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REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# Pausing to remember others' sacrifice

The week of Memorial Day is a good time to reflect on all those, war veterans and not, whose past courage and sacrifice have made it possible for us to be who we are. This year, I had the added incentive to memory of spending a week before Memorial Day with my brother helping my dad prepare his home outside Cleveland for sale.



He is now one of Austin's newest residents, but he has brought with him 86 years of memories of life in Cleveland and selected personal memorabilia of family and friends from the late 19th century onward.

Sorting through family photos, letters and documents, I came across a cache of letters that my father's youngest brother, Joey, had sent to my mother, the only woman my dad ever dated and his wife then of three years and eventually of 57. The letters came from undesignated places in the Pacific between 1944 and 1946. Joey was a corporal in the 14th regiment of the Marine Corps 4th Division and was living through fierce fighting on Marshall Islands, Roi-Namur, Saipan and Iwo Jima. The Fourth Division alone suffered more than 17,000 casualties in these battles.

His letters are simple, occasionally ungrammatical, but heartfelt. He asks about my dad, Mike, who was off with the First Cavalry in the Philippines, his two other brothers Pete and Adam and their young families in Cleveland, and most especially his dear mother and father, my grandparents, Sophie and Michael. Sophie was born in 1887 in eastern Poland and she worked as a household servant before coming alone to the United States in 1913.

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Michael was born in 1875 and came here at the close of the 19th century and worked "in harness" as a steel worker until retiring in 1945.

Joey's letters are full of dreams of home. He asks repeatedly for a full family photo. He asks my mom to pet the family dog. He vows, when he returns, never to leave the family house. He proclaims Pete's children the prettiest girls in the world. He declares that he is going to get married and start a family within three months of returning home, despite the fact he has no girl in mind. He expresses a desperate need for letters from my mother — she apparently wrote almost daily.

In one of the few topographical references that escaped the military censors, he asks for Mike's address, which he "lost in combat on Iwo." But he also asks at one point why Pete has not written in nine months or Adam in two and angrily adds, "What have I done to deserve such treatment?"

Read James Bradley's "Flags of Our

Fathers" for a good reminder of the hell these young men went through, and you'll understand the roots of Joey's anger. He had been in ghastly fighting of the Pacific campaign, risking his life again and again, and his brothers in civilian comfort seemed too distracted with the busy details of their lives to write him a short letter of affection.

But that is what happens with us as we get totally absorbed in our own affairs, and distracted by life's real and imagined problems. Reading these letters prompted me, for the first time I am ashamed to say, to visit Joey's grave site in Calvary Cemetery in East Cleveland. The day was sunny and cool, and the simple stone markers in the veterans section had been carefully tended in preparation for Memorial Day.

They formed an American melting pot of names, dates of birth and death and military service: William E. Kelly

June 20 1924-April 11 1945; Angelo J. Centorbi March 30 1919-March 10 1945; Stanley J. Zupancic June 13-1924-June 20 1944; John J. Yovanno December 31 1923-January 7 1944; and Louis J. Cinadr July 18 1921-June 10 1944.

Joey was lucky. He made it back. He was restless. He did leave home. VA letters are addressed to him at a coffee house. He never married and died of tuberculosis on January 12, 1948.

Joey reminds me of courage and loss, and not just his. In a letter dated April 10, 1945, Joey writes about what "coming home" will mean to him and adds, "I remember once Mother told me about how she felt when she came to the United States and left her parents in Europe, and then she started to cry i [sic] never realized what she was crying for because i [sic] was to [sic] young but now i [sic] do."

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