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Single digit birthdays

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Sitting at our kitchen table, Dad, Mom, and I listened quietly, raptly, excitedly, fearfully as a radio announcer narrated the horrific events of the day that will live in infamy, Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. That our homeland would be bombed was horrific. Dad, already a well-regarded Staff Sergeant in the 45th Division of the National Guard, would be called up. In five more days, I would be two years old. Before my sixth birthday, my father, recovering from a machine gun bullet wound to the spine, would send my mother and me back to that kitchen on 12th street in Tonkawa because I could start school in Oklahoma with a December birthday but not in Utah where he was doing two years of surgery and physical therapy.

The 45th National Guard was nationalized on September 16, 1940. In increasingly salty language, I heard the story of my father’s exchange with his commanding officer. The guard commander, Colonel Crowder, told Glen that he was going to go to officer’s candidate school. Glen retorted that he didn’t want to be a God-damned officer. Crowder responded that his IQ and proven leadership skills dictated otherwise. Glen, a true wartime leader of men, graduated from the three month program and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. Historians now believe that the German military command had underestimated how quickly that U.S. would be able to do the human resource development necessary to put a premier fighting force into the war. Programs, such as these three month miracle officers, and technologies, such as the use of training films, contributed to the speedy creation of a highly effective armed services. Band of Brothers chronicles these years sensitively.

Glen, Doris and their three year old went to Officer’s Candidate School in Manhattan, Kansas. Housing was difficult because officers and enlisted men could not be quartered in the same buildings. We lived in a room with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities. Doris’s role model for me was Shirley Temple even though my fine golden hair resisted curling, and my singing and tapping were substandard. The hats and dresses she made with her portable Singer sewing machine were first class knock offs with the prize going to a dusty rose velvet dress with matching pillbox.

Glen was assigned as a lieutenant in the 9th Armored tank division which was transferred to Needles, California for desert training. The high command apparently planned to use them in the battle for northern Africa. In a favorite family photo, the three of us pose with one of the tanks. The officer and gentleman business was a step up the social ladder for all of us.

The scarcity of children in war time venues made us celebrities no matter how limited our talents were. Dinner table conversation was my forte. My passion for pickles, which I called blether dethers, was part of my repertoire. That reliable pickle holder, the hamburger, continues to be a favorite. I preferred not to have the onions cooked into the patty itself. In Utah, that required ordering a cherry burger.
My education was a parental obsession. In kindergarten, I had a memorable encounter with finger painting. My cousin and I later replicated this artistic endeavor in mud to create a favorite photo with my hair in soft brown rubber curlers. That early art training was the beginning of my lucrative career as an artist.

As the Allies massed for and executed their successful D-Day attack, the 9th Armored continued to be held in reserve in the U.S. Doris and I returned to our snug kitchen in Tonkawa. Doris’s sister Neva and her son Gary moved in with us. Even though Doris had trained to join Rosy as a riveter, she began her lifelong career as a medical assistant while Neva worked evenings in the local movie theater. Gary and I shared a bedroom where the ghostly tree branches scratched on the window. Now an awesome four, I was older, wiser, braver.

The Queen Mary finally delivered the exquisitely trained 9th armored division to England where my father bought a wonderful doll for me in some London night club. The doll must have been on a transport sunk by the Nazis because she never arrived in Oklahoma. The 9th Armored joined the war in the Battle of the Bulge. Glen, now about 29 years old, commanded a company of some 200 men. His peers said that he was a favorite commanding officer because he always ensured that his men were fed and housed before he settled in himself. As a National Guard sergeant training in Texas, he had refused to have a beer with General Patton because the other troops were not being included.

Glen led the task force that took the Remagen Bridge, a key to the winning of the Battle of the Bulge. The day before as the 9th swept through a nearby village, the officers gathered in the town square. Firing from a church tower, a Nazi machine gunner decimated the huddling officers. Glen got either the first or the last bullet which shattered his spinal cord. Many brilliant surgeries and much physical therapy later, he still walked with braces and a cane and still conceived himself as a warrior.

Doris and I drove out to Brigham City Utah to be with him. One of only two children in the enormous rehabilitation hospital there, I sold drawings for five cents, the same price I charge now for psychiatric help. I once reported to my mother that a coke machine had taken a chunk of the day’s proceeds. She costumed me in a nurse’s uniform so that I could work as a cheerleader. On my fifth birthday, one of my favorite friends, an amputee, beat me in a race up the stairs to my party. Thinking the white gift box held the high-topped lace up shoes my mother approved, I tried to hide my disappointment. The doll inside was a bridesmaid to attend the bride from my parents.

Some months later as my educationally-obsessed parents contemplated my sixth birthday, they decided that we should return to Oklahoma where my father join us soon. Not too long after that, my sister appeared. When my aunt told me, I went right on painting my Easter eggs.