

Of Tears, Finding The Book And Father — My Favorite Vet Of Them All

Here's how growing up in a family-owned brownstone worked: my immediate family lived on the first floor, my mother's uncle — who owned the building — was on the second.

It was upstairs on the third floor, however, where all the magic happened. That's where my mother's parents lived — known affectionately as “Nanni” and “Father.” And walking up those two flights of stairs to visit was always a treat.

It was up there, in a room lined with 8-tracks of big-band music, that Father would let me settle into in “his” chair and he would sit on the stool across from me.

It was up there, in a room overlooking the neighborhood cul-de-sac where we played every sport imaginable, that Father would open the mysterious closet. And I would beam.

He'd dig through the racks and pull out that green uniform — shirt, jacket, pants, hat, you name it. The works. It smelled musty, it was a bit dirty, but I could never take my eyes off his World War II Army uniform.

It was up there, in the room with the hardwood floor, that Father would dust off that old book with German writing on it. Then, he'd sit down.

It was story time.

They called him “Rubber Legs,” he said, because he loved to dance. He would take all their money in poker, he said. So much so that by the end of the war, nobody sat down if the cards were out and Mailan Pelc — that mountain of a man with a face carved from granite — was already at the table.

He'd flip through that old book, the pages ready to turn to dust, filled with photos and German-language postcards from various places in Europe and other things I didn't quite understand but filled me with awe anyway.

Then came the pièce de résistance.

“Want to put the uniform on?” he'd ask.

I couldn't nod my head hard enough.

It's all too easy to miss those conversations with the man, who after the war became sort of a neighborhood legend. In Chicago's close-knit Little Italy, the Italian boys who wanted to date Josephine Leonardi — my grandmother — knew they had no chance when the Polish boy,

dressed in his full Army regalia, went walking through the neighborhood, carrying a dozen roses with her name on them.

When I started writing for my high school newspaper, he wanted every copy and he'd pore over the thing like it was today's news. When I started writing for my college paper, it was the same. He wanted to read everything, and my parents obliged, bringing him clips of the articles.

"Damn it," he'd say. "This is what you should do for a living."

Who argues with someone awarded a Purple Heart? Who argues with a man with a voice that boomed and a laugh that rumbled buildings?

So it's what I did.

He never got to see it, chasing everybody out of the hospital room with an "I'm fine," and dying before all of those who left could get back home. I was away at college. I never got to say goodbye.

Typical Father. He never wanted to be any trouble.

I always wondered about that book that I later learned was a spoil of war, probably taken from a German officer's home or found along the roadside of some town in the European Theater Father fought in.

And for years, all I could do was wonder.

Months after my mother died, I finally had the will to go through a box she compiled for each of her three children. She threw in photos, our baby books and a few other things from our childhood. I put all those knickknacks aside.

At the bottom was a large plastic bag with two books inside.

The tears streamed when I saw what they were — a scrapbook of all my high school and college articles he kept and that old German book. The one filled with photos and postcards of exotic lands visited by Father — my favorite veteran of them all.

Of Mom, A Talk Over Wine And The Importance Of October

It's tough to forget our conversation that April day under the sun in a courtyard surrounded by America's beautiful Southwest.

There we sat, me with a black baseball cap on, her — my mother — with a blonde wig on her head splitting a bottle (OK, maybe two) of wine at the Iron Horse Inn in a little Arizona town called Cottonwood.

A few years prior, the wife and I fell in love with the town, picking it off a map when we decided to go see the Grand Canyon. When we made plans to return, my mother was years into her breast cancer diagnosis and had never seen the Grand Canyon, nor had she ever taken a long-distance train ride. It was settled: I — a lover of Amtrak's long distance routes — would invite Mom and Dad on the trip.

And after 32 hours on the train and a night in Flagstaff, we finally arrived at our hotel in Arizona's wine country of the Verde Valley and I quickly grabbed two bottles. It was then, I decided to talk to her about her "battle."

She quickly corrected me.

In the past, before she got sick and before she died in November 2017, I used to call it a battle, never realizing how dumb of a word that was to use. "Battle" implies there is a winner and a loser: There really is neither when it comes to any kind of cancer. She didn't shake her finger at me, that's not how my mother was, she really didn't even correct me. She threw her usual laid-back, very philosophical words my way.

It was impossible for the cancer to win she said, taking a sip of a good, deep red wine.

"If I die, it dies with me."

How right she was.

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, when everything will be wrapped in pink, ribbons will be worn and memories will be talked about. And memories of my mother are not hard to come by. She was a constant force in my life. The woman who was born and raised in the same Chicago neighborhood — Little Italy — left for only a brief stint in Minneapolis after marrying my father, another neighborhood kid, and came back to raise her family on the same street she and my dad grew up on.

But, for some reason, my mind ... my memories of her ... always go back to that trip. When she and Dad got their own sleeper compartment two cars down from the wife and I, and she woke up before dawn, headed down to the observation car and just stared out the window.

She was used to flyover country, certainly not used to rumbling through it at 80-plus mph. And there's one photo I took that I love, unbeknownst to her, as she looked out the picture window toward the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Always, I'll be grateful for that trip. Always, I'll be grateful for that train ride and the look on her face as we crested the parking lot hill at the Grand Canyon and the hole in the ground exploded into view. I think I heard her gasp, much like the first time I saw it and almost lost my legs with shock.

And I'll always be grateful for the conversation, the last time my mother really openly talked about what she was going through.

The last time I saw her, she was just a husk of her former self at my godson's baptism. Sitting in her chair, wig off, her face tired and thin as the wife and I packed our car and were ready to leave.

She was silent. I kissed her on the forehead, not ready for the 13-hour drive back to Virginia.

"We'll holler when we get home," I said.

She smiled and patted my face.

A month later the phone call came. A month later everything changed.

That's why this month is important to me.

In Retirement, Philip May Tends To Small, Historic Cemetery In Singers Glen

SINGERS GLEN — Out here, where the rolling hills slowly climb into Little North Mountain, Philip May found his “old man” project.

Out here, in the shadow of Hopkins Gap, the 67-year-old retired Air Force nurse anesthetist came back home to his family farm with roots dug three-generations deep into the green fields and built a log-cabin house atop a hill where mockingbirds chase crows across the field.

Down here, at the bottom of the hill, sits St. John Lutheran Cemetery, along the side of Singers Glen Road with a small rock and dirt cut-from-wheels driveway leading to it. Here, where May wipes sweat from his brow on a warm July morning, three generations of his family are buried.

“And over there,” he says, pointing toward concrete embedded into the ground, “are the steps that led up to the church.”

Three steps leading to nowhere with tombstones, misplaced over the years, leaning up against them.

“We’ll find out where they belong,” says Maribeth May, Philip’s wife. “They got a good cleaning.”

The project is simple, though backbreaking. One of four trustees for a cemetery only noticeable by a metal sign covered in plexiglass on two wooden posts, Philip May is entrusted with keeping the sacred ground in tip-top shape.

That involves mowing, weed-whacking and power-washing headstones once dulled by black mold, green moss and dirt in the gleaming white stone. Headstones of all shapes and sizes — from plain oval stones stuck into the ground to ornate peaks that stand 5-feet tall. There’s even one with a carved sheep sitting on top.

It’s his “corporal work of mercy,” he says.

Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless and bury the dead, Philip says. “And there’s probably a couple other things in there. This is my corporal work of mercy for the Lord.”

Philip, on his riding lawn mower with noise-reducing headphones over his ears, Maribeth with her dark hair pulled back into a pony tail, sunglasses and hat on, picking up any trash that makes its way to the grounds. The project in action during the spring and summertime, backed by donations from local organizations that help pay for lawn mower gas and other small expenses.

The now-gone church, deconstructed and moved to Caroline Furnace Lutheran Camp and Retreat Center in Fort Valley during the 1980s, traces pastoral services back to 1796, according

to “Little Saint John’s: A History Of St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church” written by John F. Byerly Jr. And burials have been recorded in the cemetery dating back to the same century.

That old church, where Philip and his older sister, MaryMay Angelil, used to swing open the wooden shutters and bats would fly out in all directions.

“There really were bats in the belfry,” he says.

Angelil laughs.

“I just remember opening those shutters and all those bats flying out,” she says.

The names on the tombstones are local, like the crossroads passed driving to the cemetery. There are Byerlys, Showalters, Mays, Gowls, Paynes, Hinegardners, Funks and more; familiar names in a familiar area.

There are also two stones that mark mass graves, and while Philip May isn’t sure who exactly is buried around those plain stone markers, he has heard they could be from the War of 1812, Civil War or maybe slaves.

“We’re not sure,” he says.

He may never be.

But they’re washed like the rest.

They’ve been fixed all the same, just like the tombstone of Shem Funk, who died in 1879, the white marker cobbled back together by Phil’s own hand with help from friends, neighbors and his son, Levi. The crack still visible on its lower left corner.

“I just feel so proud of him,” says Angelil, who in her online blog — Angelil’s Adventures — highlighted the project. “He just sticks with it. People kidded him about it, but it hasn’t stopped him. He takes pride in preserving that little piece of history.”

Philip May always wanted to come back home, convincing his wife — who admits she enjoyed the suburban life in Texas — to take the plunge in 2012.

“He really wanted to devote his time here,” Maribeth says.

He never felt that far away in Texas, though.

On visits back home, he’d drive by the cemetery, “And I’d say, ‘Man look at that.’”

It was overgrown; black mold had embedded itself in the tombstones. May knew when he moved back to the family land, he had his project.

“Everybody has to do something when they retire,” he says. “Some people retire and they don’t know what the heck they are going to do with themselves.”

It’s the project just down the hill, back here amid the rolling farmland that was destined to be home; where he wipes his brow and points over there, toward a shaded part of St. John Lutheran Cemetery.

The place he hopes to be buried someday.