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Never Too Young: A Journey with the Century

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Preface

As in all conflicts great changes were wrought by World War I the "last of the honorable wars." When the word "honorable" is mentioned the youth of that age shudder at this euphemism. The changes made to our society by that war impacted the very soul of America. The ideals, the hopes, the patriotism of the prior decades were altered in meaning and intensity as never before in our nation's history. Family values were to never be the same and human values toward God and country would never match the feeling prevalent since our Civil War.

Chapter One

Part I

Nineteen forty-three was a critical year in the progress of the United States to achieving victory in World War II. Victories in the South Pacific during the prior year which occurred after the shock of Pearl Harbor, the loss of Wake Island, the surrender of the Philippines and the assumption of rule by Japan in the critical areas of Southeast Asia had buoyed the energies of the American people. War production was increasing at astounding rates and the draft was accelerating at a rapid pace, all men who were physically fit between the ages of 19 and 35 were either in or being inducted into the army forces. By the spring of 1943 all deferments for those attending college had ceased by May of 1943 and the majority of these draftees/enlistees were 18 years of age as the draft began to increase their inductions.

What were these youth of 18/19 years like? What backgrounds did they come from and how did their mental and physical make-up cope with the rigors to come ahead. These questions bothered both the home front and the armed forces. Questions arose to the fact that their age had progressed little beyond puberty and the lack of experience with the world had been of little or no extent. Fresh from the High Schools and Colleges where they had none of the growing up period so valued by past and especially future generations. Whether they came from poor, working class or upper income all were melted together to eventually become the greatest fighting force the world had or would ever see.

What was the background of these youth? What had they to offer from their prior background that would sustain them in the trials ahead? Certainly they offered youth which the Army, Navy and the other services strived to attain. the younger they are, and the fewer responsibilities such as family ties (unmarried), the better they were able to cope with the mental and physical strains of combat was the general opinion of the High Command.

Many of the answers to questions of stamina in all areas by these inductees can be traced to the prior decade in this country and the before that the mental images brought back from World War I, only 25 years earlier, by their fathers. The Depression of the 1930's hardened many recruits to the rigors of deprivation and fear. These were almost inbred due to the effects of the Depression on the stability of their preteen years and the uncertainty of what life had to hold in terms of riches to rags, extreme poverty, and loss of ability of the family to earn and achieve a stable life-style.

The strength of American youth had been revealed by their early childhood and adolescence to accept the privations and hardships of battle and the stress of the years of World War II.

Part II

My childhood was above average for the time as far as food, shelter and privilege. My parents were both immigrants from Belgium in the early 1900's and came to the United States for different reasons. My father was from an upper middle class family in Bruges. He was from a large family and the youngest son. He came to this country to find his older brother to ease my grandmother's worries, as the family had not heard from him for two years. Since he was a third-class passenger he was not required to go through the Ellis Island Terminal but landed directly in the port of New York.

The family had made arrangements for him to go to friends in Marshall, Minnesota to begin his search. He arrived in Minnesota in 1908 and was met by friends of the family. When he arrived in Marshall he was informed that my uncle had arrived the same day from Alaska where he had worked on the railroad. He then took a job for the next year as a hired hand on a farm of another family friend. In 1908 the area had a bumper crop and he then convinced his brother, Isadore, to rent a farm and share crop the farm with one third going to each-- my uncle, the landlord and himself. That decision would be catastrophic for them at the end of the growing season. The crop was small and each received one bushel per acre, ending the hope for continuing on their own.

My father decided to go to Illinois to find work and live with family friends in Moline, Illinois--at that time the largest Belgium populated city in the country. Having apprenticed in Belgium as a cabinet maker-- he would not take the college entrance exams in Belgium because they were in French and he was Flemish--he got a job with a contractor who was also a family friend.

In 1912 my mother came to this country to visit her aunt Louise-- also a resident of Moline--who had come to the United States to find her father, my great grandfather. He had spent the past thirty or forty years traveling the United States from New York to San Francisco. The family was wealthy at the time and he lived very well, going home twice during this time. The joke in the family was to have children, first my grandmother and then my great aunt Louise. His travel coincided with the Chicago fire of 1874 and the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. He died in Chicago in 1908 or thereabout.

My father met my mother in 1913 and though of dissimilar backgrounds they were married in 1915. Dad built the house they moved into doing most or all of the wood work himself. My sister was born in 1916 and in 1917 America entered World War I. Dad registered for the draft and received a deferment because of his age (30) and because he had two dependents. In August of 1918 his status was changed to 1A and he was to report for induction on November 11, 1918. (Unbeknownst to him and my mother the Armistice would be declared on that day and he would not have to report to duty.) When he returned from work one evening, my mother announced that she had sold their home and bought a business. She told my father that since he was to be drafted, she would need an income and this was an opportunity for her to survive while he was in the army. Thus was born Bonte's Confectionary and Grocery. The business grew under my mother while my father continued to work for the next year.

Now this store was not the usual corner family grocery store. Today we would more likely call it a Deli or Convenience Store. There was a soda fountain, a cigar and tobacco stand, magazines, candy counter (from penny candies to expensive chocolates), canned groceries, milk, dairy products and assorted lunch meat. There was an area for soda tables and chairs (later booths were installed), and a U.S. Postal Station-- Moline #4.

My father, a Master Craftsman, was working in the store and the carpentry trade and by 1919 had to choose to put his whole effort in the store. He quit the carpenter trade and ran the business full time. By the time I was born in 1925 my parents were well established in business and had an excellent reputation in the community of the Quad-Cities consisting of Moline, Rock Island and East Moline on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River and Davenport on the Iowa side. They traveled to Europe in 1922 and 1929 doing very well having bought the property and improving the building next door with the erection of a new building. October 29, 1929 was the beginning of the Great Depression and the bank failures effected my parents greatly, though they did not lose the property or the business the next two or three years were touch and go. The rental property kept them above water and as the store struggled (later I couldn't believe how little income was available) they were able to buy a car in 1931 and place my sister in a private Academy. In the depth of the Depression by 1933, my father was able to go to Chicago for the Century of Progress World's Fair and in 1934 he went to the fair again. My mother also took my sister and me there. In the same year they enrolled my sister in a private college. In 1935 my parents decided to send me to Boy Scout Camp for a week even though I was only 9 years old. This period was over the fourth of July. Dad said it was cheaper to send me there rather than let me shoot fireworks (He claimed that the year before I had shot so many fireworks that he didn't make money on his sale of fireworks which in most years netted him over \$1,000. I still don't believe I shot that many!)

By 1936 things were better for finances and by 1938 I spent five weeks of my summer at Boy Scout Camp. The years 1938, 1939 and 1940 great for me at Scout Camp, though by 1939 the war in Europe began effecting my perspective of life and the world.

September 1939 was to have a great impact on my life. The war had begun in Europe and I had begun high school. In 1941 I was enrolled in a Boy's Academy and had begun working 60 hours a week in the store. This may seem impossible but when 32 of those hours were on Saturday and Sunday, the other days of the week I would work after school for 9 hours for 3 days and have one other day off and Friday off. Though sometimes my mother would send me upstairs of the store (our apartment) earlier to study.

All in all at least my life was good and I was happy. Other boys my age worked just as hard except for friends whose parents were more affluent than mine and did not believe in long hours for their children. My father believed in hard work even for the young.

Senior year in high school was a little easier due to my mother. I learned to drive my father's 1938 Buick Century and was allowed more time off to go to dances and attend

class functions. I was actually Assistant Manager of the store and Dad treated me as such, gave me time off (even gave me a raise of \$2.00 a week which increased my salary to a whole \$5.00 a week.

During this period of my life the country was drawn into the war in Europe and Asia. In 1939 two days before I began high school, Hitler invaded Poland and war began. The beginning of the war saw more interest in European events and no focus was made on the Pacific conflict which had been on and off since 1936. The Russians had been defeated by little Finland in Europe and the phony war was begun in France. Then on May 1940, Holland, Belgium and France were invaded. The British sent troops to the continent and the real war began in earnest. Those my age were little interested in what was really happening. We were too involved in our own lives, school, dating and fun. The next twelve months would cause drastic changes in our thoughts and lives.

During this period France and the lowlands had fallen; the British forces were forced to miraculously escape during the battle of Dunkirk. Friends of my parents would come from Europe talking of the collapse of Belgium and France and bringing word of my uncles, aunts and cousins in Belgium. This involvement of family heightened interest in the war by all, especially those whose relatives were still in Europe.

Pearl Harbor during my junior year changed complacency to deep awareness of the war. We were now involved. Older friends were either in the Armed Forces or enlisting. One neighbor whom I admired was on a ship going to the Philippines as an Air Force pilot and was detoured to Australia, later becoming one of the first Aces in the war. He was killed in a crash in the states after returning in 1943.

By June 6, 1942 the Draft had begun to take 18-year olds and one after another my old friends began to leave. Many 1942 graduates entered college before they were 18 and were deferred until the completion of their first year of college. At school a training program was established to teach all of us military drill and formations, but our lives had not changed that much. The rationing of food, clothing and gasoline had begun which limited many of our activities. These restrictions at first not extreme were to become so later. Some classmates enlisted in the Marines and Navy when they were 17, but these were few. One of my friends, George Schatterman, enlisted in the Navy and was a Corpsman on Tarawa. Another, Herman Sotekchek who would eat lunch with me everyday at Newberry's, a dime store in Rock Island, joined the Marines and in December of 1942 had come home from Guadalcanal. Soon more and more were drafted and were off to the various services. By June of 1943 the draft began to take those friends from the 1942 college class. John Carton, Bill Olson were two from that group. My oldest friend John Hoeg was drafted and became an MP in the Army. During that year I dated and studied for graduation. I turned 17 in December 1942 and had enough credit to take college courses while still enrolled in the Academy which was on the same grounds as Saint Ambrose College. In the Spring of that year the Armed Forces began tests to qualify high school seniors for the College Programs they were instituting in colleges throughout the country. The Army had the ASTP (Army Special Training Program) and the Navy had instituted the V12 program. These tests, the first College Entrance Exams, were used extensively and became forerunners of the current SAT exams. I took and passed the

Army tests that spring.

At this same time I met my future wife, Mary Slee, who had graduated from high school in May at the same time I did. I subsequently enrolled in St. Ambrose College as a freshman and attended my first classes with Navy V12 students. I had not heard from the Army on their program and would not discern my status until July when I received word of my acceptance on the premise that I enroll in the Army Reserve given that I was only 17 years old at the time. I took time off class to go to Chicago to enlist but was told to come back later because they were too busy to take me that week. When I came home and spoke to my father he said he would see what he could do to help me. The next week I was called by a civilian of Rock Island Arsenal to report there to take my physical exam and be sworn in. My father had talked to an affluent business associate and family friend (after whom I was named) and he had arranged for me to enlist at the Arsenal. When I was assigned my serial number, the log from which it came had the last date of 1939 for an enlistment at the Arsenal.

I continued my studies the rest of the summer and in September received my orders to report to Michigan State College on or before October 10 of 1943. The good-byes during this period were many and when the end of September arrived many of my friends had already enlisted or been drafted.

The first two weeks of October were filled with anxiety and final good-byes. Another old friend, Dick Kipping had enlisted in the Air Corps and the days before I left we went out often. I said my good-byes to him and spent my last evening with friends who had not yet left for the services. As I looked forward to a new chapter of my life, I wondered what was next, and what the future would spring upon me. It was a blustery October Saturday and I anxiously awaited to start out on that future. Now I finally was facing my mother; I could see that she was hiding her feelings. She gave me a hug and softly said good-bye. My father drove me to the Rock Island Lines station in Moline. As the moment came to board the train, Dad said his good-bye, shook my hand and wished me good luck. As the train pulled away, there was that seventeen-year old boy (quickly becoming a man) going off to war, apprehensive and a little afraid of the unknown.

Chapter Two

ASTP, Michigan State College

I arrived in Chicago that windy Saturday afternoon and left the LaSalle Street Station for the Dearborn Station to board the train for Michigan and the future. That night on the train I mused about what the future would bring. My thoughts were filled with anxiety, wonder and exhilaration-replete with the adventure conjured up by a