

SUE NEWCOMB MOWER

How Hiram Really Died and What Came After

Hiram was seventeen the day the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. He sat with his family as the reports buzzed out of the massive Philco in the parlor, tubes glowing, staccato accounts from panicked reporters, grown men in tears at the sights—bombs plummeting out of the sky, ships blazing at anchor, charred men wasted in water slick and bright with oil, still more men imprisoned below decks banging furiously on iron bulkheads, screams and pleas muffled behind massive sheets of metal. He sat with his family in front of the Philco again when Roosevelt spoke to Congress the next day, *“Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked...,”* denouncing Japan for its cowardice, demanding America go to war, declaring that justice must be served.

Hiram fairly flew down to sign up when school let out the next day, joining the mad crush of men and boys at the enlistment office. When his turn came, Hiram pled his case. The enlistment officer was sympathetic but, in the end, he had no choice but to send Hi home with a waiver for his father’s signature, permission for an underage son to join the Navy. If his father would sign, Hiram could go to war. If not, Hiram would have to wait for his next birthday, a full eight months away. There was nothing else to say.

That night after supper, Hiram gave the form to his father and pled his case once more. His mother cried. He was too young, she said. It was too early for him, he hadn’t even finished school. Hiram didn’t care. His friends were signing up at a

frantic pace, anxious to get their licks in, afraid it would all end too soon and they would miss their chance. If they joined together, they could all be assigned to the same ship. It would be better to go to war with fellas he knew and trusted, couldn't they understand that? In the end, Hiram got his way. His father signed that miserable double-edged form. His parents had no recourse but hope. The rest of the world had been at war for years already. With America in, maybe the tide would quickly turn. That's what they hoped—hope, the last refuge of a desperate parent.

Not long after, Hiram cast aside his high school years along with his childhood and shipped out for San Diego. Hiram's brother, Fletcher, lived not far up the coast in Santa Monica, just a two-hour ride by train. When their mother came to see Hiram that one last time, it was almost a family reunion. They posed for pictures on the lawn, on the front steps, mother with brothers, brothers together, Hiram clowning with his brother's wife, Hiram in his fine indigo uniform and Dixie cup cover. He was a man-child in costume, ready to play at that terrible game of war. His smile was genuine.

Hiram was assigned to the *USS Northampton*, a fine heavy cruiser that had been in continuous service since the 30's. He could not tell his folks where he would be sailing or when he would leave but there were clues. His mother received a beautiful silk pillow with "Greetings from Honolulu" splashed across the front and fringe around the edges; he sent his sister-in-law a silk handkerchief with "Hawaii" emblazoned in bold script and renderings of palm trees under which girls in grass skirts danced across the sheer fuschia fabric. They knew then that he would be sailing the Pacific. It's hard for a family to be grateful for any deployment with a son, a brother in peril. In the Pacific it would be the Japanese and their Kamikaze dive-bombers. In the Atlantic, it would have been the Germans and their U-boats. They were grateful he wouldn't be sailing in ice. Small comfort.

The family received their telegram late one morning, damp cold still clutching the ground when the courier arrived. The *USS Northampton* had been sunk in the Battle of Tassafaronga on November 30, 1942. Hiram was dead. He had been eighteen for ninety-six days.

Official accounts of the battle went something like this: near the end of the battle off Sapo Island at 9° 12'S, 159° 50'E, *The Northampton* was struck port side by two Long Lance torpedoes fired by the Japanese destroyer *Oyashio*, sheering away decks and bulkheads. The fuel and diesel oil that had sprayed out onto the surrounding water through the breach caught fire and blew languorous flames back over the ship spreading the conflagration. She began to list. Three hours later, sometime after three a.m., Captain Willard Kitts ordered *The Northampton* abandoned. Shortly

thereafter, the battered lady turned on her beam ends and went down by the stern. Fletcher class destroyers were sent in to recover the survivors. Over 700 men were pulled from the water that day; Hiram was not among them.

All through school, brother Fletcher had defended the younger Hiram who had never been a brawler by inclination. It wasn't that Hiram was a coward for he was not. If you were to ask him about his disinclination, he would simply say that he didn't see the point of boys who were friends yesterday and would be friends again tomorrow beating on each other today. So, when older boys picked on Hiram, Fletcher took care of it with a quick temper and quicker fists. It happened so often, in fact, that there was a regular routine to these fights. Fletcher would remove his cap and coat and hand them to Hiram. Hi would take them and the fight would commence. Their mother would frequently look out her kitchen window watching for the boys to come home after school and be greeted by the sight of Fletcher beating the bejeezus out of some boy that had been foolish enough to pick on Hiram. There would be Hi standing by patiently holding that cap and coat. Sometimes if there was too much blood when it was finished, Hi would carry the cap and coat all the way home until Fletcher could get cleaned up. Fletcher had never failed to protect Hiram. But this wasn't the school yard. This was war. This was the first and only time a Fletcher wouldn't arrive in time to save a Hiram.

Siblings came home quickly knowing their mother would need the comfort of living children at her table. They placed a stone for Hiram in the National Cemetery. There was no burial as there were no remains. Only an alabaster marker stood as testament that a well-loved son had once walked these roads, that he had rushed to war with a reckless enthusiasm reserved for the young, that he had made a grievous sacrifice in his nation's defense and that he would never again return.

Several weeks later, a box arrived from Hawaii. Inside was a smaller box, one that Hiram's family had sent, hoping it would arrive before his ship left port. It contained cookies and letters, two packs of Lucky Strikes in their green packages with the famous red target, photos of his family and a newspaper clipping about his send-off in town. This smaller box had been too late to catch him alive and it was therefore returned to his family unopened. The larger box that held it also contained a few things that somehow had been left behind by Hiram that the base chaplain had taken possession of. One of those things was a small New Testament with Hi's name and a small notation of presentation. The sight of that Testament brought his mother to tears. Would that small book have been any comfort to her boy in his off-duty hours? Would he have had it in his pocket as the ship went

down? As she held it in her hands, she wept knowing he had met his end without the solace he might have found in those pages.

Much later, when a few of the survivors of the *Northampton* arrived back home for R&R, a shipmate and classmate named Flickinger came to visit Hiram's parents, to pay his respects, to share their pain. He told them that Hiram had been in the ship's bakery when the torpedoes struck. The torpedoes had hit the ship's magazine located next to the bakery and blew it all to Kingdom Come in one massive explosion. Hiram never felt a thing. This was the lie Flickinger told to comfort Hiram's parents, the lie that would let them sleep at night, the lie intended as a kindness for the parents of a cherished son and lifelong friend.

Flickinger, however, did not offer the same lie, the same salving balm to Hiram's brothers—Fletcher and John. To them, he told the truth.

Hiram was not in the bakery when those Long Lance torpedoes rammed home. It was the *Northampton* that had initiated first fire. When the klaxon rang out sounding General Quarters, Hiram ran to his battle station on deck—a turret gun with a small surrounding cage. When those God awful torpedoes hit, tearing out decks and bulkheads, they twisted the cage around Hiram's gun, trapping Hi in a mangled mess of metal against the deck. Flickinger had been on a catwalk at the time of impact. When he came to, he ran to find Hiram and when he did, he found Hiram alive and awake although the same was not true for the other five men that had been caught in the mangled bars with him. Flickinger and Hi spoke, saying things that men say only when they know that one is going to die. Eventually, Hiram gave his friend the last words that were meant for those he loved. Hiram lay there, alone and fully aware, until the ship finally succumbed to her grievous wounds, sinking to the sea bed below.

After taking just enough time to get their own affairs in order, John and Fletcher enlisted.

There is no need here to tell the story of Fletcher that joined the Merchant Marine and spent the war carrying diesel fuel to Allied ships through the Panama Canal. He survived his war relatively untouched. He returned to his family, to his wife and to his daughter, and would add one more child some years later. He built himself a life that any man home from war would gladly have taken up. He lived into old age and died well loved.

Life was not so easy for John.

John joined the Army and was assigned to an engineering unit bound for Britain. There he worked repairing the roads and bridges that were destroyed every night by the Nazis during the Blitz. He, along with every other GI in Britain, awaited

the invasion of Europe. One week before D-Day, John was caught out during a V-2 raid. A buzz rocket smashed dead center into a building in which John had taken shelter and blew it to shards. When his men found John later, both his legs were broken. He was carried to hospital where his legs were set. He was there the day his unit received its orders. He was there the day the Invasion commenced. He was still there the day his entire unit was wiped out to the man as they landed on the beach at Normandy.

John was a Staff Sergeant by the time he was released from hospital. The Army offered to send him home, service complete, honorable discharge, a medal in his hand. He would never again be able to run well enough to be placed in an active combat unit. John declined their offer of release and chose instead to remain in London to help there. He now led a unit that cleared rubble, searched for survivors and unexploded ordnance after the nightly bombing raids. He didn't need to run fast for that.

It might have struck people as odd, declining an offer of family and safety, preferring a London shattered and torched nightly, scouring the rubble when daylight came. But John had his ghosts. He was haunted by a two-year old sister that died in a car he was driving. He was haunted by Hiram laying on an ocean floor, held in the unloving arms of tangled bars and twisted metal. He was haunted by the men of his unit, forever rocking in the bloody surf on the beaches of Normandy. None of those ghosts would have begrudged him safety and home, none would have condemned him, bitter or jealous. He didn't need ghosts for that. He did that all by himself. His only salvation lay in work, work that would hold the ghosts at bay with broken bricks and beams. At home, without the distractions of war, the memories would suffocate him.

So John stayed. Every morning he went out with his detail shifting debris, looking for unexploded ordnance and survivors, laying lifeless bodies to one side for the collection crews, laying those that still drew breath to the other for the ambulances. Churchill had implemented an evacuation policy, sending children to the countryside, there to stay in the homes of relatives or strangers with extra rooms. That did not mean every child left London for the safety of quiet green. John did not cringe when he uncovered adults, men or women, that had been less than prudent in their choice of seclusions when the sirens screamed. But, occasionally, he would find a small broken body under the bricks and he would collapse. For him, every child was that two-year-old sister crushed under the fender of a Ford. There are some ghosts from which a man simply cannot hide.

Eventually, the war ended. Eventually, the men came home.

John did not return to the farm. He took a job as a brakeman on the Frisco Railroad. He was married. He had children. Time passed and things were as good as John expected them to be.

The year I turned nine, I went to stay with my maternal grandparents for the summer. I was invited to spend some time at Uncle John's. His wife was still alive then. We sat in the kitchen, she and I, while she put together a pie and made dinner. She was good about talking with a small child. She knew how to do it. We talked about the fireflies and cicadas and how much we loved it when they worked together on these summer nights, soundtrack to a light show in the front yard while we ate watermelon with salt on the front steps, spitting our seeds into the grass. John listened from the living room while he read the paper. I could see him watching us, smiling, always that sad smile on his face. I was young then. I didn't know how sad a smile could be. Not yet.

I went home to visit again the next year, the summer after my aunt killed herself, one shot to the head. I only knew she was dead; my parents hadn't shared the how of it. Uncle John came to see me again. He knocked on my grandma's door lightly. *Is Little Sister ready?* He wore a black suit, a thin black tie and a pork pie hat. He had always been thin but he was too thin now and everything hung loose like words on a weather vane. We drove out to the old home place far out on the rural route. He showed me the farmhouse, the old wash house, the barn, the church my great-grandfather had donated the land and lumber for. Mostly he'd point, name it, stare, then wait, lost in his own memories. I had no idea what a child was supposed to say to an uncle that dressed like Johnny Cash, with a dead wife, who doesn't speak except to point and name. Finally, when there were no more buildings to point at or name, he said, *You like chocolate malts, Little Sister?* I nodded. *Good.*

We drove to the Dairy Queen and sat in his black sedan with our chocolate malts and watched the teens sitting on top of the tables, young men with their dates, old people with their sundaes, children with their Dilly Bars. It stayed quiet in our sedan until my straw hit bottom and lingered, sucking the air out of the empty cup. That's when John laughed. The harder I sucked on that paper straw, the harder he laughed. I suctioned every bit of chocolate evidence off the walls of that cup. He laughed til the tears ran free down his face. When John finally returned me to my grandparents, he bent over and kissed me lightly on the cheek. His hand lingered, cupping my chin, he rustled my nine-year old hair, smiled that bare Mona Lisa smile, turned and left.

Even though I went home for summers on end, I never saw my Uncle John again. I don't know if drink got the better of him or if he just didn't want to see me grow.

If he didn't see me again, I could forever remain "Little Sister." I would always be small, blonde, blue-eyed, I would always be fond of chocolate malts, I would always be able to make him laugh. I didn't know about Nadine then, the baby sister small and blonde that had died in that terrible wreck. I was always "Sister" at home to Pop. Being Uncle John's "Little Sister" didn't signify anything different to me, not then. But now? Now I wish I had never left Kansas that summer. Now I wish I had never left Kansas at all.

SUE NEWCOMB MOWRER graduated summa cum laude from the University of Texas at Tyler with a BA in English in May 2016. She has completed her first manuscript currently entitled "Burying Fletcher and Other Stories that May or May Not Be True," recounting the lives of an American family through the generations, reflecting on an America way of life that is fast disappearing.