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Muriel

Joanna Sandbo Engstrom

For Muriel, Elvira and Johanna - my heroes

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Introduction

I wrote this memoir in the voice of Muriel Olson Kappler, aptly described as my “Great Aunt.” My grandmother was Elvira Olson Bergh, Muriel's sister. When I was interviewing Muriel, she was matter-of-fact and extremely humble about her experience in World War II. She did not think I had enough material to write a book. Muriel is understated and does not embellish her experiences in any way. She sticks with the facts and loves history. My intention was to be true to her stories, while using additional description to help give life to the stories that have shaped her world.

These stories are the product of memory and generational memory. Each of us, I'm confident, would tell these stories in a slightly different way, based on our own experience and interpretation.

In the
Beginning



Martin, Elvira, Johanna, and Freeman Olson

1.

My mother knew as soon as she opened the door and saw Uncle Alfred.

It was Friday, November 30, 1917, the day after Thanksgiving. Dad was at the hardware store. The family had been at Grandpa Olson's; all the Olson's were there. After Thanksgiving dinner, Freeman and his cousins, Chester and Kenneth had gone to the pond to test the ice. Mother had told them it was not safe to skate. Rachel, Mother's sister, was staying with us, along with Mother's cousin, Martha. Our house was full and brimming with cooking and laughter.

As soon as he got up on Friday, Freeman had asked Mother if he could go to the pond with the Knutson boys. It was a pleasant, early morning. My mother said, "No, I don't want you to go to the pond."

The kids played there all winter long. The ice became their playground. The edges were for exploring. All the kids in Brandon, Minnesota met at the pond. The young ones would skid across the ice, experimenting with the slippery surface. As they got older, it became the place to meet before going somewhere less familiar.

Mother did not like the pond. It was unpredictable, especially in the late fall. No one had a clear view of the pond from town.

Freeman ran to the hardware store and asked Dad if he could go play with the kids. Martin said, "Alright, as long as you stay on the small pond."

Freeman ran all the way to the pond, carrying his skates awkwardly in his right arm. He broke his right arm years ago when he fell from a tree, and it was never set correctly. His range of motion was off.

Freeman ran down First Street, so that Mother wouldn't see him. He loved to skate and it was such a lovely day. He hardly needed his wool winter coat.

There were plenty of other kids there. Some of the kids were going to Love's Lake; there were fewer people there and more room to skate. Love's Lake was bigger and fed by many springs. Freeman knew he shouldn't go with the Knutson boys to Love's Lake, but it wasn't far from the pond.

They hadn't been there long when there was a loud crack. Most of the kids got scared and ran home. Merle Dickenson and Phil Hanson were still there when they heard the splashing from the other side of the lake. They heard someone struggling. As they got closer, they saw Freeman. They got on their stomachs trying to grab him; however the ice wouldn't hold them. They knew this wasn't good, so Merle ran to get help. Phil stayed with Freeman trying to give him his hand.

Merle went straight to our house.

"Freeman's gone through the ice!" he said, out of breath. Mother gasped. She ran for a blanket.

Uncle Alfred, my Aunt Edna's husband, was there having coffee. He took the blanket as he threw on his coat and ran to the lake. Mother shook her head sick with worry.

Normally, there would be the usual group of kids pushing sticks across the ice and darting along the edge. Although now, Phil was the only kid.

Alfred saw the dark spot under the ice. He walked as far onto the lake as he could, while being careful not to break through. He yelled for Phil to get a sled. Phil ran around the perimeter of the pond to his house to get a sled.

Alfred slid on his stomach to get as close as possible to Freeman without going in. As he inched along, he heard Phil's dad coming with the sled.

"Be careful. Push it out here as far as you can without putting any weight on it," Alfred said.

Everything suddenly went quiet for Uncle Al. He couldn't hear anyone or anything. The town was focused on the pond. People were yelling, "Do you need help?" "What can I do?"

Al didn't hear any of it. He was fixated on the dark spot, Freeman, his nephew under the ice. He inched along on his belly to the spot ahead. He knew he didn't have time, yet if he fell through, he would have no chance of saving him.

When he was close enough to reach Freeman, he could see that his nephew wouldn't be able to grab him.

"He's gone," Al said to no one.

Freeman fell through and panicked. He had known to get his skates off, but had kicked too far from where he fell through. He was just inches from the hole in the ice, standing up.

The kids who were skating that day ran away when Freeman was in trouble. They would be punished if they were at the Lake.

They were suppose to stay on the small pond.

Alfred carefully broke the ice above Freeman's head. He knew the boy was dead, but he didn't want him to slip further under or farther away. He grabbed the back of his coat and effortlessly hoisted him onto the sled. He had to slide on his belly away from the hole to avoid falling in.

Merle and Phil stood at the ready on the side of the pond. Once Alfred got to the area where he knew it was safe to stand, he stood and pulled the sled to the kids waiting.

Phil's dad took over pulling the sled. Alfred found his coat that he had shed earlier and draped it across Freeman. My brother's body was drenched, bloated and freezing as they moved him away from the pond. They slowly walked across the town in no hurry to bring evidence of what my family already knew was the outcome. They came up the street and finally reached the house. Mother and Dad were standing at the door, while Elvira stood behind them. Mother didn't scream or cry when Alfred carried Freeman up the steps. She just watched and showed them where to lay her son. She had placed blankets on the Davenport in the living room. Uncle Al laid Freeman across the blankets, while mother knelt on the floor in front of him.

"Elvira get your uncle some coffee, please," my Mother asked.

Elvira, Al and Dad knew to leave Mother alone. They did not want to hear her cries or her silence.

She wept then, at least I think.

While in the kitchen, Elvira poured the coffee and Al stood by the stove. Dad sat at the table. Rachel tried to stay out of the way wishing she were invisible, as she cleaned the kitchen repeatedly.

After what seemed like a long time, Mother asked, "Martin, will you fill the wash tub with water and leave it in the kitchen?"

Mother and Dad carried Freeman to the tub. She stripped off his wet clothes. Alfred went into the living room with Rachel and Martha. Elvira went upstairs burying her head in her pillow. Mother bathed Freeman with the help of Dad. Once he was bathed, they brought him back to the Davenport. Mother went upstairs to find his church clothes.

"Elvira, set up the ironing board in the living room, please," Mother asked.

Elvira went to the sewing room and found the ironing board. She brought it to the living room, grateful that she could do something to help, but heartbroken at the

same time. She didn't understand how Freeman's death would change their lives.

Mother placed his church clothes, his only set, on the ironing board. Then, she, along with Dad carefully laid Freeman on the ironing board. Mother dressed him quickly, knowing that it would soon be more difficult. With a lump that sat in the back of her throat and affected her whole body, she carried out the task of preparing her second son for burial.

Jake Tamble, Mother's cousin, had been asked to build a casket. The furniture store sold caskets, but they did not believe in keeping small caskets in stock. Jake measured his own living son who was a few years older than Freeman, not wanting to disturb Johanna and Martin with the reality of putting a measuring tape next to Freeman's body.

Once he was dressed, Freeman stayed on the ironing board until a child-size casket was ready. When Jake came with the shortened casket, he placed it in the center of the room—the abomination, an empty coffin built especially for this child. Dad and Alfred gently placed Freeman inside. They hoisted the boy onto the ironing board, this time in his casket. Mother gently tidied up his clothes and kissed her son once more before going to bed.

The next day, everyone from town came to the house to pay their respects. Mother had done this before. She made coffee, stood by the door and ushered everyone in.

"Thank you."

"Thanks for coming."

"Thank you."

Stoic and uniform, it's all she said. People brought food, more food than could be stored. Elvira dutifully put things away. My sister stayed near Mother without getting in the way. Reverend Mageleson had been at the house most of the day. He stayed until the last person left.

Mother was beside herself with grief. Once everyone was gone, she sat on the Davenport and wept. Her heart ached. It was a physical ache. She felt as if there was a huge, visible, gaping wound on her chest where her heart sat. Her face showed her sorrow, and her tears were difficult to stop. Reverend Magelessen said, "Mrs. Olson, don't you believe in God?"

Mother hesitated, unable to believe what he asked.

"I hope you never have to go through what I am suffering today and always will," she answered.

Rachel tried to coax Elvira to come to her house, thinking it would be better for my

mother. My sister wanted nothing to do with it.

"I'll buy you a new doll," Rachel said.

Elvira replied, "Who cares about a new doll?"

The funeral was the next day. Mother was up all night. Elvira slept. When Elvira woke up, she hoped everything from the past few days had been a dream, a nightmare. She had to remind herself that Freeman was really gone.

That day she went to church, then to the cemetery to bury another one of her brothers.



Me, 1922

2.

Elvira was born in 1905. It was a family of three. A trusted triangle with three strong sides. Three at the dining table; three in church. Mother, Dad and Elvira.

Harvey was born in 1907 when Elvira was 2. They became a family of four. A symmetrical dining table, and a full pew in church.

Harvey slept in a crib in Mother and Dad's room. Wherever Mother went, Harvey was on her hip. Elvira followed in tow. Without warning, Harvey died of convulsions at 11 months. Mother was heartbroken.

The sweet quartet was back to a trio. It took time to adjust to the roles again, even though they had only recently become a foursome. For Mother, it was the worst. She had carried Harvey for nine months on the inside, and eleven months on the

outside. She had spent the most time with him, and missed him terribly when he was gone. People didn't know what to say, often saying the wrong thing. Mother didn't blame them, but never underestimated the sense of loss. No matter how old the child, a mother bonds with a child irrevocably. Time and space don't alter that bond. There is nothing to say to a mother who has lost a child. Words are empty and meaningless. The feeling of absence is that woman's new normal.

Freeman was born in 1908. Mother was elated. For nine years they were a family of four again. Four at the dinner table once again; walking to church, they were two and two. Mother and Dad, Elvira and Freeman.

When Freeman died, the trio was back again.

In remembrance, Mother wore a wide black brimmed hat every time she went out for one year. Dad wore a black armband. Elvira wore a black ribbon on her middie blouse when she went to school. A black ribbon hung on the front door.



In 1920, Elvira realized that Mother was pregnant with me. She was furious. She thought Mother was too old to have a baby.

Mother and Dad hardly even spoke. Elvira thought, "How could mother be pregnant?"

It was very difficult since Freeman had died. Elvira tried to speak to her mother as little as possible. She hardly spoke to her dad. She stayed at school as late as possible and did her chores immediately when she got home in hopes that nothing would be said to her. Finally Mother, knowing exactly what Elvira was thinking, asked, "Do you think I'm too old to have another child?"

Elvira tried to avoid Mother's eyes. She thought about it. Saying it out loud didn't sound right.

"I've lost two sons," Mother said.

My sister felt horrible and didn't know what to say. How could she tell her mother she didn't want a brother or a sister? Elvira began to cry, knowing that she was really not angry about her mother's pregnancy. She was afraid, afraid of having another brother or a sister. "What if something happened again?" Elvira thought.

As always, mother could read her thoughts. Mother put her hand on Elvira's—it was as affectionate as Mother got.

Mother always worked in her garden and continued working throughout her pregnancy. Elvira got up to join her. Mother spoke quietly as she worked.

“These summer squash are too close together, we'll need to spread them out, give them some room to grow,” she said as she continued working.

Elvira dried her eyes on the sleeve of her blouse.

“Elvira, go get some chicken wire. We need to keep those rabbits out of the beans,” Mother said.

Elvira ran to the shed and came back with the chicken wire.

“I forgot I had planted cabbage here, these are going to need to be thinned, too,” Mother said.

Elvira helped her mother. She felt like things were going back to normal. She didn't respond or make comments as they gardened. She knew her mother's mind worked faster than her hands, and she needed to sort out her thoughts through her lips as she pressed on with other tasks.

Elvira was too young to understand that the promise of this garden and the energy her mother spent making it whole was what kept her from falling apart. Mother worked from the moment she rose to the moment

she slept. Mother tried to keep order among the things over which she had control. Mother's garden grew every vegetable imaginable—tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, zucchini, carrots, potatoes, rutabagas, squash, raspberries, strawberries and melon. Mother also had an apple tree.

She tended the garden from spring until fall, harvesting every vegetable and canning as soon as the produce started to arrive. Elvira helped her mother can, preserve, cook and tend the garden. She would wrap the apples in newspaper to keep them as long as possible. They ate vegetables from the garden all winter long. Elvira learned everything about cooking, canning and saving money from Mother.



Elvira loved school and boys. She knew she wanted to be a teacher when she was 12. She loved learning and the rhythm of the school year.

Mother thought Elvira should branch out a little and do something other than teach. When she finished school, Dad was happy that Elvira stayed in Brandon, living near the family.

Before she was married, Mother had moved to Chicago and lived with a wealthy family, honing her cooking, cleaning and housekeeping skills. Mother was resourceful and bold, unintimidated by the huge city of Chicago, the distance between her new home and her family's modest farm near Brandon.

For a brief time, Elvira went to high school in St. Paul, Minnesota. She stayed with Aunt Inger and Uncle Will, but eventually went back to Alexandria to be closer to her family. She graduated from Alexandria High School. She missed her mother and life in Brandon.



Elvira and I, 1925

3.

Dad was at the store when mother was in labor. Despite her earlier misgivings, Elvira was excited. She was still unsure how this was going to impact her life, but she knew it wouldn't be helpful for her dating career to have a baby in tow.

Mother walked around the house doing as much work as possible while in labor. She was always busy, and this helped keep her mind off the pain and the fear. Elvira followed her around, trying not to get in the way but knowing she needed to be close. She was not looking forward to her dad coming home. He would not be any help. Mother told Elvira to go get her dad, but Elvira delegated that task to her friend, Doris, who was elated when she was asked to go to the hardware store. She was

excited to tell Martin Olson his wife was about to have a baby.

The baby, (me) was coming early. They were not expecting me until November. Dad sent for the doctor, and then took his time coming home. He made sure the doctor was already there before entering the house. He kept his distance when it came to things like giving birth. He waited on the porch and listened for his cue to come inside, while Elvira helped the doctor deliver me.

I was tiny. After I was born, Mother kept me in a little white dress that fit on one of Elvira's dolls. She wrapped me in blankets and kept me in a basket next to the stove.

Elvira adored me in spite of herself. We gradually settled in as a family of four, again. We were a foursome at the table with me in a highchair and Elvira next to me.

She liked to feed me and change me. She let me play with her old dolls, until I started taking them all by myself. My sister would watch me while Mother was in the kitchen working, and she would bring her friends to see me and dress me in silly clothes. I was her living doll. Unpredictable, but malleable, to whatever adventure Elvira was drumming up with her friends. When she took me around town in a wagon, the boys

thought I was so cute. Elvira did not mind having me around then.

We walked two and two to church, again. Mother and Dad in front, Elvira and me behind. Elvira held my hand and helped me through the snow. We wore our Sunday clothes and loved to be together, the four of us. We sat four across in a pew. I went to Sunday School, while Elvira was in the choir. I loved to see her with rest the of the choir singing. I couldn't wait until I was old enough to be in the Grace Church choir.

To church, I wore a white knit dress that my mother had made. One Sunday when we got home from church, I was playing in the backyard. I found the coal bin and started shoveling coal. Elvira had been helping my mother in the kitchen when she decided to go outside. Elvira saw me and my delicate white dress smeared in black.

Elvira said, "Mother, Muriel needs a darn good licking!"

My mother took off my dress to try to get it clean. She did give me a darn good licking. Elvira cried.

When I was 3 years old, I had double pneumonia. I was in my room, and Mother was keeping cold wash cloths on my forehead. At that time, they called it the "nine-day crisis." If the fever did not break, the child would likely die.

Elvira, sick with worry, ran out to the front porch.

"She's going to die. She's going to die. My sister Muriel's going to die," she yelled.

My mother told me I started reciting, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, ...thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven."

I'm sure my mother had said it three times a day if not more, since the day I got sick. Elvira had probably said it, too. My mother was terrified that I was going to die. Elvira was terrified as well. Looking back, I am not sure if Elvira was more afraid of losing me, or of how it would affect my mother to lose another child.

Years later, Mother told me that somehow, after I said the Lord's prayer, my fever broke and I recovered. That sums up my mother. She had strong faith. She was committed to God, committed to the church and committed to her family.



I do not remember my mother ever being sick. She was extremely healthy, and she attributed this to taking a spoonful of honey and eating raw garlic every night.

One day, when I was about 4 years old and Elvira was going to school and living in Alexandria, Mother started not feeling well. She was not eating. Dad was concerned and thought she should gain some weight. This was during prohibition, and we never had liquor in our house. Dad would bring beer home in a brown paper bag at night, so no one would see it. Mother would hold her nose and drink beer to gain weight. Despite that, Mother was still not herself.

It never occurred to me that she could even get sick. She didn't complain or stop working. She was quieter than usual and seemed to be gritting her teeth, showing that she was even mildly uncomfortable was completely out of character for her. She was taking extra garlic and honey. The pain was finally more than she could bear, so Dad called the doctor.

Dr. Meckstroth arrived. After a few brief questions and knowing my Mother as he did, he was sure it was gallstones. Mother had to go to Fergus Falls, Minnesota for surgery, which meant two weeks away from home. Dad would be at the hardware store, and Elvira was in school.

First my mom's sister, Aunt Ellen, came to take care of me. She was my godmother and such a sweetheart; however, I would not listen to her. I would crawl into my dad's bed refusing to stay home when he

went to the hardware store. I wanted to go to work with him. I caused so much trouble that she finally left.

My mother's niece, Winnie, came to take care of me next.

"Ah Muriel, namen den, you can't run round da house like dat! What would yer mahder tink?," she said.

Winnie did not know what to do with me. I was awful, so she left.

Finally, Dad asked his sister, Aunt Edna, to come. Aunt Edna straightened me right out. There was no more hiding behind Dad. She made sure I ate my supper, went to bed when I was told and was ready in the morning. She was straight to the point with no fooling around. I did not get away with a thing as long as Aunt Edna was there. She told me how things were going to be, and I complied. Aunt Edna was not cross, but she meant business. She took care of me and the house while my mother was away.



Once Elvira had completed her teacher's training in Moorhead, she moved back to Brandon to live with us. She was my teacher my first year in school. This delighted me and filled me with dread. She

would scold me, just like the other children and make me finish my homework as soon as we got home.

"I can't have my sister missing assignments!" she said.

At the time, it concerned me that my sister knew everything about my academic aptitude. She knew everything about my behavior at school, and what I was like compared to all the other children in Brandon.

Elvira and I walked to and from school together. My mother was thrilled that Elvira was my teacher. Mother never worried that Elvira would let me off easy on anything. At school I addressed her as "Miss Olson." As soon as we were home, she was back to "Sissy."

I was one of two girls in my entire class, so we were outnumbered by boys. This would serve me well during my preparation as a nurse in the Army, once again grossly outnumbered by boys. I was not necessarily a tomboy, but I was use to playing pick up baseball games in the schoolyard, walking long distances to see a game and keeping up with the scores of the games in the neighboring towns. We spent time with the boys—there were boys in the houses on either side of us, and my cousin Warren lived across the street.

§

One day my mother said, "Girls, we have to go to Grandpa Olson's house."

We were told to put on our church clothes. I followed Elvira, and she helped me get dressed. Elvira went into her jewelry box and found the black ribbon she had worn when Freeman died. We went downstairs to the sewing room, and she got out Mother's scissors. She cut a small swatch from the ribbon for me, tying it to the collar of my dress. She explained to me that our cousin Warren who was 5 years old, just like me, had died of pneumonia.

Elvira and I walked with my mother to Grandpa's house. Warren was in a casket in the living room. In the dining room, there was food everywhere. My aunts were bustling around, making sure the platters were full and the empty plates were brought to the kitchen. My mother was silent. When she found my Aunt Agnes, Warren's mother, she took her arm and looked her in the eyes. They stood across from each other holding each other's gaze, speaking a silent language known only to mothers who have suffered the loss of a child. My mother then held her quickly, barely an embrace, and moved along.

My cousins Lillian and Winston were there. I spent many afternoons with Lillian, Winston and Warren. Aunt Agnes, my dad's sister, and Uncle Otto lived across the street. My mother would drink coffee with Agnes and Dad liked to sit on the porch talking with Uncle Otto.

Elvira shepherded me to the dining room. I scanned the table. There was ham, potatoes, lefse, various salads and pickles people had brought. I found the pink cookies. They were packaged cookies my mother never bought, so I took two. I held one in my right hand and one in my left. I walked to my cousin in the casket and slipped the cookie into the right pocket of his Sunday suit. My mother saw what I did and took my hand approvingly to leave.

I had survived pneumonia just a few years earlier. This fact hung in the air as we entered our house and changed out of our church clothes, returning to the routine day.

§

Mother ran a restaurant in town. In the summer, she brought me to work with her in a wagon. In the winter, she brought me on a sled. I would play with my dolls in the corner of the restaurant while Mother worked. Mother would cook and talk to

everyone who came in to eat. Her skill and spirit united in this endeavor where her bounty from working in the garden and her complimentary ability in the kitchen could be enjoyed by the town. Almost more at ease in the restaurant, she loved it when people sat at the counter and talked with her while still working behind the line. My mother loved being in the kitchen, making hearty meals.

When I came home from school, I would leave my books everywhere. My mother would leaf through them nonchalantly. It wasn't until later that I realized she didn't go to school because she married Dad and had a family.

She was a quick study and insatiably curious. She had a gift for problem solving and worked tirelessly. She would try something once, understand it and then perfect it. She demonstrated this in cooking, sewing, gardening and most matters of maintenance around the house.

When the kitchen roof leaked, my mother told my dad what she needed from the hardware store.

"I'll need two buckets of tar, a trowel and a roll of roofing paper," she said.

When he brought it home, she prepared the roof, laid the paper, threw the tar and

spread it like old hat. It never occurred to her that Dad might help.



In addition to the hardware store, the restaurant and school, we spent a lot of time at Grace Church. Mother was often at church—her entire social network was linked to the church.

The Ladies Aid depended on her for her consistency and commitment. She did not argue or disrupt the order of the Ladies Aid. She was dependable and able to do anything. She knew about the politics in the church—which dishes to use, what to serve at funerals, details on Baptisms and the storage of the paraments. Mother did not get involved in those discussions. She silently supported the decisions that were made by other members.

She spoke up, however, when it came to matters of Sunday School. Mother was dedicated to this program, and spent time organizing and coordinating. Of all the discussions that went on regarding the Church, she felt the Sunday School program was the one area that was worth asserting her opinion.

Mother was the Sunday School Superintendent, and I was her star pupil. The area churches all met in Brandon for Sunday School. She spent many hours working with the Ladies Aid and coordinating with the area churches.

She appreciated the time she spent with the women at church, and knew that the gifts she had nurtured throughout the years were appreciated among the group of women.

Dad would sit in church with limited patience. He was social and liked talking with people. As soon as he believed the sermon should end, he would pull out his pocket watch and hold it at arms length. Sometimes if the pastor didn't get the message, he would tediously leaf through the hymnal. Mother would look at him, but Dad didn't seem to notice, although the pastor would.

Dad would often say, "Well, hello Mrs.," clearing his throat to cover up the fact that he didn't know the person's name.

Other times he would whisper, "Muriel, what is her name there in the blue dress?" I would tell him, and he would carry on as though he'd always known her name.

Besides working, gardening and contributing to the Ladies Aid, Mother loved to play cards. Sunday afternoons when I was

in high school, my boyfriend Bunny (Glen Rogney) would come over. We would play Whist with my Mother and Dad. Mother would pull the curtains, so no one could see us playing cards around the dining room table on a Sunday. Mother told us, if anyone comes to the door, "We are *not* playing cards."

One day Reverend Bestul from Grace Church knocked on the door. He had seen that the curtains were drawn, and he wanted to make sure everything was alright. We could see the wheels turning as Mother considered where to hide the cards. Mother got up and opened the lid of the organ with one word, "Here!" she ordered.

We threw all the cards in the organ.

We suspected Pastor Bestul knew what was going on when he sat down at the organ and suggested we sing some hymns.

I started dating Bunny in high school, and we spent a lot of time together. We had known each other since grade school. We went fishing at Moon Lake and would spend many silent hours there. I watched him play baseball in the neighboring towns, kept track of his batting average and thought I would be with him for a long time.

We would go to the dance at City Hall on Saturday night. Everyone from town and the farms around Brandon would go, too.

The expectations of the Saturday night dance filled us with anticipation all week long. We looked forward to who would be there, what they would wear and who would dance with who. At 9 p.m., the town curfew bell would ring and everyone made sure to be home.

My sister had two boyfriends who wanted to marry her. Ed Ugdahl was adventurous and kind. Henry Bergh was a church boy and in the choir. She had a very difficult time deciding between the two.

She chose to marry Henry, in spite of the fact that Henry went to the *other* Lutheran church in town, Chippewa Free Church. Henry and Elvira lived in Brandon. Henry's parents came by to walk with him to Chippewa Church every Sunday, while Elvira continued to go to Grace with Mother and Dad.

Elvira's first three children were all born at home. When Elvira went into labor with Charles, her first born, we sent for Dr. Meckstroth. He came in the evening with his black doctor's bag and liquor on his breath. Poor Charles was not coming out no matter how hard Elvira pushed. Finally Dr. Meckstroth used his forceps and pulled him out. Charles had two black eyes and a bruised skull.

Just like my mother and dad, Elvira and Henry did not have running water. In the winter, Elvira would fill the laundry tub with snow and melt it to wash clothes. Elvira had two children by then, Charles and Kathlyn. The kids would have snowball fights in the kitchen using the snow Elvira had collected.

Elvira did not live far from Mother when she was first married. Mother would help her as much as possible. My sister would eventually move to, among other cities, Naperville, IL, with Henry. This was good for both Elvira and Mother. They were dependent on each other and liked the fact that they needed each other. Elvira needed Mother to help her around the house once Charles and Kathlyn were born. Elvira stayed close to Mother throughout the years. She was the tangible reassurance of life moving on, yet a gentle reminder of the past that fades from everyone's memory, except the severely broken hearted.

While Elvira was starting her family, I graduated from high school and hoped to become a nurse. I planned to go to nursing school in Minneapolis. I packed my trunk and pinned my perfect attendance Sunday School pins to my blouse. I wanted to make a good first impression at school.

I was going to stay with Aunt Inger before going to the dormitory. Aunt Inger and my cousins, Wallace and Howard, met me at the

train. I noticed a broad grin on Wallace's face as I descended the steps of the train, but I skeptically attributed it to him maturing and being happy to see me.

When we got back to Aunt Inger's house we had lunch. Wallace was needling me about my big trunk and plethora of belongings. He teased me mercilessly all our years growing up.

Finally Wallace said, "Muriel, you better not go anywhere outside this house with those Sunday School pins on your blouse."

Blissfully confident, I was puzzled why he was so adamant about this. There were not many people I knew who had perfect Sunday School attendance. I suspected I might be the only one at Northwestern Nursing School. I finished my lunch and went into the living room, taking off my evidence of biblical scholastic excellence. I tucked them carefully into a place of distinction in my trunk.

Aunt Inger and Uncle Will brought me to school the next day. After I had been living in Minneapolis for some time, I appreciated the act of kindness Wallace had bestowed upon me. The students at nursing school would never have understood why in Heaven's name I was wearing all those pins. Wallace and I became close after that.

Although I had spent time with Aunt Inger and Uncle Will in Minneapolis, I had never really been on my own. I went to school in September and didn't get to go back to Brandon until December. The first year I had to work on Christmas Eve.

At the nursing school, we had supervisors that watched over us. I was scared stiff of those supervisors. I can still hear their purposeful shoes clucking down the barren halls of the hospital, and I was one of the favored ones.

We worked hard in school. There were strict rules for student nurses, and they expected perfection from us. They could not afford for us to make mistakes, and there were no practice sessions.

I graduated from nursing school in 1941. I worked at Northwestern Hospital from 1941 to 1943. I scrubbed in for many births while working there. I had been present for the births of my nephew and niece, and was always eager to witness another life entering the world. They always knew to ask me if they were looking for someone to help with a birth.

While working at the hospital, I would go home to Brandon to see Mother and Dad often. I also would go to Osakis, Minnesota to see Elvira and her kids. I loved to spend

time with Charles, Kathlyn and Helen, her newest addition, when I would come to visit.

In June of 1943, I took some time to visit Mother and Elvira and her family.

One day while visiting Elvira, I decided to go fishing. Charles loved to go out in the boat, but Elvira would rarely let him go. She was terrified of the water. She never swam, never went in a boat, and practiced the same limitations for her children.

Charles ran in the house, he did not tell Elvira he was going to the lake.

"I'm going with Muriel," he said.

Charles went to the shed to get his fishing pole. He ran out on the dock, and I carefully eased him into the boat. He was so excited that the boat tipped, which made him smile. I steadied the boat, at ease in the water.

I loved to be on the water. Fishing made me think of my dad and being on Moon Lake in the summer when I was young. The ash trees persuaded the fish to settle along the shoreline. My dad taught me how to find the fish. We looked for the shady spots and drop offs just past the cattails.

Elvira saw Charles leave the house with his fishing pole. She finished pinning up the laundry, and she briskly walked around the house and down to the lake with a furrowed

brow. As soon as she saw the boat, she knew Charles was in it along with me.

"Charles get out of that boat this minute!" she yelled.

Knowing his mother's intolerance of all things aquatic and not understanding the basis for her fear, Charles jumped over the side of the boat upon hearing his mother's scream. Elvira was aghast. She shrieked as she walked towards the lake. She then turned away, unable to watch.

I was furious with Elvira. I leaned over the boat to fish out Charles. He was flailing in the water, not frantically, but given that Elvira never wanted him to swim or be near the lake, he was not used to being in the water.

I said, "Elvira, what were you thinking?"

I gathered him up sopping, but safely into the boat. We rowed in, and Elvira went to get Charles a towel. Lips pursed, she dried off my nephew. I went back to the dock and continued fishing.



There was a lot of pressure to join the military after nursing school. The nation was extremely patriotic. People gave up sugar and cigarettes, anything to help the

military. We had a common purpose, and anyone who was able to help did.

I signed up in 1943. Tommy, Gladys and I, friends from nursing school, enlisted together. We wrote letters stating that if we could stay together, we'd join. The three of us went to Camp Crowder in Missouri. We stayed in barracks, ate army food and got comfortable in fatigues. We went through basic training, just like the men. We worked in an army hospital, and we spent three weeks learning the basics of soldiering: equipment, clothing and tent pitching; defense against chemical attack; basic signal communication; military discipline; and rifle marksmanship.

As part of basic training, we had to run the ropes course with simulated bullet fire overhead. Tommy passed out. Somehow this did not disqualify her from being deployed. When we had completed basics, we were given our assignments. Tommy went to the Pacific as an army nurse. Gladys went to England to work in the general hospital. I was sent to the European Theater as a nurse with the First Army in a field hospital.

In December, shortly before I was deployed, Elvira's youngest daughter, Marie, was born. I went to Naperville to be her Godmother. After the celebration, I would

report to Fort Bragg, North Carolina where my service began.

The War



High School Graduation, 1937

4.

On January 31, 1944, I reported to Fort Bragg and joined the 42nd Field Hospital. Here I met the unit I would be with for the next two years. At Fort Bragg, I received additional training on setting up and breaking down surgical tents as well as remote hospital training.

We quickly realized Uncle Sam was going to send us somewhere cold, because we were issued "Long John's." On February 16, 1944, we arrived at "Camp Secret" (Camp Kilmer, New Jersey) for our last processing. We were given a 12-hour pass in New York City. Other nurses from my unit—Maxine, Vivian, Pankake, Doris and I—went for a drink at the Lincoln Hotel. We also saw a play. None of us had been to New York before. This was the first of many new

experiences we would share. We had no idea what was to come.

On February, 20, 1944, we departed on the Susan B. Anthony, one of many ships in a convoy, at 22:00. The threat of German submarines influenced the course of our journey. It was crowded. In spite of the cold February air, we stayed out on the deck to try to keep from being seasick.

There were many nurses in one state room. This was the first war where female nurses were embedded with the Army troops. We learned Naval expressions such as "port" and "starboard." We participated in ship drills. This was the beginning of our adventure. Fortunately, we were young and naïve.

Our ship docked in Belfast, Ireland on March 11, 1944. We took a stroll on Irish soil, stretching our sea legs. We then continued on to Glasgow, Scotland, (Garnid) and disembarked on March 13. Finally, we boarded a troop train headed for Bromyard, Herefordshire in "Merry Old England."

The house where we stayed was called Selbourne. We were two to a room. We had to light a fire every night to stay warm. Maxine found some bikes, so we explored the town and the surrounding countryside. The downs were beautiful lush pastures where livestock grazed. We became

familiar with the terrain and settled in as temporary residents.

People from Bromyard were very kind. They were gracious and generous. The American troops were all over this tiny town. When we spent time in town, we would have dinner at a small hotel and go to the theater. This is where I met Mr. and Mrs. Barton. They took the nurses in our platoon under their wing. They told us about the Herefordshire County and the best places to bike and see the countryside. They invited us to Sunday tea and asked us about our families. I told them all about Mother, although I tried not to talk too much about Mother's wonderful cooking. This is what I missed the most, and I did not want Mrs. Barton to feel self conscious about her delicious Yorkshire pudding.

We tried all kinds of dishes typical of Herefordshire. Mrs. Barton made pork, lamb and a wonderful beef roast. Some of her dishes were better than others. I ate her blood sausage thinking it would taste like Mother's, but it was nothing like it. My dad would have never eaten it.

When we weren't in town or with the Bartons, we were working hard. Our Field Hospital was divided into three platoons or hospital units. A Field Hospital Platoon supported an infantry division. Our bivouac (preparatory camp) was erected in

Herefordshire. Here we were able to receive and ready our supplies in preparation for our deployment. We sterilized tools and prepared surgical instruments. We practiced setting up and breaking down our hospital tents and equipment. We had no idea when or where we would go.

I was in the third platoon. Our commanding officer was Major Bartolini. Our unit consisted of the following:

Post Operations Tent: Captain Stone
X-ray, Pharmacy and Laboratory: Captain Healy
Shock tent: Captain Whitt
Dentist: Captain Camero
MAC: Lt. Sewell

While the nurses in our platoon were as follows:

Administration: Lt. Hansmann
Post Op: Lt. Meers and Lt. Ketchum
Shock: Lt. Lewis, Lt. Moede, Lt. Olson

There were three platoons in the 42nd Field Hospitals, with one nurse, Captain McIlvin ("Miss Mac"), in charge of all the nurses. She would travel from platoon to platoon.

As soon as I met fellow nurse, Martha Meers, it was like reuniting with an old friend. She seemed to know me without having to tell her a thing about my life. Instantly inseparable, we sat side by side at dinner and enjoyed the last few tastes of normalcy before our rigorous tour of duty.

Knowing that we would be deployed shortly, accelerated and intensified our friendships. I'd bonded with the nurses and doctors in our platoon. We were a family. England was now our ancestral land, and our homes felt like generations away. We explored our homestead and settled in as a family. The town accepted us as part of the village rather than transients who would soon be departing for unknown peril.

The mess tents were set up just as they'd be when we were on the lines. We all ate together in the mess tents, cafeteria style. I saw Joe scanning the group looking for someone he recognized. He had a hand in his pocket and a grin on his face. He looked vaguely interested, but distracted. His dark hair framed his face, and he had translucent blue eyes framed by black eyelashes. He looked comfortable in his fatigues, unlike some of the fellows who looked like they'd never worn anything that hadn't been selected by their mothers. Joe glanced past the nurses with a refreshing nonchalance. Most of the men were falling all over themselves around the nurses, vying for their attention. Joe was self-assured and secure.

He would look for the nurses and always found room at our table. He would settle in like one of us. Never giving it a second thought. Neither did we.

Every time the nurses would go on an outing we would make sure to tell Joe. On our excursions, Joe would step aside to make sure we had the best view, the easiest path or the most comfortable spot.

Joe was Catholic and had trouble finding a church to worship in. The churches in Herefordshire were all Anglican, which suited the protestants among us fine. Joe finally joined us at the Anglican church muttering, "Up, down, up, down. Why don't you people ever kneel?"

We ignored the question and told him he'd get use to it.

One especially interesting outing was when we received passes to London, where we spent the weekend on the Thames River, seeing Westminster Abbey, Trafalgar Square and the House of Parliament.

Being from Brandon, these were places I had heard about in school and seen pictures of in the Encyclopedia, but I had never imagined visiting them in person. London was enormous. Up until this point, the largest city I had ever been to was New York, and I had been there less than 12 hours.

I was overwhelmed by the winding London streets. There were beautiful parks in the middle of the city. There were buildings after buildings and people everywhere. I

took photos, hoping that my brain would catch up with me later when I had a chance to digest the expansive world I was taking in all at once. This was my last scenic adventure in England before moving out with the troops.

On May 12, 1944, the nurses left the unit and went to Falfield out of Bristol, England. There were bombings every night and blackouts. Tortworth Castle was being used by the army. Just as we became familiar with the expression "Tally Ho!," we were positioned to mobilize with the command. D-day wasn't far off.

On June 4, 1944, we left for Southampton and Camp Hersfield, England. We saw our bombers in the sky and knew that Operation Overlord was upon us.

June 6, 1944, we packed up and got on the Liberty Ship "Thomas Wolfe" and went out on the Channel. There were many ships and many troops. We were on the Channel, when we heard Churchill speaking of us, and the thousands of other troops moving into France. *"...It is, therefore, a most serious time that we enter upon..."*

We were told to take a sedative to help us sleep. We didn't know when we would have a chance to rest again. Maxine and Martha said that despite the pill, they still had trouble sleeping. Their pills had come in

foil. I smirked a little embarrassed, saying, "My pills came in a bottle, and I slept like a baby."

Maxine and Martha paused and looked at each other. I had taken chlorine pills, which were used for treating water for drinking, not the sedative.

The soldiers in our Hospital Unit, or "our boys" as we called them, were on a different ship, the Susan B. Anthony—the ship we took over from the United States. That ship had made numerous crossings of the Atlantic in preparation for our engagement in the war. I was envious of our boys heading out on the ship most familiar to us.

My feelings changed, however, when I learned that it sank on that last trip bringing our boys across the English Channel. All 2,689 soldiers were able to evacuate the ship, only to face the enemy on the shores of Normandy fighting for the Nazis.

Our boys hit Omaha beach on D-Day. On D-4, June 10, 1944, the nurses came to Utah Beach. As we approached the shore, what we saw from a distance slowly came into focus. There were bodies in the water and on the beach—face down, face up, missing limbs and bloody.

Our ship approached land, and we were told to depart. Our instructions were to disperse, as soon as we were ashore. There

were rope ladders leading down to the landing boats. We were all apprehensive.

"Go!," They shouted at us.

There was a nurse from another platoon, a bigger gal. She froze. Besides the disaster that welcomed us on the shore, she was afraid of heights.

"I can't go down! I can't go down!," she said.

There was no choice. She could either climb down on her own terms or get pushed.

"Go!," the soldier on the ship said.

"If you don't go down, we're going to throw you!"

Finally, one of the men pushed her off the ship with one quick motion. She sat up and mustered a smile, assuring us she was fine.

"Thanks," she murmured.

We were silent on the short ride to the shore. There was no time to process the death surrounding us. We got off the duck boat and waded through the soldiers who had arrived and fallen before us. We put on our nurse persona. We didn't have time to process the massive number of people, the stories, the green fatigues and the crimson blood. We'd been prepared to do a job. In Army training, we were prepared for the fact that we wouldn't be able to save everyone.

This became painfully obvious as we scanned the beach for patients.

Once ashore, we defied our natural inclination and spread out. It was unnerving to rationalize the fact that this made us a less likely target for the Germans. We fanned out as we climbed a small hill led by our commanding officer. Our hospital equipment was dropped on Omaha Beach. We found some medics and followed their instructions. We gave a lot of morphine. There were bodies everywhere. Our fellow hospital troops reached us several days later. They worked their way down from Omaha beach, helping where they could; however, they mostly administered morphine and followed instructions to get to where they needed to be.

Once our supplies and fellows arrived, we set up our first hospital at St. Marie Du Mont, France under First Army and General Hodges.

I worked in the shock tent. The medics triaged and bandaged them. We got the most critical soldiers who needed surgery immediately. We cut off their clothes and gave them blood until their blood pressure reached 100. That's when they could be sent to surgery. We received all of our blood and plasma from England. The surgical units were separate from our platoon. We worked 12-hour shifts. We

treated amputations, chest cases and abdominal wounds.

At night, we heard bombers over head and a reprieve only when they saw the red crosses on top of our tents. When we first arrived, the Germans respected the red cross. Towards the end of the war, they did not.

When we were fired on by the Germans, the men we were treating would say, "Get under my cot, it doesn't matter if I'm hit again. I'm already wounded."

The men we were treating were grateful. They could not believe that there were nurses with them on the front lines. We only kept them at the hospital for two or three days, until they could be transported back to England to the general hospitals.

As we gained more area in France, evacuation hospitals were set up. Evacuation hospitals were semi-permanent and could house the critically wounded, until they were stable enough to be sent to a general hospital, at this time only in England. Eventually station hospitals were available, which were fixed hospitals near our military post. These locations would give medical and dental care to anyone attached to the post. Later, men were transported to these hospitals instead of the general hospitals in England.

While we were positioned at St. Marie Du Mont, we received a radio message directly from the Germans. They called us by name.

“42nd Field Hospital, Third Platoon. You are near an ammunition dump. We are planning to bomb the ammunition dump tonight.”

We moved at 22:00, and they bombed once we were gone.

Our Colonel, who was regular army, asked his men to dig a foxhole. He spent the remainder of the operations there. He later was sent home on a Section VIII, mental health, discharge.

We slept in sleeping bags on the ground and when it rained, we got wet. After we'd been there a few weeks, we got cots. We took baths using our helmets and also used them to wash our clothes.

We were also given “K” rations. A “K” ration is the size of a Crackerjack box, containing a small can of cheese or ham—the size of a small can of tuna—two crackers, an envelope of Sanka coffee, an envelope of lemonade and a very nutritious chocolate bar.

Months later, we would receive “C” rations. A “C” ration contained spaghetti and a meatball, or pasta and pieces of hot dog, or a #2 can of beans. It was this or bartering with the locals. We bartered.

In France, we would barter for many things. Sometimes we would get chickens, and occasionally we would get marmalade from people in the countryside. We would eat bread and marmalade, but the bumble bees would swarm the marmalade and get stuck in it. Eventually, I could not tell the difference between the marmalade and the bumble bees. I still don't care for orange marmalade.



Martha Meers, Me, Captain Bill Morgan

5.

We moved every three days. We broke down the tents, packed up and left. From St. Marie Du Mont, we went to Pont l'Abe. From Ponte l'Abe, we moved to St. Sauveur le Vitcome, then to St. Mere Eglise, then to Carentan. We then moved to La Cambe, Ville Dieu and finally to Senonches.

Because the Germans were losing ground, we took our time getting to Paris. We came in from the south and stayed in Antony. It was August 1944, and Paris was just recently liberated. As we came into Antony, people came out of their houses and greeted us. Families lined the streets. We were given sunflowers, hollyhocks and fresh vegetables. The people of Antony had been forced underground listening to the bombing over head.

We walked down Rue Adophe Pajeaud. One family in particular walked past the wall around their house. They slowly moved the wooden gate and peered out. Micheline Le Hegarat was 4 years old and holding flowers from the garden. It was a sunny day, and she and her family walked from Rue Pierre Vermier. She threw the flowers out to us. The American troops threw Bic pens and gum to the people on the street. As they walked to see the Americans, there was a dead German soldier in the street. The people of Antony walked by the German soldier and spit on him.

Life in Antony during the war was much like life in Brandon during the depression. Micheline's mother kept a garden, so they had some fresh vegetables to eat. She grew rutabagas, potatoes, radishes. She had an apple tree. They kept rabbits and chickens in their tiny yard.

They had a dog, but M. Le Hegarat finally had to shoot it when they were unable to feed it. Micheline's father cried.

Micheline's mother would ride a small bike six kilometers to a farm to buy wheat, grain and milk. Her father rode his bike to work into Paris every day. Otherwise, they stayed close to their house, praying that the Germans would leave.

They were a typical French family of Antony. Their life was uncertain ever since the Germans had arrived. They watched soldiers march throughout the city and tried to stay out of their way. Micheline did not like having to go down to the cellar every time there were air raids. Her mother closed all the shutters and drew the black curtains. Her father hoisted her to his shoulders, carefully navigating the narrow passage to the wine cellar. When they heard that there was a American field hospital set up, they were thrilled. This meant the Americans had arrived.

During the liberation, one of the American planes landed in the backyard of a neighbor. Many people in town came to the plane with their gas cans and siphoned the gas out of the plane. Everything had been scarce since the war had begun.

The liberation of Paris was big news around the world. A Kansas City journalist, Hal Boyle, was in France covering the liberation of Paris. His Jeep tipped over near our unit, so he came to our hospital to have his arm examined. I happen to be in the X-ray tent that day.

“Do you want to be the first American woman in liberated Paris?” he asked. “Bring a friend!”

I asked my commanding officer if I could go.

“Olson, I don't want to know a thing about it,” he said. Martha Meers and I went. We were sniped at the whole way. We were nervous, but knowing that Paris was liberated gave us courage to press on to the city.

We dined at a typical French restaurant. There were white table cloths, white napkins, candles and a single flower on each of the tables. The windows were blacked out. We ate at a table with glasses, china plates and real silverware. This was a welcome contrast to our “K” rations and mess kits. The staff was thrilled to have Americans eating rare steak and fresh cantaloupe.

After Paris, we moved to Laon.



Belgium, 1944

60

Our next position was St. Vith, Belgium. We set up our hospital in a bombed out schoolhouse. We supported the 106th Division—young fellas fresh from the States. The Germans terrorized those boys, knowing through intelligence that they were young, vulnerable and ready for bullet fire, but not psychological warfare. The Germans would call them by name saying that their wives or girlfriends were leaving them and sleeping with other men.

We slept in the classrooms. We had a potbelly stove that we kept burning all day. One evening, Captain Healy had his back to the stove. He was talking about how he just knew the end of the war was near. There were fewer wounded, and a lot of France was liberated. We didn't want to interrupt him.

“Something's burning. Martha do you smell that?” I said.

“Yes. Is something on the stove?” Martha asked.

Finally Joe Healy turned around, and we saw his scorched trousers. Joe did not stop talking, in spite of the burning fabric.

In the middle of December, the Germans were in St. Vith. Our platoon had to make an orderly withdrawal. We were obligated to leave two doctors and three enlisted men to care for the patients in recovery. They became prisoners of war. Reluctantly, we left the men.

We traveled by ambulance on December 17, 1944 to Neuf Chateau Monastery. We drove on a small narrow road while it was snowing. It looked like winter in Brandon. Pine trees dusted in snow lined the road. Coming up behind us, we heard tanks. We pulled off the road for General Patton. That was the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge.

After the Battle of the Bulge, we were awarded Bronze Star Medals, and made Third Army. We had been proud to be First Army until then.

The fellows who were taken prisoner in St. Vith were released to us in Balan, Belgium on December 24—we considered this our Christmas present. They were with us for Christmas.

We were getting patients at all posts. We were still moving every three days, based on the army positions. We moved to where the action was. Because it was winter, we set up our hospitals in bombed out buildings, rather than tents. The tents took several men an hour to assemble. There were many empty buildings, so using them was easier than setting up the tents.

In the middle of the night, we heard someone come to the door of the school we were using as a hospital. It was a man. He looked like a farmer. He did not speak English. We didn't know if it was a trap or if the Belgian civilians would be unfriendly. There were still Belgians who were cooperating with the Germans—often they were forced to. The farmer showed us what he needed through hand gestures and his distraught face. We realized someone was having a baby.

One person in our platoon spoke a little French. The man was visibly distressed, so we had to believe he really needed a doctor. In an effort not to distress the man further, our Captain inaudibly asked the nurses, “Anyone have any experience with this?”

The doc packed up his bag, and I volunteered to go with him. We followed the man out the door. It was dark, and we were silent. It was pointless to speak with

him since we would not understand each other anyway.

We continued to follow him along a dark road, farther from our post. We were in our fatigues and boots. The Captain and I were watching the hedgerows, as that's where the snipers would be. The man walked confidently along the road until finally we could see the red tiled roof of his house. There were no lights on and there were no sounds. A dog came out to greet us, which made the doc and me jump. When the dog recognized the man, he simply walked astride us as if he had wondered when we would arrive.

The woman was in the bedroom. We worked swiftly. The doc gave her a reassuring smile as he guided her to the end of the bed. His ability to put people at ease transcended language, gender and ailment. Despite all of this, she was obviously relieved to see me enter. While in labor, there is something reassuring about seeing another woman to support the process.

She painstakingly moved to the end of the bed. It was dark with shades over the windows and a few dim lights in the room. The woman gave a tentative smile, but she was obviously in pain. I tried to reassure her husband with a warm smile and an air of confidence. He eventually left the room to wait in the living room, smoking and pacing.

The doc said, "It looks good. No complications."

He saw the relief on my face and face of the pregnant woman. Given that it is the middle of the night in the countryside of Belgium, there were Germans everywhere. At this point in the war, the Germans were desperate. They had suffered great losses during the Battle of the Bulge, and lost most of their reserves. We had been advised not to leave our platoon.

The baby crowned.

The doc said, in English "1, 2, 3, push." She understood.

"Everything is fine. Everything looks good. You're doing great. You're fine. The baby is fine," I spoke softly.

I know she didn't understand me, but it reassured me to tell her the things I was actually telling myself. I was ready with a towel for wrapping the baby. She pushed again, the head came out. Captain Stone delivered the baby and handed her to her mother.

We checked the newborn to make sure everything was fine. The doctor checked the mother, who was hardly aware we were still there. I opened the door to motion for her husband. The man came in and smiled. He tried to shake the doc's hand. He gave us bread from the kitchen and wine from his

cellar. We told him it was not necessary, but we knew that he would not let us leave without taking his modest offerings.

We quietly walked out of the house, knowing that all was well, at least in this country house.



JONES, SWAG, HICKS

Captain Whitt, Lt. Jones, Swag, Lt Hicks
Pfeffenhausen, 1945

7.

We moved into Germany.

In Flerengin, Germany, we stayed in a bombed out hospital. It was so cold, Martha Meers and I got into the same sleeping bag for warmth. One night, the building we were in was bombed. Martha and I got out of the sleeping bag so fast we didn't even unzip it.

We received all of our information through the *Stars and Stripes*—the military newspaper that we received periodically. The news we read was history by the time it arrived to us. We learned of all the military positions long after they had mobilized. We heard the news that President Roosevelt died through the *Stars and Stripes*.

On Victory in Europe Day (May 8, 1945 "V.E. Day"), we were in Pfeffenhausen, Germany. We were in the middle of the countryside, so we celebrated in typical

American style: By having a baseball game. The beautiful green Bavarian terrain was perfect for four bags, a bat and ball.

We went fishing while we were there, enjoying the spring in the beautiful German hinterland. It, again, was like Brandon. There were ponds and lakes, and although it was cool, we were outside a lot. Plus, we were delighted to eat something other than our 'K' rations.

Our next orders were to set up a hospital in Weida, Germany. It was mid April 1945. We had learned of a recently liberated concentration camp, Buchenwald, and set off to find it while stationed at Weida.

We came to Weimer, Germany, the town closest to Buchenwald. Our Commanding Officer approached a kind looking woman as she was walking to town. He asked in German, "Where is the camp?"

She looked at him blankly, saying nothing. He looked at her again, making sure that the translation was correct.

"Where is the camp?"

She shook her head with a conviction we could not understand. He approached another woman.

"Where is the camp?," he asked.

She just kept walking, acting as though she hadn't heard. We were confused by the

reaction we were getting from these women. We continued, knowing that we would get to Buchenwald eventually. Our Commanding Officer saw an old man sitting outside on the street. He asked him, "We know there is a camp near here, where is it?"

The old man simply replied, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Puzzled, but undeterred in our quest to find the camp, we followed along the railroad tracks knowing that it would not be far from the rail line. We were still unaware of the atrocities these locals were denying to themselves and the world that existed so close to their community. The details of the cattle cars of humans delivered to this prison had not reached our platoon.

As we moved along, we weren't exactly sure what we were looking for, or what we would find. The stillness in the air, the strange response from the locals and the looming sense of foreboding culminated to falter our pace. We saw the camp from a distance. It looked like a factory with chimneys and large livestock buildings spread out over many acres. There was menacing barbed wire surrounding the perimeter. There were smoke stacks with furnaces still burning. There were rows and rows of barracks.

As we approached, people did not even come to the fence. It was hard to understand who these people were. They were disoriented and did not realize the camp had been liberated. They were skeletal and confused. They saw us and just kept walking. We were unprepared for their appearance. They looked like they were wearing worn out ill-fitting pajamas. There were people everywhere. It looked disorganized, and there didn't seem to be any officials. No one was in charge. The German soldiers had left with as little humanity as they had used to run the camp. None of these prisoners had a voice. The worst part was that our platoon had come with no supplies, no authority and no orders.

There was an Austrian doctor who heard we were there. Desperate for information outside the walls of the camp, he asked that we come to his clinic. He told us his story.

He and his family had been vacationing in southern France on the French Riviera. When the Germans started deporting Jews from France, he was taken prisoner and sent to Buchenwald. He had no information about his family and what happened to them when he was sent to the camp. He had been treated fairly well, because he was a doctor and could work. This was little consolation given what he had seen. He said the Germans who didn't agree with

Hitler were treated the worst, and then the Jews. The Jews were used as human guinea pigs for medical experiments. Once again it was impossible to understand the enormity of the numbers, the people, the stories, the death and the barely living, which were the hardest to take.

There were piles of bodies, pits filled with the dead. There were bodies in wheelbarrows stacked like cord wood, some still breathing. We were shocked and horrified by what we saw. Here we were, a field hospital platoon trained to save lives. The idea of a camp treating people inhumanely was incomprehensible. We were at the camp not to treat the prisoners, but to simply bear witness.

We had treated soldiers regularly since we had arrived on the beaches of Normandy, almost a year before. We were becoming accustomed to bloody wounds and courageous young men giving their lives for their country.

Another field hospital was ordered to deliver medical supplies to the camp. As we left and went back to our hospital, we didn't speak. We were in shock from what we saw and helpless to do anything but go back and tell everyone about our journey.



**Louie, Fran, Bill Williams, Jeanette Baumgarten
"Baumie", Gus, Me**

8.

We had little to do now that the war was over. Although we were hoping to get home as soon as possible, we decided to take advantage of being abroad. The Red Cross did a wonderful job of setting up trips to various cities, making it easy for us to tour without having to make many of the arrangements.

Bob Hope came to Germany to perform for the troops. We saw him in Schweinfurt, Germany at the Willy Sachs Stadion.

Before receiving our departure dates and locations, we had time to travel through Europe on our own terms. This time on our own terms. We toured the Bavarian Alps and drank in the fresh August air in Bavaria. We still treated various stragglers when necessary.

We traveled to the south of France. We stayed in Nice and swam in the warm Mediterranean and rested on the stony beach. We went to Cannes, Antibes and the Cotes D'Azur. Six of us from the platoon and some of the surgical staff made our way to Switzerland, too. Gus, Baumie, Bill, By, Louie, Fran and I traveled well together and wanted to go to places we had not seen. Gus and Louie were from the surgical team that traveled to each of the field hospitals. Fran was fun and adventurous. Bill and Baumie were in our unit and spent time together from the day they met. They eventually were married when they returned home.

We knew we were heading home soon. We made our way to Switzerland as a last stop. This country gave us a glimpse of peace before heading back to the States. We wandered the streets and took in the fresh air. We were greeted by friendly patrons every where we went. Switzerland was beautiful and liberating.

When I returned from Switzerland and rejoined my unit, still waiting for our departure information, I looked through the letters I had received over the past 24 months.

I couldn't say much about where I was or what we were doing in my letters home. We didn't really know, until we were packing up

and moving to the next place anyways. The letters I received kept me connected to the home and life I had left. A place that continued without interruption.

My nieces wrote me letters I adored.

Dear Auntie Muriel, August 1944

Do you have any jokes you can send us that you have heard in the Army?

We miss you!

We got to visit Grandma in Brandon without Mom and Dad this summer. We went fishing with Grandpa, but Grandma wouldn't come with us.

Grandma jumped when she found a frog in her purse. Neither of us would admit to putting it there. Grandma just tossed it against the garage. She made us find six more, so she could make dinner! She makes good frog legs.

Please write back and tell us about the Army.

Love,

Kathlyn and Helen

I also received letters from Mother.

Dear Muriel, November 1944

I am looking forward to the day you are home. The garden looks good so far. I am trying to grow more beets this year.

Dad is doing fine, although he is not always feeling well. He likes to sit on the porch and get fresh air. He still talks to everyone who walks by.

Elvira's kids have not been here since the summer. I know they have to be in school, but it's fun to have them here. They are the dickens.

We'll be sure to have them come to Brandon when you get home. We all can't wait to see you.

Love,

Mother

Elvira had been a faithful pen pal as well. I loved hearing from her.

Dear Muriel, January 1945

I hope this finds you well. We are doing well living in Naperville, IL. Charles has a lot of friends, and Kathlyn and Helen love our neighborhood. I have a lot of friends here, too. It is different than living in Rochester, but the community is very close, almost like living in Brandon. Henry is doing well at his job, but sometimes I worry about him and hope that he will continue to do well.

The kids do not see him much, and they miss him.

Mother can't wait for you to come home. She worries about you being so far away. We listen to the news all the time, hoping that the war will be over, and you will be sent home.

Love,

Sissy

Bunny and I had dated before I left for the war. We wrote letters as I traveled with the field hospital. He was stationed in England and we had very different experiences in the war, although we were both in the European Theater. Bunny had asked me to marry him before I had gone to nursing school. I was not ready for that commitment, especially before finishing school. Bunny wrote me a letter while I was serving in the war.

Dear Muriel, June 1945

I hope this finds you well. I know you have been moving a lot, therefore I hope this reaches you soon.

Life in England has been less and less eventful. I am hoping to be going home soon. It's been slow and there is a lot to pack up, but for the most part our work here is done.

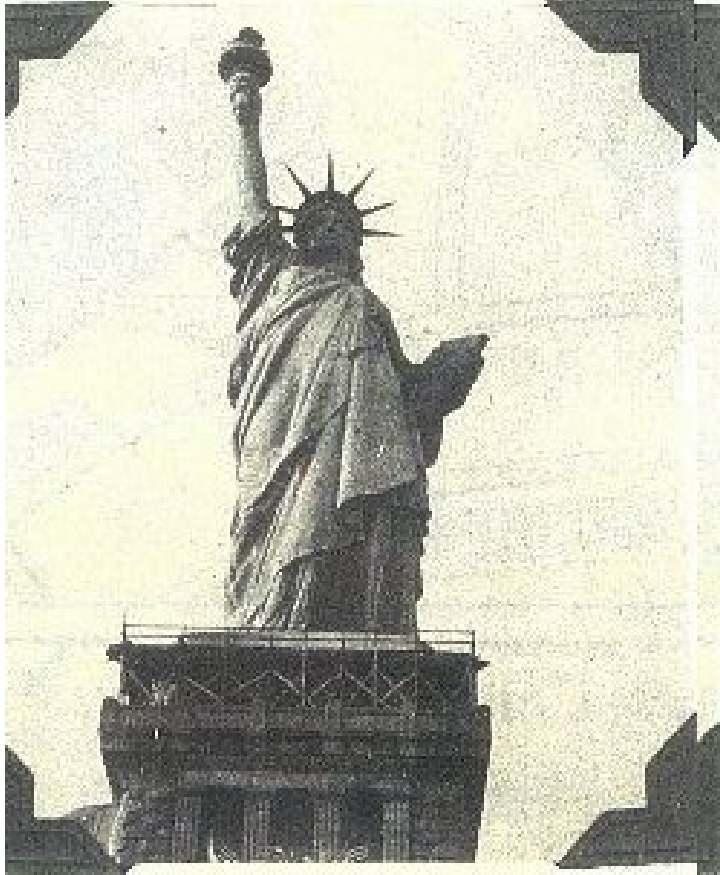
I had hoped that we would have a future together, but since you do not want to marry me, I have met a nice woman here in England. She wants to come to the United States, so we are now planning to be married as soon as possible.

I hope that you are able to get home soon. It's been a big experience being away from Brandon.

All my best to you,

Bunny

Home Again



New York City, November 29, 1945

9.

On November 22, 1945, we headed home from La Havre, France. The boat trip back was cold. Again, we stayed on deck to avoid getting sea sick. Somehow, though, this trip was easier. We felt good about the work we had done in Europe.

I had a second family, the 42nd Field Hospital, Third Platoon. I felt like I had contributed to the war effort and to the work of our Platoon. I witnessed many people doing great work.

I reflected on my time during the long ride to the United States. I had been to places I had learned about in school. I thought about what I would do when I got home, which still seemed so far away. I felt like I had the experiences of a lifetime condensed into two and a half years. As much as I had missed home, I knew that I would miss my

platoon. The comradery, the shenanigans, the intensity and the adventure.

By, Sunshine, Gus and Joe—I didn't think I'd meet anyone like them again. Martha Meers was so dear to me. I felt I had another sister.

I wondered how much Elvira's kids had changed since I left. I thought, "I'm sure they have all grown and won't even recognize me."



We arrived in New York on November 29, 1945. We went to Camp Philip Morris where we were given our discharge locations. We stayed here a few nights, as all the soldiers were processed. I was going to Fort McCoy, Wisconsin.

This transition in the barracks gave us time to adjust to being stationary. We knew where we were going, when we were going and how long we'd be there. This was all foreign to us. We were use to moving on a moments notice, not knowing exactly where we would end up.

I got on a train to Wisconsin. I was slowly adjusting to being back in the United States, integrating into civilian life and getting

anxious to see my family. From Fort McCoy, I took the train to Brandon.

When the train pulled up to the station, it looked like the whole town was on the platform. Children held signs and cheered as the train slowed to a stop.

I scanned the familiar faces and, finally, I saw Mother. She was standing on the platform as if she'd been there since I left. She looked the same. Her hair was covered by a hat, but I could tell it was grayer than when I left. When I walked up to her she held me for a long time. It was cold, but neither of us seemed to notice. She straightened out her arms to look at me. We were both smiling and crying, trying in vain to control our tear ducts.

I couldn't put into words what I had experienced over the past two years. Mother couldn't put into words how relieved she was I was finally home. I knew Mother was proud of me for serving in the war. Everyone was proud. There were people everywhere, waving and cheering me home. It was wonderful, but all I wanted was to eat my mother's cooking and be in our house. I knew she wouldn't ask me too many questions right away. Eventually, it would all come out.

We slowly meandered home from the train station. I wanted to look around the

town and see how it had changed. The grocery store was closed. Mother said Roy Christianson never came home from the Pacific. I had gone to grade school, high school and was confirmed with him. He was shot down over Burma. His parents closed the doors and never opened them again.

When we finally got home, we walked up the steps. The blue star flag indicating a family member was in the service was still hanging in the window. Dad was sitting in the living room. He got up and helped carry my bags to my room. I didn't have much.

My room was the same. My mother had obviously cleaned it, but otherwise, it was just as it had been when I left for nursing school. After I got settled, I came downstairs to help my mother in the kitchen. She had made a beef roast, my favorite.



My mother asked Elvira and the kids to come to Brandon that summer. Kathlyn and Helen stayed in the room next to me. I would sleep in late, and the girls would come in and try on my loafers. Kathlyn and Helen could not believe how tiny my feet were compared to theirs.

Charles and I played tennis for hours on the courts. At 14 years old, Charles was already much taller than me.

The girls loved to spend time in Brandon. They liked to torment Mother and Dad, but my parents took it in stride. They loved having their grandchildren visit. It was good have so much time with my sister and her kids.

I rented a boat on Moon Lake, and the kids and I went fishing for hours. Dad came with us, and the girls would paddle and "accidentally" splash Dad.

"Damn kids!" he would say. "Well, I suppose next time you come to visit, I'll be gone."

We concentrated on fishing and did not respond to his maudlin remarks.

We brought home strings of sunfish to Mother. Mother and Elvira cleaned them and pan fried them. We ate fish, potatoes from Mother's garden, green beans and fresh cucumbers. I had been dreaming about Mother's pan fried fish and vegetables ever since my first "K" ration.



Life in Brandon was the same as it had been before I left. Mother's garden was big

and bountiful. She still had endless energy for all of her responsibilities.

Mother still pulled out the push mower and walked to the cemetery to mow around the graves. The cemetery was about a half a mile from town.

She wondered who was going to take care of this when she was gone. She mowed around Freeman's grave, Harvey's grave and then her parents graves.



I managed to become accustomed to life in Brandon quickly. I went to the dime store to get my rolls of film in to be developed. I was anxious to see how all the photos I had taken turned out. There were photos of my 42nd Field Hospital family, England, France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland. I wanted to make sure I wrote everything down before it escaped from my memory.

When my photos came in, I bought a scrapbook that would hold my memories. I found scissors and bought tape. I began with the photo of the 42nd Field Hospital. I chronicled my journey from New York to England to France to Belgium to Germany and all the adventures in between.

I sat in my room, photos strewn across the bed. I traced the outlines of the countries where I had been from an encyclopedia and plotted the routes we had taken. It was hard to imagine it all now sitting in my old room in Brandon. So far from Europe and all the people with whom I had spent so much time.

My mother would come in occasionally to see what I was doing. She gave me space to work and did not press me to look at the book, until I was finished.

I had saved examples of all the currency I had collected from each of the countries. I had postcards from every town we visited while on leave.

The last photo was taken from the deck of the H.B. Alexander, the ship we had taken back to the United States. The photo was the beautiful site of the Statue of Liberty. I had a new appreciation for this monument after my experiences in the war.



While my life had changed, life in Brandon was the same as it had been. Elvira's children were exploring the town and the lakes as I did when I was young. They were

curious and adventurous, and they loved my mother and dad.

I took my time back in Brandon during the summer, and spent it fishing with Dad. I knew I would move to Minneapolis in the fall. I wanted to use my nursing degree and the experience I had from the war. I worked in Alexandria at the hospital, while I made plans to move to Minneapolis. I was planning to apply for a position at the Veterans Hospital. I also planned to go to the University of Minnesota to get my Public Health degree.

My mother was content to have both my sister and me home for a short time that summer of 1946. My mother was faced with the same dichotomy that all mothers face: Loving her children so much that she wanted to protect them from everything in the world, and knowing that the only way to really protect a child is to prepare the child for being independent in the world.

The time I served in the war was a tiny portion of my life. It did not define me, nor did I dwell on it. I had studied nursing, and the Army needed nurses. It was as simple as that. I joined the Army to use my skill to serve the United States of America. I had no idea what I was getting into by joining the military and being a part of the First Army, 42nd Field Hospital, Third platoon.

I was on Utah Beach days after D-Day. I saw most of Europe during my time in the Army. I had a pack on my back and a helmet I used to bathe and launder my limited wardrobe. I met people just like me who did not join the Service to be heroes. We were everyday people who understood what needed to be done, and we played our part.

My life began when I met and married Harold Kappler. I was asked, "How did you know that he was the one?"

"Well, you just know, don't you?" I said. Having my children, Mary Jo and Jim, and being a part of their lives and their children's lives is what has defined me. For all of the accomplishments in my life, my family is what gives me the most pride and fulfillment. I have faced what all other mothers face. Raising my children to go out into the world. They have been successful, adventurous and independent.

Serving in the military might have made me a better mother. It might have made me a better citizen of the world. It even might have made me a better nurse. What has made me who I am goes beyond my experiences in the army. I am thankful for my family, my friends and my good health. My family, faith, love of life and friends all have shaped me into who I am today.



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