Smoky, the Dog That Saved My Life
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Author’s Note

While researching my book Bonded by Battle, a collection of stories about the friendships of soldiers and military dogs, I uncovered the story of Bill Wynne and Smoky. Bill and I met at a McDonald’s alongside an interstate. He told me story after story about his life, from living in an orphanage, to fighting in the war, working at NACA (now NASA), and his life as a photojournalist. I told him his story was much bigger than just the dog and the war story, although Smoky is the story within the story. This clever canine had become a war-dog hero, and most likely saved many lives. And, according to Animal Planet, Smoky is credited with being the first therapy dog. Bill believes that Smoky brought out the best in him and he brought out the best in her. Together, Bill and Smoky lifted the spirits of the sick and wounded in military hospitals, and when they returned to civilian life, they continued to visit hospitals and orphanages.

Years later, Bill and I met again. I had just finished writing The Jerrie Mock Story: The First Woman to Fly Solo around the World. I told him I should write his biography next. That’s when the e-mail came. It read, “Nancy, if you’re serious about writing my life story, let’s get started. I’m ninety-five years old.” I quickly responded to the e-mail and our almost two-year journey began. We met regularly, sometimes at his home, and other times at the Oak Park restaurant in his neighborhood. Over lunch at Oak Park, Bill shared stories with me and our always-smiling waitress, Misty Cochren. Bill’s son-in-law David Tabar joined us to record the sessions for posterity.

Much like Bill and Smoky, I believe Bill and I were destined to cross paths and find one another. After our first meeting, we agreed that finding each other felt like a “God wink.” Bill had a story to tell. And as I learned about his remarkable life story, so many little-known
facts and details regarding World War II emerged. Bill and Smoky lived through kamikaze attacks, horrific typhoons, and combat. Bill credits their survival to his deep faith in God and to the many people back home in Cleveland and Pennsylvania who kept him in their prayers.

Although estimates about World War II casualties vary from fifty million to eighty million deaths, the war was undoubtedly an epic conflict of life and death. Although it was a horrific war, the goodness of humanity shone through it all. So, settle in to hear a story about a man and a dog, and how they lifted the spirits of those around them—no matter what the circumstances—one smile after another.
Soldier Bill Wynne entered the darkened tent in the 5212th Photographic Wing during World War II. He squinted, adjusting his eyes to the low light. A little dog tied to a truck tire jumped up and down. She bounced off his leg. “Her head was the size of a baseball, her ears resembled miniature windmill blades, and her weight was almost nothing at all,” he later recalled. “I was looking into a grinning, fuzzy face. Almond eyes laughed at me above a jet-black button nose, and a friendly pink tongue licked my hand.”

Bill asked a nearby soldier about the little dog. He was told that she was found trying to scratch her way out of a foxhole in the jungles of New Guinea. Bill loved dogs, all types of dogs, and he had never seen one like this. She was tiny, smaller than his army boot. That night, Bill slept fitfully thinking of the scruffy dog. What was she doing in a war zone? Was she a breed native to New Guinea or some type of Japanese dog? He pondered ways that he could make this dog his own. But what would I feed her? How could I fight a war with a little dog in tow? Should I bond with an animal only to watch it die?
SURVIVING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Growing up in an orphanage was a great experience.
I wasn’t a pure orphan. They had pure orphans there.
—Bill Wynne

“...it’s just for a short time,” Beatrice Wynne said, choking back tears.

Six-year-old Billy clung to his mother, wishing the family could all be together in their home in Cleveland, Ohio. But everything had changed. On March 7, 1924, Billy’s baby brother, Jimmy, was born with spina bifida, an incurable birth defect in which his spinal cord did not develop properly. Then came the strike of 1925 at “The Big Four” railroad. Billy’s dad, Martin Wynne, lost his job. Soon after, his dad was hospitalized for emotional stress, and upon his release, Martin left not only the hospital, but also his young family.

Billy’s mom, Beatrice, no stranger to hard times, had dropped out of school at age fourteen to care for her siblings when her father had died. Now at age thirty-three, she found herself alone and responsible for three young children. In August 1928, after years of struggling with
money problems and unreliable babysitters, Beatrice sent her eight-year-old daughter, Mary, to live with her mom, Grandma Caffrey, in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The boys went to the Parmadale orphanage.

Once the boys were dropped off at the orphanage in Parma, Ohio, they never got to see one another. Four-year-old Jimmy went to live in the baby cottage, and Billy resided in Cottage 13 with thirty-nine other boys, under the supervision of Sister Lucy, a Catholic nun. That night, Billy looked around the room of forty beds, twenty lined up on each side. Through tear-filled eyes, he wondered how he could feel so all alone in a room full of people.

Although four hundred boys lived at the orphanage in the care of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Augustine, Billy bonded with Rags, the wire-haired Airedale owned by Father Gallagher. Billy trusted the dog. He depended on Rags. After all, he had learned at a young age that people let you down; dogs didn’t. The boy and the dog formed an instant
Beatrice Wynne sits with Billy and holds Jimmy on her lap at a family picnic in 1926.

© William A. Wynne
bond. They ran around the grounds together. “Rags started me out,” Bill said. “He gave me a lifelong love of dogs.”

On a typical day at the orphanage, the boys explored the woods behind the cabins. They collected animals of all sorts. Snakes were kept in a concrete tub intended for muddy boots, while the turtles and raccoons ran free in the basement. One day, a couple of boys spotted two owls sitting on a branch. One boy leapt at the unsuspecting owls, captured the pair in his sweater, and added them to the ever-growing menagerie. The owls hooted all through the night. The following day, Sister Lucy made it clear that the owls needed to go back to their home in the wild. Nobody argued with Sister Lucy.

One evening, mystical sounds filled the air. A constant drumbeat, along with the sounds of accordions and violins, lured Billy out of the cottage. Deep in the woods, a group of people clad in long-sleeved white shirts danced around a bonfire. While Billy stared at the mysterious sight, an older boy came to his side and whispered, “Those are gypsies. Watch out because they steal little boys.” Billy had never encountered these traveling families, now called Romani. That night, Billy
slept fitfully, awakening to visions of strangers whisking him away in the dark of night.

Somehow, Billy survived the loneliness of the cold, dark winter. In 1929, in the warmer days of spring, the boys handpicked two baseball teams from their cottage. One of the teams consisted of not only best friends, but also the best athletes. When Billy didn’t make this team, he lumbered away, dejected—a castaway once more. But when his team of misfits practiced together, they bonded over their rejection. The boys felt they had something to prove. By summer’s end, through hard work and camaraderie, the team most expected to lose, won it all. They were crowned Parmadale baseball champions!

The older boys of the Parmadale orphanage competed for bragging rights on a yearly basis in a competition called field days. About one year after he arrived at his new home, seven-year-old Billy watched those boys compete in everything from foot races to kite flying. Six soldiers dressed in blue uniforms with big brass buttons on their overcoats stood by the bandstand and watched the kids compete. White hair poked from beneath the blue hats of the Union soldiers. Bill stared up at the long white beards of the Civil War veterans and the officers stared down at him. Little did he know that someday he, too, would be in uniform, fighting in a war.

On the occasional Sunday afternoon, Billy’s mom visited the orphanage. She came with candies and small gifts about once a month. Billy looked forward to the treats, but mostly he loved spending time with his mom. He missed his little brother, too. Every time his mother came, Billy asked the same question, “When can I come home?” His mom would look away and say, “Soon, Billy. I’ll get you home soon.”

In the fall of 1929, the world outside Parmadale turned upside down. The Great Depression hit, and it hit hard. Everyone suffered. Banks and businesses closed. People lost their jobs and their homes. Orphanages filled to capacity. Parmadale was no exception. As more children poured through the doors, the Sisters of Charity supplied every one of them with two sets of shoes and four outfits, two for winter and two for summer. Little things brought great joy to the lonely boys. A pancake
AFTER WORLD WAR I, Americans enjoyed good times. Along with world peace, people had jobs and money. They began to invest in the stock market, a place where individuals invest in businesses by purchasing shares of a company. On October 24, 1929, otherwise known as “Black Thursday,” the value of the stocks began to fall and kept falling at record rates. The single worst day for the United States economy occurred a few days later on Tuesday, October 29. The stock market collapsed, leaving most of the businesses the people had invested in worthless.

The stock market crash had a domino effect. People who invested in stocks lost their money. Bank customers’ hard-earned money disappeared when investments failed and the banks went out of business—about eleven thousand of them by 1933. Shop owners closed their doors. Over twelve million people lost their jobs. Some lost their homes. The homeless either moved in with relatives or built shacks out of scraps in vacant lots. These makeshift villages became known as shantytowns or “Hoovervilles,” mocking President Hoover, who kept promising good times ahead. Life was hard for the people living in these temporary villages. People sewed their own clothes or wore hand-me-downs. They saved used paper and string and added it to food as cheap fillers to feed more family members. Eating beans seven days a week became common. Homes had no electricity or water. Disease spread quickly. And when Christmas finally came, some kids were happy to get a piece of fruit for Christmas and possibly one toy. It’s estimated that about 250,000 teenagers left home so there would be one less mouth to feed. Some became hobos and traveled around the country looking for jobs. Nearly everyone suffered. The Great Depression lasted for ten years.
breakfast highlighted some mornings, not only because the kids loved the fluffy flapjacks, but also because of the potential prize inside. The chef had added boiled pennies to the pancake batter, and a penny could buy ten clay marbles, called brownies, at the orphanage store. The boys played lots of games with their cherished marbles.

When Christmas season rolled around, the boys were told to pick one item from a department store catalog. As Billy thumbed through the thick book, it seemed impossible to pick just one Christmas gift. Sister Rose Frances looked at Billy, slumped over and biting his lower lip. She walked across the room and sat alongside him. As they flipped through the pages, she said, “I think a dice game would be a great choice.” Not wanting to argue with the kind Sister or hurt her feelings, Billy chose the dice game. When Christmas day finally came, children squealed with delight as they unwrapped bicycles, skates, and sleds. Billy looked down at his dice game and tried to hold back his tears.

Soon after Christmas, Billy contracted scarlet fever. He went to City Hospital in Cleveland on December 27, 1929. As he waited to get checked in, he watched the electric train circle the tracks around the Christmas tree in the lobby.

The sick little boy spent the rest of the holiday season in the contagious ward, along with all of the other infectious patients. With so many diseases in one room, the patients caught each other’s illnesses—everything from the mumps to measles to whooping cough. Billy swapped one disease for another and remained in the hospital room from December until the Fourth of July. He became so dizzy from being bedridden that he needed to crawl to get to the bathroom. While fireworks and bottle rockets exploded over the Cleveland Flats, an industrial area near the Cuyahoga River, Billy was finally discharged from the hospital and sent back to the orphanage in Parma, Ohio.

One month later, in August 1930, while the country still battled the Great Depression, Billy’s mom and his uncle Bill showed up at Parma-dale in a Model T Ford. On the drive home, Billy couldn’t take his eyes off his mother as she moved a lever back and forth inside the car, manually operating the windshield wipers. The pouring rain did nothing to
Billy with Mary outside their home on 119th Street.

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dampen the eight-year-old’s spirits. He was going home! Much to his surprise, Billy learned that Jimmy had been home for a year already. Due to complications from spina bifida, the orphanage couldn’t care for him. Billy didn’t mind at all. He couldn’t wait to see his little brother again.

Billy burst through the front door. Although Jimmy and Mary were not home, the house was far from empty. Billy’s family had grown, but not in the usual way. His grandmother, aunts, and uncles had moved in. Due to the depression, most families could no longer afford to live in a home of their own, so they flocked together to make it through the hard times. Billy didn’t care. After all, he had been sleeping in a room with twenty beds lined up on each side. Being back home with nine family members would be just fine. And when a white German shepherd greeted him with a lick on the face, Billy felt right at home. After their brief introduction, Billy petted Skippy, untied the dog, and took him out to play. Although the rain kept falling, they romped around the yard, and when Skippy crawled into the large cedar doghouse, Billy followed right behind him.

That evening, Billy knelt beside his bed and proudly showed his mom how he had learned to say his nightly prayers at the orphanage. He thanked God for all of the members of his family, and for Skippy, and ended the prayer by saying “Hammer shonus.” His mom raised her eyebrows for a moment until she realized what Billy had meant to say was “Have mercy on us.”

When summer ended, Billy would start second grade. Since he had spent most of first grade in the hospital, he worried. *Will I be able to keep up with the other kids?*

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Billy left the orphanage on a rainy day in a Model T Ford. In the early days, not only were the windshield wipers manual, so were the engines. Some engines needed to be cranked manually in the front of the car to get it to run. You had to be certain the key was turned off so the car didn’t run you over.