

A Box of Chocolates

Most of you will be familiar with the popular quote from the movie Forrest Gump, “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get.” Well it also rang true for me.

I don’t remember the first time that well-worn sepia-toned box with the raised gold filigree and the words, “Bunte – Chicago – Mi Choice Chocolates”, appeared in my life, but it seems it was *always* a part of my world. The objects within held a strange and constant fascination for a young girl trying desperately to hold on to the fleeting war memories relayed by her dad to his loving family and friends. The rectangular box was never far from my side, and was kept in a nightstand, as I moved from house to house and city to city. Every now and then I would sit on the floor, carefully remove the tattered lid and lovingly lay each item before me. Maybe I was hoping a name would mysteriously appear on the back of a photo, giving me some clue as to who these young men were who stood next to my father, smiling back at me. Maybe it was a source of comfort and a way for me to try and hold on to a part of my life, for my father had passed away when I was only twelve. Maybe it was all those things and more. But the one thing I did not know and could not know, was the important role that fraying box would play later in my life.

The cherished items included things that a million other GIs brought back from their tours of duty; tattered and faded black and white photos of foxhole friends, patches and pins that were proudly worn on Ike jackets, and currency from faraway countries that I could only begin to dream about. But now there was no longer anyone to tell the story of their experiences, but only a daughter’s fading memories of tales told around the dining room table in Detroit.

Hard as I tried, I could only recall brief details from the stories that held me spellbound as a young child, but I do remember a certain sense of awe, fascination and trepidation as the German Luger came out from its secret hiding place, followed by the sound of steel as the German officer’s sword was deftly removed from its scabbard. Slice! The fascination never left and was renewed each time this scene was repeated in our house by my dad. I sat wide-eyed and in perfect silence, as I eagerly awaited another tale from across the sea. I never forgot that bullets could do a lot of damage and make holes in men, THIS BIG! I never forgot the word ANZIO and talk about beachheads and sand and a hail of artillery. I will never forget the mood in the room and the impression it made on me. Never!

Even though my dad and I only had twelve years together, those years left an indelible impression on that innocent girl. We were close. “I was daddy’s girl!” My father and I did a lot of things together and that included watching war movies and the TV show, Combat! My mother did not share our enthusiasm and frankly I think she thought we were both a bit nuts, for we would sit riveted on our sofa as the black and white images flowed across the screen. I will never forget that faraway stare that came across his face. He was instantly transformed and transported a few thousand miles away. His body would involuntarily jerk and maybe a foot would stomp or an arm would twitch, but he was no longer in the room with me. I never

questioned him, but always wondered where he was and what he was thinking. I had no way to comprehend all the emotions that must have been running through his veins, but even at that age I began to understand, appreciate and respect all that he had been through.

It always took me back to that box and left me wanting to know more. I could no longer remember what Army unit he was with, or what many of the cherished souvenirs represented. It always left me with a longing and a wish that we had written things down. But how could I berate myself for I was only an elementary school child, and when you are that young you think your parents will live forever.

One winter day at my mother's house, I sifted through Christmas cards that adorned her room, and ran across a name I was not familiar with. Mom, I exclaimed, who is Ira Wheatley? Oh, that's an old Army buddy of your dad's. Well that's all I needed to hear, and a few weeks later my husband and I arranged to meet at Ira's house. Most people would not understand my excitement, but my husband did, for he shared my interest in World War II history, and was delighted to accompany me on this visit.

What an interesting man Ira Wheatley was and what a fascinating life he had. He graciously filled us in on the 540th's tour of duty in the ETO, (European Theatre of Operations), and many times the conversation would return to Anzio. Dreaded Anzio! I began to see the same reaction in other men anytime that word was mentioned. It must have been hell. It was. Ira spoke of the intense and constant shelling that forced the men to bury their trucks in the sand, in order to keep the machine shops running. It brought back a flood of memories from my childhood. "I know these stories", I said to myself.

Ira also relayed a story of how my dad was injured by mortar fire while performing the duty of a motorcycle courier (a fact that I was later able to confirm after perusing thousands of pages of documents from NARA, the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland).

After a grand day together, I hugged Ira and told him what a thrill it was to meet him. I could kick myself later on because even though we continued to exchange Christmas cards for years, we never again met in person, and many of things that he imparted to me on that day were forever lost because of my failure to put pen to paper. When he passed on in the 1990's, my only connection was severed, and I was almost back to square one in my quest to learn more about my dad's wartime experiences.

While still living in Detroit, I contacted the National Archives in St. Louis, but it took three successive tries before I finally received a letter at our new home in northern Michigan in autumn 2003. Sorry, they informed me, but your father's records burned in a huge fire in 1973. How could it end this way? I was so distraught it took me almost three weeks before I could show the letter from St. Louis to my husband. I then began to feel angry and that anger led me to one conclusion; I would not give up and this would not defeat me. I had the Internet didn't I?

So as the winter months bore down on our little town, I put forth an undying effort in front of my personal computer. I re-opened the box of my dad's wartime mementos for the umpteenth time and fed anything and everything into the Google search engine. The first few weeks were frustrating as I tried to figure out where to begin. How does one go about looking for a military unit when you don't even know what unit a person was with? How do you write a description for a unit designation shoulder patch? The quest was daunting considering how many Army units had fought in the ETO. I began narrowing it down with the 5th and 7th Army patches, but found it was a lot of ground to cover. My job was made all the more difficult because he had one shoulder patch with a Seahorse on it and another with a Red Bull. HELP!

With bound determination, I began to feel as though I was making progress. I found a site for the 34th Infantry Division, the great Red Bulls, but conflicting info from other sites sent my head into a tizzy. The Seahorse patch belonged to the 36th Combat Engineer Regiment, but the 36th Engineers were NOT part of the 34th Inf Div. So I sent a letter to the 34th, and soon afterward, discovered the name of a Captain John Fallon, 36th Combat Engineer. I began to scratch out diagrams on paper trying to come up with a divisional chart. Still something wasn't adding up.

A few weeks later I received a letter from Jerry Gorden, webmaster of the 34th Infantry, along with a unit history. In the interim I found another reference to "Seahorses" and the name of Rene Rousselle, a 540th Combat Engineer, the contact for their unit. I sent a letter in late April 2004, along with photographic scans of the pins and patches I had in my wartime collection. Oh dear, I was coming up with answers, but at this juncture I wasn't sure which direction it was leading me.

It was then I received a hand-written letter from Rene Rousselle the first week of May. I was overjoyed. Rene informed me that my father was assigned to the 540th Combat Engineer Regiment. John Fallon's email followed a few days later, and told of the 36th Combat Engineer's proud history, and invited me to call him. I will never forget the day we first spoke, for it was the 60th Anniversary of the Normandy D-Day landings.

After conferring with John and Rene, we were able to ascertain that my dad was indeed part of the 540th, and Captain Fallon gave me the lowdown on both units, stating that they shared a very common history, and proceeded to explain their relationship to 5th and 7th Armies and 6th Corps. I was starting to grasp all this when John threw a ringer... neither unit belonged to a division. What? All along I assumed that each unit fell under a division, but I soon discovered that many engineer units were known in army lingo as "bastard" units; they were individualized engineer regiments or battalions and went where and when they were needed. Sometimes under an Army, sometimes under a Corps, and often times attached to other divisional units. The learning curve was getting steep, but I finally had some "teachers", and I was a very eager student.

In summary I've had the honor and privilege of meeting hundreds of WWII veterans and their families, and through their encouragement, moral support, friendship and love, have taken on the task of producing a documentary, No Bridge Too Far. I also created a website dedicated to

my father and the VI Corps engineers (the 36th, 39th, 540th and the 1108th). This site grew from a mere two pages from its inception in 2004, to what you see before you today, including a forum with over 1300 members, numerous veteran's memoirs and thousands of historical documents and photographs.

So through dogged determination (I inherited my dad's engineer genes!), the kindness of countless individuals and a now unquestioning belief in divine intervention, I find myself at an unbelievable juncture. And that takes us back to that tiny box that once held an array of unanswered questions; life is like that box of chocolates, you never *do know* what you're going to get!

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