

FOREVER AND A DAY

The World War II Odyssey of an American Family

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**Outskirts Press, Inc.
Denver, Colorado**

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FOREVER AND A DAY
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Outskirts Press, Inc.

<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4327-2895-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008936016

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Cover and book design by MacGraphics Services

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Table of Contents

Introduction	i
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Part I: The Black Year

1. An American Family Goes To War	3
2. A War Far Away And Then So Close.....	9
3. Missing You Is The Worst.....	17
4. Your Safe Arrival In A New World.....	27
5. I Hope You Will Be With Us Next Christmas	47
6. Take Care Of Yourself For Us	59
7. If It Would Just End.....	71

Part II: On Distant Shores

8. Somewhere In Canada.....	85
9. The Friendly Invaders	89
10. I Was Probably The First White Man.....	103
11. So Much Sadness Around.....	127
12. How Long Before We Are Together	141
13. I Received Word	157
14. Miles Across And Hundreds Of Miles Long	165
15. Maybe, You All Can Come Home	177
16. Sure Glad To Hear From You.....	217
17. In A Hell Of A Fix	233
18. It Has Been Terribly Cold.....	257
19. We Were A Long Ways From Home	271

Part III: I Will Come Back

20. The End Of The War In Europe	291
21. I Was Scared Out Of My Wits.....	299
22. We Continue Doing Our Job.....	315
23. By The Grace Of God.....	327
24. I'll Be Seeing You Soon	343

Acknowledgments	357
Sources	359
Notes.....	368
Maps	
<i>Alaska Highway and Oil Projects in Canada (1942-1945)</i>	<i>93</i>
<i>World War II Europe.....</i>	<i>181</i>
<i>Project CANOL (1942-1945).....</i>	<i>260</i>
<i>Asia and the Pacific</i>	<i>272</i>

Dedication

To the memory of my parents, family, and their friends whose wartime letters and memoirs inspired this story:

George Jensen (1907-1990), 843rd Signal Service Battalion, Northwest Service Command, Canada and Alaska.

Mary L. Jensen (1902-1990), housewife, Denver's home front.

James Jensen Jr. (1910-1997), 4th Division, *USS Belleau Wood (CVL-24)*, Pacific Theater.

Leon William Shapley (1905-1944), Medic, 157th Infantry Regiment, U.S. 45th Division, Italy.

Leroy Philip Jensen (1899-1984), Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. 1st Army, Normandy.

Robert Woodrow Jensen (1914-1989), 20th U.S. Army Air Force, Mariana Islands.

Ruth Eleanor Swanson-Jensen (1912-1993), secretary, Denver's home front.

William Foche Jensen (1918-1994), 163rd Infantry Regiment, U.S. 41st Division, New Guinea, the Philippines, and Japan—in the post-war occupation.

*For it is Mary
Plain as any name can be
But it was Mary; Mary
Long before the Fashions came;
And there is something there
That sounds so square,
It's a grand old name!*

George M. Cohan (1902)

Thursday, Dec. 31

INTRODUCTION



Time was not kind to the voices of my youth. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, family and friends from World War II were long gone. In the four months following my father's death in 1990, I spent many a weekend with Mother in an attempt to console her for her loss, and find consolation for me as well. During these special times, she shared with me stories of my childhood, the war, and her family background in South Dakota. Dad's shadowing presence remained throughout these discussions.

FOREVER AND A DAY

On one brief visit in July of that year, I found her sorting through hundreds of old letters that had been stored in a cardboard liquor box for over four decades. Years had elapsed since these items had seen the light of day. I had never seen this vast collection of memorabilia that spread out over every square inch of a large part of her living room floor, a nearby coffee table, and her favorite velvet-green couch. During the following several weeks, she gave a thorough reading to most of the letters. To revisit the past in this manner was a difficult emotional challenge for my 88-year-old mother.

Several months after she died in the fall, I found the Jim Beam storage carton containing the crumpled and yellowing Victory mail where she had left them on the shelf of a metal storage cabinet. In three years that extended from July 1942 through October 1945, George and Mary Jensen shared hundreds of letters with one another. A touching portrait of my parents emerges from their daily briefings, one that was molded by experiences on the American home front, in newly constructed Army training camps, and finally in places that barely registered on the nation's consciousness. Although their letters underscored years of personal hardship, their contents still held out hope and, most importantly, strengthened what became a sixty-two-year love affair.

Her hope chest also contained the wartime letters and memoirs of five other family members and a close friend whose journeys radiated outwards from the home front to the shores of Italy and Normandy, the jungles of New Guinea and the Philippine Islands, the flight deck of an American aircraft carrier, Tinian Island in the Pacific, and finally Japan—in the postwar occupation.

This treasure trove of written experiences reawakened my interest in the war. It was the beginning for me of an eleven year odyssey in uncovering the events and places that transformed their lives and rediscovering the special people who provided guidance to me during my childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Forever and a Day portrays the anxieties, fear, and desperation that my Colorado family experienced in more than three years of war. The book also traces the vast forces that controlled their lives—wartime mobilization and the global efforts in destroying the Axis powers. Their experiences, so distinctly similar to millions of other Americans, are unique in that they spanned the face of the globe. By utilizing the treasure-trove of previously unpublished family letters, post-war remembrances, and other primary sources, which include excerpts of interviews with more than three score Americans whose journeys paralleled those of my family, a seamless global story unfolds of the Jensen family and our nation.

Although their correspondence included a thorough recounting of life's daily activities, various subjects were never broached with loved ones. They hesitated about revealing details of their physical, emotional, and financial health to family and friends who were halfway across the world. They did not want them to know the direness of one's circumstances. Explaining the truth was not smart psychology. My mother, for example, never wrote my father of her gall bladder surgery or her financial concerns; he found out through secondary sources. Father referred to his experiences in Canada as a "camping or hunting trip." Of his combat experiences in New Guinea, Bill Jensen simply stated, "It really isn't that bad." The realities of life during wartime were far different than many of the "briefings" sent to one another.

Considering the volume of correspondence written during this period of time by all Americans, one might think that the World War II generation openly discussed the war with their family and friends. In the decades following its ending, four of my fathers' brothers seldom mentioned the conflict. They were not alone. Of the veterans interviewed for this book, a number of them had not spoken of their combat experiences since 1945; several openly wept during the interviewing process. Others did not want to reopen their emotional wounds; instead, they discussed the shared experiences of drinking green beer, swimming in the ocean, and playing practical jokes on one another.

FOREVER AND A DAY



Mother was the guiding force in my early life. Except for one short leave in early 1944, my father was absent from home three years, three months and thirteen days. Although she kept me informed of him through his letters and photographs, Dad was still a stranger to me when he finally came home in 1945; perhaps, we always remained so with one another. During his absence, Mom was in charge of creating the home front battle plan for insuring our survival—taking care of me, making the

INTRODUCTION

mortgage payments on our home, and purchasing the essential items of life that had been rationed by the War Production Board and prices set by the Office of Price Administration, and a score of other government agencies. Mother had to be adaptable under wartime government controls and nimble with a young inquisitive boy underfoot.

In addition, Mom canned goods, collected fat and bones for use as glycerin by munitions manufacturers, saved peach and apricot seeds for filters in gas masks, and created her Victory Garden in the backyard. The endless household tasks mitigated her loneliness, at least for a while. As a small child, I remember her quiet sobbing that punctuated the darkness and silence of my parents' bedroom each night as I pretended to sleep in the wooden crib next to their bed.

My father's experiences were far different than those of my mother in her day-to-day world. Prior to the outbreak of war, most Americans had never journeyed much further beyond the family farm or neighboring town. Dad discovered a New World in the Canadian north that few of his countrymen had experienced. It was a wilderness land of glacial rivers, seemingly endless mountains, and unexplored forests. Camp 78 in the Yukon Territory was one of those obscure places in the war that helped create the fiber in his life. Surrounded by mountain ranges the camp was built along a narrow ridge bisected by two large rivers. The U.S. Army facility is now just a memory; only the building foundations can be found in the surrounding stands of lodge pole pine that marked one of the most expensive civilian and military projects of the war—the Canadian Oil Project. In this most singular of places whose beauty and solitude are difficult to describe, civilian workers and soldiers struggled to overcome the rigors of climate, geography, and separation from home.

My family's wartime fears, loneliness, and hopes tie all of us together into a larger community that embraces even former enemies. Civilians in Berlin, London, and Tokyo shared the loneliness that my mother felt. The emotional depression and despera-

FOREVER AND A DAY

tion, the fear of never coming home again, that my uncles endured in the Pacific and European Wars were most assuredly similar to the feelings of enemy soldiers. We are, after all, not so very different from one another.

On the other hand, the forgiveness that came after the war remained a difficult, unresolved issue for decades to come. In 1985, my father visited Japan for the first time. It was a remarkable journey given his long-held feelings of animosity towards his former enemy. One old soldier finally ended his personal war against Japan.

PART I

THE BLACK YEAR

CHAPTER 1

An American Family Goes To War

I received the sweetest letter from you today. It was just in time for our tenth wedding anniversary. I have been thinking all day about our life together. how grand it has been, yet I have such fears for the future. I have no idea where you have gone. Wish you had called me to let me know where you are. I can't think of anyone else, only our son at times, and he sleeps peacefully most of the time.

Mary Jensen, 1942

On the warm summer morning of July 16, 1942, George and Mary Jensen posed for a final photograph on the flagstone steps before their Denver home. They made the best of these final moments with one another before his departure for the Army. George awkwardly hugged his wife once more and whispered words of encouragement to the woman he called, “My dearest Mary.” Although she wore a pretty flowered skirt for the occasion, her hair was still in curlers. Tears covered

FOREVER AND A DAY

her face. For his first trip of the war, my father wore clothing typical of the time for a man destined for the Army—beige cotton pants, a white shirt, and an unflattering brown tie. Shortly after the photo was taken, he left for the nearby Ft. Logan processing camp and then on to Union Station where his wartime journey began. Father was one of the first to be called up in his family. In the following two years, four other Jensen brothers and several score of friends followed in his footsteps as the nation set out on the difficult pathway to Berlin, Tokyo, and Rome. As the nation mobilized its human and physical resources for the lengthy conflict that lay ahead, every American family now moved in step.

Mary, a 41-year-old, soon-to-be mother, feared the worst. For this demure, shy woman who was nearly five-years older than her husband, distant memories of childhood abandonment surfaced for the first time since the ending of World War I nearly a generation earlier. Prior to American entrance into that long-ago conflict, her father walked away from his wife and six children. He left in search of a new future among the gold-mining camps of the American West. Seldom, did he give his family a backward glance. Her family barely survived several difficult years.

In 1918, Mother Amelia and her children moved to a miserable plot of sun-baked land where South Dakota's western edge of rolling prairie meets the Black Hills. A large irrigation canal snaked across a section of unplowed prairie behind the one-storied, frame building that became a temporary home for this immigrant family from Finland. Where the land sloped away from the house to a nearby dry arroyo, a hen house and a series of fenced enclosures had been built for sheltering the family's only source of wealth—a brood of chickens and several cows.¹

The never-ending financial plight forced this Finnish immigrant family to become resourceful in its struggle for survival. Mother Amelia sold eggs and home made butter to a nearby farmer's mercantile. Only two of her children were old enough to find work. John became a day laborer making concrete head gates and cleaning ditches for a nearby irrigation project. Mother, the oldest-born, found employment as a live-in housekeeper for a wealthy

banking family, and later worked as a waitress in the mining town of Lead, South Dakota. Because of the family's dire finances, she completed only the 8th grade in her schooling.

When the family's alcoholic and abusive father returned in the early 1920's as a result of discussions for a new beginning with his family, Mother escaped from South Dakota and found a new future in Denver, Colorado. The physical and emotional hurt from her childhood remained firmly etched into her memory. The father's name was rarely mentioned in family's discussions.

Near the end of her long life, and using words so unlike her, she bitterly stated, "If you can't say something nice about the dead, don't say anything about them at all."

At the beginning of another world conflict, my middle-aged mother was haunted by fears of again being left behind and facing financial hardship, years of separation, nagging loneliness, and the possibility of losing a loved one. For the most part, these burdens were born in silence. She was now married to a loving man, but those traumatic early years of childhood followed her into adult life.

George Jensen had a far different childhood than his wife. As the son of an extended family of ten children who grew up on Sunnyslope Farm near the small community of Berthoud, Colorado, George had developed a firm emotional grounding, one that Mother admired. After the two met one another in the late 1920's, their visits to Sunnyslope became a frequent occurrence. She found an inner peace and security in this closely knit family.

Mother enjoyed sharing social activities with her large adoptive family, sitting on the screened-in front porch of the two-storied frontier home, and talking with her future mother-in-law. The wrap-around porch gave her an unobstructed view of the reddish-brown barn and wooden-slatted, water-storage tank that towered above the home and surrounding fields where corn and sugar beets were successfully grown each summer. She experienced the fragrance of frontier lilacs and the shade of large cottonwood trees. Where the overhanging tree limbs had not found their way on the west side of the white framed house, the Jensen mother's garden of

FOREVER AND A DAY

beets, corn, lettuce, carrots, and tomatoes, everything needed for a brood of children, were carefully cultivated each summer.

She also experienced the shouts, screams, and laughter that emanated from all corners of the family farm. Before hay was harvested in August and stacked on the floor of the two-storied barn for the milk cows, the kids played basketball on the planked flooring of the loft. A vertical support beam at one end of the barn provided support for a metal barrel hoop. In the late afternoon and early evening hours, the sounds of a bouncing ball, squealing children, squeaking floorboards, and the dull thud of crashing bodies echoed throughout the farmyard. A wary eye was always kept on the lookout for their father; these good times interfered with farm chores.²

Sitting off to one side, watching the children play hoop ball, hoping to participate in the action, was one of the more interesting animals found on the farm. Bob and Jim had a beautiful coyote. He was so intelligent that he could climb a fourteen-foot ladder and then inch his way downward successfully. He loved to play and swim with the kids. Zeke—everyone loved him, except the Jensen mother who saw her egg-laying hens disappear during the evening hours.³

Because of the still-lingering grip of the Great Depression on rural America, James Jensen Sr. and his wife, Katharine, lost the family homestead to foreclosure proceedings in 1940. Forced off their land and emotionally devastated by this event, the family's mother, Katharine, died at the end of the year.

Their children asked themselves, "If only the parents had approached them for financial help?" The father's old-world stubbornness prevented them from asking.

This shattering event, remembered by my mother, remained a painful memory for both of them. Because of our family's wartime financial difficulties, the dread of losing our Denver home gnawed away at the core of their emotional self.

Although my parents did not share a similar background in education and family history, the two created a loving relationship that endured for decades to come. When they first met

one another in December 1928, Father was a college student attending Denver University. Because employment was difficult to find at the beginning of the Depression, he faced serious financial hardship. His wardrobe was appalling; it contained only one pair of trousers, the pair he wore each and every day. Always searching for a job to pay his college expenses, he applied for a temporary teaching position at the Juvenile Detention Home for the City and County of Denver.

At the time, Mother worked there as a remedial tutor for teenage children who had been placed in the institution by Judge Ben Lindsey, the first juvenile court judge in the United States. During the interview, she and the superintendent of the home asked questions of the big-eared and smiling young man who sat across from them.

When questioned later about her thoughts of the applicant, she replied, "He's not so good looking, but he will do fine for the job."

Father remembered the interview somewhat differently, and in his usual understated way later wrote: "I thought you were a very nice person."⁴

By the early 1940's, my parents had been married nearly ten years. As a recently employed school teacher with the Denver Public Schools, Father earned a decent living wage, which enabled them to build their own home. Because few debts existed, Mother discontinued her employment with the Juvenile Detention Center. In the spring after Pearl Harbor, their lives changed forever. Home front mobilization and desperate struggles on foreign shores now controlled their lives. Finding the resources to pay the monthly mortgage and providing for the needs of a small child became difficult tasks for a 41-year-old woman. She worried about her husband's safe return from war and the welfare of friends and family. Father's worry was compounded by Mother's deteriorating physical health, which was precipitated by wartime stress and the onset of rheumatoid arthritis. In addition, both shared the interminable loneliness that came with wartime separation.

