

Editor's note: In addition to reading the following story, the reader might visit the story of the aircraft know as "Strictly From Hunger", 41-29412, flown by the Hornbaker crew on 25 May 1944. Daneal Hoffman was the Nose Gunner on that crew.

<https://the464th.org/Aircraft/778th/41-29412/41-29412.html>

Deneal Hoffman by his niece, Denni Liebowitz

Cincinnati, Ohio

I.

My mother's brother never returned from the war. The vivid, raw scenes of reunion that kept everyone going in those hard times never happened. There were no tears of joy or pride, no tears of relief from the agony of worrying and waiting. There were no stories told or dreams for the future shared. She never again saw his beautiful face or felt the familiar comfort of his presence. But neither did she or her parents experience what so many American families dreaded every day for years - the sound of an unexpected car door slamming and a somber knock on the door or a telegram announcing that her brother had been killed. She did not suffer the return of his remains in a coffin draped in a flag, the cord of hope for his safe return forever severed. Nor did she watch as he was lowered into the earth. There were neither wails nor muffled sobs. Instead, there was only uncertainty. In the summer of 1944, my mother and her parents received a telegram, "We regret to inform you that Sgt. Deneal Hoffman is Missing in Action."

My grandfather's devoted and desperate search for his son yielded no answers. In appearance perhaps, life and time seemed to unfold as usual. Eventually, my mother married, had three children, and life went on. But in another way, a deep way, life and time were frozen – a part of her mind on hold, waiting and hoping, her life defined by a moment in time that stopped everything and, at the same time, would color everything that came after it.

II.

Millions of Americans know this experience in their bones. By the end of WWII, and to this day, there are 78,750 American men and women Missing in Action from WWII, a staggering number, especially in light of our having lost track of this collective loss; a loss uniquely defined by an uncertainty that lives on in the minds and hearts of loved ones without end and is passed on from generation to generation.

Given the unspeakable horrors of war and the incomprehensible magnitude of human life lost during WWII, it is no surprise that the children and grandchildren of those who fought are still working at "digesting" the reality of the war and the quiet ways in which it has affected our parents' lives, our own lives, and life in our country. Memories and feelings live on inside us, shaping who we are, the relationships we have, the lives we lead, and are passed on to our children and our grandchildren without our even knowing it. For in the unconscious, there is no sense of time.

When our soldiers returned, there was no time to reflect on what they had seen and experienced. By necessity, life simply had to resume.

But there are costs to undigested experience and unmourned loss. The generation that followed “the greatest generation” now bears our own legacy and, perhaps with the passing of enough time, we are able and maybe even compelled, to pick up threads that were dropped, helping to heal those who came before us as well as ourselves and those who come after.

III.

We always knew, my sister, brother, and I, that our mother had a brother who was MIA in WWII – whatever that meant. There weren’t many stories about Deneal. We knew that everyone loved him, that he was an artist and a great swimmer. We knew that he was just a year older than our mother and that they were “like twins”. We knew to turn off the TV if anything about war came on or to divert her direction if there was an upsetting installation in a museum we were visiting. And we knew that our mother (and we, in our own confused way) retained the faint hope that he might knock on the door at any time.

IV.

It was a bright winter day, the day my mother went to get the mail. Tucked among the usual bills and advertisements, she found a handwritten envelope from Eva Hornbaker, someone she did not know. Curious, but not really thinking, my mother opened the letter. Eva Hornbaker, the letter read, was searching for any surviving family of Sgt. Deneal Hoffman. Eva was the niece of the pilot who flew the mission that had been Deneal’s last and she had information the family might want to know. Eva invited my mother to call if she would like to talk. My mother carried the letter in her purse for a long time.

V.

Philippe Castellano, a native of Cannes, France, has spent more than twenty years searching for plane parts and body parts in order to knit together stories that can bring closure to families who lost loved ones in the south of France during WWII. Philippe grew up knowing each member of the crew of Deneal’s plane as a hero. Deneal’s was the only plane to go down in Cannes and Philippe’s father, as a ten-year-old boy, saw it happen. Philippe is a humble man. He sees his efforts as a natural gesture of gratitude and reciprocity, an eternal recognition of the real losses families endured and a gift, though painful, that can help families heal. Philippe sees his work as sacred, an acknowledgement of our interconnectedness and our need for one another across time, space, nation, and generation. In France, Philippe is known as the Searcher for Souls. For nearly two decades he knew that Deneal had died and had understood, intuitively, how vital this information would be for the family. But all of his efforts to locate us had failed. It was Eva Hornbaker who finally succeeded.

Like many who have loved ones Missing in Action, my mother knew her brother had probably died but in the absence of knowing this definitively, she also held onto the hope that he might miraculously have survived. When my mother first spoke with Eva, she did not ask the question at the heart of their conversation, “is my brother dead or alive?” Eva wisely perceived that my mother was not ready to know, and she was right. We wake up to painful truths in pieces small enough for the mind and heart to bear. It took time for my mother to signal that she was ready to know the truth because it was a truth that would shatter a dream she held for sixty years. Indeed, it was a dream that had held her together and kept her going, though at great cost, shaping her relationships with those she loved most and couldn’t bear the thought of losing. In her inner life, a part of my mother was living in the time of the telegram, an eternal uncertainty about her brother’s fate always pulling in the background. She created an emotional life that protected her in necessary ways, loving dearly but struggling mightily with both giving and receiving, wary of needing, harming, or getting too close. She was there and yet not there, unable to fully inhabit her own life. As a result, my siblings and I also knew intimately the experience of wanting, waiting, and absence – in our case, for our mother.

VI.

Eva was thrilled to receive a phone message from my mother, and they arranged a time to talk. Anticipation and anxiety crackled through the family, each of us knowing the time Eva was to call. But my mother both wanted and did not want to hear what Eva had to say and after their first conversation, she asked me to speak with Eva instead. The letter and the conversation had stirred up what had laid quietly in the background for most of my mother’s life and it was difficult to stay with.

Seated in the rocking chair in my living room, I listen raptly to Eva’s every word and sigh as she tells an extraordinary story that now, finally, gathers me up into its flow. The eternity of uncertainty hangs in the balance. Past, present, and future are nowhere to be seen, there is only this moment. Our rapport immediate, Eva lets me know early on in our lengthy conversation that Deneal had died, probably on impact. I will never forget how, in the wake of this information, Deneal immediately came to life in my mind, a real person who had died rather than an undefined, ghostly presence. Curiosity about him, long buried, animated my thoughts and I could imagine him in three dimensions and living color. Remarkably, Eva’s words had returned him to us.

My encounter with Eva initiated a process of deep discovery with people, places, and an unknown history that would change my life and change my mind. Two years later, I and other family members of the crew responded to an invitation from the people of Cannes to join them to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the liberation. We, who began as strangers, emerged feeling more like kin, each of our lives shaped by the same moment in history and each of us holding a different piece of the same, until now, unknown story. Philippe is a storyteller and ritual maker extraordinaire. Those days in Provence were unforgettable and redemptive. The generosity, gratitude, and love from Philippe and the people of Cannes and their *acknowledgement of our losses* were healing and transformative.

Soon after returning from France and speaking often to her about the experience, I realized that in order for my mother to fully take in her brother's death so long ago and so far away, she needed to meet Philippe. For it was Philippe who lived in that faraway place, whose father had seen the plane go down so long ago, and whose involvement in the resolution of the story was motivated by a loving wish for healing - his own, I had no doubt, as well as others. Meeting Philippe, I thought, would create a link and a bond that could make things real for my mother.

VII

Three months before my trip to France, my mother had provided the long-awaited green light that she was ready to hear that her brother had died. I flew to Cincinnati that weekend to tell her. It was Memorial Day 2004, the weekend the WWII Memorial was dedicated in Washington DC, our own recognition of the 60th anniversary of the war's end, the courage and dedication of the 16,000,000 Americans who served, and the devastating loss of 500,00 Americans. WWII was on our nation's mind as I sat at the kitchen table with my mother late that Saturday night, telling her again of my many conversations with Eva, Philippe, and Velma and Vern Kirby; Velma was the widow of Capt. Robert Hornbaker, the pilot of the plane. But this time, I included the fact that Deneal had died (sixty years and four days before) as well as stories to help explain the circumstances and how it was that she and her family had not known.

That night, the past was present and there was a reversal of generations. My mother listened, looking directly at me - I will never forget the look in her eyes - though she was pulled deeply inside herself. At one point she put her head down on the table and, weeping quietly into her arms, said, "I wish everything had just been left the way it was and not had everything dug up like this. I feel like I still don't know." It was a complicated and agonizing moment for both of us, for different reasons. My heart broke for her and I felt angry for myself. "It's a lot to take in, mom, I said softly." I questioned whether I should have pursued things as passionately as I had, given that my mother was suffering so. But I quickly realized how vital it was for me and I also remembered the poignance of her words when she let me know she was ready to know the obvious. "All my life I've been waiting and waiting and waiting", she had cried. But suffering is never easy even when the truth is longed for. Her pain was palpable and unbeknownst to her, she called me Deneal three times that night. Toward the end of the conversation, completely unexpectedly, she said quietly, "This has been a burden for you all your life, hasn't it." "Yes", I said, "it has." There was a silence of sorrow and recognition that was both shared between us as well as deeply private for each of us. "I'm so sorry Denni. I had no idea."

VIII.

Eight winters have passed since that cold bright day my mother found Eva's letter in the mail and an extraordinary story continues to unfold. But the culmination was a memorial service for my uncle made possible by the good fortune of a visit from Philippe and also because of my mother's finally found ability to bear the fact of her brother's death.

We are not made to bear loss and suffering alone. Any loss and surely a loss held at bay for so long needs the presence and recognition of loving witnesses. My mother needed a memorial service in order to help her mourn the loss of her brother so long ago. In the end, it was an experience that seemed as unlikely as it felt destined to happen.

The living room was filled with family and friends, three generations, many of whom had never met. Some had known and loved Deneal, some knew him through his uncertain legacy, and some were among those whose love and generosity had made our ritual of closure possible. Philippe and his co-searchers were in the United States to visit family of the crew and had kindly agreed to come to Cincinnati to meet my mother. Velma and Vern had arrived from St. Louis, and Eva and her partner John had arrived from Phoenix. In the evening, we gathered to meet one another and, together, hear Philippe render the story that had eluded us for so long. He was, indeed, the link my mother and others needed so that the next morning we could gather for the service of remembering that had never happened.

The ritual of remembering was itself a tapestry, woven to gather up people and places, near and far, past and present, the living and the dead. In the sacred space held by two wonderfully sensitive rabbis my mother rose to recite the Mourners Kaddish, sixty-two years after her brother had died. Yit-ga-dal v'yit-ka-dash shmay rabba, how great and how amazing is the name of the mysterious process of life. As my mother spoke the ancient words, her children's voices joined hers for we too had risen as mourners.

After reciting the Kaddish, my brother, sister, and I fell back onto the couch, weeping. It was a moment of separation long needed; not only separating the living from the dead but one generation from another, our burden now lifted. Ours were tears of grief but also tears of release. For my mother, the space of not knowing now filled with truth and her loss held and witnessed by community, she no longer had to keep her grief and pain at bay. In time, as her mourning proceeded and with her life remembered, memory returned. Stories she hadn't thought of in a lifetime brought her past, and present, to life.

IX. Coda

April 27, 2008. In a time when the media is forbidden by law to broadcast images of the returning dead, the gravitas of war is in the air as thousands of people lovingly and solemnly line the streets of downtown Cincinnati to welcome home the remains of Sgt. Matt Maupin.

"Matt Maupin" was initially all my mother could say when I called that morning. "It's tearing my heart out." Four years earlier, Matt Maupin's family had been notified that he was Missing in Action in Iraq. Determined to bring him home, Matt's family worked closely with the military and tirelessly enlisted the hopes, prayers, and help of others to find their son and share the burden of their unbearable state of waiting. "Until Matt comes off that plane – walking or in a coffin – we're going to keep hoping he's alive", Matt's father had told a Times reporter. Earlier today, Matt had arrived at the Cincinnati airport, his body in a coffin draped in a flag.

Instinctively, I call my brother. Hearing the crowd in the background when he answers, I know where he is. Suddenly, I am struggling to hear him. “Maybe I better call you back, Den, its getting really noisy... I think I hear planes.” “No Ned, *please*. Don’t hang up”. Our cell phone connection, fragile enough, provides a way for me to be there with him. He agrees and I am grateful.

I listen to the noise and my brother’s silence. Then, he begins to narrate what I later learn is the flyover formation used to honor the return of the missing. “There are three planes flying together, in a triangle..... just like us.” He whispers “just like us” almost to himself. I press the phone to my ear. Minutes pass though time has stopped. “There’s a fourth plane now, flying alone.” Ned’s voice is quiet and full of feeling. He takes in a quick breath. “The fourth plane is flying toward the other three.” His voice breaking, “now they are together.” And then, inevitably and heavily, “the fourth plane is leaving them now, Den”. Our deep recognition of the Maupins’ loss and the power of witnessing the missing man formation together, as it also represented to us Deneal’s return to our family, is palpable between us. No words are needed as the crowd achingly feels the Maupins’ sorrow and watches the planes, the three now separated from the one, until they are out of sight. Following a memorial service in the Great American Ballpark, Sgt. Maupin will finally be buried close to those who love him. Later, we learn that the planes used in the flyover were WWII aircraft.

It was a harrowing day for my mother, but by evening, she no longer needed me to advocate for the return of her brother’s remains. No longer a ghost or a coffin in her mind with no other place to rest, my mother could let Deneal remain where he was, among the dead in an unmarked grave, and let herself be alive among the living. “Let him rest in peace”, she said. “I think its best, don’t you?”

X.

The legacy of war is long and made longer when its losses and impacts are not fully born. “It is only the dead who have seen the end of war”, wrote Plato. While Plato may have been voicing a belief in human nature and the inevitability of war, my mind and heart hear a different meaning. Whether the family member at war survived, died, or is missing in action, war lives on in the minds of those who see it and those close to them. How could it be otherwise? And until the emotional experience of war is faced and digested, its impact is passed on, out of awareness, landing somewhere, from generation to generation. My life has been profoundly shaped by a war that preceded my birth. This is true for many of us, whether WWI, WWII, Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq, Afghanistan, or other traumas of history.

We are not made to bear pain and sorrow alone. We struggle in our collective ability to suffer, to recognize our own humanity, our own vulnerability, and the significance and impact of history itself. There is a vital social dimension, a communal dimension, to healing that transcends the individual and the family, strengthening the bonds between us, helping to heal us all. And for that, we need one another.

Our appreciation to Rabbis Irv Wise and Tom Hayn.

I want to remember and honor the members of the crew of 'Strictly from Hunger' (Fifteenth AF, 55th BW, 464th BG) and their families. Capt. Robert Hornbaker (Pilot), Lt. Raymond Burkland (Co-Pilot), Lt. Richard Nilles (Navigator), Lt. Carl Gein (Bombardier), Sgt. Edwin Draney (Radio Operator), Sgt. Alfred Karow (Waist Gunner/Engineer), Sgt. Lawrence Reinecke (Waist Gunner/ Assistant Engineer), Sgt. Roland Baryenbruch (Tail Turret Gunner), Sgt. William Harcher (Ball Turret Gunner), and Sgt. Deneal Hoffman (Nose Turret Gunner).

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