

University of Dayton

From the Selected Works of Maureen E. Schlangen

Spring 2015

A Telegram in 1945

Maureen E Schlangen, *University of Dayton*



**University
of Dayton**

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/maureen_schlangen/17/

A telegram in 1945

By Maureen Schlagen

On the bitterly cold evening of Jan. 25, 1945, a Western Union messenger approached my grandmother's front door in Tiffin, Ohio, with a telegram from Maj. Gen. James A. Ulio, adjutant general of the U.S. Army in Washington, D.C.: "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your husband Private Clarence W. Chester was killed in action on five January in France."

In those cold first months of 1945, my grandfather's 70th Infantry Division — the Trailblazers — fought back Operation Nordwind, Adolf Hitler's last major European advance. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his 1948 book, *Crusade in Europe*, wrote that the fighting on that front descended "to the dirtiest kind of infantry slugging. ... Operations became mainly a matter of artillery and ammunition and, on the part of the infantry, endurance, stamina and courage."

For my grandfather's company, the fighting began in earnest Jan. 2, and by the evening of Jan. 5, the village of Phillipsbourg, France, was out of enemy hands.

"It had been a costly victory, but it had prevented the Germans from gaining access to Niederbronn, which opened into the Alsatian Plain," wrote Don Docken, a member of my grandfather's regiment, in a company history. "Many friends were missing, and (Staff Sgt. Tom) Higley turned to Lt. (Russell 'Bussy') Holmes and asked, 'Where are the men?' ... Bussy simply said, 'Gone, Hig.'"

So my grandmother, Marguerite Chester, 29, undertook her own demonstration of endurance, stamina and courage. She sold her stake in the College Hill Meat Market, my grandfather's butcher shop, and with survivor's benefits and her pay as a beautician, she raised their children, Marcia, 4,

and Jim, 1 — my father — alone.

Twenty years later, after my dad's graduation from UD, she remarried, and in deference to her new spouse, she never spoke of my grandfather in his presence. After her husband died in 1990, she began sharing her feelings about our grandfather; even 50 years after his death, her eyes filled when she talked about him — his gentle manner, his irresistible charm, his wide smile, his sense of duty.

In October 2014, with the 70th anniversary of our grandfather's death on the horizon, my cousin Monica and I met in Tiffin, seeking a wider window on his short life.

We looked at ads for the butcher shop in old yearbooks and student newspapers in the Heidelberg University archives. Across the street, we stood on the lot where the shop

once stood. And from there, we walked the same six blocks he took to and from work every day.

When we reached the front door of the narrow frame house, no one was home, so we sat down on the steps and leafed through items that came to that front door in the weeks and months that followed the telegram: the Vmails he'd sent that hadn't yet arrived; the formal though sometimes sensitive communications from the War Department; a carton of his effects; the Purple Heart; the newspapers that proclaimed the war's end.

The house's next-door neighbor, Lavon Droll, noticed us there and introduced herself. We exchanged pleasantries and shared with her the letters our grandfather wrote to his "Dearest Marg" in the last days of his life.

Moved by our story, she sighed as she looked up from the binder. Then she pointed upward.

"Look," she said. "A bald eagle."

Postscript: Had my grandfather survived, my dad's childhood would likely have been decidedly better. But unlike other parents, my grandmother didn't wonder how she would provide for their college educations. "For us, because of the GI Bill, it wasn't a question of whether we would be able to go to college, but where," said my dad, who on a whim made a trip down to UD in his senior year with his high school math teacher. Without the GI Bill, he said, he probably wouldn't have come to UD — or maybe gone to college at all. Four years later, he met my mom at a UD bar called the Bookstore, asked her out for a tennis date (though she didn't play tennis) and married her two years later. I may owe my life to my grandfather's death.

Toledo in China

By Keith May

In China with the Peace Corps, I received a package from my mom that included snacks, taco shells, treasures from my Toledo home and a sealed plastic Kroger bag.

The bag contained a number of pill bottles. The bottles held my dad's ashes. I was excited about the places I would scatter them. Then I saw she had also included the baseball hat he was wearing the day he died. My eyes began to sting.

Sometime later, Clara, a student I see as my Chinese daughter, asked me to come with her to her hometown, Ziyun. I knew this was a place my father would need to go.

As we rode buses through the countryside, my mind saw not tiered, mountainous fields, but rather the back roads of Ohio from Toledo to Sandusky. We arrived at Clara's home, a two-story cement building, shrouded from the road by trees across which was a large, busy facility manufacturing

bricks. Her front yard held chickens looking for food and two brown floppy puppies. Clara's dad greeted us with a smile.

Dinner brought us five dishes including green beans with bacon as well as a very fresh chicken.

The next morning, I filled my backpack with my wallet, camera, sunglasses, snacks — and a bottle of my father's ashes. As we walked through the gate of Getu River National Park, we were stopped by a policeman. We had missed the point back down the road where we were supposed to buy tickets.

Clara looked down at her cell phone. A smile on her face looked mischievous. Then one by one the kids with us walked slowly into the park. The policeman seemed not to notice. I walked toward the fence. Then I pretended to take a picture. Then I walked in, too.

It was my childhood visit to Cedar Point with my dad all over again.

One summer's day we had gone

to visit the amusement park on Lake Erie's shore. The line to the parking lot stretched long and hot. My dad turned the van toward the entrance for people who had boats docked at the marina. We did not own a boat. A college student at a checkpoint asked his name. "Bill Jenston," he replied and drove on.

Today, the story lives on in our family.

Near the end of our visit to the park in China we began to walk back to the entrance. We detoured to a beautiful lake and soaked our tired feet. As we continued our walk, I saw a beautiful view. I took a bottle from my jeans pocket. I twisted off the cap. At the base of a tree, I poured out my dad's ashes.

Welcome to China, Dad.

The above is an abridgement from a blog by Heather May '12 and he husband, Keith, who teach English in China with the Peace Corps. Their blog, <http://SpongeandSlate.com>, won the 2014 Peace Corps Blog It Home competition.