

Home Front to Battlefield

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Preface

“There are really two wars,” John Steinbeck wrote, “and they haven’t much to do with each other. There is a war of maps and logistics, of campaigns, of ballistics, armies, divisions, and regiments,—and that is General Marshall’s war.

“Then there is the war of the homesick, weary, funny, violent, common men who wash their socks in their helmets, complain about the food...and lug themselves and their spirit through as dirty a business as the world has ever seen and do it with humor and dignity and courage.”¹

This book concerns that second war. This is the war as seen by one foot soldier, Carl Lavin, an American teenager who becomes a combat infantryman.

This is Carl’s story but it is also a broader American story, for what comes through in this narrative is how ordinary, and yet how extraordinary the tale is. Sixteen million Americans served in the military during the Second World War. They were overwhelmingly young adult males, with all the strengths and shortcomings of that group. This is a story that many of these sixteen million—or their family members—will find familiar.

This book involves only a few years of Carl’s eighty-nine-year life, from Pearl Harbor through training, combat, and finally to V-E Day and the Allied occupation of Germany.

Carl enters the war step by step. Too young to enlist on Pearl Harbor Day, he signs up for the reserves when he enters college the following fall. Spring of that freshman year he is called up. The reader journeys with him through his adventures and impressions of America at war as he completes army training, is sent to Britain, then gets thrust into combat and fights his way across Europe.

xiv From my perspective as his son, my father always struck me more than anything else as serene. A bright man, he grew up in a world of limitations, shaped as it was by the Great Depression and the Second World War. Yet he led an active and optimistic life, perhaps in part due to the trials of combat and the luck of surviving.

This book started during the summer of 2004. That year saw the dedication of the National World War II Memorial. Then came the telecast of Steven Spielberg's masterful *Band of Brothers*. Finally, there was a Library of Congress exhibit on the American soldiers of World War II. I knew, of course, that my father had served. We had talked about it intermittently over the years, and he occasionally shared a story when the lesson was pertinent. But he never seemed to particularly relish the discussions, and I never consciously sought them out.

Like many veterans, my dad seemed somewhat reticent to talk about his experience. Natural humility was part of it. His awareness of the shared sacrifice made his personal efforts not particularly noteworthy in his mind. Others suffered worse or contributed more. The goal of the war, after all, was not to revel in triumph, but to return to civilian life as rapidly as possible. In many ways, this was a typical American view of war. As the poet Karl Shapiro stated, "We all came out of the same war and joined the same generation of silence."²

But the events of 2004 reminded me that he had a story to tell, if only to our family, and that none of us were mortal. So I purchased a tape recorder, and sat down with my father for many hours of discussion.

Then I received a lucky break. In the furnace room, in an old cardboard box, I uncovered a trove of over two hundred letters from that period, almost all written by Carl to his mother, Dorothy. Thus his recollections were aided by a contemporaneous account—a flowing narrative containing Carl's thoughts and dates, as well as spellings and punctuation from that era.

As military mail was censored and prohibited any discussion of combat, I used official military records, government documents, private papers, and conventional histories of the period to place the material in historical context.

While Carl Lavin isn't a household name, his letters and recollections capture an extraordinary time in American history.

Let me begin the story by introducing our four main characters, the members of the family:

Carl Lavin, born 1924. A seventeen-year-old high school senior on Pearl Harbor Day, and by all accounts not a particularly motivated student.

Dorothy Lavin, born 1895, Carl's mother. Dorothy is the correspondent for almost all of Carl's letters, so her concerns, emotions, and principles run through his letters as well. Dorothy does not believe in a hands-off approach to raising her children.

Leo Lavin, born 1895, Carl's father and the family patriarch. Leo runs the family meat-packing business, Sugardale Provision Company, along with his two younger brothers. The company was started by Leo's father, Harry, an immigrant from Kiev, then part of Czarist Russia.

Fred Lavin, born 1922, Carl's only sibling. Fred is two years older than Carl and as a result of his age is able to qualify for officer's training. He is commissioned a US Navy Ensign and sent to the Pacific.

At times, the impression generated by this book is one of mistake after mistake after mistake. Readers should not let the anecdotes in this tale, even the horrific ones, obscure the fact that Americans and our allies fought honorably and with valor. Only in isolated cases did they not fully live up to their cause. The American fighting man was, and remains, the finest in the world. If there is one central theme to this history, it is that regardless of the nobility of the struggle, war is carried out by human beings, with all of their shortcomings and imperfections manifest in the moment. By the same pale light of war, however, we also see some of mankind's finest characteristics: courage, self-sacrifice, and quiet devotion to duty.

Perhaps this book will serve somewhat as a corrective for the overly dramatic view of war. There is a Hollywood version of World War II, usually based on the heroic moment, and spurred by a love interest. None of this drama is present in this tale. This tale is of an unpretentious young man, dedicated and dutiful yet critical, thrust by events into a world he did not seek. Daily attempting to acquit himself. Attempting to survive.

Historian Samuel Hynes captured this theme when he wrote, "Personal narratives...subvert the expectations of romance. They work at a level below the big words and the brave sentiments, down on the surface of the earth where men fight. They don't glorify war, or aestheticize it, or make it literary or heroic; they speak in their own voices, in their own plain language. They are not antiwar—that is, they are not polemics against war; they simply tell us what it is like."³

There was nothing uplifting or ennobling about war, despite the noble cause for which the United States stood. This is the World War II world of Carl Lavin, a son, a brother, a soldier, a friend—and my father.

—Franklin L. Lavin