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Searching for That Which is Lost

Sometimes you do not know you are missing something until you have found it.

There was a wall of photographs in my parent's bedroom. Preserved in black and white were images which, over time, became my understanding of people whom I never knew and of events that occurred before I was born. There were photographs of my father's father who died when my father was fourteen, my father's two older brothers as children in white sailor suits with short pants that came to their knees, the handsome and slightly raucous Whiffenpoofs of 1942 gathered around the legendary table at Morrie's with their glasses raised on high, my parents poised on the steps of the church where they were married in June of 1942 with my father in his navy dress whites and my mother in her white dress, my father sitting on a chaise long in the miniscule living room of their first house in Pensacola, Florida where he was in naval flight school, my father's older brother Bob in his army uniform. So many of the faces were members of my father's family who died before I was born; his father, his oldest brother, one of the little boys in the sailor suit, his mother and his brother Bob who died in World War II in Europe. The perfection of the images, the smiling faces in the photos conjured up for me a sense of nostalgia for a world tinged with romance that I could never be a part of and a sense of loss for all those handsome, happy people that I would never know.

Many of the bits and pieces of what I did come to know about my father's family were told to me by my mother and my father's sister. Save for a pair of very elderly and childless uncles, there were no other living members of the Woodhull family. Near the end of the war (World War II), my father's younger sister married a young man from Milwaukee. She moved there with him to raise a family of four, three sons and a daughter that nearly mirrored our family of three daughters and a son. She was one of my godmothers and a favorite aunt with a wonderful sense of self-deprecating humor that family lore said she had inherited from her mother, the grandmother that I never

knew. Visits between our families were always filled with lots of activities, laughter and warmth. With eight children running around, there was little talk of the past.

I don't remember how old I was when I learned that Uncle Bob, Robert Patterson Woodhull, had died in the war. Somehow he was just always missing. It seemed unfortunate but not outside the realm of normality to have only one set of living grandparents. But it did not feel quite right to have an uncle, someone the same age as my parents, who was dead, especially since there were reminders of him all around. Over the fireplace in the living room, there was a portrait of him as a boy posed seated and playing a drum. The resemblance to my father was striking with the same blue eyes, brown hair and round face. Rummaging in the attic one time I found his letter sweater from his time as a cheerleader at Princeton. Just old enough at the time to know the mystique surrounding high school letter sweaters and the social status that was conferred on the wearer, it made me wonder if he might actually have been cool and possibly even popular. My father would sometimes tease about the fact that his brother had had the misfortune to go to Princeton while he had the glory of attending Yale. But beyond that remark I knew nothing of Uncle Bob's college experience prior to his going to war. On some other foray into the dark and rich recesses of the attic, I came across my father's dress white navy uniform and Uncle Bob's khaki army uniform. The feel of the heavy cloth and the slightly musty smell, conjured up images of virile, handsome, young men forever smiling in the photos on the wall in my parents bedroom.

My father was a warm, loving man with a wonderful sense of humor. He was a terrific storyteller with a fine sense of comic timing. He made up a running tale of a mischievous character who was seldom seen and always in trouble which he loved to tell on warm summer nights when we were allowed to stay up late. But he seldom if ever talked about his family or if he missed them and I never knew how to ask about what seemed to me to be an incomparably sad series of losses. It was more than enough that he was my father, the provider for our family, the installer of tomato stakes in the garden, the person who taught me to hit a baseball, and the person who encouraged me in all things and reveled in my successes. It was not until I had children of my own that I really understood there were whole other dimensions to him and to his life beyond being my

father. When he died at the age of seventy-one there was so much that I did not know about him and his feelings about his family.

What I was not aware of was how deeply I had absorbed the sense of loss and sadness surrounding Uncle Bob. I don't know whether I took on my father's grief or manufactured my own out of my own inchoate longings or imaginings of what might have been if he had lived. But as time went on, the events of my own life took over my energies and kept me fully engaged in the present. Gradually thoughts of my uncle disappeared. If asked, I would have said that I hardly ever thought about him. Until that is in the fall of 2005 when my husband handed me a sheaf of papers. It was pages and pages of printing, some faint copies of copies, some with official stamps, a few grainy photographs, some pages with my father's signature, some with his sister's. With the help of the Internet and a friend who is a veteran of World War II, he had tracked down documents detailing where and how my uncle had died. In my hands were more answers than I thought were ever possible. The more I read, the more I wanted to know so I set out on my own trail of discoveries.

The first thing I did was to go to my computer and to put his name into a Google search. Immediately, his name and a web site appeared. I went to the website and there on the front page was a photograph of him in uniform. With the photograph was a narrative about his service in Europe. It was a personal remembrance written by one of Uncle Bob's fellow soldiers, Lieutenant Howard Hensleigh. All that I had known previously was that he had parachuted into France, nothing else. Howard explained that Uncle Bob had been a paratrooper in the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, assigned as an officer and Forward Observer with the 460 Field Artillery Battalion. His job was to get as far forward as possible to direct artillery fire on enemy positions.

Although I found the narrative fascinating, it gave rise to more questions. Where had Uncle Bob trained? How did he get to Germany? What were the dates of all these events? So I went to the Internet again, used the bits of information that I had and searched further.

On a website dedicated to the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, I found an account of the training and formation of his unit. The entire contents of a book about my Uncle's unit was published in 1985 by the 517th Parachute Regimental Team Combat

Association and edited by Clark Archer. The sources for the book include field notes and the recollections of survivors of the war. In the prologue to the book these paratroopers are described as “ a new kind of soldier, trained to jump behind enemy lines and fight without outside help until relieved. They were brash, cocky, self-reliant, aggressive individualists, and a great deal was expected of them...The 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, organized relatively late in the war, was destined to play a major role in the campaigns that led to the total defeat of the German Army and the liberation of Western Europe.” The young men who volunteered for parachute duty were put through several stages of rigorous training that winnowed out those who could not manage the physical and mental challenges. This included among other activities, jogging in formation for two miles every morning, speed marching, multiple sessions of push ups, running up and down a nearby mountain and constant rifle and arms training. After basic training, at Camp Mackall in North Carolina, the 517th was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for parachute training. Due to their superior conditioning, they breezed through jump school with no failures setting a record that was still unbroken at the time the book was published in 1985.

One day I was talking to my sister about my search and she told me that she had created an archive of letters that Uncle Bob had written home while in the army. I found the archive at my mother’s house and discovered his voice telling parts of his own story. Reading his letters along with the book, A Paratroopers Odyssey, created a clearer picture of his experiences. In the first letter in the collection, he reveals that although naturally afraid of heights, he was enjoying the training to be a paratrooper. The training started with both day and night jumps off a 250’ tower and then graduated to real jumps from airplanes about which he says, “I will admit that I’ve never been so scared as I’ve been in the past week and a half...but on the other hand I like it.” The unit history explains “One of (the) requirements for parachute units was a 300-mile flight, followed by a night jump and a three-day ground exercise, with all supply by air. The 517th took its turn in this operation in January (1944), working with the same troop carrier formations that later were to drop the 82nd and 101st in Normandy, and the 517th itself in Southern France.”

After completing training in late winter of 1944, the battalion made ready to be shipped over seas. These preparations included creating wills and powers of attorney,

taking last leaves, getting shots for communicable diseases and crating artillery and vehicles for shipping. The battalion was staged through Newport News, Virginia. On May 17, 1944 the paratroopers of the 517th boarded the SS Santa Rosa, a steamship of the Grace Line that had been commandeered for troop transport, while members of the 460th and 596th units boarded the Panama Canal ship Cristobal. At Hampton Roads, the two ships joined a Navy destroyer and formed a small convoy for crossing the Atlantic to a destination unknown to the troops onboard.

After fourteen uneventful days at sea, the convoy docked at Naples, Italy on May 31, 1944. The team was trucked to the Neapolitan suburb of Bagnoli and then sent to an area that was the bed of a long dead volcano to await the delivery and reassembly of their equipment. During the two-week wait, news came of the invasion of Normandy and the fall of Rome, leaving the troops in the crater wondering if there would be anything left for them to do. By mid-June with all equipment prepared, the unit was dispatched to participate in the campaign to drive the Germans north out of Italy. Although Uncle Bob's letters never gave locations, he probably was part of the troops sent north to Civitavecchia, the port for Rome, and then northeast where they were engaged by the German artillery. In a letter dated June 28, 1944 he says, "Can now say I've been in combat. Needless to say you have so many 'impressions' that you can't put them down. Its quite a shock suddenly to hear the lead fly by, watch some of the lads brought in, hit the dirt as Jerry opens up with his artillery and see the dead etc....we all get scared – really scared – plenty." His adjustment to combat was of necessity quick. "I used to think that after waiting around so damn long it would take a close shell or a few close bullets to make me realize I was in combat. Jerry was thoughtful enough to take care of that in good style the first day!" All memories of his previous life "being clean, eating real food (not dehydrated or out of a can), going to a bar and having a drink – seems(sic) in another world." Despite being in retreat, the German troops fought all the way. He continues his description in his long letter of June 28, 1944: "they're clever and tricky and well equipped in most respects (better than us even in quite a few instances) but they have more than they can handle now and although they don't think so they are licked – that is there is plenty of real fighting left and it may take some time but unless he starts using

gas or some such thing I believe he's going downhill. There's a lot to do yet though – apparently he doesn't think he's losing...”

In a change of mood he goes on, “The weather continues good which is no small blessing for a soldier. Thank God its not winter! I hope its all over by then. My job has changed again...I am a Liaison Officer with one of the Infantry Battalions at present. ...Not much sleep etc. and plenty of walking. I'm right in it however and there's not much boredom at all. Its surely hard to get used to what you see although I think I'm getting more callous.” After some chat about family matters he describes some time off. “Swam in the ocean or rather sea today. It was perfect – the beach sandy and the water just right. I felt in another world. God this country can be mighty blissful...Its sort of a dream world at times around here... It seemed strange to be swimming while you could hear the sound of guns up the coast.”

Finally he ends his letter by saying “Don't believe the papers about this being a chase over here. Jerry puts up a fight alright and it will get tougher all the time I think. Take it from me the Germans have more than enough fight to suit any of us.”

In the meantime, the plans for the invasion of the south of France had been finalized. The planned invasion of Southern France, initially called ANVIL and ultimately renamed DRAGOON, had been agreed upon by the Allies at the Tehran conference in 1943 as a secondary attack to draw German forces away from the main invasion force in Normandy. The troops were to fight their way north through France to join the forces coming from the beaches of Normandy to defeat the German army. When it became clear that there were not enough landing craft to carry out both operations simultaneously, ANVIL was postponed. Nonetheless, planning for DRAGOON continued. Troops were assembled in Italy in preparation. Since the 517th Regimental Combat Team including my Uncle was one of those units chosen for the invasion, they were withdrawn from the battle in Italy to prepare. It was estimated that there were 30,000 enemy troops in the targeted area in southern France with another 200,000 within a few days march. The plan was for the paratroopers to be dropped in enemy held territory to clear the area so that the invasion force could land safely. It had been determined that an airborne force of a Division of 10,000 to 15,000 soldiers would be needed for a successful mission. Since there was no such Division in the area, the

commanding officers combined several different units including my Uncle's unit, the 517th to create a force of adequate size. The paratroopers were assembled at various points in the Rome area along the west coast of Italy from whence they would be flown to France for the invasion which was scheduled for 8:00 a.m. on August 15th.

In the meantime, aircraft was rerouted from the Normandy invasion to airfields around Italy and on the island of Sicily. Parachutes were packed and landing craft readied. The Combat Team was sealed off on August 10th. As part of their preparation for such a dangerous battle, my Uncle and his fellow soldiers were encouraged to write letters home that would be sent in case of their death or the declaration that they were missing in action. In the middle of winter in 1945, my parents received the letter that Uncle Bob had written that August day on the eve of battle.

During the daylight hours of August 14, equipment bundles were packed, rigged and dropped off beside each plane. In addition to the equipment that would be dropped with the paratroopers was the extraordinary amount of gear each soldier carried which included "Everything needed to fight and survive for several days...The average man carried 30 pounds of personal gear his weapon and ammunition, three grenades, two days' rations, water, gas mask, entrenching tool, and the like. Another 20 to 30 pounds was added in "organizational" equipment radios, ammunition for crew-served weapons, mines, explosives--the list is endless. On top of all this had to go the main and reserve parachutes and the inflatable "Mae West" life preserver." Around midnight the paratroopers began the carefully orchestrated and extremely complicated process of boarding their assigned planes. On cue engines were started at 1:00 a.m. At 10-second intervals, the planes taxied down dirt runways, lifted off and circled into formation. Although the weather forecast had been for a clear night, a dense fog had settled over the south of France making it nearly impossible to accurately locate the drop zones. The 517th group, including my uncle and his buddy Howard Hensleigh, jumped a bit early at 3:28 a.m. just east of their target and immediately came under enemy attack. Despite the land mines, the trip wires and the dark, the different units managed to regroup and form needed cover for the seaborne invasion which landed without opposition. As described in A Paratroopers Odyssey, "The airborne operation was a remarkable performance, considered by many military historians the most successful of the war. Within 18 hours

9,099 troops, 213 artillery pieces and antitank guns, and 221 vehicles had been flown two hundred miles across the Mediterranean and landed by parachute and glider in enemy-held territory. Despite widely scattered landings all missions assigned had been accomplished within 48 hours. Two enemy battalions had been destroyed, a Corps headquarters captured, 1,350 prisoners taken, and an 'airhead' of 50 square miles opened for the advance of the seaborne troops.”

It is at this point that Howard Hensleigh’s narrative picks up the story of Uncle Bob’s experiences. After completing the jump into Southern France, he and Uncle Bob were given responsibility for obtaining information about the enemy. As Howard describes it, they were part of the First Airborne Task Force which “was assigned the mission of holding the right flank of the attack and driving the axis forces back into Italy. Although there was heavy fighting for each mountain ridge, we had the pleasant task of liberating the Riviera and some newsmen called it the ‘Champaign Campaign’”. Nevertheless, the assignment was not without dangers. On one occasion when Howard and Uncle Bob were on combat patrol in southern France they had a platoon of Germans partially surrounded. The soldiers stood at the command to surrender until their officer thwarted their actions by opening fire on his own men. Howard and Uncle Bob crawled forward until they were close enough to determine the location of the officer and fired until he was silenced. They captured the platoon along with their weapons, ammunition and equipment. Of Uncle Bob’s role in the action Howard simply said, “He was a brave guy.”

In a letter to my father dated August 29, 1944 Uncle Bob shares the happy information that at that moment he is “safe and sound and enjoying France quite a bit after our not easily forgotten jump on D day. My view of France is becoming slightly jaundiced of late however due to the amount of ground we are covering strictly on foot...mountains may be beautiful to look at but are strictly hell to cross particularly when you’re loaded down like a pack horse.” It was during the battle in the south of France that Uncle Bob was awarded the bronze star and promoted from First Lieutenant to Captain and was assigned to the 517th Parachute Infantry as artillery liaison officer. He and Howard, who was the S-2 or intelligence staff officer for the battalion, went on patrols two or three times a week during the month and a half that they were on the line

in the South of France. Howard remembers “We worked as a team and Woody would call in artillery to take care of targets of opportunity, to slow down enemy forces who were coming after us when we got too deep into enemy territory, and to destroy targets we spotted after we made it back inside our own lines.”

By early November the army had arrived at Sospel, a small French town near the Italian border and about 15 miles north of the coast. Having completed their part of the invasion, the 517th was sent to northern France to join the effort to defeat the German army there. They were sent by rail in WWI 40 by 8's, small boxcars with straw on the floor designed to carry 40 men and 8 horses. Once there they took advantage of time off from fighting to recondition equipment and reorganize in preparation for the next phase of battle. During the night of December 15, 1944 the German army launched its last great offensive of World War II, striking with three armies against weak American positions in the Ardennes region of Belgium and Luxembourg. Hitler's objectives were to seize the port of Antwerp, drive a wedge between the Americans and the British and force the allies to consider a negotiated peace. Although the Allies were taken completely by surprise and were pushed back, a plan of retaliation was formed and the counter offensive, which became known as the Battle of The Bulge to retake lost ground, began December 21.

Although I have few specifics about their participation, Uncle Bob and Howard Hensleigh both fought in this campaign. In a letter of January 28 written from Belgium, Uncle Bob relates that “It has been a bit tough and I've seen more than I like. At present, however, I'm reveling in some real leisure – actually have nothing to do but eat, sleep and write a few letters. More than that we have an old house we can keep sort of warm. It's the coldest winter in seventy years so that latter part is very important. To add to the general misery there is also 20 inches of snow on the ground. Not a pleasant background to fight but then it works both ways. The Germans must be hurting too! The Battle of the Bulge is about over now and I hope we will begin to make some time now although it looks like a rugged job ahead.” What he did not know was that “The Battle of the Bulge ... was the largest battle the United States Army has ever fought. American losses were 80,987 killed, wounded, and missing; estimated German losses vary from 81,834 to 103,900.”

Yet even in the midst of the fighting there were moments of relief. In the same letter he says, “Just came back from Paris where I had a three day pass. Its one of those combat passes where you leave from the line to go directly to Paris. ...I hit the fair city with but one real desire in mind – to get warm, take a hot bath and eat hot food on a plate. All this I did and then I just sat around and thoroughly relaxed.” Later in the letter he expresses admiration for the foot soldiers who have to spend so much in the cold and snow. “Fortunately for myself I have to spend very few nights outside as we’ve been able to find some sort of house usually.” He sends thanks for the care package he received and especially the sunglasses he had requested although he had no need of them at the moment. He sends his special best to my mother who was pregnant with me and due to deliver near the end of January and expresses how much he is looking forward to being an uncle. By this time Europe had been a battleground for nearly six long years and the hardships were apparent. Uncle Bob continues, “Speaking of shortages I might add the French have very little wool, coal and of course footwear of any kind. They envy the Americans...no little bit and of course there is a thriving Black Market. This is a very tough war over here...Most people don’t complain much and take it fairly well.” In another letter to a close family friend dated February 1, 1942, he continues his description of the conditions. “Not too much news that I can tell you. It has not been a pleasant new year so far but at least the Bulge is now pointing the other way. It cost us more than I like to think but we are moving forward again. Its discouraging at times – very – and the cost of mistakes so high that I almost get bitter but then war has always been this way and I don’t suppose that its very different fundamentally this time than before.”

Although the battle had ended, the war was far from over. A major Allied assault was planned with a divisionary force to attack the Germans in the Huertgen Forest near Bergstein, Germany. It was a daunting area that had proven to be a monstrous battleground. In the book, “A Paratroopers Odyssey” is the following description:

“The Huertgen Forest, lying within the Aachen--Duren--Monschau triangle, had acquired a sinister reputation as a man-eating monster...The Forest is a vast expanse of tall, dense firs rising from rocky crags and ravines.

The Germans had prepared the strongest defenses of the western front in the Huertgen. The entire area was honeycombed with a maze of minefields, wire, pillboxes, and bunkers. In the dark gloom of the forest the sky could rarely be seen, and the pine needles on the forest's floor provided ideal concealment for the minefields. The ridges in the area were high and devoid of cover, providing excellent observation into the sea of trees below.”

It was into this terrain that Uncle Bob and Howard Hensleigh were sent to scout German emplacements. The plan was for the army to move into the forest during the night of February 5/6 and to begin clearing a lane through the mines for troops to move forward. There were heavy casualties as the Germans used flares to locate and fire upon the American troops. In his narrative, Howard describes his unit’s experience. “We were new to the terrain around Bergstein having just arrived there before the attack (on the 7th of February). From the outset, our attacking infantry units were in serious trouble. When they hit the minefields, the supporting enemy fire came in with devastating effect. What Woody and I were attempting to do was to give G, H and I Companies artillery support in their attacks. We got too close that morning. Woodhull was killed by a burst of machine gun fire not more than three feet from me...We were doing our “damnedest” to assist the attack with artillery, probably a little too far forward ...which was usual with Woody.” It was February 7, 1945, three days after I was born.

Lieutenant Hensleigh continues in his narrative “Bergstein was a heart rending diversionary attack – our last taste of combat and a bad one. In an attempt to remove some of the bitterness we feel in our enormous losses at Bergstein, ...we must credit ourselves with the fact that it was a successful diversionary attack.” Of course the Allies ultimately succeeded in defeating Germany and my Uncle is just one of thousands of casualties of the war.

But that is not the end of the information that my husband was able to find. With the help of a friend who is a World War II vet, he contacted the Department of the Army and was able to obtain something called an “Individual Deceased Personal File” which reveals the extraordinary thoroughness and thoughtfulness with which the military took

care of its fallen soldiers in the midst of the ongoing chaos of the war. By February 12, 1945 Uncle Bob had been laid to rest in the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial near Margraten, Holland in grave number 4, row number 1, plot number Q. On the 14th of February a thorough itemized inventory of his personal effects was sent to his sister. The list included all items of his clothing, his military insignias, a tattered bronze star, four books; "Daily Strength for Daily Need," a compendium of meditations published in 1898, "Yankee from Olympus," a biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes by Catherine Drinker Bowen published in 1943, "How to Survive on Land and Sea," from the Aviation Training Division of the United States Navy and "Lost in the Horse Latitudes," a humorous book published in 1944 by H. Allen Smith about his misadventures in the movie business; cash in the amount of \$8.45 and the sunglasses that he had received only a few weeks before. In July, a letter was received from the Army Service Forces. Included in Uncle Bob's effects was a Bronze Star ribbon which was damaged by bullet marks. The Army did not want to remove it from his effects but neither did they want to send it if it would be too distressing. In August, my aunt received a letter along with a check for \$8.45 and information that his effects would be sent under separate cover. And finally in November of 1947, my father received a letter from the Quartermaster General stating that Congress had authorized the disinterment and final burial of the "heroic dead of World War II." My father chose to leave Uncle Bob's remains with his fellow soldiers in the cemetery at Margraten where he lies today. If you go to Google Earth on a computer, you can see the cemetery and the rows upon rows of white crosses.

Soon after the war, my parents received a letter from a young Dutch woman who was part of the cadre of grateful civilians who volunteered to tend the graves of the American soldiers. Her letter says in part "All the Dutch people want to take care for graves of the American heroes, how fight for our freedom, we are, very thankful for that. If you could come to here you could see...how thankful they are for this, who lose their lifes for our liberation, and resting now in our ground." In 1955 my parents did go to Europe and did meet the young woman.

Needless to say, it was overwhelming to find so much information when I had not known it existed. After reading his story about Uncle Bob, I became curious about

Howard Hensleigh and wondered if he were still alive and if I could find him. I searched for him on the Internet and found a short biography. He had been a member of the Infantry ROTC at Iowa University and had entered Infantry School and Jump School in the Army in June of 1943. In 1947 after returning home from the war he obtained a law degree from Iowa Law School, studied international law at Columbia from 1954 to 1955 and went on to serve as a general Counsel for the secretary of Defense, as a legal advisor to the US Mission to NATO in Paris, as deputy Assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury and finally from 1968 to 1991 in the Office of General Counsel at the Raytheon Company, developers of defense technology and its commercial uses. With further searching on the Internet, I found his name on a law firm in Florida along with an address. Figuring that he was still alive, I sent him a letter at the address I had found. Over a month later I received a letter from him in response. He no longer lived in Florida but with his daughter in California which is why it took so long for my letter to find him. His telephone number was included in his letter so I called him. He was delightful and thrilled to know that there were other members of Uncle Bob's family who had survived the war as he had thought that Uncle Bob was the end of the line. Finding him was like finding another piece of the puzzle.

At this point, I doubt that I will ever be able to learn anything more. Although I know more now than I ever thought possible, there is much about my uncle that I will never know. Finding a story where there were only questions has satisfied part of my curiosity but somehow has not assuaged the sense of loss and grief over what might have been that must also have haunted my father.

Resources:

World War II Paratrooper Webbase; www.band-of-brothers.nl

460Parachute Field Artillery Battallion: www.ww2-airborne.us

517 Parachute Regimental Combat Team: www.517prct.org

Paratrooper's Odyssey: A History of the 517th Parachute Combat Team, Clark Archer, ED. 1985. I used the online edition at the 517th website.

Howard Hensleigh's remembrance of Uncle Bob is on the Band of Brothers website cited above.