

Respectfully dedicated

To those of the confused generation, who, being born during a world war, were taught that Peace was the only touchstone to man's happiness; and fought another war to make it so.

Excerpt from a letter written to a friend.

Jacksonville, Florida

In training,

March, 1941

“.....Tonight is my first experimental “stay at home on Saturday night” venture, - the results may be good or otherwise. Ordinarily we are so worn out by working from 5AM to 9PM- every daylight hour all through the week, that our one time off, Saturday night, gleams like a beckoning beacon light throughout the week; as a consequence the tune is played at too high a pitch and plenty off key – meaning Saturday night is a tough number.....”

Otherwise this is heaven; we are the first class here- about 75 cadets arrive every week, they expect 1500 by the time we graduate, which is being pushed up to about the middle of July now, which is really an increased tempo over what it has regularly been at Pensacola.

..... the romance of the business – ah there is the note. Not because it gives a lot of men a chance to satisfy the always present male urge to wear the brilliant plumage of the bird of war, nor because many of us get any particular patriotic bang out of the thought of self sacrifice upon the altar of our country’s honor. No, I haven’t thought a great deal about either of those items.

The one that grips me so though, that I know I shall never be satisfied without it, you will understand because you saw it beginnings many years ago; because it is made of some indefinable something which prompted me once to drive at high speeds with all the windows open and to sail with the free board under the breaking light green wash – it’s that love of mastery over something of vibrant motion. You will smile and think, and probably rightly, that I love this because it supports my own ego, and you most probably will have hit the nail right o the head. But call it what you will, for me at least there are fewer arts in this world more closely akin to communion wih the Gods than flying upwards to the morning sun. When I can taxi off the line at seven in the morning and take off to the east light at growing incandescence, a sensation grows which is as near heaven born as actual shafts of sunlight pouring earthwards. Then to frolic all morning throughout the hedgerows of cotton clouds, looking for the sorrows of the mist and the rain, finding the joys of the gracious sun – living in a world of ecstatic life bounded only by nothingness and the faraway horizon line where earth and sky take visual vows – there is life produced by motion in nature, and I know in these two short months that only one mightier force can ever take it away from me.

Forgive me if this is too much motors mixed with lavender and old lace.....”

Norfolk, VA
December 7, 1942

My dear family:

What a day – the incredulousness of it all still gives each new announcement the unreality of a fairy tale. How can they have been so mad? Though I suppose we have all known it would come sometime, there was always that inner small voice whispering – no, we are too big, too rich, too powerful, this war is for some poor fools somewhere else, it will never touch us here. And then this noon that world fell apart. Even this business in the North Atlantic cannot be compared to the action now at hand. They still played it sort of as a gentleman's game, work during working hours, and plenty of play all the rest of the time. But now somehow all that is gone.

Today has been feverish, not with the excitement of emotional crowds cheering and band-playing, but with the quiet conviction and determination of serious men settling down to the business of the war. Everywhere little groups of officers listening to the radio, men hurrying in from liberty quickly changing clothes and reporting to battle stations. Scarcely an office seemed to know why we were at war and it seemed to me there is a certain sadness for that reason. I the reports I've heard today are true the Japanese have performed the impossible, have carried out one of the most daring (and successful) raids in all history. They knew the setup perfectly – got there on the one fatal day – Sunday – officers and men away for the weekend or recovering from Saturday night – the whole thing was brilliant.

People will not realize, I fear, for some time how serious this matter is, the indifference of labor and capital to our danger is an infectious virus and the public has come to think contemptuously of Japan. And that, I fear, is a fatal mistake – today have given evidence of that – this war will be more difficult than any war this country has ever fought. Our plans are as yet nebulous – tonight I put away all my civilian clothes – I fear the moths will find them good fare in the years to come – there is such a finality to wearing a uniform all the time – think that is the one thing I fear – the loss of my individualism in a world of uniforms – but kings and puppets alike are being moved now by the master, destiny. If I find out we're slated to leave soon I'll most probably sell my car, certainly so if we are sent cross country to the West coast (a persistent rumor).

It is growing late and tomorrow will undoubtedly be a busy day. Once more the whole world is afire – in the period approaching Christmas it seems bitterly ironical to mouth again the time worn phrases concerning peace on earth – good will, with so many millions hard at work figuring out ways to reduce other millions to slavery or death. I find it hard to see the inherent kingdom. Faith lost – all is lost; let us hope tonight that people, big people, little people, all people throughout this great county have the faith to once again sacrifice for the things we hold essential to life and happiness; let us defend these principles to the last ounce of blood – but then above all retain reason enough to have

“Charity for all and malice toward none.” If the world ever goes through this again – mankind is doomed. This time it has to be a better world. *All my love, Bill*

Description of Christmas Day

1941 – Embarked on shakedown cruise

U.S.S. Hornet

Bleak winds flowing with sharp alacrity across deserted streets, only a few early risers abroad, probably not through choice, no snow, no real winter, only a haunting loneliness, Christmas but a different Christmas from any I had ever known. Eight o'clock in the morning, no time to be searching desperately for a taxi-cab. A cold wind swept without concern for the comfort of early wanderers up and down the empty street now giving scant refuge to the saddened drunks who tried in vain to find further excuse for merriment and while so doing added even greater pity to the scene. Cabs evidently were anywhere but here. Christmas morning is no time for business, only the very tired, the very cold and impatient children have intercourse with this hour.

At home previous Christmases had meant the clatter of joyous clamoring, eager to be about the mystery of Christmas giving. Memories of the evening before still lingered with the lazy comfort of cold and yet not too cold blankets, brilliant trees shedding multicolored light upon the Christmas Eve, a murmur of well cared for voices encircled by friends and family, an old face peddling holly on a street corner, countless little thoughts passed in the present become a multitude of conscious reality when remembered. That empty street in Norfolk became a breeding ground where remembrance multiplied itself into infinity of items too personal to be caught in the intolerance of words. Half unconscious with the anesthetic of nostalgia, half eager with an anticipation of new horizons to cross, I finally found a cab and settled back to the luxury of that last carefree ride to the pier, too tired to worry, too eager to appear anything but nonchalant.

For at the tide we sailed, not as the wise men long ago had journeyed with gold and myrrh and frankincense, bearing gifts to one beneath a star, but booted and spurred to spread the alarm we sailed on Christmas day, seaward, seaward with wings, seaward to find a star.

Upon the majesty of this day, with all the irony that twenty-three years of mistaken faith can summon to mind, we were sailing for the first time into the mystery of we know not what, only knowing that this our first cruise would be one never to forget. Two weeks before, the United States had become again involved in a great World War, to what far end, to what unknown destiny, to what mysterious corners of the earth were now going we could only guess. As the cab fled along the lonely streets their emptiness echoed and reechoed in hollow tones “peace on earth – good will to men.”

At the pier officers with their families lingered in the bittersweet familiarity of last good-byes. The older men to whom such partings were old tales whose flavor was lost in the retelling, fared well, even with the realization that today, even welcomed departures, were tinged with sadness. Younger officers, many of them finding fresh pain in each fleeting farewell glance, built their pain into wounds, making them unconscious of anything

else. Occasionally someone essayed nonchalance but the scene had not been properly rehearsed and few were convinced by these amateurish performances. A greater number waited as I, silently bidding farewell to youth and the more popular connotation which the platitude encompasses. No more college days, no more small groups around a well scarred table telling stories and singing the songs of youthful fraternity. No more uncertainties as to where our country stood in the scale of peoples fighting for a place in the sun. Issues had been settled, the die was cast and upon this new venture a large measure of its success now lay. Air power had grown from a dream to the bug-a-boo of both civilian and military minds. Both industrial and sea power were now revealed as only progenitors of the new giant upon the field of battle airpower must and would decide the issues from now on. To that task an aircraft carrier, virgin in experience, was now dedicated. From the gangway came the call, "officer's motor launch make the starboard gangway of the U.S.S. Hornet."

With two thousand men and officers standing in the hot Pacific sun beneath a sky of unbelievably light blues we have just experienced our first funeral at sea. While smallish clouds of dirty cotton hung motionless in the sky overhead, all hands stood quietly with a rigidity that is not discipline but respect, as ceremonies on the hangar deck tokened the conclusion to a life spent in the service of this country, given while on duty at sea. Today there was newness to the ritual which with the passage of time in these waters will wear off without dimming the solemnity of the occasion. Four destroyers, two heavy cruisers, and an aircraft carrier flew their ensigns at half mast in tribute to one reserve apprentice seaman, symbolizing so effectively as anything I have yet seen, the tangible evidence that this nation holds still the life of even its lowliest as worthy of tribute as the might. Where else in this world can such be so?

Words speak poorly in trying to catch the mood of that last far journey across the horizon; even in our thoughts we cannot bridge the chasm which separates the mystery of life from the mystery to which we go. It is fitting that men and officers stand quietly in the sun, stand quietly while Taps are sounded, stand quietly as the smallest of boxes returns the unexplainable to the unexplainable. How fitting that man and his creations take cognizance of these things in which they are so little. Tomorrow or the next day it will be done again and then again as from the beginning of time, as we return mystery to mystery, and the wisdom of the sea accepts them all.

"That from these honored dead....."; may the awe give us that increased devotion.

U.S.S. Hornet
April 1942

Dear Friend,

You will pardon, I hope the presumption which allows me to write thusly after a silence of so many month. Or is it years? By this time, I have learned that no matter how others may, for the sake of convenience, reckon the length and breadth of this world, its true unit of measurement is in terms of happy memories, and although censorship prohibits much that I should like to say, allow me, by right of those bright memories of your gracious hospitality, to wish you one and all a bounty of health and good cheer.

The fates have been kid to me. In a war where any semblance of pleasure is to say the least, bad taste, I find many that would please you. When you hear others saying harsh things about American youth, know how wrong they all are. So many times now that it has become commonplace, I've seen incidents that make me know that we were not soft nor bitter; perhaps stupid at first, but never weak. The boys who brought nothing but contempt and indifference in college - who showed an apparent lack of responsibility - carry now the load with a pride so Spartan ever bettered.

Many of my friends are now dead. To a man, each died with nonchalance that each would have denied was courage. They simply called it lack of fear, and forgot the triumph. If anything great or good is born of this war, it should not be valued in the colonies we may win nor in the pages historians will attempt to write, but rather in the youth of our county, who never trained for war, rather almost who never believed in war, but who have, from some hidden source, brought forth a gallantry which is homespun it is so real.

I say these things because I know you liked and understood boys, because I wanted you to know that they have not let you down. That out here, between a space less sea and sky, American youth has found itself and given itself so that at home, the spark may catch, burst into flame and burn high. If the county takes these sacrifices with indifference, it will be the cruelest ingratitude the world has ever known.

There is much that I cannot say, which should be said before it is too late. It is my fear that national inertia will cancel the gains won at such a price. You will, I know, do all in your power to help others keep faith - as I know you do - with these few who gave so much.

It was not my intention to wax patriotic nor poetic. I hope you will see the sincerity intended. Remembering the countless happy hours spent with all of you has been a constant source of contentment. Thoughts of Connecticut laurel are perhaps incongruous as I become accustomed to the business of death, but they serve as a balance wheel.

My luck can't last much longer, but the flame goes on and on – that is important. Please give all my best wishes to all of the family, and may all you do find favor in God's grace.

Bill