Hitler-directed sarcasm. Maybe if I had taken notes this way in high school, I might have retained more of this *or* maybe the truth is, this really was all too evil to hear and retain past a high school exam, at least in this once happy-go-lucky teenager’s world.

A Chronology on the Road to War

March 21, 1933: Oranienburg concentration camp, located near Hitler’s beloved Berlin, was opened and more followed.

From the start, abusive treatment, inhumane living conditions, and improper and basically inedible nourishment were the norm for the prisoners. Words cannot begin to express what this prototype will mean for so many but statistics indicate that during the course of the war, approximately 1.7 million prisoners died in these camps.¹⁴ Overall, the Nazi mass murders of Jews is estimated to have cost the lives of approximately 6 million individuals.¹⁵

March 23, 1933: Courtesy of the Enabling Act, Hitler was empowered to make laws without having to ask permission.¹⁶ A dictator was born.

April 1, 1933: Efforts to break a people down with impoverishment began with the Nazi boycott of Jewish stores. Imagine living in a country where you no longer have a means to support yourself or your family.¹⁷

May 2, 1933: Hitler banished unions and the German workers' right to strike.¹⁸

June 30, 1934: Aware that members of the SA leadership were plotting to interfere with Hitler's plans, the Nazi Party murdered approximately 200 persons, primarily Hitler's old pals, the party leaders of the Storm Troopers SA since they supported continuation of National Socialism (Not the Nazi's cup of tea). Referred to as "The Night of the Long Knives," the SS eliminated many of the key SA leadership and had no problem in taking out some innocent people who happened to get in their way.¹⁹

July 25, 1934: Less than a month later, another murder, this time, Chancellor Dollfuss of Austria as Hitler laid the groundwork to move into Austria.²⁰

August 19, 1934: As previously mentioned, following the death of German President Hindenburg on August 2, Hitler, wearing both the Chancellor and President's hats, became Germany's one and only empowered Führer.²¹

October 1, 1934: Hitler authorized establishment of an air force, called the *Luftwaffe*, and in doing so, broke the post-World War I Versailles Treaty.²²

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March, 1935: Hitler let the world know that his Army was expanding.²³ I suspect this was one of those times I mentioned when people really had no idea of where this was going and how greatly this would impact the world.

September 15, 1935: The Nuremburg Laws redefined German citizenship. Jews were no longer part of the Third Reich (*Reich* defined means “Empire”). Germany had, in effect, legalized discrimination against the Jews.²⁴

October 3, 1935: Germany was not alone in its desire for more space. Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia taking the first steps to control North Africa.²⁵

October 18, 1935: The Nuremburg Laws stated that Jews and Aryans (the non-Jewish Caucasians) could no longer associate with or marry one another. In those days, it was no longer just your parents monitoring who you were dating.

November 14, 1935: The Nuremburg Laws extended the ban on marriage to those of German descent (or any sexual relations which might produce offspring that did not meet Hitler’s dream for a German master race) to include gypsies, blacks and their children.²⁶

February 10, 1936: The Gestapo received its own taste of “freedom,” having been set free from any constraints set by Germany’s laws.²⁷

March 7, 1936: Hitler sent troops to reoccupy Germany’s own Rhineland, which shared borders with countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg. It was an area that had been demilitarized in 1919. This was another breach of the Versailles Treaty.²⁸

October 25, 1936: Perhaps, feeling somewhat misunderstood, Germany and Italy decided it might not be such a bad idea to have at least one country that understands your honest desires for peace yet expansion in Europe and the Mediterranean. Thus, they established an Axis alliance

between their two countries, perhaps something England and France did not fully understand or appreciate.²⁹

July 7, 1937: Not to be left out, Japan invaded China. By December 13, Nanking, the capital of China, was captured. Over the next two weeks, it was a free for all with not only significant destruction to the city, but more than 200,000 innocent civilians murdered. If that was not enough, they also raped and murdered approximately 20,000 females. It was known as the “Rape of Nanking.”³⁰

November 5, 1937: Hitler shared plans for war at a German conference and documented it in the Hossbach Memorandum. His justification for war sounded more like a confession. It was Germany’s own inability to be self-sufficient. Adding a little more positive Hitler spin to that act, he explained that more living space was needed for the German people and that German needs superseded that of other lesser people.³¹ Perhaps Hitler felt that the rest of the world found no objections with that thought process.

March 14, 1938: Germany “peacefully annexed” Austria, whether the Austrians wanted it or not. Hitler forced Austria’s Chancellor, Dr. Kurt Von Schuschnigg, to resign to also force the way for a new Austrian Chancellor Seyss-Inquart, a Nazi, who was naturally open to the Nazis and their military.³² German expansion was underway.

September 30, 1938: The Munich Agreement served as a bone thrown to Germany by Great Britain and France to try to keep the peace. Germany was given some of Czechoslovakia (the Sudetenland region).³³

November 9, 1938: Referred to as “The Night of the Broken Glass,” the Nazis attacked and destroyed thousands of Jewish shops and synagogues and about 30,000 Jewish citizens were sent to concentration camps and/or killed. Later, the Nazis blamed the Jewish people for the destruction.³⁴ (Certainly this type of violent behavior could not be a reflection of the

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nature of Hitler or the growing Nazi Party, at least not in their eyes...)

Early 1939: Italians, followed by German scientists, discovered and experimented with the power in splitting a uranium atom. Scientists Albert Einstein and Enrico Fermi, who had fled persecution of the Nazis and Fascist Italy, were concerned how Germany would use this new power. They expressed their concerns in a letter to President Roosevelt and other U.S. officials. President Roosevelt, while establishing an advisory committee, did not share their concerns for prompt action (so much for presidential intuition at that moment) but the United States did begin to explore this technology.³⁵

March 15, 1939: Forget the Munich Agreement, one short year later, apparently the Sudetenland region was simply not enough; thus, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. Britain watched, but went on record two weeks later warning that if Germany “moved” into Poland, they would come to Poland’s rescue.³⁶

August 23, 1939: The Nazi-Soviet Pact was established, a secret pact to split Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.³⁷ Three guesses where they planned to “move” next.



Newspaper headline from the *Harrisburg Telegraph*. (Image courtesy of *Williamstown American Legion Post 239*)

September 1, 1939: The start of a successful invasion of Poland. Germany made an unwelcome entrance into Poland's northern, western, and southern borders. Hitler believed that Britain and France would not come to Poland's aid as they had promised. (I guess he thought since he failed to keep his pacts, why would they?) He was wrong. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany.³⁸

September 3, 1939: Britain and France declared war on Germany, the Allies blockaded Germany, and Germany willingly returned the favor. It was the beginning of the longest campaign of the war, known as the Battle of the Atlantic. It would last until Germany's defeat in May, 1945.³⁹

September 17, 1939: As if Poland did not have enough problems, the Soviet Union's Red Army invaded the country from the east. Poland was faced with invaders on all sides closing in fast.

September 28, 1939: Following the desperate efforts of their outdated military to repel the double invasion, Poland's Armed Forces began to surrender. If we are to learn from history, then perhaps there is something to be said in having a strong defense. In Poland's case, by October 5, it was all over. Poland had completely surrendered.⁴⁰ However, Poland's concession certainly came as no surprise to the Nazis. They were so confident in the anticipated outcome with Poland that they did not wait for Poland to surrender before they began divvying it up. On September 22, before the country of Poland was even "cold," the Nazis released a previously agreed upon section of Poland, the Brest-Litovsk area, to the Soviet Union.⁴¹ Now that showed confidence! By October 6, 50,000 Polish soldiers had been killed and 750,000 were taken captive. Over six years of occupation, approximately 5.5 million Polish civilians, including Holocaust victims, would fall victim to the Nazis.⁴² The Nazis began their efforts to trim down the Polish population with

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a killing spree targeting the upper and middle classes, including those in the fields of government, education, journalism, and those who might band together to lead an uprising of the Polish people. To avoid the possibility that the Poles might rise up and oppose the invasion, they even arrested and imprisoned priests.⁴³ No one was safe.

October, 1939: Hitler implemented a secret diabolical plan to eliminate the sick and disabled of Germany through medical euthanasia. No one was spared, including newborns and small children with birth defects or who had developed illnesses to older youths and adults who were physically or mentally ill. While most were snuffed out quickly, there were also some who were elderly and in need of assistance who were taken away then starved to death. Perhaps this was Hitler's means of cutting costs by both reducing food and chemical expenditures?

Regardless of his methodology or madness, Hitler thought nothing of emptying the hospitals and nursing facilities to rid his precious Germany of these imperfect or simply aged souls. With the help of the SS and even the medical profession, the "chosen" would be eliminated as a part of his plan to create a "German master race," perfectly free of flaws. Once people became aware of the reasons for these 'hospital' transfers, there were Germans who rioted to stop and prevent such cruelty. However, despite the efforts by family, professional caregivers, and clergy to prevent the murder of these innocent people, over 100,000 succumbed to his twisted plans by August, 1941. In light of the German people's reaction to Hitler's maniacal plans, Hitler did tone down, to some degree, the euthanizing of German citizens, but perhaps it was simply because he had other victims in mind too. For instance, there was that bothersome population living in Poland that he wanted to eliminate from Europe.⁴⁴ A part of Hitler seemed determined to find a way to satisfy cravings to commit mass murder. Thus,

a façade of assistance was presented when relocating the Jews to a promised new haven which in reality led them to their deaths or a life of slavery and abuse. For others that posed a threat to his plans, or that were simply considered undesirable, guilt was proclaimed which gave the Nazi's their desired justification for arresting the accused and sending them to a life of maltreatment and often their demise in the then growing number of concentration camps. In reality, I think it bears repeating, there really was no one who could feel safe residing in or near Germany. I think the esteemed German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel might even have supported me on that statement, if he himself had lived through Hitler's reign.

Fall, 1939: Speaking of not having a strong defense, the United States Army consisted of only a little less than 200,000 soldiers.⁴⁵ Although unprepared for war, eventually we would be...

November 30, 1939: Just imagine trying to remain neutral in a world gone mad. Meet the Finns. Although they had no desire to sell part of their country, sections had become desirable real estate since it was viewed as somewhat of an open door for Germany to "visit" their dear Soviet friends (OK, barge in, invade, take over, etc., it obviously all meant basically the same thing to Hitler). However, despite the fact that the Finns turned down the Soviet's offer, the Soviet Union overrode that decision since the Soviets perceived the area to be an escaped section of the former Russian Empire. In response, the League of Nations showed the Soviets the door.⁴⁶

April 9, 1940: Germany "moved into" Denmark and Norway.⁴⁷ There goes the neighborhood...as it once was.

May 10, 1940: Germany continued its "expansion plans" by invading the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France.⁴⁸

May 15, May 28, June 10, 1940: The Netherlands, Belgium and Norway respectively succumbed to the Nazi

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invasion.⁴⁹ I am certain that many wondered and feared that there was no stopping the Germans.

June 3, 1940: Germany not only decided to “visit” Paris, they also invaded France and bombed the city.⁵⁰

June 10, 1940: Italy jumped on Hitler’s bandwagon by declaring war on France and Britain.⁵¹

June 14, 1940: Germany captured Paris by military force. Just eight days later, an armistice was signed on June 22, 1940 and the Nazi occupation of France would continue for four years.⁵² Countries seemed to fall like children’s building blocks to Nazi Germany. Obviously, we were not the only ones who were unprepared for this kind of aggression.

July 1, 1940: As part of the Battle of the Atlantic, merchant ships, even those unarmed, as well as battleships and aircraft carriers became victims of German U-boats in 1939 and 1940 and shipping losses increased greatly as of July, 1940.⁵³

August 10, 1940: Germany made use of that Luftwaffe they had been building and began the Battle of Britain for airspace over Britain. Having watched the Nazis attack and succeed in invading France, it was Britain’s turn to feel the sting of German bombings. Eventually Britain’s Royal Air Force (RAF) prevailed and prevented a ground invasion but not before the London Blitz (bombing) began on September 7, 1940. The bombings continued through May 16, 1941 ending only to enable Hitler to shift Germany’s air resources in anticipation of a larger undertaking, Russia.⁵⁴ (Remember when Germany and Russia were pals divvying up Poland in 1939? Time certainly had changed that relationship.)

September 7, 1940: London faced intense air raids. Every night from September 7 until November 3, they were bombed by an average of 250 planes, but London was not the only target. Germany also bombed other cities, such as Coventry, Southampton, Liverpool and more.⁵⁵

September 13, 1940: Italian dictator Benito Mussolini

decided to do a little expanding of his own. He eyed Egypt, which was a British colony.⁵⁶

September 16, 1940: U.S. neutrality began slipping away. For the first time in U.S. history, legislation was signed by President Roosevelt enacting a peacetime military draft, which affected men ages 21 through 45. Say “hello” to the Selective Training and Service Act (STSA).⁵⁷

September 27, 1940: Axis Club membership was opened and Japan made their membership official. Known as the Tripartite Pact, it was created under the guise of pursuing “world peace.” Although Germany had already shown aggression to the U.S. in the Battle of the Atlantic, this little agreement perhaps sealed Germany and Italy’s decision to make their declaration of war official against the U.S. once Japan “visited” Pearl Harbor. Of course, they may have felt there was some safety in numbers. Odds of three against one must have sounded pretty good, or so they thought.

October, 1940: The Nazis basically imprisoned more than 400,000 Jews within a 1.3 square mile area known as the Warsaw Ghetto. Their food was harshly restricted as the Nazis begin what you might call their own “natural” Final Solution. The victims were limited to 4 ounces of bread a day. The exception was made for children. They received no rations of their own. If they were orphaned, their only hope was to beg or steal and many died. With rampant malnutrition and starvation occurring as a result of the Warsaw inhumane conditions, approximately 5,500 Jews died monthly as of August, 1941.⁵⁸

October 7, 1940: Seems like they never had enough, so Germany invaded Rumania. By November 20 and 23, 1940: Rumania and Hungary were “convinced” to join the Axis alliance.⁵⁹

November 14-15, 1940: Germany continued to bomb Britain, this time targeting Coventry. The Germans destroyed about 60,000 buildings, most of which were residential. A

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historic church was also destroyed and 1,419 were killed or wounded.⁶⁰ Imagine coming home from work and finding the neighborhood gone, your home included.

November 15, 1940: The Nazis sealed the Warsaw Ghetto with a high wall and made it known that Jews would be shot on sight if they left the area.⁶¹ Nothing like building a prison around the “neighborhood” they forced you to live in.

December 9, 1940: Despite facing more than twice their own forces, British and Indian troops successfully launched an offense against the Italians in Egypt. Initially, 4,000 Italian soldiers surrendered and by the third day, they had captured almost 40,000 Italian soldiers complete with tanks and significant artillery.⁶²

December 29, 1940: Extensive bombing continued in London, again Germany’s target. In December, 1940 alone, 3,793 British citizens were killed and another 5,244 wounded.⁶³

February 12, 1941: German troops landed in Tripoli, North Africa, with the “Desert Fox,” Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, leading the way.⁶⁴ Where the Italians failed, Hitler was determined to succeed.

March 11, 1941: The U.S. took another step with the presidential signing of the Lend-Lease Act, which released military supplies and equipment on credit to the Allied countries.⁶⁵ Once signed, President Roosevelt declared, “This decision is the end of any attempt at appeasement in our land; the end of urging us to get along with the dictators; the end of compromise with tyranny and the forces of oppression.” Perhaps while gritting his teeth, Hitler accepted the existence of the act without retribution, having little desire at the time to create an issue leading to a U.S. declaration of war which might foil his ambitious plans.⁶⁶

April 6, 1941: Germany continued to “expand,” this time into Yugoslavia and Greece.⁶⁷

April 14, 1941: Germany's forces attacked the Libyan port city of Tobruk.⁶⁸

April 14 and 27, 1941: Two more "blocks" fell to the Nazis in a matter of weeks, Yugoslavia and Greece.⁶⁹

May 1, 1941: In a refreshing turn of events, the Germans failed in their efforts to take Tobruk in Libya.⁷⁰

May 10-11, 1941: Although after this bombing there was a brief reprieve from the attacks on London for about ten weeks, Germany still did their best to leave Britain with a resounding bang. This time in the form of 1,436 killed, another 1,792 wounded and attacks made on the House of Commons and Westminster Abbey, just to name a couple.⁷¹

May 24, 1941: Germany's battleship, the *Bismarck*, attacked the British ship, the *Hood*. Despite putting up quite a battle, once mortally hit, the *Hood* sank in just 4 quick minutes, leaving only 3 survivors from a crew of 1,419. On May 27th, the *Bismarck* was tracked down and the British Navy wasted no time in sinking it. Of the *Bismarck's* crew of 2,000, only 110 survived.⁷²

June 14, 1941: The United States hit the Axis where it hurts by freezing Germany and Italy's holdings in the U.S.⁷³

June 22, 1941: Less than two years after signing a Treaty of Non-Aggression with the Soviet Union, Germany did an about face and invaded the Soviet Union. This was known as Operation Barbarossa. Within a week, German forces captured the city of Minsk.⁷⁴

July 26, 1941: U.S. relations with Japan were suspended as the U.S. placed an embargo on oil and steel trade in an effort to force Japan to leave China.⁷⁵

July 31, 1941: Hermann Goring, Germany's Reich Marshall, issued a memo discussing "The Final Solution," a term used for their plans to "exterminate" European Jews.⁷⁶

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Confronting Evil

Hitler had his vision for a perfect Germany, but his methods of achieving this were far from perfect. For problems such as insufficient living space for the chosen German citizens, he had the Nazi SS commit mass murder of Germany and other countries' formerly recognized citizens. In an account of a SS mass murder, the cold calculating disregard for human life is chilling. The people were brought to a pit which would eventually be their final resting place. The guards held whips to ensure compliance. However, the families did not beg or plead as I feel certain that they knew it would fall on the Nazis' deaf ears. The people were told to hand over their valuables and strip, sorting and placing their articles of clothing in piles with others of the same type. The families quietly comforted each other and prepared their beloved children for what was about to happen. Some tears were shed and as they lay themselves in their grave, they spoke quietly to those lying beneath them, some of whom were not yet dead.⁷⁷

With that last image in mind, imagine for a moment what your life would be like if suddenly you were no longer welcome in the country you once called home. From out of nowhere, you suddenly find that despite your innocence of any crime, you are on the run. You are trying to save your life, and perhaps even the lives of your entire family, whether that includes an innocent newborn or someone well past retirement age or one or more loved ones in between. Your family is now looking to you to save them. Where do you hide or provide for an entire family when you are surrounded by countrymen who would turn you over to authorities in a heartbeat? Even most of your close neighbors refuse to associate with you now for fear of their own family's safety. Only the truly brave will step up to such a risk. You no longer

know who can be trusted or would be willing to put their own lives on the line to help save your family.

You are no longer permitted to work, even if you were a trained doctor, lawyer, teacher, etc. and as a result, you and your loved ones now have very limited access to food. Put yourself in those shoes and experience for a moment how truly frightening this would be. Then finally something good happened. You found a new home, perhaps in another country, and you finally felt you could take a deep breath and simply live the life you once had. A life you perhaps had taken for granted not because you did not appreciate it but because you never thought it might be ripped away for no reason. However, there are no safe havens for your loved ones, no place anywhere on the continent to rest your weary heads. Like a bad “zombie movie,” they just keep coming. Hunting “your kind” with a vengeance claiming that your or your family’s religious beliefs are unacceptable no matter where you live.

The beliefs of which you’ve been accused may even be part of a past of which your family is no longer affiliated. But that does not matter so you run again, or at least you try to. But everywhere you go, they hunt you down and anyone like you, without exception and without mercy. There really is no escape and no return to the normal everyday life you once lived. The life you cherished but perhaps never bothered to give much thought to until it was gone. Your days may truly be numbered and apart from going into hiding, if someone offered that kind of help, there really is nowhere to flee. Welcome to life as a Jew during the Holocaust, but remember this has not even begun to touch on the separation of family, imprisonment, starvation, slave labor, death by gas, death by shooting, horrible medical experimentation and more that they experienced. It was a life far worse than you ever want to experience.

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The evil of those who ordered and those who hunted down and spinelessly carried out the murders of so many Jewish individuals and families, all ages, defies description. Sadly, with the Nazis unleashed, life for the Jews, as well as the Nazis' other victims, was just one atrocity after another. Frankly I am beginning to understand my youthful aversion to hearing the details and extent of World War II. It was easier to simply not think about it. Now older and a bit wiser, I realize that these acts should never be forgotten for so many reasons, including but not limited to a compassionate remembrance of those affected, both civilians and soldiers and the atrocities committed against them. We must also learn from the past and remain alert and open to the importance of early recognition of an existing threat. We cannot ignore or deny the reality and danger it may present for others as well as ourselves. We need to recognize that sometimes it is necessary to make the unpopular decision of going to war. Despite being an ocean away, my parents found themselves living in a very brutal world that was making its way across the ocean to the United States.

Like so many, I was always sickened by the Holocaust, nervously visiting the museum in Washington, D.C. on a class trip and almost losing it physically while serving as their chaperone, something my son surely would not have appreciated or lived down. However, my research for this book opened my eyes even more so to the personal aspect which the Holocaust and World War II truly had on the world and so many lives. Even so, I have only touched on some of the "highlights," if you can call them that, primarily of the European Theater of Operations (ETO). The world was on the move, with countries invading countries, other countries ready to aid the invaded countries, murders and atrocities right and left. Relations with Japan were tense as the U.S. placed embargos on products the Japanese perceived as essential.

While I do not claim to be a historian, I think it is important to share some of this history that provided context for a soldier's life before he marched off to war. With that in mind, along with the highlights of Hitler and Nazi Germany's aggressions and atrocities which I touched on, I invite you to step back in time to my parents' world, circa 1940. They were living peacefully in a neutral country where no one, no country, no military had tried to move into your backyard and they were falling in love on their first date. It was an incredible date, taking place during the summer of 1940 at the New York World's Fair. Little did they know that the magic of the World's Fair and its promised theme of "The World of Tomorrow"⁷⁸ would all be put on hold for them following the reinstatement of the draft in September, 1940.

Instead, reality dictated that they were living in a country on the brink of entering a terrible world war. A war that was fought and ended long before I was born, the last of George



Teeney and George, love at first date.

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and Christine's three children, born years later on Easter Sunday, 1957, at a point in their lives when memories of this war had been pushed to the back of my father's mind and was rarely mentioned or discussed.