

FORWARD

THE BOX

When I was ten-years-old, I was poking around in an old chest of drawers in our basement where my father kept his hand tools. My Dad often had me help him with projects so I knew all about the tools and to this day I am still have the knowledge and skills he passed on to me.

I opened one drawer which I guess I had never looked in before and found a collection of papers, photos, booklets, medals and a pistol - a German Luger. There were photos of planes, bombs and soldiers - very interesting things - but with no knowledge or context in which to really understand what I was looking at, I could not put them in context. I did get the feeling, however, that perhaps I should not have been poking around in there. So, I closed the drawer and put it out of my mind. Or so I thought.

I was afraid to ask my Dad about his private stuff, but I could not get it out of my mind! So, I asked my Mom. She was always a very pleasant lady, a great Mom, but the piercing look she gave me and the stern, "don't go there", cured my curiosity.

My Dad and I never talked much about his war experience but he did acknowledge that drawer was full of memories – just not necessarily good ones. Nonetheless, when the topic did come up in group settings, often including discussions of someone named Mike and someone named Gibby, he became cold and distant, often walking away. I found that puzzling but once again my Mom would look at me and with her eyes would say, "don't go there".

As I got older, I grew less interested given everything else that was going on in my life. Time rushed on, I forgot about the 'drawer' of painful memories and my Dad and I enjoyed our times together. He put up with my quirks, habits, beliefs, phobias and occasional misdeeds and I put up with his. As I grew intellectually, the sources of my own personality quirks became quite clear to me, but I could not imagine why my father was the way he was - introverted, claustrophobic, alcohol dependent (although fully functional and never abusive), always treasured an army blanket he kept in his car and on his bed, somewhat cold regarding building new loving relationships - but a great Dad anyway.

My Dad passed in 1996 at the age of 79 from lung cancer as a former very heavy smoker (another result of the war). For the last ten years or so of his life after Mom died, he moved in with my brother, John. Dad was really defeated when Mom died - she was his rock in more ways than I appreciated at the time.

My brother and I moved on and around 2006 John retired, moving from New York to North Carolina. He came across a lot of Dad's things in boxes in his attic and moved them into my attic for safe keeping so he did not have to take them with him.

In 2010, it was time to start cleaning out my own attic. Opening my Dad's boxes was like opening a time capsule. His careers, awards and recognitions came storming out. The black and white photo albums of me growing up, our summer vacations and generations of people I never knew were fascinating - old high neck dresses, knickers, old cars, horse and buggies - wow!

Then I opened 'THE BOX' and it took my breath away. There were the photos, booklets, medals, pistol I had seen fifty-four years ago. I stared at the contents for a long time as distant memories came tumbling back. I Shuffled through the items for a few minutes and then it hit me - there was a story somewhere in that box that I needed to know. I hoped it was not too late to find it.



I laid out the contents of that box chronologically on the floor in front of me – and thus, began the quest. I would spend many long days and nights over the next four to five years connecting the dots. Much of what I compiled was written by others who were with my father along the way. However, a lot of it I wrote myself as only I would know the details from conversations with my mom and my brother.

Corrections and additions were made over the years as I continued to follow loose ends and find other information. Now, with 1,632 illustrated pages in 24 chapters, seven appendices and an epilog, I finally know the whole story. I understand my dad better today than I ever did when he was alive. And, I also have grown to know two young heroes that I otherwise might never have known. Together, three young men, the best of friends, went off to war. For eighty-one years, it appeared two of them were lost forever. That changed in 2024. This is the story of one of those friends who finally came home.

Sadly, discovering such stories posthumously is a common occurrence for children of veterans of WWII – or, for that matter, any war. There are few WWII veterans still living today and many of their stories will never be told¹.

This one, buried for eighty-one years after the loss of another member of the greatest generation, will live.

Al Hofmann

¹ Driven by the desire to know my father's story, I have also compiled the stories of family and friend veterans of WWI, WWII and more recent hostile actions. Doughboys, Army Infantry, Air Force, Fighter Pilots, Navy, Special Forces, Airborne, Military Police – grandparents, uncles, brothers, cousins and friends - each with boxes and stories that needed to be told.

