

War Era Story Project 2012

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Fading Memories

To fast-forward five years of living into five hundred or a thousand words leaves me to ponder: What do I wish to leave to history? Let me flip the pages of that five year calendar to the first page, December 4, 1940, when I enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. I served under our Big Dipper here, under the Northern Lights in Iceland and the Southern Cross in New Zealand. I returned to the Big Dipper Sept. 21, 1945. Officially, my war ended 67 years ago. There is yet a healing process that will pass into history but is lost in living memory forever.

War is a paradox. In spite of the destruction, killing and maiming, friendships are formed to last a lifetime and love transcends all barriers and obstacles. It was under the Southern Cross in New Zealand that I found that friendship and felt I betrayed an act of love. I shall introduce to you at this time John M. Swisher and Margaret Towgood.

It was on a combat patrol on that open graveyard called Guadalcanal that the name Swisher stayed in mind and memory. Upon making contact with him fifty-three years later, I asked did he remember me and his reply was, "Hell yes, I remember you; you almost got me killed!" From that phone call to the day he died, Sept. 13, 2004, we once again shared adventures that would fill a book to overflowing.

Margaret is the centerpiece of this novella. She was a young lady – and lady she was – studying to become a teacher. She was my date throughout my stay in New Zealand. Ours was not a casual relationship.

It was also from there that we were launched into two battles: Guadalcanal and Tarrawa. Six weeks of combat on the 'Canal did not dampen my spirit of adventure. Tried and tested in battle, I walked tall. Four days for the battle for Tarrawa, I lost my sense of adventure and walked away with a deep sense of guilt. I yet still ask and wonder of the thousands that fell, why, why, not I.

Secretly and silently we left New Zealand to do battle at Tarrawa. I had no contact with John nor Margaret for over fifty years. Several years later, upon the death of my wife Novella, I instigated a search for Margaret. Novella passed away March 14, 1986.

Walter Ogreen, a veteran of Guadalcanal from Warren, Ohio, gave me a contact in New Zealand: Dawn Rentoul of Auckland. In our correspondence, she expressed the opinion, "Louis, with the scant information you gave me, it will be like finding the proverbial needle in a hay stack." She kindly omitted that she may have well died.

I returned from a mini-reunion of my company in Shebogan, Wisconsin, when my daughter informed me that Dawn asked that I call her. That I did, and she informed me, against all odds, she found Margaret! She furnished me a phone number and I called. "I say! Who is this? Don't you know it's two o'clock in the bloody morning?" It was Margaret's husband.

I spoke to Margaret for the first time in over fifty years. We corresponded by phone and letters to learn what transpired in our lives over those many years. It wasn't long after that John and I decided to revisit New Zealand. And upon meeting Margaret for the first time in over fifty years, the hug that we shared, for me, was more comfortable than any I can remember! Her husband Bruce captured in on camera.

Margaret and Bruce returned our visit here in Lowellville, Ohio, where they met most of my family. For their second visit, John and his wife Gil invited them and myself to their home in Apple Valley, California.

This man said once too often "I love you" to a sweet trusting girl in New Zealand. Those words and actions haunted me for over fifty years. And for so young a girl, when I confessed, to say, "Louis, you belong with your wife and son." Those words endeared Margaret to me forever. Margaret died in June 26, 1205.

And Novella, mother of my four sons and two daughters, truly said, "Louis, I don't care what you did over there, just so you came home to me." Novella, by no means, is a short story.