

Down By The Berry Patch

"Protect Them"

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August 17, 2014

I never saw that before. Just Uncle John, Uncle Jack and both the Cederwall cousins sitting around the kitchen table drinking alcohol. Did they climb up on the cabinet and get it from the cupboard high over the sink?

Nobody who knew the rules about staying in bed was around. If you went back downstairs and traipsed through the kitchen to get to the bathroom enough times, then sat on the toilet long enough, you were sure to hear an adult in the kitchen say something interesting.

Mostly they were just saying dull stuff about the Army when Uncle John's voice sounded angry. "If there is ever a war right here in the US, first, I'd kill my family to protect them and then I'd reenlist."

Did the silence mean they agreed with him?

Then he said he wasn't fighting for his country. They were all fighting for the other men with them. He said he never felt that close to anyone else in his whole life.

Not that close to Aunt Mary and Jay? How could that be? They were his family. He had to love them the most. Why would they fight for each other and not their country? America won the war.

And what could be so horrible that it would make Uncle John kill his own family so they didn't have to be a part of it? Daddy wasn't in the war. He wouldn't know that was the right thing to do.....if it really was the right thing. If it was that bad, would Uncle John also kill our family. Should he? I hoped there would never be a war right in our country. I should have stayed upstairs.

Then on another trip to the bathroom I heard, "I don't tell war stories. If you weren't there you can't understand what it was like. If you were there you don't need someone to tell you stories."

"People who are always telling war stories probably weren't really in it."

I wondered if my relatives ever really killed someone. Larry McKay said Blaze Hoffenberger did. He said Blaze told him bloody stories about shooting Germans. He claimed Blaze was a war hero. I wanted more than anything to know Blaze. I'd walk slowly past the ST&H Gas Station where he worked hoping he'd come out to pump gas. I wished Daddy would buy his gas at ST&H instead of Ott's Shell Station. Ott wasn't even in the war.

Reprinted from *Down by the Berry Patch*

<http://berrypatch.info/rita/014.html>

Last updated on 17 August 2014

Photo Caption: John Liberacki with son Jay. Summer of 1943

After I heard the conversation about people who told war stories probably not knowing what it was really like, I stopped being jealous of Larry talking to Blaze. Years later when Miss Payne, my home ec teacher married Blaze, I secretly hoped he really was a hero. She deserved a war hero because she had been a WAVE and told us she actually swooned when she saw Frank Sinatra in a USO show.

Another good time to listen in was when Mother, Lillian and Helen got to talking. They talked about the real family secrets. One time, when Aunt Mary was with them, my ears perked up because they were talking about our cousin Paul and his family. All I understood about they were saying was it was a whole bunch of stuff kids shouldn't know.

Paul was a paratrooper. He gave me a framed picture of himself standing at attention in his uniform. He had on tall, round-toed boots but it didn't show his parachute. He came to visit us with his beautiful wife, Billie. She was as romantic as her name. They slept in the front bedroom and, when I peeked through the crack in the door, I could see Billie's long red hair spread over the pillow and Paul's head was right up against hers. After they were gone, I'd lie down on that bed and daydream about them. Then Tom was "killed in action."

Aunt Mary's voice got sarcastic. "Killed in action behind the enemy lines, my ass! Hell! He was probably shot by his own men. They all thought he was a big SOB!"

"That's not what the war department said."

"Well, what do you expect? They couldn't say that."

What was a SOB? That was something I needed to know. Was it like a Sargent or Lieutenant? It must be something else because I never heard anyone say you got killed for being something like that. It probably wasn't true anyway. Soldiers wouldn't ever kill someone on their own side. Aunt Mary was an Army Nurse. She should know if that could ever happen. Americans only killed Germans and Japs because over there, they were the enemy. Americans were good. Maybe she didn't really know. Another secret I learned before was that Aunt Mary always shot off her mouth without thinking; saying things just to shock people.

Uncle Stan was missing in action and then he was safe again behind the American lines. I wished Mother, Lillian and Helen, would have just told me these stories. They were talking about it and said he was sick of peeling potatoes in the German POW camp—or else they said he was tired of only getting potatoes to eat in the POW camp—so he decided to escape.

The underground helped him get out of Germany. They'd tell him to go to a certain place like a street corner and then someone would bump into him and he was supposed to follow that person until they gave him another direction. They told him not to talk because that would be a dead give-away that he wasn't a German. He finally got all the way across Germany to the American lines by getting bumped by strangers who would show him where to hide and then give him a new direction.

Why would German people help an American escape? There must be some good Germans even in Germany; not just the ones who are our neighbors. Maybe they were related to each other. Why were

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they on our side? That must have been very dangerous for the underground people. What would have happened if German soldiers had caught him escaping? What if he would've forgotten and talked? How did he know which people he could trust? How did they know who he was so they started to help him?

Why didn't anybody tell me about this? It is so hard to figure things out for yourself when you are a kid and the things you want to know about are secrets. You can't ask any questions about the secrets you over hear when the adults think they are things you need to be protected from. You don't want to upset them by letting on you know anything at all. They need to think they are protecting you. It makes them feel safer.

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