

The Book

The Miller Siblings' story written by Jane Ballard Roth

WE GREW UP HEARING the story of our father's homecoming filtered through the eyes of our Uncle Boyd's childlike awe. Our father's medals hung above the fireplace, and in that sense, his experience of the war was always with us. But he never mentioned it unless we thought to ask questions, which we didn't very often, being caught up in our daily affairs. Because of our ages (and our genders), the questions we asked were different, and so we each glimpsed a different facet of his experience and held notions of him as a soldier differently in our imaginations.

Moreover, our father presented a sort of contradiction: we knew him as a soft-spoken farmer, but we also knew that he had been a soldier. He had fought and suffered and likely killed. People said he was a hero, but what did that mean? Volunteering to fight? Enduring terrible conditions? Killing the enemy? When our middle brother Del was just a kid—maybe seven or so, just old enough to envision our dad as a battle-hardened hero, he asked a seemingly easy question of him, “Did you ever shoot anybody?” He looked at his little boy for just a second and then said, “I don't know, I always closed my eyes.”

Even at that young age, Del recognized that the answer seemed suspicious, and it opened his eyes to the fact that being a hero was, perhaps, a more complicated affair than he had been given to understand. Years later, at our father's funeral, it was talking to people who had gone to high school with him that began to sharpen our focus. They described our father, that soft-spoken farmer, as someone who had been a tough guy and a fighter—until he returned from the war. Which one was he really? And what did it take for him to change? How could we begin to answer these questions?

Sparked by watching a documentary on World War II, Myra (the baby of the family, who had never thought to ask her own questions of our dad) started working to discover the facts of his service in Europe. Through Facebook, she soon made friends with historians in France and Germany who brought forth even greater discoveries about our father's history.

Like so many other veterans of that war, our dad had spoken very little of his experiences, mostly sharing short humorous bits and almost nothing about combat. The more we unearthed about the details of his experience, the more we were drawn into the challenge of detective work. Through our efforts and those of our new friends, we discovered the rich history of the 83rd Infantry Division, the Thunderbolt, and in particular the 331st Infantry Regiment.

It was Myra who determined that we must go to Europe to retrace our father's footsteps. Just a few months later, four of us landed in France to follow his route. Our experiences and the people we met along the way inspired this book project, which we conceived of as an opportunity to allow other families to share stories of what their own fathers and grandfathers did in WWII. From the outset, we knew that we would need the stories of many other soldiers, and we set out on a campaign to include others in helping us make this project a success. We soon discovered that it was a very common, almost universal fact that WWII veterans spoke so little of their time at war. That realization compelled us to gather these stories together before the memories are lost to time. Thus, *Soldiers' Stories* was born.

Our journey took us to Omaha Beach, Sainteny, St. Malo, the Ardennes, Luxembourg, the Hurtgen Forest, Remagen, and other places. We saw the beaches, the hedgerows, the city streets, and the towering forests that had been the scenes of terrible suffering and fighting over seventy years ago. We experienced first hand the grateful memories of French, Belgians, and Germans who were there then and the appreciation of a new generation for what those soldiers did to free Europe of tyranny.

While our father may have inspired this book, the collection of stories and images draws on the experience of many Americans who sacrificed so much for the sake of our country and its citizens. Reading their stories has helped us understand that heroes are people who allow themselves to be changed to affect the greater good. We intend for this book to honor the sacrifices those brave men and women and their families made for the sake of our nation, and we hope that it can do a small part in helping future generations appreciate our shared heritage.

Introduction

Coming Home

as told by Boyd Miller to Jane Ballard Roth

“ON NOVEMBER 14 OF 1945 when my brother returned from the War, I was five years old, and he was 27. Three days earlier, he had arrived back in the U.S. after serving a year and a half in the European Theatre Campaign, and somehow (we didn’t have a telephone) he got word to us that he would be home in a few days. My mom channeled her nervous excitement into preparing all of his favorite foods—fried chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes and gravy, apple pie for dessert. On the day he was to arrive, mine was the impatient anticipation of a little kid, asking when, when, when all day long.

“When bedtime rolled around and he still wasn’t home, I was sent upstairs, where instead of going to sleep, I stared out of the window of the front bedroom into the darkness, waiting. I must have dozed off because I woke up to a commotion on the landing at the top of the stairs. I stumbled out of the bedroom stunned to see a big, tall, strong, magnificent soldier in uniform — my brother was home. The first thing he did was bend down to pick me up and hug me tight. He smelled like travel: he had been on a train from New Jersey to St. Louis and then somehow made it the last 100 miles from Jefferson Barracks to our farm in Dixon, Missouri.

“We went down to the dining room to eat and talk. My brother drank the biggest glass of milk you’ve ever seen and ate biscuit after biscuit, smothered in butter and jelly. ‘That didn’t come out even; I’d better have another one,’ he joked as he buttered another biscuit. The grown-ups talked late into the night and let me stay up as long as I could. I was desperate to get some attention out of him and to pacify me, he cleaned out his wallet—brown leather, smooth with handling—and gave it to me. I couldn’t leave his side, and my hand stayed on his knee until they finally made me go to bed.”