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Notes from Kilroy: A Collection of Stories Inspired by the Lives of Arkansas WWII Veterans

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**Notes from Kilroy: A Collection of Stories Inspired by the
Lives of Arkansas WWII Veterans**

written by

Victoria Anderson

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Amy ~~Sonheim~~, thesis director

Dr. ~~Johnny~~ Wink, second reader

Dr. Chris Mortenson, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 18, 2018

For our veterans

I would like to acknowledge the following people for their impact on my life:

My loving parents, Frank and Melissa

Dr. Amy Sonheim, my amazing thesis director

Anita Deason, my inspiring internship supervisor

My incredible grandparents, B.F. and Joyce Anderson and Clarence and Patsy
Crosskno

Notes from Kilroy

A collection of stories inspired by the lives of Arkansas WWII veterans

Victoria Anderson

Ouachita Baptist University



PREFACE

Dwelling: The Only Way to Write

No history is far from static, not even mine. Some people may think history is stuck in the past, along with all the lives that have come before, but if that were the case, there would be no point in studying or even recording history. If it is truly something that dwells only in the past, unmoving, then it would not affect anyone—but it does. As William Faulkner said, “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.”

It is the same with God. God is not confined to a certain time or place. He surrounds his sons and daughters and guides them throughout their lives. A relationship with God is neither static nor passive. When I have my quiet time, I think about who He is, listen for His voice, and follow His commands. And I strive to serve Him in all aspects of my life because that is what He has called me to do. Even my academics are a way for me to respond to God, to worship him. He has put a desire to learn and write in me, so when I pursue these in order to bring Him glory, it pleases Him. For me, everything I do points back to God, and writing is how I relate to God. I think of it as my theology of writing—I listen to God, and then I write down my thoughts and prayers. I am dwelling, which means I am always listening and always responding.

A way to respond to God involves responding to histories outside of my own to see how He works in His creation. Take political and personal history, for example. Political history informs one that America was founded in 1776. My personal history tells one that I was born in 1996. Is one of these more truthful and influential than the other? No. They are equally true. These two histories, political and personal, also coexist with each other. The major events that occur in the world affect the personal experiences of the people living at that moment in time. And those personal experiences

give one a glimpse into the reality of that time and place. I would not know very much about what my hometown of Blytheville, Arkansas, was like in the 1950s if it were not for my mom's parents, Clarence and Patsy Crosskno. They were both teenagers at this time, and Nana likes to talk about how they first met at the Kream Kastle drive-in. The restaurant is still there and open for business, but whenever I look at it now, I see it through my nana's eyes. I see the cheerful lights, the red and baby blue convertibles shiny from the rain. I see a young lady, eyes bright as she laughs the evening away with a tall, handsome man with reddish-brown hair.

But this is not all I see. My grandparents' experiences did not end in the 50s; history moved and so did they. The effects of the Vietnam War stretched all the way to their little town in Arkansas, and God called them to serve. From 1959 until the late 1960s, Nana worked as a clerk typist. During the 1970s, she cross-trained to the accounting field and worked in the finance department, where she did payroll for all the civilians employed on the Blytheville Air Force Base (about 350). Then she was promoted to the military pay section and was the first woman to be chief of that section. From 1959-1961, Papa was in the army. He got early out and served in the national guard for six months. He was stationed at the army post in Fort Meade, Maryland. When it was time for him to come home, he hitchhiked for a while until he could afford a used car.

Unlike my mom's parents, my dad's parents, Benjamin Franklin (everyone called him B.F.) and Joyce Anderson, were alive during the Great Depression. I know from history books that this was an extremely hard time on people, but that hardship is brought to life when I remember Grandma's house in the tiny town of Poughkeepsie, Arkansas. She kept everything—from cool whip tubs to buttons—in case it could be

reused. Then during WWII, B.F. joined the army. I never got to ask him about his time in the war because he passed away before I was born, but I like to look at old pictures of him and imagine how he would tell his stories. I think it would involve music because God gave him a passion for singing and playing the guitar. In 1969, he even played in the Arkusaw Traveller Folk Theater.¹

This is just a glimpse into my family history. Although I was not there for any of this, I still like to dwell in these stories and remember them. It is a way for me to experience their lives, connect, and empathize. If I let the stories surround me, I can choose to step outside of my history and put myself in theirs. And this is what it takes to write about lives that are not my own.

The Internship: The Beginnings of a Thesis

My time at Ouachita is an important part of my personal history, especially the period of time devoted to working on my thesis. This thesis has shown me my theology of writing and has made clear to me how everything in my life is connected with the purpose of serving God.

My love for writing is why I became an English major when I came to Ouachita. Then I added a double major in mass communications because I needed to know as many writing styles as possible. And then, when it came time to do my directed study, I wanted to work one-on-one with an author to learn about the writing process. Ace Collins was kind enough to introduce me to the world of pitching and publishing. With the date for my thesis proposal rapidly approaching, I knew I wanted to do something with creative writing. I just did not know what.

¹ My grandma, dad, and cousin are pictured on the poster.

The spring of my junior year I applied for a summer internship with the office of Senator John Boozman. I found out about the opportunity in the fall when I went home to Blytheville one weekend for the Mississippi County Republican Committee's Lincoln-Reagan Dinner. I had never been to one of these dinners before, so I went for the experience and to spend time with my family. Among the guests was Senator Boozman, who gave a speech because he was running in the election. Afterwards, I shook the senator's hand and answered his questions about where I was attending college and what I was studying. As soon as he heard what I had to say, he pulled out a business card. He told me that he had an internship program for college students and that I should apply. Then he proceeded to write down the name and number of the person I could talk to about applying. As everyone was leaving, a lady who was working with the senator stopped to talk with me. Her name was Kelsi Daniell, and she wanted to know if she heard right when I said I was going to school at Ouachita. When I said yes, she smiled brightly and told me that she was an OBU alumna. This connection is more evidence of how my personal history is not separate from political history.

At home that evening, I sat in a kind of daze. The thought of getting that internship did not seem scary or far away from my interests. It seemed exciting. It was something new, something I would not have sought out on my own. There were two options for the location of the internship: Little Rock, Arkansas, or Washington, D.C. When it was time to send in my application, I still could not decide, so I applied for both. I figured that way, the application process would decide for me.

My interview day came. After my classes, I put on my dress and my pearls and drove to Little Rock. I was two hours early. I ran through all the possible questions they could ask me, carefully practicing how I would answer. Time seemed to drag on until,

finally, it was time for my interview. There were two people in the room at a small, brown table—Chris and Stacey. Copies of my resume and cover letters lay in front of them. Chris spoke first: “Tell me about yourself.” That was hard. Where was I supposed to start? What did he want to hear? Was there a right or wrong answer? I honestly do not remember what I said. Then they were done. I could not believe it. They said they did not have any other questions. Did I have any questions? I could not have been in there for more than five minutes, and I had a 30-minute slot. So, I asked questions—a lot of questions.

I found out that D.C. was a lot of office work. Little Rock was some office work with a majority of the focus on the Veterans History Project (VHP). I knew about the VHP from the senator’s website (a project through the Library of Congress to document the stories of American war veterans), but I needed more information. I needed to know how involved I would be. I felt my face light up when Stacey told me that I would be assisting with the interviews throughout my five weeks there. I would be able to meet the veterans, listen to their stories in person, and establish those personal connections. Then Chris asked me one last question: “Would you like to be in D.C. or Little Rock?” They wanted me to choose. Although God had placed the opportunity in my path, He had left the final choice up to me. Thankfully, at that point, I felt in my heart that the VHP was where I was needed and where I would find joy. I also knew that God would provide a way for me to fund successfully my internship. Just a few days after I was officially given the internship, my professor and friend Dr. Amy Sonheim sent me information about a Sigma Tau Delta Summer Internship Stipend. I received \$1,075 dollars, which helped me pay for business attire, gas, food, and rent.

At the time all of this was happening, I was not consciously seeking God. I was simply pursuing a job opportunity, but later I realized that God was in all of it. God did not control me. There were decisions that were mine alone to make. But I let God guide me in those decisions. I responded by following Him and dwelling in the joy He gave me, which shows that my history is not static.

Researching on the Job: Dwelling

During my internship, I experienced a unique working environment. I was in the office some of the time, answering phones and filing paperwork. However, a majority of my time was spent on the road, in meetings, and in veterans' homes. I enjoyed visiting with the veterans the most because it was like sitting down with my grandparents and hearing them talk about their lives. Col. (Ret.) Anita Deason, my supervisor and the senator's military and veteran liaison, encouraged me to share the experiences I had through a blog post for the Library of Congress. Here is an excerpt of what I wrote at the time that captures how I felt listening to these stories:

Although it was a joy to hear all the interviews, it was also emotionally heavy. I know I just barely scratched the surface of the sacrifices these men and women made, but I hope by listening, I shouldered a little of the burden. What impacted me the most about each of these veterans was their character. When I see them, I see incredible strength. I see love and courage. I see an inspiring history that will last forever. (Anderson)

I did not just listen to these men and women. I dwelt. I empathized. This was my thesis research—looking through another's eyes.

Again, this was my personal history converging with political history. When I interviewed a veteran, his personal story and our interaction joined with the wealth of

history contained in the Library of Congress. This is what God calls me to do. My personal history shows that I am saved by Christ and that I serve God by interacting with all of His creation. And this interaction is where I find joy. Joy is very different from happiness. Happiness comes and goes, but God gives a joy that I can stay rooted in during hard times. Listening to the veterans' stories is a perfect illustration of joy. I heard some stories that made my heart ache and brought tears to my eyes, but I always came out of the interviews joyful because I was able to serve others and form relationships.

Continuing to Research, Continuing to Dwell

Although a large part of my research was complete after my internship, it was far from done. I needed to immerse myself in the world of the 1940s. I looked at countless photographs from the WWII era to see what people wore, how they fixed their hair, what the war planes and ships looked like, what the battle field was like, where the foxholes were, what they did for fun, etc. For one of my stories, I wrote about a dance, so I found a picture of a military dance and looked at it for a long time. And while I was looking, I listened to a few songs from that time and imagined how I would be dancing and what I would be wearing.

I also had to look into 1940's slang. This was fun to incorporate, and more importantly, necessary. Language changes over time. A word can be used frequently and then nearly vanish from the vocabulary. The stories I have written are an experience, and that experience cannot be complete without the right language.

Old documents from the war were also a huge inspiration for some of my work. One that was particularly moving was a telegram to a mother informing her that her son had been killed. I used the telegram as one of my creative forms to write a mother's

response to receiving such news. I had to dwell on this and put myself in a mother's shoes—and I cried.

What my research process showed me is that empathy is powerful and moving. It is the only way to truly connect with, understand, and respond to the human experiences that surround us. By responding to those experiences through my research and writing, I was continuing to respond to God.

The Creative Process

Some people may argue that the creative process is not really a process. They may think to be creative, one merely has to have an interesting idea and put it into some form with minimal work or effort. I hope I have shown that there is much more to it than that. Of course, everything starts with an idea, but ideas must come from somewhere. I found my ideas through listening to or reading veteran interviews, movies and documentaries, and other works of fiction.

After the idea comes the form. I needed a way to present my stories, so I looked at different genres of writing. This allowed me to include my own versions of a journal entry, short story, one-act, and others.

Anyone involved in academics must always be aware of her audience. As I wrote, I was also keeping my “ideal audience” in mind. As art philosopher Susanne Langer states,

It is a great mistake to think an artist must constantly bear in mind the particular public that will visit the gallery or the concert hall or the bookstore where his work will make its first appearance. He works for an ideal audience. Even when he paints a mural, knowing what public will use

the building that houses his work, he paints for his idealization of this public, or he paints badly. (393)

This is an ongoing and important part of the creative process. I wrote for an audience who will dwell in the personal experiences I created as I dwell in the words spoken by God, my grandparents, and the veterans. If I did not write for this “ideal audience,” I would have been writing poorly and without much significance.

More importantly, the creative process is a way for me to worship God. My calling is the form my love for God takes: writing. So, my calling as a writer is my form of worship.

Finding Joy

What I have learned through my thesis will stay with me for the rest of my life. I have learned to dwell, and in dwelling, I have learned how to respond. This way to respond to the world through the creative process is pleasing to God because neither He, nor history is static. I can interact. But it is up to me whether I choose to or not. I chose to empathize with others who had different life experiences and then learn more about those different perspectives through writing. My thesis is my interaction, my response. And in doing so, my history has changed—I am not the same person I was when I started this adventure. History has changed, too. I have seen WWII through so many eyes that it would be impossible for it to remain as it was before.

I hope my work inspires others to dwell in the lives outside their own and remember that history is not stuck in the past. As I wrote for the Library of Congress, “History is living and breathing.” Empathize with personal experiences, respond, and find God’s joy. See how history moves.

Stanton
Navy Seabee
Short story

July 1944

20:00

I looked around the room filled with dancing couples, string lights, and streamers. The band's saxophone players performed an upbeat duet, and the trombone chimed in every now and then. Beautiful dames' heels tapped lightly on the wooden floor, rhythmically matching the louder clomp of sailors' freshly shined stompers. I glanced down at my own and realized I had forgotten to shine them. At least my uniform was pressed.

I maneuvered through the crowd like our ship through the islands to the table where a young girl served little cups of punch and silver plates of cookies. Red, white, and blue banners hung from the front of the table. Two vases of six-inch American flags sat at either end. She smiled when she handed me my punch. I smiled back because that's what I would do any other day.

The punch was a little sour, but I drank it anyways. It was better than having a dry mouth like earlier. As I looked out at all the smiling, dancing people, my eyes kept focusing on the twirling dresses of the women. The fabric swayed and rippled like the sea I had watched all morning from the back of the ship. I felt the hollowness in my chest return, so I moved my feet in time with the music. I wished my wife was there to dance with me. If I danced, maybe I could forget.

Suddenly, a doll in a polka dot dress emerged from the swirling current of the crowd and headed toward me.

"You're Bette Davis," the words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them. I gave a sheepish grin.

"Why, yes, I am," she laughed, and her red lips parted to show pearly white teeth.

"What's your name?"

"Roger Stanton, ma'am."

"Well, Mr. Stanton, aren't you going to ask me to dance?"

The music changed to the soft, romantic notes of "Moonlight Serenade" as I led her to the dance floor. Her hand was warm and delicate in mine, but I could only think of the cold stiffness of the ship's railing.

"I'm thankful for your service," Bette said.

I gave her a small smile.

"What is it like on the ship?"

"Kind of like this. A lot of rocking back and forth." I paused and looked up. "No streamers, though."

Bette laughed, a sound that rippled through the room like the infinite waves of the ocean.

"Where are you from, Mr. Stanton?"

"Arkansas, ma'am."

"Oh, I hear that's a beautiful state."

"Mighty hot this time of year, though."

"Do you have a family?" she asked.

"I have a wife, May."

"What a beautiful name," she smiled, then continued, "I know she's proud to have such a brave man in her life. And a good dancer, too."

I smiled my thanks and felt a pat on my shoulder.

"Mind if I cut in?"

I turned to see a young sailor with bright eyes and an even brighter smile. I nodded and stepped to the side.

“It was swell meeting you, Mr. Stanton,” Bette said, the puffy sleeve of her dress nearly brushing my arm as that eager beaver led her past me and the orchestra started another song.

A chill crawled up my spine as I watched the polka dot dress sail farther and farther away. When I could no longer see it, I let out the breath I didn’t realize I had been holding. I stood still for a moment, listening to the new voice that had begun to sing.

I'll get by

As long as I have you

Though there be rain

And darkness too

I'll not complain

I'll see it through

I headed for the door.

Back in my quarters, I began writing a letter home. I told May about dancing with Bette Davis. I teased her about being jealous. I told her I loved and missed her. I didn’t tell her that the only thing I could do as the torpedo barreled toward the ship was wait —and that the only reason I was alive was because the ship happened to turn. I didn’t tell her I almost died that day. The squiggles that were my handwriting became blurred and out of focus. A few wet drops hit the paper, making the ink smudge. But the tears would dry before it was delivered.

Hall

Army Private First Class

Journal

June 4, 1944

Heading over to France. Will land on Omaha. Bottom of the ships are like big parking decks—we can put our guns & trucks & all that in there. Not excited to be on a ship again. Avoiding torpedoes makes trip longer & all there is to eat is stinking fish.

R.H.

June 7, 1944

Got on my knees. Dear God thank you for letting me live through it. If I make it to the end of this war all I want is someplace quiet.

R.H.

June 8, 1944

The ones who got there before us were laying on the beach. Had everything greased & the exhaust pipe extended 4 ft. Then drove the truck off the ship & into the water. Course then there was bodies floating in that I had to push out. Had bulldozer tank move the soldiers to the sides so we didn't run them over. I didn't want to.

R.H.

August 10, 1944

No news from home since last letter. Could write a letter but it goes to a big metal building where they cut everything out that might give us away.

Dad, Mama, Ella:

Wish I could tell y'all I'm OK. I survived D-Day, but this war is still going. I have to wake up each morning and think this might be my last sunrise. But I'll keep going b/c I'm a soldier.

Love,

R.H.

August 14, 1944

Team & I were firing today. Sgt. came by and asked where we got automatic. Told him it wasn't—we just shoot fast.

R.H.

August 25, 1944

Battle for Normandy—DONE.

R.H.

December 10, 1944

It's very cold here. Wish I had thicker socks.

R.H.

December 17, 1944

This is a bad, bad place. German tanks came out of the woods—heavy fire. No cover. Too many injured & weapons useless. Picked up a helmet & stuck it on a soldier's head—told him to keep it on. Don't know what happened to him after that. We had to run & run fast.

R.H.

December 20, 1944

Fighting alongside Russians. They're more open than us. We barely light a cig & they're building a fire & roasting a pig!

R.H.

December 25, 1944

Sang some carols in our foxholes today. Prayed Santa brings us warmer socks.

R.H.

January 17, 1945

Been setting our helmets on the fire to cook—potatoes & scrambled eggs. Just gotta rinse it real good before I put it back on. Have guard duty tomorrow. It's gonna be long & cold.

R.H.

January 26, 1945

Finally headed home.

R.H.

February 3, 1945

Family figured I was dead. I'm like a ghost now. They're not sure what to do with me.

They just talk, 'How ya doing?' 'Fine' 'Can I get you anything?' 'No thanks.'

R.H.

C.C.

Army Air Corps Pilot

Short story

I drew back the curtain. A flock of starlings flew over the field, and I watched them. It was like a black wave that flashed with silver as it flowed up and down, left and right. The way their wings sliced gracefully through the air so many feet above the earth stirred up the same feelings I had when I was six years old, sitting on the old porch of our house in that quiet Arkansas town and watching the hawks swoop down when they spotted one of our chickens.

I turned my attention from the window to the mess of paint and small wooden parts on my kitchen table. I had just finished my model of the P-51. With more and more time on my hands, I had resorted to tinkering with WWII models. As I looked at my miniature replica, I suddenly realized I had forgotten something. I grabbed a brush with a thin bristle and added a few letters to the tail of the plane. I stood back to admire my work, pride swelling up in my chest, followed by a small ache.

The doorbell rang. I made my way to the door, using the various furniture along the way to keep my balance. Two beaming faces greeted me as I opened the door.

“It’s my birthday!” my grandson Cody shouted as he threw his arms around me. I curled my fingers around the doorframe to keep from tumbling backward.

“Is it really?” I laughed and ruffled his dark hair with my other hand. “And how old are you now?”

He held up six fingers and grinned, showing a missing front tooth. I looked up at my daughter, whose smile was replaced with concern.

“Where’s your walker?” she asked.

“Clara, I’m fine. I don’t need it to answer the door.” This didn’t seem to offer her much comfort.

I motioned them inside. Cody darted every which way, nearly bursting with excitement.

“Did you get me a present?”

“Well, let me think,” I said as I tapped my temple. Cody rocked impatiently back and forth on his feet. “I do believe I have something waiting for you on the table in there.”

Cody ran around the corner, and when Clara and I made it to the kitchen we found him standing still and staring at the tiny aircraft.

“Happy Birthday,” I said, smiling.

His little blue eyes grew wider as he asked, “Did you make this?”

I nodded.

He walked around the table, looking at every angle.

“I flew one of those, you know.”

“Really?”

I motioned for him to follow me. He carefully picked up the plane, and we went into the living room where I pulled a photo album from the bookshelf. I sat in the lazy-boy and patted the space beside me. Cody climbed up next to me, being careful not to damage his airplane. Clara sat down in the rocker across from us and looked pointedly at the walker standing in the corner. I opened the album to the first black and white photograph of me in my uniform standing next to my plane.

“Who’s that?” Cody asked.

“That’s me.”

“You look a lot different.”

“I’m a lot older,” I laughed.

“What are you wearing?” Cody asked as his little finger pointed at the picture.

“That’s my uniform. I was a pilot for the Army Air Corps during World War II.”

“Did you drop bombs?” he asked with wide eyes.

“No,” I chuckled, “my mission was to go to the factory, pick up the planes, and then fly them to the point of debarkation on either the east or west coast.”

“Oh. How’d you learn how to fly this?” Cody carefully held up the model.

“Do you see those birds out there?” I pointed out the window to the starlings.

Cody nodded. “When I was little, I would watch those birds and hawks, the way they seem to rest on a big bag of air, and I would think, ‘If I could only do that.’ So, one day, I was at the airport with my friend John, whose brother was having a flying lesson, and I told him, ‘I’m going to learn how to fly.’ He thought I was kidding—”

Clara let out a laugh, and I smiled.

“So, I went to talk to the fellow that was teaching, Clyde, and told him I wanted to learn to fly. Do you know what he said?”

Cody shook his head.

“He said, ‘I think you’ll make a d—”

Clara suddenly cleared her throat and looked at me with eyebrows raised.

“A *darn* good pilot.” Clara gave a small nod, and I continued, “To get my pilot’s license, I rode my bike six miles to the airport for class—and thank goodness it was downhill on the way back.”

I flipped to another picture of me holding my license.

“You look really happy,” Cody said.

“That’s what the kids would tell me on my way back. They’d say, ‘You flew today.’ I asked them how they knew, and they told me, ‘You’re so happy.’”

“Tell him about being a pursuit pilot,” Clara said, slightly leaning forward in the rocker.

“Alright, well, by the time the war was declared, I had my private pilot’s license. So, I thought I could serve my country through something I loved. Twenty-five thousand applied. There were 1,800 accepted. Of those, 1,074 received their wings. And of the 1,074, there were only 114 pursuit pilots. I was one of those.”

Cody looked up at me, eyes wide and fingers absently twirling the propeller. I tapped the wing.

“This was my favorite to fly. The P-51 was the fastest at that time, and it was like having your very own wings. If you leaned forward, the plane went down, if you leaned backwards, it went up, and if you leaned sideways, it turned.”

As I leaned in each direction, Cody copied my movements. He leaned too far on the turn and bumped my shoulder. I tickled him, and he jerked back in laughter.

“Where’s your medals?” Cody asked, suddenly. “People in wars get medals, don’t they?”

I glanced up at Clara, who was looking at me sadly.

“Well,” I began, “I actually wasn’t recognized as a veteran until 1977.”

Cody started to count on his fingers, but then stopped.

“How long is that?”

“A long time.”

“Oh,” Cody said quietly, “But it’s better now?”

I smiled and pulled him onto my lap.

“Yes, it’s better now.”

Cody turned the plane in his hands and came to the letters painted on the wing.

“What’s W-A-S-D?”

“That’s a P.”

“Oh, what’s W-A-S-P?”

As my grandson’s bright eyes looked up at me, I brushed my fingers across the letters.

“Women Airforce Service Pilots.”

William

Army

One-Act

Act 1: Battle of the Bulge

The Ardennes Forest covered in a soft layer of snow. The sun sets behind the fir trees, making their snow-dusted branches shine as a troop of U.S. soldiers dressed in brownish-green uniforms approach. Drivers park the jeeps and trucks, and 300 soldiers unload equipment. After a few moments, the men trek deeper into the woods, guns and shovels in tow.

WILLIAM. [*with gun still strapped to him, pushes the shovel into the ground, pulling up a chunk of earth*] I'm gonna dig my foxhole a little deeper this time. Last battle cut it a little too close. [*glances over at soldier a few feet to his left*] Herman, that knucklehead, never digs his hole deep enough—it's a wonder he hasn't bit the dust. [*piles some of the dirt around the edges of the hole, whistling the tune of Bing Crosby's "I'll Get By"*] This reminds me of gettin' our garden ready a few years back. Sure did have a lot of okra. I wonder if Martha got my letter... 'course if she did it probably doesn't say much now. Nuts! I miss her cookin'. Pretty tired of eatin' outta my helmet. Don't think I'll ever get the smell of eggs outta my hair. Alrighty, I think that'll do it. Thank ya army banjo [*nods at his shovel as he lays it down then drops down into the freshly dug hole and holds his gun close to his chest, sighs*] Now for the fun part. [*shifts a little, shoulders brushing against both sides of the pit*] Probably shoulda dug myself a little more wiggle room. If only it weren't so dang cold, maybe it wouldn't feel so long. Thicker socks would help. Haven't felt my feet in two days. Martha's killer-diller cornbread sure would make this a whole lot better. There's some light left, maybe I can work on my sketches. No, I used the last of my pencil yesterday. Not that I would be able to sketch very well with my gun in the way. [*looks down at his heavy muddy boots and frowns at the squish that comes from wiggling his numb toes in his wet socks*] Thicker socks would help. Best just not to think about it. Don't think about it. Don't. Think.

WILLIAM. [*stirs after having dozed off then opens his eyes suddenly*] Huh, I didn't mean to drift off like that. [*pulls up his sleeve and looks at his watch*] It's too dark, I can't make it out. [*pats his breast pocket then swears under his breath*] Forgot I lost my lights in craps the other day. Is this thing even workin'? [*taps and shakes watch, brings it to his ear to listen, attempts to wind it*] My fingers are too numb. Can't even tell if I'm

wigglin' my toes or not. Thicker socks would help. [*hollers for the time, and a voice hollers back that it's three in the morning*] Alright, not too much longer, but I sure do have to go to the bathroom. And I can't feel the tips of my ears or nose. [*cups hands over his nose and mouth and breathes*] Well, if that did anything I sure can't tell. What is that? [*tilts his head, listening*] Herman's singin' again. Kid doesn't have the best voice, but it's better than hearin' him cryin' through the night or beatin' his gums about home. What's he singin'? Is it...sounds like "Silent Night." What in the world's he singin' a carol for? It's not...wait, no it is, it's Christmas Eve. [*he chuckles softly to himself then looks up*]

The moon comes out from behind the clouds, sending a cold light into his even colder hole. Fresh snowflakes begin to swirl around him. Shots ring out, followed by shouts.

WILLIAM. [*grips his gun, breathes deep, and pushes himself up and out of the foxhole*]
Merry Christmas.

CURTAIN

Eliza Pool

Nurse

Flash fiction

MEDICAL CHART

LOCATION: 33rd Field Hospital

Anzio, Italy

SERVICE NO.: 16 064 029

DIAGNOSIS: IW (Incised Wound)

ORIGIN: Soldier was hit with shrapnel in the right leg after a shell landed near his foxhole. The piece has caused major lacerations of the thigh muscles.

TRANSLATION: He was so young, couldn't be any older than eighteen. When they brought him in there was so much blood running from his leg. And protruding from the red mess was a wicked scrap of metal. What few lights we had reflected off the jagged edges, creating a sharp light that seemed to try and blind those who came anywhere near it. The poor boy tried his best to be brave and strong, but the tears did not stop. And every now and then a horrible wail escaped his chapped lips. I wished I could take his pain away, but the morphine only did so much. He was still conscious when the surgeon came. I looked into his blue eyes, eyes that were thirty years older than the boy they belonged to. I asked him his name. When the surgeon was ready I placed my hand gently on Edwin's trembling shoulder, smiled softly, and sent up a silent prayer. It wasn't until Edwin was asleep on his cot, a blanket tucked around the only leg he had, that I cried.

MEDICAL CHART

LOCATION: 33rd Field Hospital

Anzio, Italy

SERVICE NO.: 12 099 031

DIAGNOSIS: WIA (Wounded In Action), MW (Multiple Wounds)

ORIGIN: The officer has multiple gunshot wounds—right shoulder, lower abdomen, left leg—due to assisting an injured soldier during a firefight. Two fractured ribs on the right side. Right ankle twisted. Signs of malnutrition.

TRANSLATION: Officer Mattox looked remarkably like David. As he lay on the operating table, pale and ghostly, I had to repeat to myself that David was safe. He wasn't here, he was flying his plane, and he was going to come see me in a few weeks. Still, I could not keep myself from constantly twisting the gold band wrapped around my finger. After Nurse Molly cut away Mattox's uniform, I put on my gloves, grabbed the forceps, and began removing bullets from the torn, bloody flesh. Mattox bit down so hard on the bite stick he trembled but did not make a sound. I removed the last bullet and looked at the officer's face. He was blinking very slowly, and his forehead was shiny with sweat. Another nurse finally arrived with more morphine. Molly and I bandaged and stitched him up and tightly wrapped his waist and ankle. It didn't take much cloth because he was so thin; I think he was the skinniest grown man I had ever seen. We were all hungry—so hungry during the day, but it was somehow worse at night. As I stared at Mattox's skeletal figure, I was amazed that he had managed to drag an unconscious soldier to safety. I took off my apron. The blood that stained it was as bold as the red cross stitched on the front.

A mother
Family
Telegram

The Secretary of War desires me to express—

Stop. Why am I getting this telegram?

--his deepest regret—

Stop. I don't want to keep reading.

--that your son Corporal Charles B. Smith—

Stop. My baby boy, no, he's safe, I just got a letter from him.

--was—

Stop. I don't think I can read anymore.

--was killed—

Stop. Oh God, please no.

--in action on twenty seven July in France—

Stop. No, no this can't be true, this can't be real.

--Letter follows—

Stop. Why Charles? Why my boy? No, this can't be right. This was supposed to tell me that he's coming home.

Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop.

Griffin
Army
Interview

I's regist'rd when I was 18. Had to go to Little Rock to git a physical, an I was a lil worried 'bout meetin' the weight limit. We's all lined up, naked as jaybirds. They asked me what branch I wanted, an I said, "Army, sir," real loud. They wrote down army in big, red letters on my file. Guess all those milkshakes I'd been drinkin' paid off.

Wound up in Camp Robinson. We's in our street clothes, so they lined us up to get our uniforms. They gave me a helmet that was darn near twice the size a my head. The edge of it came down over my eyes. Old Sergeant came down the line an asked if I could see 'im. I says, "I can see your boots, sir." He cracked up an said, "Go git you a different helmet, Arkansaw."

We was down by the field where they had some parades sometimes. Old Sergeant came an sat down next to me, put his arm 'round me like this. I ne'er will forget this. He said, "Son, I know I been hard on ya, but I am 'cause I'm tryin' to keep ya alive. I want ya to come back."

They don't tell ya nothin'. They dropped me off where the 69th Infantry Division was in France. It was dark as pitch. Old Sergeant comes up to me an says, "First thing ya gotta do is dig yourself a foxhole." I says, "I ain't got a shovel, sir." He looks at the top a my head an says, "You got a helmet don't ya, Arkansaw?" In the mornin', a big ole tank came a rollin' over my head "nneeoo" like that.

When the flare popped I dropped down on the ground, an 'bout the distance from me to you was how close I was to the machine gun. He opened up and dug a trench all up alongside me. Snow an dirt flew all 'round me. Then it stopped. Charlie hollered, "Hey, Arkansaw, you okay?" An all I could think was I made it.

The Germans took out my squad, so I was runnin' to git back. I went cross a field, and a tank saw me. He opened up with everything he had. I don't know how I didn't git shot. There was a brick wall left from an old buldin' that I spotted, so I ran to that for cover. But I could hear the tank comin' an the bullets still firin'. So I kept runnin'. When I got back, Old Sergeant asked how in the world I made it back, but I couldn't tell 'im. Would you believe, I still don't remember a thing.

That mornin', I had to cut another hole in my belt. My uniform was gittin' baggy, too. Then we found one of the prison camps. Them was horrible things. I saw the furnaces. Grown men an women 'bout that big around. Dead bodies was stacked up like wood in the pits. Boxcars was full of 'em. Some of 'em couldn't speak, they just looked at us, holdin' their hands out like this. It was the awfulest thing I e'er seen, an I didn't think twice 'bout my belt or uniform.

It was 'bout five o'clock in the mornin'. Those Germans were fightin' til the last man. One kept firin' at our slip trench, an one of our soldiers kept gittin' up to git a look for a shot. I told him to git down 'fore ya gitcha self shot. Then he fell across me, dead as a doornail.

What most folks don't understand 'bout a combat soldier is we're comin' home to a different world. It's so quiet, an our brains are still wired for battle. But it's worth it to fight for the greatest country in the world.

Anderson

Author

Epilogue

You open your door and welcome me with a hug. You sit
In your favorite chair, and I look at you
And can't help but wonder
How you make each day so normal.
Your hair is grey, your smile bright,
And I think about how your smile is brave.
You were so young when you picked up your gun
And charged into that first battle.

I lean forward in my chair as you speak
Because everything you say sounds so unreal:
Sitting for hours in the cold in a foxhole,
Landing a P-51 on a ship you can barely see,
Mending wounds of fallen soldiers,
Watching as a torpedo heads toward your ship.

I try to imagine what I would do if I were you.
Would I be brave enough? Strong enough?
What about after it all? Would I be ok?
Are you ok?
Your eyes tear up as the memories come back,
Some good, some bad, some not mentioned.
I reach out my hand to say
I'm here for you.
I will never fully understand, but I will always listen
And I will always remember you.
I promise.



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