

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Virginia Snowden

Current home town: Cincinnati, Ohio

Age: 84

To this day it is hard for me to talk about the war without tearing up. I was from a family of six children: five older boys (two of them twins) and I, the youngest. When WWII was declared on December 7th, 1941, I was 13 years old. My mother and dad and I were with friends who had invited us to dinner. We sat and talked after dinner in their living room when the news came on the radio regarding Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt was speaking and my mom and dad were visibly upset, as one of my brothers was in the Marines at the time, stationed in Japan, and had not been in the Marines very long. Later, through the news, we found out my brother was on *Corregidor* with Douglas McArthur and was ultimately captured by the Japanese.

We left our friends' house shortly after, as my Mother was crying and very upset, and my Dad was trying to console her. I understood at this point and time what war was and was very worried. I tried to hold back, but couldn't. I was very close to my brothers and really looked up to them.

As the war went on, three other brothers eventually volunteered as they graduated from High School. My oldest brother had already graduated from college and was a pharmacist. He was the last son to go to war as he was deferred due to our family already having four brothers in the war, and at the urging of my Father to "please stay home." As time went on though, he became upset being home while his brothers were off fighting for their country; in those days, if a young man was seen without a uniform on, it was not unusual for him to be asked why he was not in the service. And, with his High School sweetheart being a nurse in the Navy, he decided he had to go out there and fight to bring his brothers home. So, one day he went downtown and joined the Army.

I was very close to this brother, him being the only sibling left at home. When he left for the Army it about broke my heart. The day my mom and dad and I took him to the train station to leave, I shall never forget. I remember my Mother crying and talking on the phone to her sisters who were trying to console her.

Mother ended up in the hospital many times, not being able to cope; the first was upon hearing my brother was in a Japanese Prison Camp, and another on September 26, 1944, when my oldest brother (having gone in last) was killed in Italy. The following February 23, 1945 a second brother was killed on Iwo Jima, only five months after the first casualty. He had gone through the battle of Bougainville unscathed and was wounded in the next battle of Guam. He then went on to the battle of Iwo Jima, where he was killed. It was to be his last battle to be eligible for a leave.

Once, when he was in the hospital after being wounded on Guam, he sent me a picture of Betty Grable, a movie star, visiting the wounded. I did all I could to write to my brothers and keep them informed of

things going on in our hometown and their friends. I hold dear letters sent to me from them. My mom and I would bake cookies and my dad and I would wrap them according to the directions regarding war packages; I can still make a box if I don't have the right size. At school I would knit scarves and mittens for war-torn countries.

Dad was very patriotic and would head up War Bond drives for his company. At one of the War Bond drives, the actress Jean Tierney came to talk to employees, urging them to buy war bonds. Dad told us when he came home that day that she was a beautiful lady. He would stay up half the night with the radio by his side listening to the news. I would sometimes wake up and find him right next to the radio. He was always trying to shield my Mom from hearing the news.

We did not know my brother was prisoner of the Japanese until close to the end of the war, as he had always been listed as missing before that. My Dad would hear about prisoner of war ships being sunk and we had no idea if he was on one or not. We found out later he had been moved several times on the kind of ships that would sometimes be sunk by our own men because the Japanese would not designate the ship with a red cross as being a hospital ship. The prisoners would be down in the hold of the ship squashed together with dysentery and no facilities. He came home stripped 60 of his 150 pounds.

We did know my older brother was in the European area of the war and the youngest boys (twins) in the Navy were in the South Pacific, having joined right out of High School and went through boot camp together. It was after the five Sullivan boys went down on a ship that they would not allow brothers to stay together. Both twins served in the Pacific; one was aboard a LCT-222, which landed tanks in several amphibious assaults, and the other was aboard an ancient destroyer. After my two brothers were killed in the war, someone my Dad worked with contacted a congressman, and the war department sent the twin brothers to a Naval facility in St. Louis, stating our family had already sacrificed enough.

The brother who was killed on Iwo Jima had started college. He wanted to go in the Marines right after High School, but my Dad would not sign for him to go, as he was only seventeen. But finally right before he was eighteen my Dad signed.

I was 17 years old when the war ended, and a senior in high school. I will never forget when the war ended we heard on the news that food and clothing was being dropped to the prisoners of war, and some days later, my brother called us, and it was only then we knew he was really alive. After spending time in the medical center in California where he had been treated for malnutrition and many other things, he called us and wanted an update on his brothers. My Dad broke up when he had to tell him two of his brothers would not be coming home. What a thing to deal with all by yourself! What a joyous moment it was when we went to the train station to pick him up. I stood back and just couldn't believe he was back home with us.

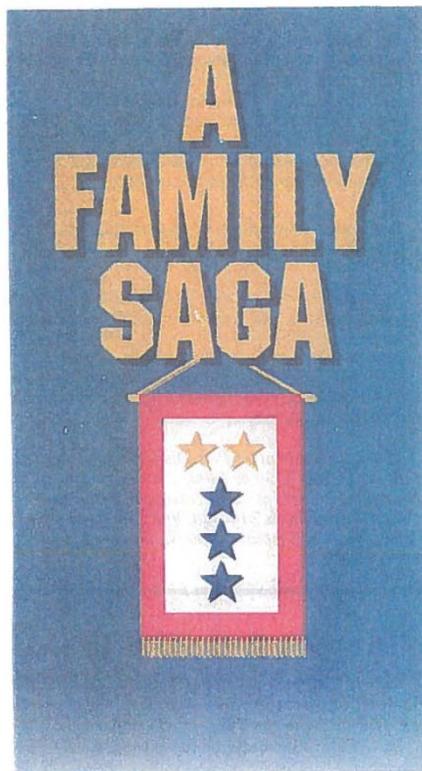
WORLD WAR II 50TH ANNIVERSARY

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

VOL. 117, NO. 246

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SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1995



For Meier Clan, War Meant Death, And Life

By Harry Levins
of the Post-Dispatch Staff

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ABOVE: Gil (front) and Harvey Meier with medals of two brothers killed in World War II: Vernon (top) and Donald.

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RIGHT: In 1938, the Meiers gather for a family portrait. Standing (from left) are Harvey, Donald and Howard Meier. Seated (from left) are Vernon, Virginia, Alma, Ernie and Gil Meier.



Vernon Meier
Killed in action



Gil Meier
Was prisoner of war



Donald Meier
Killed in action



Howard Meier
Pulled from combat



Harvey Meier
Pulled from combat

WEATHER

Good Picnic Weather



FORECAST
Sunday
Partly cloudy
with wind
from the
south at 5-15
mph. High 86.
Partly cloudy
Sunday night.
Low 66.
Monday
Cloudy. High
86.
**Other
Weather,
8B**

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To an extraordinary extent, the Meier family of Brentwood reflects both sides of America's World War II.

On the shiny side, historians note that alone among the warring nations, the United States came out of the war more prosperous than it had gone in.

That prosperity boosted three of the Meier brothers into the affluent, educated middle class and anchored them there — them, and then their children, and now their grandchildren.

Of course, the historians note, a relatively few American families paid an awful price. That fate, too, fell on the Meiers.

Two brothers were buried where they fell — one in Italy, the other on Iwo Jima. And one of the survivors spent three grim years as a prisoner of the Japanese.

Their father died early, a victim of the strain. Their mother suffered such anguish that she was never the same.

Shortly after the war, the family got a letter from Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, who said: "Your sacrifice in this war has indeed been great."

Here is the story of a very average, very special American family.

WW II: The Servicemen

Pvt. Vernon A. Meier, USA: With a degree from the

St. Louis College of Pharmacy, Meier went to work in Kirkwood as a druggist at the old Chippewa Drug Store in 1941.

On Dec. 7 of that year, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Meier tried to join the Navy as a medical corpsman, but bad eyesight barred the way. The Army proved less choosy; he joined that service in 1943 and trained as a medic.

Late in August 1944, Meier caught up with the 91st Infantry Division's 363rd Infantry near the Gothic Line, the German defenses north of Florence.

On Sept. 26, 1944, at Futa Pass, a burst of German machine-gun fire cut him down.

The Army buried him at Scarperia, Italy. In 1948, Meier's corpse came home, to Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery.

When he was killed, he was 25 years old.

Sgt. Gilbert C. Meier, USMC: Late in 1940 — a year after graduating from Brentwood High School and a year before the United States went to war — he quit Ranken Technical Institute to join the Marine Corps.

"I thought a war was coming, and if we went to war, I wanted to be in the best," he says. Anyway, he concedes, he was a bored, itchy teen-ager, ready for adventure.

He ended up with the 4th Marines in Shanghai. The regiment moved to the Philippines in December 1941, "and we got there just before they started bombing the hell out of everything."

In May 1942, on Corregidor, the Japanese took Meier prisoner. They held him for the rest of the war, first on the Philippines and then in Japan, where he worked as a slave

Meier came out of the prison camps with pellagra, beri-beri, dengue fever, yaws, ulcers and a mouthful of rotten teeth. Malnutrition had stripped away 60 of his 150 pounds.

The Navy flew him to a hospital in Hawaii and then quickly flew him on to a hospital in Oakland, Calif. From Oakland, he called home, for the first time since the war began.

That's when he learned at last that two of his brothers were dead. He was 24.

Sgt. Donald L. Meier, USMC: After graduating from Brentwood High School in 1941, he put in a semester at Washington University before joining the Marines.

With the 3rd Marine Division's 21st Marines, he invaded Bougainville, where a Japanese bullet put a hole in his helmet but left him unscathed. "Bullet Clips Hair From Man's Head," said the headline in the Post-Dispatch.

Meier was less lucky on Guam, where mortar fragments peppered his back in the summer of '44. His wounds healed in time for him to rejoin his regiment for the invasion of Iwo Jima.

There, on Feb. 23, 1945 — the day the flag went up atop Mount Suribachi — a Japanese bullet killed Meier as he crested a small rise near a hotly contested airfield.

He was buried on Iwo Jima, then brought home to Jefferson Barracks in 1948.

Meier had wanted to be an engineer but had set aside his studies to join the Marines "and help liberate my brother Gil."

He was 22.

Petty Officer 3rd Class Howard Meier, USN: Like his twin brother, Harvey, he joined the Navy in October 1943 after graduating from Brentwood High School.

The Navy trained him as a radioman and put him aboard LCT-222, which landed tanks under fire in several amphibious assaults.

In December 1944 — after one brother had been killed and another taken prisoner — Meier's father decided that his family had given enough. Through an influential businessman, the senior Meier petitioned Rep. John Cochran to intervene and spare his remaining sons. Eventually, the government showed compassion. It pulled Howard Meier out of combat and sent him home to the Naval Air Station at Lambert Field.

But that wasn't until April 1945 — two months after his big brother perished on Iwo Jima.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Harvey W. Meier, USN: Like his twin, Harvey Meier ended up in the Pacific but as a sonarman aboard an ancient destroyer, the Ballard.

Meier is frank about why he and his twin joined the Navy: "We didn't want to be foot soldiers. The grunts were the guys who had a higher chance of getting killed."

But many a GI never left native soil, while Meier the sailor picked up five battle stars at places like the Marianas, Peleliu and Leyte Gulf.

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He still has letters from home dated Oct. 24, 1944, and March 15, 1945 — typewritten letters from his father, telling him that his brothers Vernon and Donald would never come back.

Like his twin, Harvey Meier was pulled from combat in the spring of 1945 and reassigned to the Naval Air Station at Lambert Field. He was 19.

WW II: The Family

Ernie Meier, the father: Meier was the son of a Missouri farmer who expected at least one of his boys to be a preacher. That lot fell to Ernie Meier, who became a Lutheran clergyman in Idaho.

But he came to feel that the pulpit wasn't for him. God's word was fine for the hereafter, but in the here and now, Ernie Meier wanted to be an engineer.

School was beyond his means, but he taught himself enough engineering to pass the licensing test.

Given his experience with his own father, it seems curious that Meier would pressure his sons to be engineers. But he did, and most followed him into the world of technology.

First, the war intervened. The senior Meier worked for Monsanto, producing chemicals vital to the war effort. He was too busy to write much to his sons. Then, after two of his boys were killed and a third disappeared into the purgatory of a POW camp, he lost a lot of heart.

In 1958, Ernie Meier died. "There's no question that the strain of the war had a lot to do with his early demise," says Harvey Meier.

Ernie Meier was 63.

Alma Meier, the mother: She lived until age 93, dying just three years ago. But the last half of her life was bleak.

After the loss of her sons, says Harvey Meier, "My mother had nervous breakdowns, frontal lobotomies. She went through close to 100 electric shock treatments and was in and out of many hospitals.

"She couldn't live alone after dad died, but she couldn't live with any of us, either. From 1960 until she died in 1992, she was in nursing homes."

As an acknowledgment that World War II had wounded Alma Meier, too, the Veterans Administration allotted her some money to help pay the nursing-home fees.

"But she got nothing until she went through all her assets first," says Gil Meier. So there was no estate for the surviving children?

"No. We had to chip in to bury her."

Virginia Meier, the kid sister: She was the family's baby, a teen-ager in the war years. Like so many wartime teen-agers, she had to grow beyond her years, helping around the house at 2603 Louis Avenue and holding the family together.

"My mother just couldn't communicate," says Harvey Meier, "and my father was too busy at Monsanto to write much.

"It was Ginny who wrote us all the time, telling us what was going on at home.

"Ginny was a godsend."

When the war ended, she was 17.

Postwar: The Veterans

Gil Meier, broadcast technician: World War II took most of the itch out of Meier. In 1946, he settled into a job in Dallas with American Telephone & Telegraph, helping to splice the coaxial cables that would pull America together for the telecommunications age.

The job moved him around a lot — to Watseka, Ill., for example, where in 1947 he met Chris Norder, a waitress at Razzano's Cafe. A year later, he was in Owatonna, Minn., where Norder caught up with him to get married.

In 1951, splicing cables somewhere in Ohio, Meier decided to settle down. He went back to technical school, this time in Kansas City and this time for good.

"I used my GI Bill money," he said. "Face it — without the GI Bill, I couldn't have done it."

His wife worked as a phone operator, and they lived in a cramped trailer in somebody's back yard.

"But I didn't intend for the trailer to be forever," she says. "Things were going to get better."

They did. Meier's training took him first to a television station in New Orleans and then to a career in television technology in St. Louis and to a suburban house in Affton.

He retired in 1986 from KMOV (Channel 4), having helped to midwife a medium that would forever change the way Americans looked at their society.

A postscript: The Cold War that Meier's war spawned touched one of his three kids, daughter Catherine, now 42. In the Vietnam era, she spent three years in the Air Force as a nurse.

She got out as a captain, far outranking her father.

Howard Meier, electrical engineer: Like his big brother, Howard Meier invested his GI Bill benefits in education — first at Southeast Missouri State for a year of pre-engineering, then at the University of Missouri: Rolla.

He graduated in 1950 and worked for a spell in a Cold War job at the Defense Mapping Center in St. Louis.

In 1952, he felt the same tug that pulled millions of other postwar Americans; it drew him west, to California. Meier spent a long career there helping to design and build the satellite tracking stations that kept tabs on America's Cold War enemies.

Like his brothers, he financed his house through the GI Bill, which underwrote much of America's postwar housing boom.

And in the great upward social mobility of the postwar years, Meier's three children climbed past him on the socioeconomic ladder. One is a doctor, one a lawyer and one a computer expert.

Today, Meier, 69, lives in retirement in Lompoc, Calif., close enough to Vandenberg Air Force Base to hear the deep thunder of missiles being launched across the Pacific or into space.

Harvey Meier, mechanical engineer: Like his twin, he got his discharge from the Navy in August 1946 and packed his bags for Southeast Missouri and then Rolla.

He majored in mechanical engineering — specifically, heating and cooling. The postwar building boom made the field rewarding, because prosperity was pushing air conditioning from the status of luxury to the category of necessity.

Still, Meier's college years were far from luxurious. Like so many veterans, he decided to take on marriage and college together. In December 1946, he wed Gerry Poe.

Before long, they were contributing to America's biggest postwar social upheaval — the Baby Boom.

Prewar couples dreaded children, because in the Depression years, children merely deepened poverty.

But postwar America was rich, or felt that way, and children were part of the treasure. Babies poured forth; Harvey and Gerry Meier had four of them.

Meanwhile, Harvey Meier followed jobs around. Prewar Americans tended to settle down where they were born, but postwar Americans followed opportunity.

Opportunity led Meier to St. Louis, to Bloomington, Ill., to Kankakee, Ill., to Elgin, Ill., and then back home to St. Louis. Here, his wife died, on Aug. 1, 1993.

Today, Meier, retired, rattles alone around a spaciouly comfortable new home in an unincorporated area of north St. Louis County. There, as the Meier family historian, he maintains scrapbooks filled with mementos from WW II.

One of Meier's children, Donald, followed him into the Navy, in the Vietnam era. Like his Uncle Vernon, killed in Italy, the young Meier chose medical training and today is a

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1995

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Postwar: In Retrospect

For somebody who spent three years and three months in unspeakable Japanese prison camps, Gil Meier is remarkably forgiving of his former foe.

He has owned a Toyota (although his brother Harvey, remembering Pearl Harbor, won't hear of a Japanese car). Gil Meier even says he'd like to go back to Japan someday. He says, "It would be interesting."

If Gil Meier has any hard feelings — and it's difficult to tell, because he is a placid, pleasant man — they're against the Veterans Administration.

Not until his retirement years did Meier get nudged into seeking disability benefits for the health problems stemming from his POW experience.

He gets a small monthly sum, "but somebody told me I should have been getting it all along."

Still, Meier shrugs it off, the way people from his generation tend to do. They're a tough breed, hardened by the Depression and tempered by the war, and for all of it, Gil Meier says, with simple sincerity:

"I consider myself one of the luckiest guys around. After all, I came home."

One afternoon this summer, he and his brother Harvey sat around Harvey's kitchen table, pondering what the war had meant to them.

They seemed to agree that it was the central period of their lives; indeed, most people who lived through World War II look back at the period as the most vivid years ever.

But two of the Meier brothers came home in coffins, and the war scarred their parents for the rest of their lives.

So on balance, did the Meiers of Brentwood come out ahead? Or was the cost of the war too great to bear?

The brothers thought on the question silently, and at length. Then, Gil Meier said, "I don't think there's any such thing as a good war."

But his brother Harvey said, "I wouldn't have been what I am without the war."

Then the silence resumed. Finally, when it seemed as if there was no answer, Gil's wife, Chris, uttered simple words that summed up a society as well as a family:

"Two of you died so that the rest of us could have a better life."

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After War, Meiers' Sister Prospered Outside Home

GINNY MEIER grew up to be Virginia Monroe, now retired from a job with the University of Cincinnati and living in that city.

In the war years, she was a kid at Brentwood High School, too young to work at a defense job. Still, she volunteered to help the war effort however she could — for example, by “knittin’ for Britain,” making socks, sweaters and mittens for the people of that hard-pressed country.

After graduating in 1946, she got a job here as a secretary at Western Electric. Six years later, she married a World War II veteran — Wyndham H. Monroe Jr., a salesman who had served with the Army Air Forces in New Guinea.

The postwar boom had opened up new opportunities and made Americans more mobile than ever before. That mobility took the Monroes to Pittsburgh, to Columbus, Ohio, and to Athens, Ohio, before they settled in Cincinnati in 1965.

Like generations of women before her, Virginia Monroe quit work when her two sons came along.

But unlike those earlier generations, she went right back into the labor force once her boys were old enough to tend to themselves. Like millions of postwar American women, Monroe spent her days out of the house and on the job.

When she typed letters at Western Electric in 1950, she was one of about 17.4 million American women in the work force.

By the time she retired in 1991 from her job as coordinator of college graduation and certification, she was one of about 53 million — a number that continues to grow.

(She was also self-supporting; her husband had died in 1987 after a long bout with Alzheimer’s.)

When Monroe recalls the war, she thinks of her mother in tears and her father sitting up far into the night, listening for war news on the radio.

“It was a very sad time,” she says. “I was really trying to keep my brothers apprised on what was happening at home — and to hold up my mom and dad.”

— Harry Levins



Long after the war's end, the surviving Meier siblings gather in the early 1990s. They are (from left), twins Howard and Harvey Meier, Virginia Meier Monroe and Gil Meier.

Sept. 23, 1995

Harvey Meier
4312 Bangor Drive
Florissant, Mo. 63034

Dear Mr. Meier:

Please excuse the stationery (I'm writing this from home) and the delay (I've been out of town for two weeks) -- and thanks for the kind words.

It was my privilege to tell your family's story, and what a story it is. I had many flattering comments from my colleagues, but I told them all the same thing:

``A story that good just tells itself.``

Thanks for enclosing the letter from Mr. Kavanaugh. He said it well, and I concur with his closing line:

``God bless all the Meiers.``

Thank you for letting me invade your privacy -- and thank you and your family for marching off to defend me and my family. You deserve every salute you get.

Sincerely,

Harry Levins
Harry Levins

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September 3, 1995

Mr. Harvey W. Meier
4312 Bangor Dr.
Florissant, MO 63034

Dear Mr. Meier:

It was with awe, admiration, and most of all a sense of profound gratitude that I read the story about your family in this morning's Post. I was born in February, 1942; so my only direct knowledge of the World War II era are a few very faint recollections of some men wearing uniforms. Nonetheless, I am keenly aware that it was brave, gutsy, devoted (and I'm sure, scared) men like you and your dear brothers who preserved for me and others that precious thing we sometimes take for granted: **freedom**.

No mortal can utter words which will bring back Vernon and Donald, your 2 brothers who gave their lives overseas. Nor can anyone completely erase the physical and psychological scars I am sure you men must still carry. I do hope, however, that it will help at least a bit for you men to know that every right-thinking person on this planet is now and forever will be grateful for what you gentlemen gave so that some terrible terrible beasts could be knocked from power, never again to threaten the decent folks in this world.

We who benefited from the courage and the class of the Meier brothers do not express our gratitude often enough (an all too common a human trait, unfortunately); but please know that we do care and we are thankful beyond words.

Please pass my comments and best wishes on to your brothers and your sister (she sounds like a neat lady). God bless you; and God bless all the Meiers.

Sincerely,



TJK:se

THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY

WASHINGTON
25 February 1946

Mr. Ernest F. Meier,
2603 Louis Avenue,
Brentwood 17, Missouri.

Dear Mr. Meier:

I have noted that during World War II you have had five sons serving in the armed forces of the United States:

- Howard E. Meier Navy
- Harvey W. Meier Navy
- Gilbert C. Meier Marine Corps
- Donald L. Meier Marine Corps (deceased)
- Vernon A. Meier Army (deceased)

Your sacrifice in this war has indeed been great. I hope your sorrow will be tempered by the knowledge that a grateful nation honors your sons who gave their lives for their country, as it honors you and your family for your exceptional contribution to the cause of freedom.

With deep respect.

Sincerely yours,

James Forrestal