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.

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.

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