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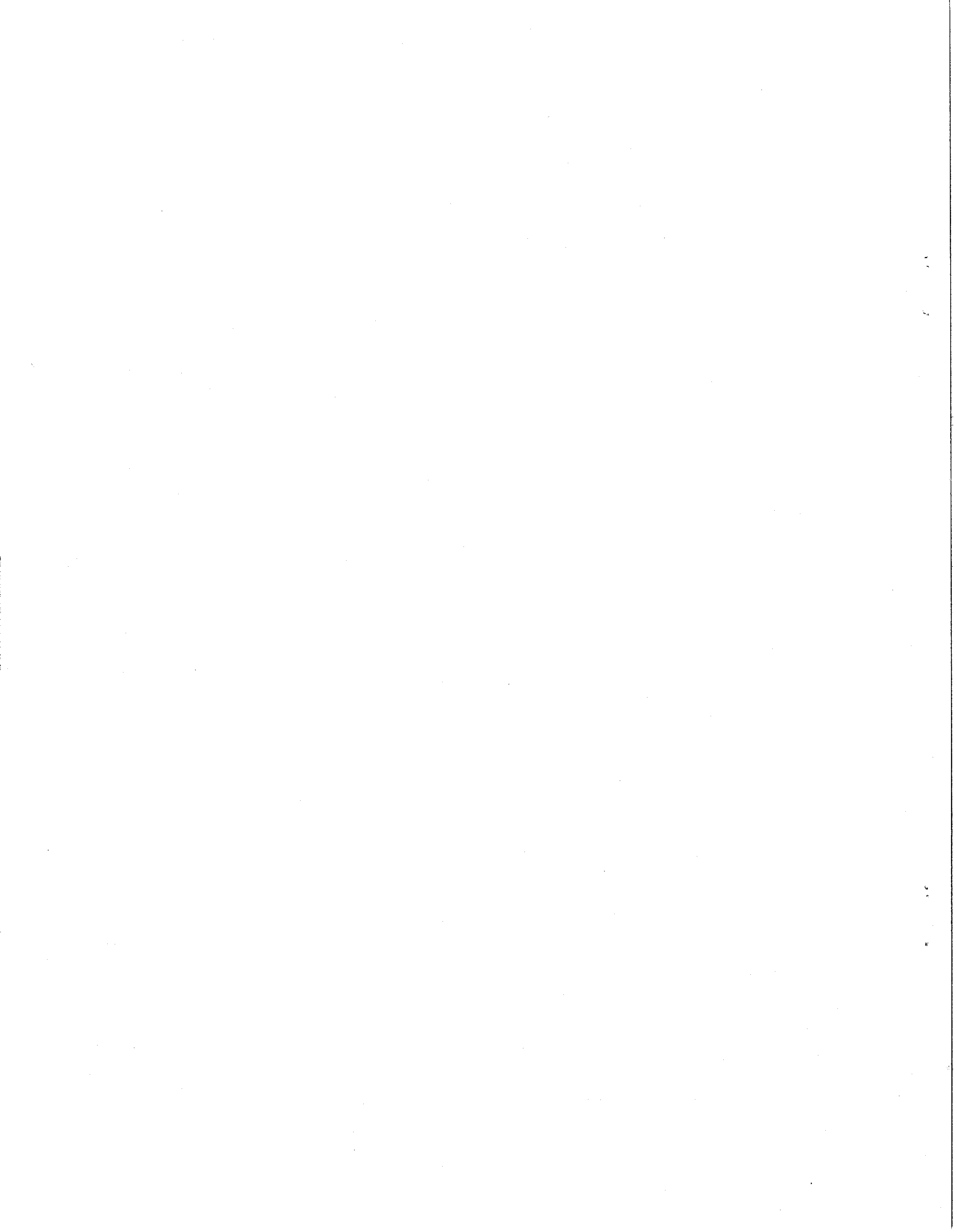

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Finding My Phantom Father: A World War II Daughter's Quest

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Embarking on this quest involved a multi-layered approach to mystery solving. This mystery involved my father, missing in action and then declared dead at the end of World War II in Europe. Without proof of his demise, my family accepted his fate and moved forward with all questions unanswered. A formal inquiry into the question, "What is the effect of father-loss on women whose fathers were killed in war?" (Taylor, 2001) was an effort to seek commonality or disprove it. Through this research, it was discovered that there is an entire population of war-orphans whose American fathers were killed in World War II. Based on that rich and meaningful discovery, I began a search for my father's missing crash site in Germany. This article illuminates this quest, the eventual outcome, and the impact this work has on grief and loss literature; the substantive reality of war loss, the component of disenfranchised grief, and how healing from this kind of loss is defined.

All I know of my father is contained in 450 letters written between 1939 and 1945. In some ways, they are all I know of the woman who was my mother. The mother who raised me was another version of the woman my father called his "darling," his "guiding star," his "angel." I know about loving her as a mother and confidant, but I never knew the joyous woman who received these letters. And, after 60 years of yearning for my father, I often know more about him than myself.

The mythology of my lost father, First Lieutenant Shannon Eugene Estill, was my birthright and my paternal legacy. I was certain of few things as a

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child, and my father's death in combat wasn't one of them. At 2:40 p.m. on Friday, April 13, 1945, a well-sighted and precisely placed round from a German 88-millimeter anti-aircraft gun toppled my 3-week-old world, plunging my mother into a lifetime of chronic sorrow as it shattered my father and his fighter plane onto the field below. The plane and the pilot burned for 3 days, and what remained was carted away or covered over by 60 years of farming and weather. Nothing was known of the pilot except that he was the enemy. The immediate need was to clear the debris, wreckage, and human remains so the field could continue to be productive.

After the war, the farmers who worked the field thought little about the events of that afternoon except for the reminders of burned and twisted metal that would periodically jam their plowing equipment and ruin their tractor tires. They continued to plow over the crash site until fewer and fewer pieces of wrecked aluminum interfered with their work.

Fifty-four years later I learned that my father's plane crash was never discussed in the families of the two 9-year-old boys who saw it happen from shot to impact. Their vision of a massive iron enemy plane spinning toward the ground—the field where they worked with their fathers—and exploding in a symphony of unspent ammunition and fuel remained a lifelong horrific memory. One eyewitness said he tried to run toward the field to "rescue" the pilot but was dragged by his father into a ditch to protect them both from exploding ammunition and flying fiery debris.

When the war ended 12 days later, the people of the German farming village of Elsnig, where the wreckage of an American fighter plane was still being carted away, had more than enemy aircraft crashes to fear. The Russians had claimed that part of Germany in the final peace treaty between the U.S., Great Britain, and Russia, and the divide between the East and the West restricted travel in or out of East Germany for decades thereafter. U.S. government investigative teams searching for a missing pilot were denied entry. My father became one of thousands of American soldiers and pilots left beyond closed borders.

Two days after the crash, my mother received the first of two telegrams. The first declared her husband *missing in action.* Nine months later and 6 months after the end of the war, the second telegram arrived, indistinguishable from the first except for the words *killed in action.*

My father's status was amended even though what happened after his plane collided with that fatal burst of flak was yet unknown. My mother, believing he was arbitrarily declared dead, returned my father's medals to the War Department in Washington, D.C. She wrote to the Quartermaster General of the Army Service Forces:

> I appreciate your letter of May 1st, but there is a question still unanswered. If my husband had been listed as missing for the full year period, I should understand why there were no details of his death or grave. The fact that

> he was only missing six months, then declared dead, led us to believe that conclusive proof of death had been found. Even if there isn't a grave, there must have been something to bring about the declaration. I have decided to return, under separate cover, all the medals awarded my husband and recently received. I would prefer having information about my husband rather than awards you send me in an effort to rationalize his absence. Sincerely yours (M. T. Estill, personal communication, October, 1945).

My parents had been together since high school. Their entire relationship, including a sweet young courtship, marriage, and a baby daughter, spanned less than a decade. He was 22 when he died and she had just turned 23.

In a final gesture of grief and despair, my mother set aside my father's letters. Their correspondence begun in high school wove its way through his first and only civilian job after graduation at John Deere Farm Implement Company in Waterloo, Iowa; around the airfields and barracks of his basic and advanced flight training in Texas, Arizona, and California; through his days and nights of being a flight instructor, representing each day of his European tour of duty while living with his squadron in the Chateau Le Beauchene near the village of Falaen, Belgium; and in tents on a muddy winter airfield in Euskirchen, Germany.

In all, 3,000 pages of correspondence were enfolded with original drawings, small news articles and cartoons, tiny love notes, and once an Indian Head penny. A few of my mother's letters were there, too—each written on personalized shell pink airmail paper. Some had been returned and stamped "Casualty Mail or Missing in Action" in violent purple ink.

After the first telegram, she addressed but never mailed others that remained unopened until I dared to violate those seals, full of my mother's DNA and prayerful wishes. After the second telegram, she stopped writing to her handsome young husband and surrendered all hope that he would ever return to be my father. In a simple act of paradoxical injustice, everyone accepted my father's death without ever knowing if, how, or where he died.

My mother purposefully distanced herself from her life with my father by storing her grief in all the soft parts of her tiny body. Over time, it would tear through her from the inside out in lethal shards of rage and depression. After she remarried, she gave birth to and buried three other babies who all died before leaving the hospital. My little sister lived the longest—nearly a week—and the way my mother knew she'd lost her too was that the nurses closed her hospital room door.

Grief ran through her veins like spilled dark ink. She would tell it differently, saying that "death was part of life and war," but the truth was, the woman my father loved died with him. Despite her losses, she was mandated by her standards of motherhood to shepherd me into adulthood. Her life was ended by two kinds of cancer that we knew of, when I was 36, 3 months

short of her 60th birthday. My adopted father saw her smile like the healthy young woman she once was as she spoke her last words, "Hi, honey, I've been waiting...." By that time, she'd buried both of her parents, three children, a suicidal brother, an alcoholic sister, and her own dreams.

I deeply grieved for her but felt freed of restraint in my curiosity about my father's fate. It felt too convenient and dismissive to base a life upon the uncertainty of my father's death, so I became their self-appointed fearless truth-seeking daughter. It was what I could do when there was nothing to do but "accept it and move on." I decided to "move on" in another direction that had little to do with acceptance and everything to do with determination. I decided to find my father and bring him home.

Motivation was tied with faded green ribbons, and stored in a silver strong box that held my parents' long-lost correspondence and a soft black scrapbook. My father's mother had patiently reclaimed each piece as it flew away from my mother's grieving heart. As I grew up, my grandmother presented me with the things my father wore, touched, read, created, or wrote. I sensed her reverence and accepted them from her knowing I was receiving puzzle pieces but no picture of the puzzle. The assembly remained, until now, mostly a mystery. What was certain in this collection was that this war, like all others, carried the seduction of patriotic duty, cloaked in the certainty of collective desperation and fueled by the lurking possibility of heroism.

One summer, I embarked on the daunting task of transcribing my parents' letters. By then, my mother and my grandmother were dead, and I felt bold enough to draw back the curtain of my parents' intimate legacy. I began to examine my parents through the lens of their own writing. How could I know that their letters would form the basis of the research I would explore in two graduate programs? Though I didn't yet name this work, I had begun considering the lived experience (mine and others) of father loss in war.

As a daughter, I stood between my mother's desire to forget and a burning curiosity about my ethereal, ever-perfect father. An enduring conflict existed between underlying feelings of loss—in my extraordinary expectations of those I love, in my fear of abandonment, and in my desire to know why and how things happen. In my struggle to know and to recapture lost truth and understanding, I hoped to learn that I was not alone. I wondered about other daughters whose fathers had died in war, and if they knew, as I did, that we were unique.

As I searched for and found women willing to participate in my research, I learned that each held a story in her heart that she yearned to tell. Their stories, though particular to their loss, were exactly like mine. What emerged was confirmation that we are indeed siblings in the universal family where the father dies in war. We are daughters raised amidst the silent emotional bleeding of sorrow and yearning, into which we pour ourselves in an effort to make it stop. These revelations, unspoken and subtle, are

manifested in a million other ways in the lives of the fatherless daughters who seek truth and resolution.

My research into the phenomenon of father loss in war was a process of discovery and recovery and an attempt to close the circle that otherwise remains open to interpretation, misinterpretation, and fantasy. In my quest to close the circle, I hoped to gain resolution and truth. I wanted to touch the lives and hearts of other daughters and enable us all to symbolically bring our fathers home. The driving force behind my inquiry was borne of our shared loss—to portray this experience accurately, to find meaningful and pertinent themes within the father stories, and to derive meaning from this distillation. Because my father story resides with those who share my experience and is woven within each of their stories, as theirs are within mine, these findings become salient and powerful.

This research, filtered through my own experience, was at once disparate and similar. It was as though I was interviewing reunited siblings raised in the same enormous family system, framed by early tragic loss, and anchored (at times badly) by intensely and silently grieving disconnected mothers.

At first glance, it appears that these women could be sisters or members of a distinctive tribe whose men never return from war. In this tribe the elder women suffer and collapse from the loss; the baby daughters become children before they are infants, teenagers when they are youngsters, forfeiting adolescence for adulthood. Everything accelerates for these women whose lives are fashioned of wartime cloth that lies shredded around their hearts.

Despite this early-life jolt from childhood reverie into harsh war-induced reality, these women personify depth and resiliency. Each carries her private sorrow, but has managed to balance it with outward manifestations of creative and empathic expression. There is a sense of relief among them when they are asked to tell their father stories, which makes it surprising that they are stories laced with fear and caution. Yet, there is a distinct sense of pride and joy that testifies to the depth of disclosure.

These are women who never had a chance to learn the art of "daughtering," who never realized the nurturing touch of a father or how to recognize the buffer zone between themselves and danger. Somehow, in the twisted remnants of life in the postwar 1950s, these women were disregarded and expected to cope as adults in a shattering shift of reality. They did, but not without a fight. Some only realized in midlife that their fathers were not the only family hero(ine). They, too, survived a war of unending emotional proportion.

To lose a father in war becomes a flat fact of life until women like those who entrusted me with their precious secrets, fantasies, longings, and hopes come forward. In coming forth, they risk what I sought to learn. They are each whole unto themselves despite their initially abrupt disconnection from what they believe would have been a perfect love. Each speaks of a trauma that takes its toll and offers little recompense for what was lost.

The themes that continued to emerge before me in this research stand deep and dark, flowing with a perpetual insistence through the women's lives. They are either astonishing in their clarity or subtle in the way they blend with the nuances of life. The birthing of these themes would not be a simple matter, but one of teasing and coaxing them from the darkest places, some unknown, all unlit. They provide a glimpse of what lies beneath, what illuminates what was lost in World War II. The themes that describe this common lived experience among WWII orphaned daughters include feeling different; yearning but not necessarily grief for what should have been; inordinate fears and anxiety; fear of being abandoned and replaced, dying unexpectedly, or of death itself; chronic loneliness; being given or taking on extra responsibility and caretaking; feeling illogically responsible for their father's death; being in relationships marked by lack of trust and ambivalence; and seeking a partner who fits into the father template that is based on projection and fantasy.

My parents emerged from their correspondence like holograms and took me back with them to their early 1940s courtship, informing my life in ways family anecdotes never could. I saw them as high school sweethearts, I watched them fall in love, and I helped them nervously plan their simple wedding in Ft. Stockton, Texas, near my father's first airbase; I tried not to notice how the tone of my father's writing changed after their wedding night. The rhythm of my parent's relationship was indelibly etched in these letters. Rather than intrusive, I felt included, and I knew I had been dearly loved by these two people. It was easy for me to step, at last, into my place as their daughter.

When my father learned of my mother's pregnancy with me, he also learned that his mother dreamed that the baby would be a boy. From then on, I was called "Mike," and his letters included whimsical advice for my mother:

> As soon as the baby arrives, you'd best arrange a carrier similar to that employed by Indian mothers. On this basket, install a transparent turret, similar to those found on bombers. From such an advantageous position, the baby will be able to spot all pickpockets. Of course, some sort of intercom system will have to be developed. The baby will always wear a throat mike and you a headset. OK—you're all set up—this will be a typical message from the baby, "Check this blonde coming in from 0900, Woo Woo!!" (Well, she wasn't a pickpocket, but the kid is evidently enjoying his work.) You'll be a slight bit more conspicuous than the average shopper, but the complete freedom from worry more than compensates for that little inconvenience (S. E. Estill, personal communication, November, 1945).

The transcription of my parents' letters set me upon the path that would reveal the picture on the puzzle box. Their lives together and apart were full of people, events, preferences, and history. Somehow, my father managed to

receive Book of the Month Club selections even in the Belgian chateau. My mother had a companion subscription in which they both preferred history, biography, poetry, and essays. It was easy for me to read the books they read and discussed in their letters because some of them ended up in my library. Each contains his personalized bookplate and his signature on the frontispiece.

She wrote to him about movies she saw and he wrote back that, in his opinion, Frank Sinatra was a "wolf" who couldn't sing or go to war. He transcribed his favorite prayers for my mother as she became a Catholic. There was a flurry of loan arrangements with his parents when he bought his first car for less than $100. It was a fine green Plymouth into which they would put a nickel's worth of gas and drive around all day. I learned they had romantic dinners at the Yacht Club, that he valued higher education and loved to buy her gifts. He devoted a page of one of his last letters to telling her about a rosary and flyer's medal he was sending that day.

They both subscribed to *Time* and *Reader's Digest*, which led to spirited written discussions of current events. He accounted for his pilot and hazardous duty pay in money orders sent home and urged my mother to buy anything she needed. They were preparing financially for the life they would enjoy when he returned home. Also, they had "Mike" to consider. Their intimacy was mostly contained on those pages. Separated by preparing for war and going to war, my parents probably spent less than a month sleeping in the same bed.

I made a comprehensive "people they knew" list culled from the letters that included my father's crew chief, who after nearly 50 years was surprisingly easy to find. When he called in response to my letter, his memories of my father were distinct and evocative.

> I waited all night for your dad's plane to come back. I wouldn't leave because I believed his plane would appear in the sky at any minute. He was the only guy in the squadron with a baby. I never got over that empty runway. His own plane was there, you know, because we'd pulled it off the line the day before... he was flying a borrowed bird. Finally, they made me leave when they all came to fly the next morning. Your father was the best man and pilot I ever knew (H. Ham, personal communication, July 1991).

Up to this point, my losses outweighed the gains in my father-loss experience. But, woven among the evidence of my father's existence, his crew chief offered me the exquisite point upon which my fate would turn. He told me that the 428th Squadron and the other two squadrons of the 474th Fighter Group, the 427th and the 429th, still met for regular reunions. These men were my father's friends and they remembered him, among other things, as the last man killed in the squadron.

After my first and only conversation with my father's vigilant friend, I began hearing from my father's squadron mates. I became the long-lost and now-found daughter of 150 former fighter pilots. In knowing these men, I know my father in a way that defines my love for him and for them.

At the invitation of one of my beloved adopted dads, and in collaboration with the others, I flew to Phoenix for a surprise visit to Champlain War Museum at Falcon Field in Mesa, Arizona. The museum was not open for the day, when we were led into the massive hangar still resonating with the silenced engines of a pristine collection of WWII war planes. We walked beneath their massive wings toward a distinctive silver plane with two engines and a thing on the tail that looks like a spoiler on back of a race car. We stood in the shadow of a restored version of my father's P-38 Lightning.

I was boosted up the slim ladder at the back of the plane and into the cockpit where, under the closed Plexiglas canopy, I buckled myself into the pilot's seat as my father had before me. I sensed my father's arms around me as we sat together for a whisper of time in a plane like the one he loved and flew. At that moment, I knew he would continue to help me work on our puzzle. Each precious piece of information wrapped in a distant memory and shared by my father's squadron gave me the courage to search for my father's crash site and believe that I would bring him home.

When I decided to write my doctoral dissertation about how women are affected by losing a father in war, I saw endless research possibilities. I felt certain that by witnessing the experience of others, I would write my father's last story. One of my squadron "dads" connected me with a German aircraft researcher who locates WWII planes shot down in Germany. I was assured that Hans-Guenther Ploes was not only the best man for the job but the most ethical one.

I learned why when I stepped off the train from Brussels in Aachen, Germany, in March 2001 into a world where my destiny would be changed and where I would have unexpected help assembling the elusive puzzle.

I was a month into my travels around Ireland, Belgium, Holland, and Germany, where I was geographically envisioning the last months of my father's life. My itinerary included travel to where my father lived and flew, the airfield of his last take-off, and the Wall of the Missing in The American Cemetery in Margraten, Holland, where his name is inscribed. Some of the names on the wall had little bronze rosettes attached to them. I learned that the rosettes signified that they were no longer missing. I made Hans-Guenther promise that he would meet me at the Wall of the Missing in Margraten American Cemetery when they placed the rosette next to my father's name.

From there, we headed to Belgium to find Chateau Le Beauchene and the former Louie's Pub and Barber Shop in Falaen. My father's letters were full of illuminating descriptions of both. I had embarked on the most revealing journey of my life.

To call Hans-Guenther a brilliant expert in matters of WWII aircraft research would be minimizing his level of knowing and discounting his ability to see what lies beneath the surface of a field, a bog, a forest. As an added bonus, I began to see Germany as more than the former political enemy of the United States. He and the people we met became my teachers, and Germany my field research lab. Searching for my father's crash site was but the essential center of what I hoped to find.

In our travels, Hans-Guenther and I drove on the Autobahn at speeds I learned not to convert from kilometers to miles per hour. We consulted endless maps while marking our route along the way so I wouldn't forget where we'd been and what remained to be explored. We met with people who were in some obscure or obvious way connected to WWII aircraft research. We trekked through ancient forests, bogs, and battlefields with a metal detector and plastic bags, collecting aircraft pieces and identifying buried aircraft and pilots.

We spent a dark and uncomprehending morning at Buchenwald, a Nazi concentration camp near Weimar. What makes Buchenwald memorable outside of the barracks, ovens, and desolate remote landscape is the zoo built by starving prisoners for the amusement of the SS officers. The bear enclosure still exists with its empty moat as evil evidence of the inequity and injustices of war.

This bleak history connected to my quest to find my father's crash site, through a curiosity about life in Germany when we were the enemy in the sky. It helped me sort through some of the vagaries of war, to picture a country under siege, and learn why my father wanted to protect us from that fate.

Above all, I learned about WWII aircraft recovery as it touched all sides of the war. I wondered if the gunner who shot down my father's plane had a daughter. My primary challenge, however, was listening to lengthy unintelligible German conversations. As an only child for 7 years, I had honed my skills as an observer of adult behavior and conversation also mostly lost in translation. As a therapist, I learned to interpret nuance and to manage silence. Despite my patient exterior, I remained ever-vigilant for the German word I knew to mean "father." I believed that this strange route, in conjunction with Hans-Guenther's skills and intuition, would lead me to him.

The next spring, I found myself again in Hans-Guenther's car in the middle of East Germany. This time he had a mysterious air about him. He wouldn't say why but just smiled in a maddening noncommittal way and instructed me to be patient. "Tonight at dinner, I have something to show you. Now, we have a new crash site to check out." New people had joined our team in my absence. One of them, a retired German engineer who spoke perfect English with a British accent, knew more about my father than I expected, and he became not only a dear friend but my most attentive and willing translator. I was again listening to intense German conversations punctuated with the cadence of eyewitness accounts of an ancient crash, but this time I knew what was being said.

After spending the day in the woods digging and speculating with our metal detectors and plastic collection bags, I invited Hans-Guenther and the search team to join me at my hotel. Hans-Guenther arrived with his P-38 aircraft parts catalogue tucked under one arm and a mysterious package wrapped in plastic under the other. He wasted no time showing me a drawing in the thick aircraft catalogue of something he identified as a lead weight for an aileron stabilizer.

He carefully unwrapped the plastic package. "This part is important. It has numbers—see them? They are small but it tells us . . . hard to see, but, the numbers here," as he ran his finger across the faint identifying stamp on the piece in my hand, "match this."

He placed the first page of the Missing Air Crew Report written by my father's squadron leader on April 13, 1945, next to the lead weight. "This part is the aileron stabilizer from your father's plane." My involuntary and contagious reaction was to cry. As though I had given direction to an orchestra, everyone cried with me. Then we had wine.

As I was flying to Germany that morning, they had by process of elimination and eyewitness interviews discovered the field where my father's plane crashed. They found the piece I held like the Holy Grail on the surface where they had only to collect it, clean it off, and read the matching numbers. It was hard for me to give it back so it could be preserved with the other plastic buckets of pieces retrieved that morning. In fact, I negotiated its custody for that night and I slept with it on the next pillow. Later, as I drifted off to the sleep of the jet lagged, I realized that I had asked my parents to bless this venture, and this lumpy gray part was their permission to continue. Symbolically, the aileron stabilizer is as essential to airplane wings as my parents are to me.

The next morning we drove 15 kilometers from Torgau to the nearby village of Elsnig. As we turned onto a narrow road bordered on all sides with sunflower fields and traversed by railroad tracks, it looked as it had in 1945. Despite all the evidence that would be produced to prove the myriad connections between field and pilot, I knew this was the place where we would find my father. At the time it seemed incidental that all I had to do was to get the U.S. government to come over and excavate the site. The agency for this job is the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command and the Central Identification Lab in Hawaii (JPAC). Because a possible human bone fragment was found in the field the prior day, Hans-Guenther had already contacted JPAC. It would be 3 years before an anthropologist/archeologist, an ordinance officer, three mortuary affairs officers, an Air Force photographer, a medic, a senior military officer and team leader, and one pilot's daughter would walk onto that field to reclaim my father and his P-38 Lightning.

Each year, JPAC sends recovery teams all over the world to former war zones in search of those left behind. There are still 79,000 missing from World War II. Only a fraction of them will come home, but not for JPAC's lack of interest, efforts, or dedication.

A branch of the same family who owned the field in 1945 owns it today. One of the eyewitnesses married the daughter of the original field owner. At our first meeting, she told me her father had also been killed in the war and that he was buried in an unknown grave in Russia. Ours is a sisterhood forged with the empathic connection of father loss. Our shared realities are interconnecting pieces of the same puzzle. One day, after I had mentioned that my father was Catholic, a lovely handmade oiled oak cross appeared at the edge of the field directly parallel with what would eventually prove to be the site where the cockpit of my father's plane was found. My friend, the field owner's daughter, places flowers from her garden there in honor of her father and mine.

I never felt my father's mortal arms around me, saw my parents together, had a sibling with whom I would share them, or heard my father's voice. Instead, I have created resurrection from the wreckage the war made of those things.

The process of final release began in the humidity of Honolulu in October 2005. I traveled, as my father did, from the field in the former East Germany to a runway at Hickam Air Force Base. He was coming home, and I was there to witness his passage.

Nearly 300 people were there to welcome him, including everyone from JPAC, Brigadier General Flowers, a contingent representing all branches of the Armed Services, Korean and Vietnam war veterans, and the unmistakable silhouette of the MIA/KIA flag flying for my father for the last time.

I had spent weeks sifting the dirt of my father's German field grave to be granted the uncommon privilege of holding his bones in my hands. Where that would have been an indescribable and powerful event itself, at the crash site, surrounded by tons of aircraft parts, spent and unspent ammunition, and a small bucket of what was scientifically referred to as "osseous material," my task was to keep working. I blessed his bones and tried not to think of how they arrived on the field. Somehow, I maintained my emotional equilibrium. It is extraordinary to have a family member at a working crash site. I wanted to preserve that space for my successors by honoring my father with dignity. My feelings would only deepen in time.

As my friend and the guiding force behind JPAC, Johnie Webb, walked with me up the metal ramp of the waiting C-130 transport plane, it was time to feel what I couldn't in Elsnig. The flag-draped transport case containing my father's carefully collected bones was the middle of three. The other two held the remains of men lost in Vietnam and Laos. My father was no longer alone in a field in Germany but in the grand company of heroes who followed him.

In the bay of the transport plane and not in the field in Germany or ever before, I felt the flag-draped significance of what I had accomplished in my father's name. I realized that the small bones I'd placed in the special bucket on the German field made his presence as my phantom father real.

The transport case holding my father's remains was carried from the plane by the uniformed honor guard and rolled onto the waiting blue Medivan bus. I watched this march protectively and proudly as my father was placed on the runway for his final flight home. The very last step in this dance of repatriation was the precise and deliberate act of a lone soldier standing at attention before the closed bus doors. After a prolonged and deliberate pause, he raised his right hand in a reverent slow salute to his brother warriors. He saluted across time, offering the gratitude of a nation once again at war. At the moment of the soldier's reverent salute to my father in Hawaii, I knew why my father died: for love of country and the belief that that he was doing the next right thing.

My father was buried in Arlington National Cemetery on October 10, 2006. My mother wasn't there to receive the folded casket flag because she died not knowing she had been tricked by the cultural dictates of the postwar 1950s into believing she would never have the answers she needed to live a life of resolution or have a chance to sit by her husband's remains. I stand in her place and correct history on her behalf.

A perfect bronze rosette was placed next to my father's name on the Wall of the Missing in Margraten American Cemetery on Memorial Day 2007. Hans-Guenther stood with me as we watched the final piece of our puzzle fall into place. Everyone who goes there will stop at the Wall and notice there are some names that have a rosette. If they ask why, someone will tell them the rosette means those few people are no longer missing.

People ask why I do this. What does this provide besides the thrill of discovery and always appearing on the same stage with sorrow, joy, and the practiced revelation that "my daddy died in the war"? My reasons are far simpler in their complexity: I do this as the curator of his legacy and I do it because my mother never could. I do it as an adopted daughter of the fighter pilot group who witnessed my father's death and never forgot. But above all, I do it so I can be my father's daughter.

Sharon Estill Taylor, LMSW, Ph.D is an Associate Professor of Community Services and the Chair of Women's Studies at St. Martin's University. Dr. Taylor has conducted research into the effects of parent loss in war; she has lived and worked on a U.S. Army base in Germany to work with military personnel dealing with issues of grief and loss; she has developed and teaches a semester-long intensive grief and loss seminar; and she is invited to tell her father-quest story nationally and internationally at professional conferences and organizations. Dr. Taylor's search for her father is the subject of a Der Spiegel Television documentary film, "The Last Flight of Lt. Estill" (2007). For more information about Dr. Taylor's quest for her father, please visit www.myphantomfather.com