

## **Growing Up a World War II War Orphan**

It was December 7, 1941. My father's brother Dale, whom I was named after, had survived the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. I was eighteen-months old. Little did I know what effect that event would have on my life.

A year earlier in October 1940 when I was five months old living in Velva, North Dakota, my father, Warren, packed our belongings in the family's 1932 Oldsmobile and drove us to Baltimore, Maryland. He had been hired by Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company and was looking forward to earning fifty cents an hour.

In November 1939 my father and his two best buddies pooled resources to buy a Piper Cub for \$544. He soloed after only five flying lessons and four hours of flight time. So it was not surprising that he decided to attend a two-month course in Aircraft Mechanics at the School of Science in Wapeton, North Dakota. Soon after returning to Velva he received word that he was being offered employment at the Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company.

Martin Aircraft's wartime boom began in 1939. The company's work force in Baltimore rose from 3,639 in December 1938, to 30,826 at the time of Pearl Harbor, to a wartime peak of 52,474 in December of 1942. Roads to Middle River were jammed, leading to the construction of dual highways Eastern and Martin Boulevards, meeting in front of the plant in Maryland's first cloverleaf. In the fall of 1941 a small number of women aircraft worker were hired.<sup>1</sup> Consequently my father was promoted to supervising a group of "Rosie the Riveters."

---

<sup>1</sup> John R. Breihan, "Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company." Maryland Online Encyclopedia, a joint project of the Maryland Historical Society, the Maryland Humanities Council, the Enoch Pratt Free Library and the Maryland State Department of Education, 2004-2005, <http://www.mdoe.org/glennlmartinco.html> (August 4, 2008)

The week after settling into a cabin on Philadelphia Road, my mother, Olga, spent a week in John Hopkins Hospital with a serious kidney infection. Needing someone to look after me while she was in the hospital brought Lois and Lawrence Bair into my life. They soon became close friends with my parents. I continued to live off and on with the Bairs during the early years of the war. I proudly declared, "I have not just one mommy and daddy but two." Over the years, having no children of their own, they continued to treat me as their daughter. They bought me my first pair of roller skates at the age of six and my first bicycle at age eight. I recall taking great pleasure in speeding down what I remembered as a very long steep hill in front of my parents' home on Echo Lake in Seattle, Washington. Years later, as an adult, when I returned to the neighborhood, it turned out, of course, to be a very short and not so steep hill.

Not long after Pearl Harbor Warren joined the Civil Air Patrol. By 1942 he felt duty bound to enlist in the United States Army Air Corps. Finally in April of 1944, after he received the rank of Second Lieutenant, my mother and I were able to join him at the Army Air Force Base in Avon Park, Florida.

I have a few vague memories of life there with him, mostly enhanced by pictures in the family album. One picture always held my attention, the image of my father and me standing on a beach in our bathing suits. Both of us had the same bowed legs, not my mother's great legs. I remember how hot it was and playing under the canopy of a grapefruit tree in the front yard of the house we shared with another military family. On October 16, 1944 my father received his overseas assignment. Warren planned on becoming a commercial airline pilot in Seattle, Washington when the war was over. Therefore it was decided my mother and I should join my father's parents in Orchards, Washington.

My grandparents received the Western Union notice on December 2, 1944, that my father, Second Lieutenant Warren Hugh Guernsey, had been reported “Missing in Action” since the 18<sup>th</sup> of November. It was not until a year later, in November 1945, my mother received the letter from the War Department declaring his “official finding of death.” Warren’s B-17 (Flying Fortress) aircraft had fallen to the earth, exploded and burned in the village of Sitno, near Troger, Yugoslavia, about ten miles west of Split. His plane had gone down during a return flight to his airbase in Fozzia, Italy after a bombing mission over an oil refinery in Vienna, Austria.

I was too young to mourn his death at the time in the same way that my mother mourned. To this day, every time I wrap a bath towel around my back and swish it back and forth to dry off, I think of him. Shortly after his death my mother told me, while teaching me how to do it myself, that was the way my daddy did it.

Not long after arriving at my grandparents’ home in Washington, we moved into an apartment over a restaurant on East Madison near my father’s sister Ruth and her family in Seattle. Mother went to Business School and was soon working full time. I was often on my own under the supervision of the family next door, during those early days in Seattle. One day a couple of older neighborhood girls talked me into taking in a deep drag on a cigarette. That sure cured me of taking up smoking when I got older!

During those early years living on East Madison I remember conquering the skill of roller skating. I also took pleasure in shopping at the 5&10 cent-store not far from our apartment. One of the items I coveted was a pair of Dutch wooden shoes. For some reason I don’t remember, my mother would not buy them. That night I dreamed she have given in and purchased them for me. The dream was so

real when I woke the next morning, I reached under my bed to put them on. What a disappointment!

I often looked forward to attending Saturday matinees at the movie theater around the corner from our apartment. On one such Saturday, my mother came looking for me when I was late returning home. I had stayed to watch the movie “The Merry Widow” for the second time. I felt compelled to watch the romantic Viennese Waltz dance scene in that grand ballroom one more time. My mother did not have the heart to discipline me for my action. I had created my own punishment by getting really sick on the excessive amount of popcorn I ate during my extended stay.

Then came June 6, 1945. I had just turned five years old the month before. I was sitting in my birthday wagon on the sidewalk in front of our apartment. I vividly remember the unusual amount of jubilant activity taking place. People were honking and shouting from their cars. Neighbors were tossing newspaper confetti from their windows. I shared what I had witnessed when my mother came home. She explained the excitement was over the announcement that the war in Europe was finally over!

When men friends began visiting, I had the habit of asking if they were going to be my new daddy. New Years Eve 1947, my mother married my stepfather, Robert Irving Cummings. I finally had a new daddy and gained an older stepbrother and two years later a half sister, Peggy.

My brother, Richard, and I shared many adventures playing in the woods near our home on Echo Lake. There was the time he built a four-foot by four-foot log cabin. The walls were about three-feet high and it had a long bench across one wall. We had recently had a tiff with a couple of playmates. They discovered our

campsite. We believed they would come and wreck it, so we decided to dismantle it before they could. Much to our surprise they came bearing gifts the next day to make up with us. They had hoped to share the place with us; but they were too late.

My stepfather went to work for the Seattle Police Department, requiring us to live inside the city limits. Now summers bring many memories at our new home in town. Climbing the neighborhood fruit trees to eat tree-ripened bing cherries, apricots, pears and apples. Organizing little talent shows with my playmates and selling admission tickets for a nickel. A favorite activity for the neighborhood kids was to gather in our next door neighbor's yard in the evening to play kick-the-can. On occasion when I had been sent to bed early, I even resorted to climbing out my bedroom window to participate. My brother and I helped supplement family vacation money by taking a wagon down to Ravenna Park to collect beer bottles for a refund. My sixth grade boyfriend carved Ted plus Dale on a park bench in that same park.

By the time I got to Junior High School, I was sewing my own clothes. I had an electric Singer sewing machine at home. I often spent weekends sewing at my best friend Cece's house. We delighted in challenging each other to see who could make her grandmother's treadle sewing machine run the fastest. Another sport was to see who could visit the local fabric store without being tempted to buy fabric. The trick for success was to walk though with your eyes closed. Then of course during my teenage years, I looked forward to dating on the weekends and going to drive-in movies. My movie idol was James Dean after seeing him in the movie "Rebel Without A Cause."

Upon graduating from High School, I was eligible to go to college under the GI War Orphans Bill. During my first year at Everett Junior College, I met my husband, Theodore. We married December 4, 1959. Being a Korean War Veteran, he was also going to school under the GI Bill. This made it possible for both of us to complete our college educations and pursue teaching careers.

Growing up, I often fantasized how my world might have been different if my father had lived. When I viewed photographs of him, I looked for other visual similarities in our looks, like his dark brown hair and widow's peak that we shared. I was often disappointed when people remarked how much I looked like my mother, which I really do. To fill the hole in my heart, I wanted to believe that I looked like him. In time I realized that I had inherited his artistic talents. It was not until my stepfather passed away in 1988 that my mother shared memories of her life with Warren before the war. She also gave me his diary from Cadet School and letters that helped me glean more insight into his personality. When my mother died in 2000, I inherited the diary she kept. The first entry begins with their first dance at the Odd Fellows Hall in Velva. The last entry was November 7, 1944, the day we began our long journey across the country to Washington State.

Upon joining the Americans World War II Orphan's Network in 1996, I attended their National Conference in Washington D. C. Having found other war orphan brothers and sisters, I experienced an instant bonding. It was amazing to discover that we all shared similar feelings and grew up not knowing a single other war orphan until joining the group. I also came to appreciate that I was one of the luckier orphans being able to maintain a relationship with Warren's family even though none of them ever talked about him. My Uncle Lisle always took me with him when he visited my grandparents.

During the World War II Orphan's Conference I had an opportunity to go to the National Archives to retrieve all of the war records related to that fateful day of November 18, 1944. When finally I opened the "after report" folder, I cried over my father's death for the very first time in fifty-two years!

© Dale Roybal, 2008. All Rights Reserved.