



William Lee Burch

REMEMBRANCES

A British and American Tale



Two families with widely differing perspectives, and more than 5,000 miles apart but destined to share in a common bond, struggle with hard times, personal problems, and war during three of the deadliest decades in human history. This adventure, set amid constantly changing historical events, will test the souls of these families but prove that tenacity, laughter, and the undeniable spirit of working together can and will overcome even the worst that mankind can throw their way.

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REMEMBRANCES
A British and American Tale

A Novel
By
William Lee Burch

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ONE: An American Family

At the age of 18, George Hammer, sold on the glory of becoming another fighting Doughboy, signed up for the U.S. Army. Since George's pacifist parents, Fred and Louisa, had always expected their only son to take the reins of the family farm in due time, George's decision to fight the Hun was not popular. The year was 1917, and young George, despite all of Louisa's tears, boarded a Bakersfield train that would take him to an Army training camp and prepare him and several other raw recruits for the war in Europe. Before the end of the year, Private George Hammer and his infantry outfit had arrived in England, but would remain in further training and reserve status for some time.

Finally, in June of 1918, George's unit was sent across the channel to join the fight. After less than two months amid the unspeakable realities of trench warfare, Private George Hammer, having gone a bit berserk, was wounded and soon taken prisoner after charging a German trench somewhere on the Western Front. George was then reported missing in action by the U.S. Army, but eventually turned up in a field hospital behind German lines. The Army, after receiving word from the Germans of George's status, then sent word to Fred and Louisa that their son was a prisoner of war. The telegram stated Private Hammer was recovering from bullet wounds somewhere in enemy territory, but failed to mention George had snapped on the battlefield, and had been classified in absentia as suffering from "shell shock."

REMEMBRANCES

After the POW experience, George Hammer was returned to the U.S. Army to be sent home after the armistice. Having survived the war and returned to the farm in Shafter, California, George then settled slowly into his postwar life, much to the delight of Fred and Louisa. Within a few months, however, George would be reunited with the woman he'd married before leaving Germany. That woman, Gretchen Meyer, a sturdy college educated nurse who spoke fluent English, was not particularly welcome nor a complete surprise to Fred and Louisa when she arrived at the Bakersfield train station.

Having been raised on a farm in western Germany, Gretchen Meyer was already prepared to become a farmer's wife, but found a somewhat chilly reception from her new in-laws after traveling thousands of miles. Nevertheless, George Hammer and his new bride proceeded to set up housekeeping in the farm's guest house, near the main Hammer farmhouse, about five miles west of Shafter.

While Fred and Louisa had a fair share of German in their own blood, they felt no love for anyone who fought or toiled on the side of those who'd shot their only son. Although their new daughter-in-law had tended George's wounds, as well as other more personal needs, with universal efficiency, Fred and Louisa Hammer weren't really warming up to George's choice for a life partner. George, with his usual aplomb, soon told Gretchen he loved her, wouldn't even consider returning her to Germany, and simply advised her to give his stubborn parents more time to adjust.

While Fred and Louisa Hammer had for months remained cold to Gretchen's efforts to be accepted into the realm of the Hammer family, the birth of their first grandchild soon thawed

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

the two older people into submission. First, early in 1920, Henry Hammer, despite some problems of birth, took his first breath out in the guest house. A little more than a year later, weighing in at nine pounds, Martin joined his toddler brother, the two later terrorizing both the guest house and the grandparent's once quieter domain. In 1923, another boy, Lee Hammer, entered the scene and that followed in 1925 by Freda, thus fulfilling Gretchen's wishes for a girl, and essentially ending her child bearing years.

Like all families anywhere, the growing Hammer brood had its fair share of problems. Not the least of those problems was George Hammer's penchant for curse words, and this amid Gretchen's joining of the nearby Seventh Day Adventist Church. While George never once talked about his war experiences, even to Gretchen, that short time in the trenches had changed the man forever. Raised as a good church going Christian by Fred and Louisa, since his war experiences George Hammer didn't mind telling anyone that he no longer believed in God. To his way of thinking, "No supposed God that, according to those damned Sunday preachers controls every damned thing on the planet would have allowed that goddam useless war to happen."

While the boys were still young, Gretchen's efforts to raise them in a church going atmosphere were somewhat successful. However, as time went on George's assigning of Saturday farm chores and other such ruses took its toll on Gretchen's religious leanings. Eventually, only Freda would occupy the Ford's front passenger seat as Gretchen headed off to church, while the boys, happy to be spared another sermon, all breathed a sigh of relief. There was also a tendency for the boys, and especially Henry, to

REMEMBRANCES

throw around a few choice curse words that his father used on occasion, thus another added thorn in Gretchen's religious side.

However, Gretchen was sometimes her own worst enemy when it came to certain moral issues and the religious education of her boys. Her and George, always passionate when it came to love making, failed to realize that those innocent little boys were both curious and sometimes awake when their father became amorous with their mother. Three boys, thought to be fast asleep in a nearby bedroom, were almost always awake or awakened by the passionate groans coming from the master bedroom of the house. And, of course, in the heat of passion neither George nor Gretchen would hear those innocent giggles filtering through their bedroom wall, and then quickly subside when all that unbridled passion had been satisfied. Only years later would the truth of so much compromised secrecy in the Hammer master bedroom become known to both George and Gretchen.

Henry was not yet in school when Gretchen began teaching the boy how to feed chickens, gather their eggs, and milk the one family cow that roamed a small pasture near the chicken coop. George, during some of his more leisure moments, which were few, also began teaching the boy how drive the Farmall tractor. That tractor, while often cursed, was an important relic on the Hammer farm, dating back to the machine age transition from mules and horses to the gasoline engine. Although both Fred and George often cursed that old Farmall, they refused to get rid of it. And it wasn't unusual for Gretchen to hear her husband issue a string of swear words while her man, short on patience, struggled to keep the old tractor in a serviceable condition.

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

The real evil in the evolving Hammer woodpile as the boys grew older was George's Saturday night poker games. After a long week of twelve hour plus days, George Hammer's one outlet for sweet relief eventually settled on pool hall row in Shafter. Gretchen's Sabbath day would be nearing its end when she dropped George off on Central Avenue, and sent the boys around the corner to the Shafter Theater. Thus in the back room of one of four or five pool halls, George Hammer would buy into a back room poker game while Gretchen did whatever after sundown shopping she could manage with Freda in tow. While it wasn't the best arrangement for Gretchen's religious beliefs, at first causing vociferous arguments, she eventually realized that the male side of the Hammer clan, sinners all, would have to remain free to pursue their own chosen path of destruction.

As the boys grew into adolescence and Freda reached the age of four, the stock market crash of 1929 ushered in the Great Depression. During that fateful year, George Hammer, the only heir to Fred and Louisa's modest farm holdings, was elevated to the status of family patriarch. Fred Hammer, deciding he'd had enough of the fickle business of farming, turned the entire 320 acres over to his only son. With very little advance notice, the older Hammers packed their belongings into a rented trailer and struck out for Phoenix. Although Louisa had a difficult time saying her last good-byes to the curious grandchildren, Fred was more than ready to move on. Fred had just turned sixty, and admitted to George that he was already too tired to keep up with farm work and the constant demands of keeping it all going.

With Fred and Louisa barely out of sight on their way to Phoenix, George and Gretchen began moving their belongings into the farm's larger main house. Within only a few days after

REMEMBRANCES

his parents' departure, spurred by Gretchen's insistence, George declared the two rancid outhouses on the property to be obsolete. After many months, even years, of hearing loud complaints and serious threats of mutiny from Gretchen and several shocked visitors, George at last decided the main house and guest house were to have indoor toilets, despite the cost of modernization.

The Hammer outhouse problem had indeed become critical long before George's final decision to modernize. During the summer months, the short walk to either outhouse was bad enough, but sitting alone on a wooden two-hole seat in 100 degree plus heat was downright stifling. The rank smell wafting up from below the outhouse seat quickly surrounded the wary occupant, giving he, or she, little choice but to hold their breath, thus hurrying up nature's call. In the winter months, when chill and fog most often enveloped the southern end of the valley, a morning walk to the outhouse was then more like an arctic experience in Alaska. Often, with frost on the ground outside, sitting bare butt on that cold seat once again meant hurrying things before frost bite set in, and then dashing full speed back to the main house to huddle around the wood stove.

While the boys had seldom complained of the many toilet hardships, both Gretchen and Freda were overjoyed with the decision to modernize. After a short period of construction by a work crew from Shafter, the new indoor toilets, complete with bathtubs and sinks, were up and running. The change in mood, especially the mood of the two Hammer females, immediately changed for the better when nature called. Even the boys, who often sat in the rancid outhouses to hideout or leisurely thumb through the old Sears catalog used as toilet paper, had no

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

complaints about the new location of the toilets. Important progress, at last and after many hours of held breath and hurried toilet business, had descended upon the Hammer farm.

Although George Hammer had his darker moments when his new role of farm owner seemed far too challenging, he quickly settled into a routine. Fortunately, the farm had few debts, and was returning a small profit when Fred departed. George did, however, and probably due to the increased stress of Fred's departure, become even more addicted to those Saturday night poker games.

Pool hall row, besides being a favored gathering place for many local farmers, was fast becoming a nightmare for some concerned Shafterites as the depression years brought with them the onset of hard times. It was with those hard times that even more of the country's unemployed rail riders began descending upon Shafter. Only fifteen miles from Bakersfield, the railroad tracks beside Central Valley Highway brought many north and southbound freight trains onto Shafter's rail sidings to load farm products from its packing sheds. Inevitably, at least a few hobos on almost every train would jump from the parked rail cars and make their way into town.

All through the 1930's, Shafter's pool halls, conveniently located on Central Avenue, just across from the railroad tracks, became a favored destination for hobos in need of something to eat, drink, or looking for part-time work. For many of the local farmers in need of workers, including George Hammer, pool hall row was fast becoming the town's unofficial employment agency, as well as a great place to win or lose a few bucks, drink a few beers, even get away from a bitchy wife when things got tough on the home front.

REMEMBRANCES

Most work nights, Sunday through Thursday, were relatively slow on pool hall row. Saturday, from late morning until the wee hours of Sunday morning were notable exceptions, especially before WWII. Farmers and farm workers, after working long hours out in the country, were indeed thirsty by Saturday evening. They were thirsty and thirsting for some excitement on pool hall row, especially in the back rooms where the always in-session poker games lured many of them.

Henry, the oldest Hammer son, was quite young when first asked to round up his father from one of the pool halls on Central Avenue. Like a huge magnet refused to release him from sin, George Hammer invariably stayed too long in those smoky back room card games. Gretchen, impatiently waiting outside and not about to enter any business that sold alcohol and maliciously corrupted her husband, eventually would be forced to put Henry to use as her personal messenger.

Gretchen had long since accepted her husband's addiction to Saturday night poker and simply loaded the kids into the family Ford on Saturday afternoon. From the farm, she obediently rode to town in the front passenger seat beside her husband. However, hours after darkness had settled upon Central Avenue, George Hammer was often nowhere to be seen and it was already past the bedtime of the Hammer kids. About that time, Gretchen was fuming, sometimes cursing her thoughtless man in German and telling Henry, "Enough is enough, so go round up your father."

While George Hammer was not a heavy drinker by any means, he was certainly addicted to the game of poker. After a beer or two to loosen up, things in the back room of Shafter's pool halls would often become far too serious. Sometimes, entire

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

farms were eventually lost when the poker player found himself in trouble with cash flow. Mostly, however, especially with George Hammer who didn't overdo the drinking, the winnings and losings would amount to no more than a hundred bucks or so. And, while that sum seems like a pittance these days, one has to understand that the average wage in those days might have been .25 cents an hour, sometimes even less.

George and Gretchen Hammer were doing okay, despite the hard times, but losing a hundred bucks was hardly anything the Hammers' could afford. Keeping three boys and a female toddler in food and clothing, as well as keeping up with farm expenses, meant that losing only ten bucks might mean disaster. Losing money of any amount certainly wouldn't put Gretchen in a good mood. She loved her man for sure, but there were limits to her affection, especially during those late Saturday nights when George Hammer was gambling in the back room of a pool hall.

Almost from the time he started school, into his later grade school years, Henry was almost always the one tasked by his mother to be her messenger, sent into battle to rouse George Hammer from his lust for Saturday night poker. Sitting in the darkness across from pool hall row, even little Freda, if she was awake, knew exactly where the head of the family was passing his time.

Within the back room of any Shafter pool hall, the smell of beer lingered throughout, becoming almost like a heavy fog as it mixed with the ever-present cigarette smoke sent aloft by saturated patrons. There were also a few choice words invariably thrown around when things went bad for an angry card player. All in all the inside of a pool hall on Central Avenue was not a

REMEMBRANCES

pleasant place for those inside, and certainly much worse for a kid being pressed into the temporary role of messenger. How anyone, especially someone as young as Henry Hammer, lived through the poker experience in the back room of Shafter's pool halls remains an unexplained mystery of a bygone age.

As Gretchen's chosen messenger, and being the oldest of the brood, Henry Hammer was being urged to walk into the pool hall of his father's choice. Not much taller than a goat, Henry would have to walk through the swinging doors of Frank's Place or a nearby competitor, on past the bar where the Saturday night drinkers were certainly already tipsy, at best. Then, like someone on a secret mission, Henry would have to find his way to the back room. Find his way into the back room, where absolutely nobody but poker players and an occasional waitress with fresh bottles of beer were allowed to enter.

Despite Henry's objections, and there was always objections, the boy would voice his concerns to his mother then reluctantly make his way from the Ford toward the swinging doors. For a while, probably the first few months of this routine, Henry became quite adept at sneaking past the many bar stool butts that were just about head high to someone like Henry, as he made his way past the action up front.

The bartenders, of course, knew what was going on. For sure, Henry wasn't the only offspring tasked with messenger status, thus meaning this was simply another stealthy effort that was allowed to pass with no more than a casual glance and a knowing smile. Henry was, eventually, just another squirt that came and went on a regular basis.

Once at the door to the back room, Henry would quietly nudge the door open, just a crack, to make sure the old man was

sitting among the other card players. Ninety percent of the time, at least, Gretchen had chosen the right pool hall and Henry immediately knew he'd come to the right place. Sometimes, but not often, George would be sitting facing the back room door and soon see his oldest son peeking through the barely opened door. That was a sure sign that Gretchen, the love his life, was ready to go home to the farm and the Hammer kids in the back seat of the Ford were already past their bedtime.

Sometimes, however, and depending upon how much George Hammer had won or lost, the recognition of Henry peeking through the door was slow in coming or the seating for the night placed his back toward the door. With only the back of his father visible, Henry would be required to sneak on into the back room and somehow nudge his father's arm, the prearranged signal that it was past time to get on home. This, at best, was dangerous in Henry's young mind. Sometimes, not too often, George wasn't about to give up on the poker game, responding impatiently to Henry's nudge with, "Tell your Mom, I'll be out pretty soon!"

Those words, leaden with hidden meaning when aimed at young Henry, meant trouble was brewing, since George Hammer seldom left the poker game for at least another hour after those words were spoken on the first visit. During that next hour or so, Gretchen growing more and more angry and the kids already bitchy or falling asleep in the back seat of the Ford, Henry would invariably be expected to make that dreaded second run into the pool hall.

Second runs into the pool hall were like going through a war zone, all inside drunk or near drunk by then and, especially if he'd been losing, George Hammer would be in a sour mood. In

REMEMBRANCES

that case, George was certainly in no state of mind to go anywhere until he'd won his money back. It was during these times when Henry Hammer wished he wasn't the oldest child or that he had enough money to hire his own damned messenger. To hell with this shit, he was thinking, although he never expressed those words to his mother.

After George Hammer had finally been persuaded to leave the Saturday night poker gathering, the drive home was usually done in relative quiet. However, if George had maybe one too many beers, poor Gretchen often sat with white-knuckled stiffness, fearing for herself and the kids as her tipsy man negotiated the five mile drive home. Often, she would insist upon driving the brood home, but George would have none of that, not ready to relinquish his status of the most qualified driver in the family. This, of course, was another myth that George Hammer, as well as many other farmers in the area held that women were inferior in all those male dominated areas of the times. Gretchen, in fact, was a much better driver than her husband, but, like many other farm women, she suffered in relative silence.

Another particular task that was originally assigned to the oldest Hammer child had to do with Sunday dinner on the farm. Since George Hammer was quite fond of fried chicken, Gretchen had soon learned the art of preparing and cooking fryers taken from the family's own chicken coop, out next to the barn. Almost always, with the exception of an occasional steak when the family's budget would allow, preparing Sunday dinner first required one of the boys go out to the chicken coop and round up one or two of its many fat hens. After Gretchen pointed out

her first choices for Sunday dinner, one of the boys would spring into action and chase down the fleeing critters.

Martin, being particularly adept at chasing down doomed chickens, would soon have two fryers rounded up and ready for the chopping block, that chopping block being a tree stump in the front yard of the main house. Gretchen, of course, would be standing by with a sharpened hatchet while directing Martin where to place the struggling birds for impending execution. Once the creatures were properly situated, head placed at the right spot on the stump, she expected Henry to perform the deed, as directed by George Hammer. After all, George had informed his oldest son, it's always been a tradition in the Hammer family that the oldest son chops off the heads of Sunday dinner. No chop, no Sunday dinner! And, it made no difference that George had been an only child.

Henry was probably only seven or so when first asked to perform chicken chop duty. Reluctantly, he'd taken the hatchet from his mother's hand, and then glanced down at the doomed critter, about to become Sunday dinner. It seemed to him, he later told his mother, that the chicken was looking up at him, knowing disaster was near and pleading for its life. Something strange came over him, he further stated, and he just couldn't force himself to do such a thing.

Rather impatiently, Gretchen had taken the hatchet from her son's hand and immediately inflicted the brutal, fatal blow to one-half of her Sunday dinner while Henry watched on in horror. Quickly, she directed Martin to place the second chicken in the same position, and again precisely removed the head of another former occupant of the Hammer chicken coop. Henry could feel himself growing queasy as both chickens ran in circles

REMEMBRANCES

with their heads removed, all the while spurting their life's blood onto the ground around them.

Later in the afternoon, just before Sunday dinner was served, Gretchen informed George that his oldest son had dismally failed to accomplish the mission assigned to him. George, of course and as philosophical as ever, simply grunted and told Gretchen that he understood anyone having reservations about taking any kind of life. "After all," he said, "That damn war I fought in, and you had a part in, taught me that taking any life ain't all that satisfying. That's his choice, Gretchen. Maybe we can get Martin to do it. He ain't all that queasy as his older brother."

And, so it was that Henry Hammer was never again asked to help with the execution phase of Sunday dinner. Instead, and probably as punishment, Henry was soon placed in charge of preparing a tub of scalding water to soak the birds, and then remove all the feathers before Gretchen cut them up for her frying pan. And, as was predicted by George Hammer, Martin Hammer then accepted hatchet duty on most Sunday mornings. Henry, now reduced in status, busied himself, out of sight of the spectacle outside, by heating water on the kitchen stove, in preparation for the next phase of Sunday dinner.

Into the 1930's, as the Hammer brood grew, the individual personalities of Hammer kids were becoming more and more evident to George and Gretchen, as well as those familiar with the family. Henry, it seemed, was more of an introvert than the other two, spending much of his free time reading or fantasizing on his favorite sport, baseball. Martin, on the other hand, was more of an extrovert, often concocting deeds of mischief that he felt would relieve the boredom of living and working on a farm.

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

Martin's primary fantasy was to be a soldier, often picking his father's brain about World War I, but seldom receiving any more than a grunt of dissatisfaction for his curiosity. Gretchen, however, was considerably more forthcoming, eager to steer her second son in other directions than the ugliness of war and soldiering. This motherly tactic, while undoubtedly meaning well, only served to further stir the boy's interest in the military.

Lee, the youngest of the boys, was by far the most mischievous of the lot, and near fearless. He was also the class clown in his Shafter grade school, always eager to stir up some laughter in the class, and consequently often in trouble with his teachers. Teachers, of course, were somewhat underpaid and preferred things in their classes to be more serious and orderly. How many times Lee Hammer was directed to the principal's office during his school years will probably never be known.

It's a fact, however, that Gretchen Hammer spent several hours over the years, just sitting quietly across from a teacher or principal while listening to Lee's latest episode being laid out for her to digest. Gretchen, like most concerned mothers, would be eager to pass along the results of her latest meeting with school officials to her husband. This, unfortunately, would seldom lead to more than a shrug of the shoulders from George, and on rare occasions, maybe, "I'll speak to him, Gretchen. Not to worry, he's just a boy having fun."

Freda was the real enigma of the family. As the youngest and only female child of the lot, the girl had inherited a special place in both her mother and father's mind. The boys were also particularly protective of their younger sister, often going out of their way to look up some kid in her school when Freda complained of being bullied or one of them made fun of her for

REMEMBRANCES

any reason. Gretchen never condoned such behavior, but simply looked the other way when the boys took action to protect the girl. Gretchen's brother, Kurt, four years older than she, had behaved much the same way when she was threatened during her school years in Germany.

And as time went on thru the 1930's, Gretchen and George's brood growing into teens, the news from her native country was indeed growing more ominous with each new letter Gretchen received from her mother. Finally, early in 1937, her mother wrote that Kurt Meyer had disappeared from his professor's job in Berlin. Despite all their efforts, Gretchen's worried mother and father had been unable to turn up any information on their only son's whereabouts. Rumor stated that German authorities had carried out orders to purge the universities in Berlin of many of their professors. The Nazi Party, growing more powerful by the day, had placed college intellectuals at the top of their purge list. There were also concerns that Gretchen's father, Erwin, a retired farmer and merchant, might have been placed on another list of those suspected of being disloyal to the cause of Nazism.

Amid all the family fears, there were other rumors going around about the brutality within her native country, including some ugly tales about European Jews being targeted by the Nazis for removal and resettlement. With a lot on her worried mind, Gretchen slipped in a melancholy mood for several weeks. Dr. Sparks, the family's physician in Shafter, would later suggest that all the apparent stress in Gretchen's life coincided with female menopause, another factor she hadn't previously considered, but had long been suspected by George and the

boys. "What's wrong with Mom" had become an often used phrase among them.

1937 would prove to be a pivotal year, not only for the mother of the brood, but the entire Hammer family. Along with Gretchen's spiraling dive into melancholy, also came the realization that her beloved boys were no longer boys, but rather quickly sprouting into manhood instead. Henry, despite all the previous warnings by his parents to stay away from the labor camps in and around Shafter and Bakersfield, managed to impregnate one of the Okie girls living in a ragtag labor camp north of Shafter.

Henry, only seventeen at the time he'd met the tall girl from Oklahoma, had followed her after work hours into the packing shed where she worked as a potato grader. On a huge pile of discarded potato sacks, Henry had lost his virginity and possibly his future freedom of choice. The girl, Lori McCune, almost nineteen, had come to California with her family of seven from their failing and foreclosed farm in Oklahoma. They, like too many others, hoped to make a new start in the Golden State, where it was erroneously believed that plenty of work and opportunity were waiting for those who dared venture west. However, the McCune family, like George and Gretchen Hammer, didn't consider an unwanted pregnancy to be opportunity knocking.

To further complicate Gretchen's spiraling outlook on life, Martin had run away to join the Army, leaving no word of his intentions with the family. Although the boy was only fifteen, he was tall, about six-foot-three, and looked rather older than his years. For several weeks, up until the late fall of 1937, Martin's whereabouts were unknown, leaving both parents in a state of

REMEMBRANCES

constant worry until, nearing October, the second son appeared at the main house, having hitched a ride from the Bakersfield bus station.

Martin remained quiet about his whereabouts during his absence, but eventually admitted to Henry that he'd lied about his age to an Army recruiter. He'd signed the enlistment forms in Bakersfield and was soon sent to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma for training. Unfortunately for Martin, his company commander suspected the tall but immature boy might have been lying about his age. After some intense questioning by the commander himself, Martin had admitted he was only fifteen years old. He'd been quickly released from the Army, advised to enlist again in a couple of years, and then provided with a bus ticket back to California. It was an adventure Martin readily admitted had been quite exciting, albeit a failure to live out his fantasy to be a military man. That same fantasy, in the not too distant future, would be lived beyond Martin's wildest dreams.

The Christmas season of 1937 was shaping up to be a rather grim affair. Gretchen hadn't heard from her German relatives for more than four months, and Henry's girlfriend was well beyond showing she was with child. Martin, still smarting over his failed Army enlistment, was becoming more and more preoccupied with leaving the farm, Army or no Army. But, like a true trooper, Gretchen busied herself with finding a suitable Christmas tree for the living room of the main house. With that accomplished, she threw herself into the task of sewing together modest gifts of clothing for her brood.

George, on the other hand, and in true agnostic fashion, continued to ignore the Christmas season, focusing instead on staying busy with equipment repairs and other chores he'd

saved for the winter months. He had, however, managed to spend time alone with his oldest son, advising Henry on the pros and cons of his situation with Lori McCune. Henry wanted to ask the girl to marry him, but George had pointed out to the boy that a shotgun marriage seldom led to anything but trouble down the road.

George didn't, however, tell his son that he'd recently looked up Silas McCune in the labor camp near Shafter and was subsequently informed that Lori McCune, pregnant or not, wasn't about to marry anyone. "Matter-of-fact," she'd told her father, "I would rather have gotten rid of the child right from the first, but you and Mom wouldn't let me do it!" Silas also noted that Lori McCune had big star struck plans to eventually make her way down south to become a model or a famous actress. After that meeting concluded, it seemed to George Hammer that the future of his first grandchild was in serious trouble. He later passed Silas's words onto Gretchen.

"God knows," Gretchen offered upon hearing the news of her first grandchild's possible fate, "If the child, whatever it is, boy or girl, stays with the McCune family, anything could happen to it."

Since his war experience, George Hammer had certainly adopted a kind of fatalistic attitude toward life. However, neither he nor Gretchen was about allow one of their own blood to fall into a family situation as grim as the McCune's were offering the child. He and Gretchen had worked hard to raise their family and see to their needs, and now the ancestral baton of family was being passed on to Henry and the other children. Socially acceptable or not, the first Hammer grandchild deserved as much as its Grandpa and Grandpa could contribute to its

REMEMBRANCES

future. It was soon agreed that whatever it took, Henry's grandchild would be made part of the Hammer family, rather than face an uncertain future with the struggling McCune family.

George's talk with his oldest son, taking place out in the barn during a rainy Saturday morning, eventually settled upon the father's own experiences, before, during, and after the Great War to end all wars. Up until that point in Henry's and the other children's life, almost nothing was known of either George or Gretchen's role in the past war. It was as if both parents had previously agreed to never bring up the subject to anyone, including their offspring.

Having seen the look of uncertainty in his oldest son's eyes, revealing a youngster caught up in the first real dilemma of his short life, George Hammer must have felt an uncommon rush of compassion. Or, maybe, George simply had some long suppressed but lingering need to purge his own conscience. Usually too busy with running the Hammer farm for long hours every day of his married life, he'd left the task of parenting mostly to Gretchen. Now, as uncharacteristic as it seemed to George himself, his son's situation called for a real father's touch.

For some time after he'd returned home from the war, George Hammer had refused to think about what had happened in faraway Europe. After Gretchen's arrival from Germany, he'd begun the slow process of extracting himself from the shell that had enclosed him for so long. At last, and to the delight of his parents, he was showing interest in the world around him and, most especially, besides Gretchen's presence, he'd taken particular interest in the writings and other works of

Will Rogers. The Oklahoma humorist had touched something inside of George Hammer that he feared had been lost forever. Will Rogers taught him how to laugh again.

Will Rogers, it seemed to George, could fluidly see the ugly side of life, digest it, then make fun of it. Taking life less seriously was exactly what he desperately needed to learn. He didn't believe in what the church taught anymore, but the ingredients for laughter to put the world in some sort of sane perspective was making a difference. And, learning to laugh again was his first priority if he was going to make his new bride a decent husband.

Henry sat on a shop stool and listened patiently while his father stammered a bit, as if thinking out the right words to say to his oldest son. Finally, after a deep breath, George Hammer spoke his first words to another human being about the past war he'd been a part of.

"Henry, sometimes doing the right thing is gonna get you in a pile of trouble down the road. I thought it was right to join the Army, back in '17. President Wilson got us young guys, most of us just looking for some excitement in our lives, all charged up to do the right thing. We were sure we could save those stalemated Europeans who were just killing off one another for no damned good reason. So, as dumb as we were, we followed the call."

"They called us Doughboys, and we really thought we were damned well invincible . . . that is until our first damn charge across no man's land. Doing the right thing, charging toward those German trenches, past dead and dying soldiers kind of gets all muddled up with all those damned lead bullets zipping past your head and the guy next to you gettin' his head shot off."

REMEMBRANCES

For a while, just a few seconds, Henry couldn't believe what he was hearing. His father was actually talking about the war, the same ugly war his mother and father hadn't previously acknowledged ever happened. "Why haven't you and Mom ever talked about that war, Dad? Was it really that bad?"

George chuckled somewhat nervously. "Look, Henry, I didn't come in here to talk about me and your mom's war experiences. This talk is about my son doing the right thing, for the right reasons. Let me tell ya, though, whatever you've heard about war, it's a damn sight worse when you become part of it. We haven't talked about it with you kids because neither of us wanted to encourage you to join the military. We don't need any more war experiences for this family."

"Dad, you know there's talk going around that we're gonna have to fight the Germans again, and Mom really hates the idea of any of her kids fighting her kin. Please tell me about the war. It won't make any difference to the way I feel. I hate the thought of going to war, not like Martin who can't wait to go into the Army."

"Damn, Boy. Can't you take no for an answer? Like your mother, I suppose."

"Yeah, I guess that's true." Henry answered, eyeing his father as the man considered going further with this rainy morning talk, long overdue in the mind of both father and son.

"Okay, Henry. I guess it's time to pass on what I know, and maybe a little of what it was like in that damn war. You gotta promise me, though, that you won't repeat any of this to the other kids. This is between you and me, Henry. At least it's between us for now."

"Promise, Dad. Were you scared?"

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

“Scared ain’t the right word for it, Boy. There are times in this life when a body is beyond being scared. There are times when you just wanna close your damned eyes and wish it all away. Anyway, after training back east, we took a boat to England. We were pretty charged up by those English people, standing around and watching us ignorant Doughboys stepping onto their soil like we belonged there, and cheering like we were something special. Like we were their saviors, like supermen. Hell, we were only kids. I think I was 21 at the time, maybe 22. Hell, I really can’t remember.”

“Anyway, after a few months we were headed to the front, thinking we were gonna help end that damn war in a few weeks, maybe only a couple of months tops.”

“Just a month later, we were thinking real different. By then, half of us were dead or wounded, and the rest of us had trench foot from slogging around those damned wet trenches, always ankle deep in mud and water when it rained. Some even died of pneumonia. Hell, by then I just knew in my gut that I wouldn’t get home and see my friends, or anyone else, again. Any day now, I was thinking, I’ll probably take a damn bullet or one of those shells will fall on my head, like it had some of the others. We were all thinking like that. And, believe me, most of us, religious or not, did a lot of serious praying. I was religious in those days, if you can believe that.”

“Anyway, one night the rain started and didn’t stop through the night, even though Sergeant Whitman told us to get a good night’s sleep, ‘cause we’re goin’ over the top’ at 0600 the next morning, after the artillery guys pounded the German trenches, probably 150 yards across no man’s land. Hell, nobody slept, even if they could have. The damn trench was all mud and

REMEMBRANCES

water, and finding a dry spot, like the officers always had when they slept, made anything to do with sleep among us poor enlisted grunts damned near impossible.”

“At 0500 the next morning, those damned artillery rounds started from our side, the shells goin’ over our trench while we hunkered down like rats in cage. Then the Krauts retaliated with artillery of their own, most of their shells landing too damn close to our trench, sometimes spraying wet dirt on us while we hunkered down even more.”

Henry listened patiently, his mind now struggling to imagine what it was like for his father then. Probably not like the Hollywood people tried to show it was, he was thinking.

“Hell, when the shelling finally let up it was pretty near 0600, and we all knew this was probably our last day on Earth. Some guys threw up, some whined like babies, and others just prayed. Some, the worst of us, just sat in the rain with a blank stare, wishing the hell they were back in New Jersey, or somewhere. We all had that feeling that this wasn’t the right day to be goin’ over the top. Something wasn’t right about all of it. Not like past times, when things were bad, but not so damned bad as they felt at that minute.”

“Then, right at 0600, Sgt. Whitman blew that whistle of his. We all called that damned whistle the beckoning from beyond, maybe the mortician’s call, maybe something worse. Then, we were going up the ladder, me at the front of the pack, some of the others down below, pushing you on or hunkering down in the trench and hoping all this war shit wasn’t really happening to them. We were all, even the officers, wishing the hell we were back home and never heard of the goddam Army . . .”

France: The Western Front September 1917 the Argonne Sector

George Hammer found himself at the very top of the huge trench that wound serpentine-like through the once peaceful French countryside, as if dug too long and too deep by some drunken machine operator. He was soon right behind Sergeant Whitman, hearing the man screaming loudly at his men, "Get at it, Boys Keep moving! . . . that's it, keep moving . . . don't let the goddam grass grow under your goddam feet . . .!"

George's trench companion, Private Buckley, newly arrived from the replacement depot, fell in step with his rifle and bayonet pointed toward the German lines. It was eerily quiet with only the sounds of men struggling up the ladder, some cursing. George could see only raw fear in the boy's eyes, guessing now that he was nineteen at most. At this point, men were moving steadily forward as if being propelled onward by some unknown force, feeling only the tightness of fear throughout their bodies, but obediently following the lead of Sgt. Whitman. There were many soldiers out the open then, spread out and just falling beside the others, forming an uneven line that constantly changed as men stepped around shallow or deep craters where exploding artillery had been falling for many weeks.

It seemed to George that the entire scene was surreal, like landing on the moon or some other world bent on destroying itself. Nothing could possibly live for long or want to spend even a moment in this hellish place, he was thinking. Hell, not even the goddam devil himself would want to live on this godforsaken piece of ground. Even the dead bodies and the

REMEMBRANCES

wounded from the last charge were nowhere to be seen, as if sanity and civilization itself had moved on to some other dimension.

Then, they were approaching ominous lines of barbed wire, at least 50 yards from their own trenches, but still no rifle fire from the Germans. George could hear Sgt. Whitman again, still leading the way, "Keep moving, boys. Heads up . . . they're waiting until they have a good shot . . . keep moving . . .!"

Another 50 yards, past the barbed wire barrier that had been cut by some stealthy and silent souls during the night to make way for the charge. George could now easily make out the earthen ridge in front of the German trench, but still no sign of those distinctive helmets, their wearers peeking out at the advancing enemy, searching for an easy target. Keep moving, behind the Sergeant. The Sarge is like someone with a guardian angel . . . leading the charge, never been hit. More barbed wire, those damn pointed stakes that can surely impale a man if he ain't careful. Dear God, help me through this day. . . Damn, still no fire from the Germans . . . maybe they've pulled out, retreated, or moved on down the German lines . . .

Then, as if rising up from some unseen cavern, far below the Earth's surface, the Kraut helmets appeared beyond the dirt in front of Sgt. Whitman's outfit, all carefully aiming rifles at the men charging toward them. Crack! Crack! Crack! The sound was now deafening, the feel of bullets racing past Private George Hammer's head, sparing him, but unmercifully sinking deep into the gut of the new kid beside him.

Private Buckley wouldn't be going home!

George moved on, hurrying to be closer to Sgt. Whitman, as if the Sergeant was the one magical answer to survival. In the

periphery George could see men diving into the nearest crater to them, hunkering close to the earth, beneath the line of fire from the trench, giving up the charge, now only cowardly men hoping to live for one more day, wishing somehow this nightmare would end, like the rain finally had. Without the rain, they were all better targets. George kept moving . . . as if now he was simply part of some unseen and unknown force, pulling him like a powerful magnet into a world beyond that of mere earthlings.

"Out of those holes, boys," Sergeant Whitman screamed. "Goddamit, we're almost there, you idiots!" Then, without warning, Sgt. Whitman turned quickly to the right, rushing headlong for the nearest crater where George could make out four men hunkering against the dirt in front of them, all of them beyond scared, more like terrified.

"Out of the trench, you cowards . . . This is a goddam war, not some candy ass football game!"

Private George Hammer could never be completely sure what had happened next. The German's were firing directly at Sgt. Whitman, taking dead aim on the man leading the charge, but missing badly, as they always seemed to do with the Sarge. Then, Sgt. Whitman was reaching for the first man hunkering inside the artillery crater, dragging him by the collar, exposing him to the bullets that seemed to find no home with Sgt. Whitman. Then, as if frightened into fearless action, the man being wrested from the artillery crater fell back inside the temporary sanctuary, his rifle pointed directly at the Sergeant. One CRACK . . . louder and much closer than the German rifles seeking more American boys to send into oblivion.

George stood transfixed, unable to comprehend, as Sgt. Whitman slowly clutched his heaving chest, blood spurting from

REMEMBRANCES

between his fingers. He watched, paralyzed, still unable to move, exposed to the enemy, as the Sergeant fell into the crater, among the four men, all now even more terrified with what they'd seen or done.

Maybe it was shock, maybe something else. Hell, he would probably never know. Without further thought, George wheeled toward the German trench once again, completely oblivious to the rifle fire that continually sprayed past him, on back toward the American trenches. He was now invincible, a mindless entity, rushing toward a futureless clash with an unseen enemy, suddenly only yards away. For a while the firing ceased as the German's in the trench stared in awe at the charging enemy soldier, lunging onward almost in an inhuman fashion, possessing an athletic ability not seen before on any battlefield before.

Paralyzed with shock at such a sight, a dozen German soldiers could only watch in frozen awe as the man, with his rifle and bayonet in hand, hurtled toward them, probing for whoever would be the first living thing with a German helmet on his head to feel the wrath of sheer insanity, atop the earthen crest that shielded them.

Then, Private George Hammer, from the state of California, some 5,000 miles away from this awful place, reached the top of the mound of European earth occupied by a horrible enemy, screamed an unearthly sound that, at least from the men behind him who witnessed the spectacle, sounded like, "Kill me . . . you goddam Krauts . . .!"

His last memory from that day was reaching the top of the mound and then, as if flying bird-like to some unseen place, beyond all the horror of the corpse laden battlefield behind him,

he was above it all, simply surveying the scene, a silent observer to the worst of what mankind could possibly offer. He had yet to feel the two bullet wounds that had penetrated his young body, staining his soiled and wet Army clothing with splotches of red among the mud of battle. As far as George Hammer was concerned, at that point he had joined his Sergeant and Private Buckley in some other place, some other dimension. Some other place that certainly must be better than the one he'd just flown away from, he must have thought. Somehow, he knew it was raining again, but he didn't care. Hell, he no longer cared about anything.

There are important moments in all our lives when perceptions of the world we live in will change quite rapidly. So rapidly that it will take some time before any of it sinks in. Such was the case on this rainy Saturday morning in the barn on the Hammer spread. Henry had always perceived his father to be a hard man, addicted to the game of poker, and too busy with running a farm to be the kind of father city kids expected. Yes, he was a good man, as Henry's mother often pointed out to her growing brood. At that moment, after hearing his father's sordid story, Henry at last understood that his mother had shared a life of always changing experiences with George Hammer. She'd shared the good, as well as the unspeakable experiences that could never be completely shared with anyone other than the two of them. War had changed them both into human beings who knew both the good and bad of human kind, and both had eventually chosen the good over the evil. At that moment Henry felt . . . well, proud to be part of the Hammer family.

REMEMBRANCES

Henry thought the rain outside had become heavier, his father's voice merging with the sound of raindrops on the barn's roof. It was that same leaky roof Henry had sometimes found quite relaxing to sit under when it rained in the valley. This, in truth, was often his sanctuary, a place to go when he needed to think, sort out things in his mind. He needed to sort out some things at this moment, things like what was happening with Lori McCune; pregnant with the child Henry Hammer was responsible for fathering. It was certainly not the same kind of problem, or the same kind of story, that his father had just passed along to his oldest son, but a problem nevertheless. Shit, he was thinking, compared to what my father went through in that damned war, this thing with Lori McCune isn't much more than a speck of dust.

George took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and then smiled at his oldest son. "That's about the whole story, Henry. Sorry, I got so wrapped up in it. Hell, it's been 20 years since all that happened. Guess it was kind of itching to see the light of day."

"I'm glad you told me, Dad. Us kids have always wondered about all that war stuff."

"Yeah, I guess you would. But, now you're probably wondering what the hell all that has to do with your problem. Let's just say everything that happens in our lives has a purpose. Most of the time, probably 90 percent of the time, we don't notice how things change, how they affect what we're becoming. Then, one fine day, along comes something or someone to turn us and our world upside down. It takes a while, but eventually we come to understand that we and the world we live in ain't

the same as it was. And, it never will be, either. You follow me, so far?"

Henry looked into the face of his father. A face that seemed softer, more open than it ever had. "I think so. It's just that I'm really confused about women. What the hell do they want from us guys? Lori's carrying my child, but she claims she doesn't want to marry me. It makes no sense. Hell, I thought she might love me. I think I love her, or maybe I just thought it without good reason."

"Look, Henry. I don't think love figures into any of this. The girl has other ideas about becoming someone important. You, know, kind of the Hollywood type. She says she ain't marrying anyone, and would prefer not to have the child. I talked to her father the other day, out at the camp in Shafter. Like most of the Okies coming here lately, they don't need another mouth to feed, but they ain't in favor of an abortion. They're damn poor folks, but they are church going. So your Mom and I talked it over, and we decided that if she keeps the child, we'll damn well pay her expenses and help you raise it as one of our own. That is, if you and the girl agree to it. Her parents said they would. We can't do any more than that, Son."

Henry sat silently, his father's words being digested while the rain falling on the barn roof played a familiar symphony. A symphony that seemed to be saying something his mother often said. While she often cursed in German, thinking the kids wouldn't understand any of it, her words of encouragement were always passed along in plain English.

"Mom always says, 'things will work out.' I guess maybe they will. But, how the hell does a man get over being turned

REMEMBRANCES

down by someone he thought he loved? It kind of hurts, you know."

"Yes, Henry, it does hurt a little. I damn well understand that. Your old man's had his moments when some woman turned him down. You won't ever completely forget it, but time makes it better. Focus on that child, and making damn sure it has a chance in this crazy world, and keep busy is all I can say."

"Yeah, I reckon. Can I borrow the car? Need to talk this over with Lori. Guess it's time to make some plans. Thanks for everything. And, I'm really sorry about all this. I don't like causing any trouble."

"Okay, Son. Everyone makes mistakes. Go do what you have to do. By the way, I hear you two broke into the potato shed a couple of times. Not the best place on Earth to conceive a child, but your old man's done it in worse places, back during my heyday. How was that in a potato shed, anyway?"

"Pile of damn potato sacks, some rats running around. Kind of takes away from the romance part. Like you say, it's not the best place, but it does beat the back seat of a car. Guess I'll have to go celibate now, like Mom says."

"Good luck with that celibate idea, Henry."

George watched as his oldest son hurried from the barn, shielding his eyes from the rain when the boy . . . no, the man, stepped through the open door. For a few moments George was reflective, his mind returning to a similar day in 1917 when, in this same barn, he'd told his now departed father that he was leaving the farm for a while to join the Army, fight for the cause that seemed so right then. He hadn't really understood his father's reluctance to give blessing then, but now, all these years

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

later, George Hammer knew another family baton had been passed, and nothing would ever be quite the same again.

For a brief second George felt somehow much older, the pain in his back reminding him of old wounds and what he had once been. After that flash of distant memory, he shrugged it all away, satisfied that he had indeed become something more than he had once been. It was raining, but he had plenty of work to do. Hell, he was thinking, damn farm always has work that needs doing. No damned rest for the wicked.

TWO: Another Generation, Another War

During the early spring of 1938, out in the guest house of the Hammer spread, a son was born to Henry Hammer and Lori McCune. It was, by all accounts from those present, both inside and outside the guest house bedroom, a difficult birth, requiring almost twelve hours of hard labor by the mother. Then, finally, after another shrill scream and one last push, the male child was at last outside its nine-month home. However, as the doctor later reported, the new arrival was a deep purple in color, which was certainly in keeping with an umbilical cord being wrapped tightly around its tiny neck.

After some scrambling from the doctor and Gretchen Hammer, the cord was quickly removed and life eventually restored to the new infant with no further thought about lasting damage. The mother, Lori McCune, saw none of it as she lay expended in the guest house bedroom. At her request, she would not see the child, which was soon taken by Gretchen into the pre-prepared nursery in the main house of the Hammer spread, where Henry and the other boys had waited out the past few hours. Freda, almost thirteen, would be the first in the family, besides Gretchen, to hold the new baby, and certainly the first to become quite attached to it. Freda was, it seemed, a natural born mother.

A name had not yet been decided on for the new child, but Henry was leaning toward Louis, after his baseball idol, Lou Gehrig, whose middle name it was later discovered was also Henry. So, after a week or so, the child became Louis Henry Hammer, to be described by Gretchen Hammer after several months as, "the most ornery child she had ever been around."

With the often mischievous antics of her own three boys, this statement was indeed telling, although Louis, later in life would remember very little of his questionable childhood behavior. This would undoubtedly reveal that memory, as well as hearing, can indeed be selective when necessary.

According to Gretchen Hammer, and she will always remain the most trusted authority on these matters, Louis Hammer learned to curse before he learned to say 'daddy.' This, of course, always remained somewhat of a thorn in the side of the child's grandmother, usually devoutly faithful to her religious beliefs, even though she continued to curse in German upon occasion.

In Gretchen's defense, however, none of her kids ever heard the woman utter a swear word in English, although she often wanted to, especially when George Hammer stayed too long at a Shafter pool hall. And, yes, it was Louis, the grandson, who eventually became a messenger for a short time, sent by his angry grandmother to retrieve his Grandpa George from Shafter's infamous pool halls. But, then, that's getting ahead of the story.

Louis was not yet four years old on that cold December day in 1941 when the family's Philco radio gave notice of the events taking place in Pearl Harbor. Louis, already becoming proficient in the art of swearing, as learned from his uncles and Grandpa, hardly understood the news, and knew absolutely nothing about war. The rest of the Hammer family, all gathered in the living room of the main house, sat in virtual shock, the radio announcer's words sinking deep into their souls. Gretchen, overcome with the news, then hurried into the kitchen, trying to hide the sobs from those in the living room. As Louis would say, years later, "I didn't know what was really going on, but I must

REMEMBRANCES

have sensed things were about to change, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it."

The following day, December the Eighth, the Hammer family had again gathered around the Philco to hear President Roosevelt give his famous "day of infamy" speech, essentially telling the American public that the war had begun. Like most Americans across the country were feeling, the president's precise and unmistakable words left little doubt that the Japanese had crossed the line of civility and the American nation would fight back, with a vengeance.

As the president's speech ended, the Hammer boys said little, each mulling over their future role in this war none but Martin really wanted. Gretchen again hurried from the living room, soon to lock herself in the bathroom. Freda, just sixteen but well aware of the situation, gathered up Louis onto her lap and, with tears running down her cheeks, hugged the boy tightly. World War II, already months old in Europe and Asia, had spread its tentacles to a country that couldn't possibly remain neutral any longer.

Fall 1938 London, England

World War I, with its four years of trench warfare that seemed like little more than a horrible exercise in human futility, essentially killed almost an entire generation of Europeans. However, the flu epidemic that first broke out in Spain in 1918 would kill more than twice as many within a few months. Many survivors of war and disease, regardless of what country they

lived in, would begin thinking and voicing the notion that God was punishing everyone for the devastation and insanity they'd caused themselves and the planet in the Great War. Almost a hundred years later, after another World War and several other that wouldn't qualify as worldly, one might wonder if the punishment handed down by higher authority might never end.

William Thatcher had joined the English Army when he turned eighteen. After training, nearing October of 1918, he and his artillery outfit were shipped to France, expecting to see more than their share of combat by bombarding the German lines. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending upon which soldier you asked at the time, after one major battle causing a shrapnel wound in William's shoulder, the war soon ended with the armistice that November.

A civilian again and healed from his wounds, William began looking for work on the docks along the Thames River, eventually hooking up with a well-known company that manufactured and exported soap products. He was, despite the heavy lifting of cargo on the docks, somewhat content with his life when he contracted the flu virus. The flu epidemic had already felled many in England and on the continent, as well as the United States and other Asian countries.

For almost a month, William teetered dangerously between life and death while being tended constantly by his aging mother or his girlfriend, Sarah Harris. Eventually, the obvious effects of the virus began to dissipate, leaving him weak but pronounced by the family doctor to have gotten past the critical stage.

After a few weeks of recovery, William returned to work along the docks, where he was told the company still needed his services, since many in their workforce had died from the flu

REMEMBRANCES

during his absence. However, not yet 20 years old, William began noticing his dark hair had begun falling from his head at an alarming rate, and his vision wasn't what it was before the flu had struck him down. Within another month, and much to his chagrin, only a few long strands of precious dark hair remained on each side of his head, and his once 20/20 vision had been reduced to wearing glasses.

Sarah Harris, who had certainly been attracted to William, at least partially, by his crop of thick dark hair, watched in anguish at the physical transformation of the man she fully intended to marry someday. It was William, however, who soon broke off the courtship, telling Sarah he was rather embarrassed with becoming bald at such a young age, and wasn't all that keen on having to wear glasses as well. He had, essentially, decided to remain a bachelor, like his older brother, for the rest of his days.

Part of a large extended family scattered around London or nearby areas, Sarah was devastated but soon followed her mother's advice to, "give it some time, he'll bloody well come around." Within a week, she accepted a full time position as a clothier's seamstress, not far from her home in Forest Gate in London's east end.

Almost five years would pass before William finally came around. After a modest wedding ceremony attended by many in Sarah's family and with William's older brother acting as best man, the newlyweds settled into a modest row house in Forest Gate. The brother, Hugh Thatcher, was still close to William but since being wounded in the Great War moved in completely different social and political circles than his middle class brother.

Since his own war experiences in the trenches of France, earlier in the Great War, Hugh had essentially become an atheist,

as well as remaining a bachelor, living alone in a rather posh flat nearer the center of London. He had intended to eventually become an officer, making a career of the military, when fate, like it had so many others, intervened. Then the ranking sergeant, serving with a general's command center near the front lines, he'd somehow been spared when several others were killed or wounded by a direct hit from German artillery. The blast severely wounded Hugh, throwing his torn body several yards away from the exploding ordnance.

Morning would pass into late afternoon with Hugh laying semi-conscious among a pile of debris, unable to move or yell out, while the wounded nearby were tended to or their bodies removed and taken to the rear. Eventually, nearing darkness, a French farmer and his young son, searching for food or anything of value to retrieve from the evacuated battlefield, came across Hugh's apparently lifeless body, laying face up but only partially exposed to the waning sunshine.

Thinking the English soldier couldn't possibly be among the living by the looks of his shrapnel wounds and the blood on his stone-like face, the farmer began going through the pockets of Sergeant Hugh Thatcher. The son, maybe ten or so, watched in awe, and a fair amount of horror. Within a few seconds of feeling hands moving around on his prone body, Hugh had opened his eyes, but was unable to speak.

The farmer's son, seeing the dead man suddenly come to life, those eyes staring angrily at what the farmer was up to, screamed something in French and the two frightened souls quickly left the scene, not caring where they were going or thinking about notifying British military authorities. After a couple of hours, hiding in an abandoned and bombed out barn,

REMEMBRANCES

the farmer had been given enough time to come to his senses. Without further thought, he directed the boy to a nearby encampment of British rear echelon forces. It was after dark by then, but the boy easily led a team of medical personnel to Hugh's rescue, probably saving him from impending death.

Inert and alone in an English hospital for several weeks gave Hugh Thatcher plenty of time to think. No matter how hard he tried to make sense of mankind's purpose on Planet Earth, his thoughts always returned to his own experiences in the Great War. Those thoughts, too often, dwelled on those killed or wounded and constantly asking why some were taken, some not. After a while, as he neared release from the hospital, Hugh simply filed it all away as an overwhelming exercise in futility. In his mind it was yet another example of human cruelty, without any justifiable reasons he could find, and certainly one without guidance from a supposed higher plane of existence. He knew, without a doubt, that his personal future would never be what he once thought it to be, and the world he lived in would never be what he once envisioned. It was time to move on, become something different, and, more importantly, make some money and enjoy life while he could.

With all the pondering in his past, Hugh Thatcher soon accepted a somewhat secretive government position he'd been recommended for by his last Army commander. He then quickly began moving within the important inner political and social circles of London. By the early 1930's, having made some wise investments in property and other ventures, money was no longer a problem, giving him opportunity to find ways to help others with his good fortune.

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

After a few visits to the live theater district of downtown London, Hugh soon became a large contributor, helping finance productions and supporting new talent that struck his fancy. While he traveled extensively, having little free time for his sailing interests, he eventually purchased a 27 foot cabin cruiser that he kept tied to the dock of a wealthy friend's riverside home near Henley. The vessel, his one pride and joy, was sometimes seen sailing down the Thames to the channel and back, with Hugh happily at the helm. However, despite his obvious success and elevated social status, he remained quite close to his brother and visited William and Sarah whenever possible.

Should William and Sarah have taken all the warnings of impending war seriously, they might well have remained a childless couple, content to live out their lives as such. However, by 1937, Sarah was nearing the end of her child bearing years and William, now a plant supervisor for his firm, considered the opportunity for fathering an heir was also fast disappearing. So it was that awhile after the Christmas season of 1937, Sarah announced to William that she'd been to the doctor and was "with child."

Despite the ever increasing vibes spouting the near certainty of war, William began updating his modest home, set among a row of three-floor row houses on Monega Road in Forest Gate, only a few miles from his job on the Thames River. He soon added a more modern toilet, just outside the kitchen on the first floor, as well as updating the spare bedroom into a nursery suitable for Sarah and the new baby's needs. Whenever his busy schedule allowed, Hugh, once a carpenter's apprentice, before going into the Army, and certainly good with his hands, gladly

REMEMBRANCES

pitched in with help, and the job was completed by early summer.

That August of 1938, after a fairly normal pregnancy but several hours of hard labor, Sarah gave birth to a healthy girl they would name Susan Mary, in honor of the child's great-grandmother. Unfortunately, like so many fears voiced by the London newspapers and English radio, the push by the German Reich to conquer all of Europe, maybe the world, had already begun before the year faded into 1939. Few of the English people who still carried vivid memories of the last war, wanted to consider the worst might lay ahead for a country barely two decades into recovering from the last debacle.

As 1939 replaced the unrest of the year before, the German's did indeed prove the concerns of all Europe to be well founded. First Czechoslovakia, then onto Poland as the German Army, with devastating Blitzkrieg strikes from the air, pushed south with little opposition. Left with little choice, Britain's new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, having already declared war, ordered his forces in Belgium to retreat. By the spring of 1940, the German's had moved rather easily into France, surrounding the Armies of both France and Great Britain, some 350,000 men, on the French port of Dunkirk.

The shallow water off the coast of Dunkirk soon proved to be a problem with rescue efforts as the Germans strafed and bombed the helpless armies. After the British Navy called for help, the response was immediate and effective. Any English citizen with access to fishing boats, yachts, anything that floated, sprang into action, setting sail amid a vast flotilla toward the French coast.

Being the patriot that he was and certainly no lover of the Germans, Hugh Thatcher would be among the first to begin preparing his boat to sail across the choppy waters of the English Channel. After some heavy discussion and no small amount of opposition from Sarah, William Thatcher, a man who once considered joining the British Navy before ending up in the Army, had finally been reluctantly asked to join his brother in such a noble effort. William, however, failed to tell his brother about his journey to France, in 1918, aboard a British troop ship. During those eventful hours, most of it spent languishing in the stormy water of the channel; many of the soldiers onboard had fed the fish, including the most frequent visitor to the ship's railing, Private William Thatcher.

Barely emerging from the Thames into open sea, and following the lead of several other vessels of various descriptions, Hugh could feel an exhilarating ocean breeze on his face as he stood at his boat's tiller. He'd always felt at home on the sea, having, since childhood, intended to sail around the world with a decent crew, but had turned his interests elsewhere after joining the Army.

William, however, had disappeared into the cabin, telling his brother he "felt a bit queasy." Intending to do his part, maybe take the tiller now and again, William instead had fallen victim to the "worst seasickness" Hugh Thatcher had ever witnessed, alternating between bringing up at least his last three meals over the side of the vessel, and groaning terribly down in the confines of the cabin, just below Hugh's station at the tiller.

Genuinely more concerned about his brother than doing his humanitarian duty, helping save his country, Hugh briefly considered leaving the flotilla to return to London. William,

REMEMBRANCES

however, between bouts of retching, rejected such an idea, citing something about “bloody well carrying on” while struggling to keep his feet planted on deck, and hide his ashen hued face from Hugh.

Hugh, seeing his brother’s face, then broke into uncontrolled laughter of the kind only brothers that have shared most, but not all, of their secrets can do. William, not yet ready to feel anything but nausea, watched his brother curiously, not quite understanding the joke. After all, didn’t this moment require sympathy rather than making light of someone else’s plight? “What’s so bleedin’ funny, mate. You think being seasick is something to poke fun at?”

“Bloody Hell, William, I’m not bloody well laughing at your seasickness. I’ve been that way a few times, myself. Not quite as ugly as all that, but more than queasy. I was just thinking how bleedin’ funny it is that the two of us, survivors of that bloody first war with the Jerries, might get our behinds shot off as civilians. The bloody Jerries will probably strafe us into oblivion, and poor Sarah will have to raise your child alone. Shouldn’t have given in . . . this is a job for real seafaring men.”

“Bugger You, Hugh! You may be my older brother, but I can still thrash your bloody backside!”

“To hell you say! If you could see your face, you might not make such a statement. You appear to be a warmed over corpse. Take some deep breaths. You’re probably feeling more fear than seasickness. I’m always bloody afraid when I know some misguided Jerry will soon try to kill me.”

William gingerly eased himself beside Hugh, resting his hand on the boat’s aft seat back. “Keep talking. It makes me forget how sick I am.”

Hugh glanced to the port side of his boat, seeing the flotilla making good time while remaining somewhat orderly in the choppy waters of the channel. He calculated the ragtag flotilla was at least ten miles from Dunkirk, probably still too far away to see German aircraft. He could feel the increasing pangs of fear rising in his own stomach. Hell, he was thinking, it's been almost 20 years since anyone shot at me. I'm too bloody old now for this kind of nonsense.

"What shall we talk about, William?"

"We should talk about the war. You seem to have the inside track these days. What's next . . . even if we rescue our boys?"

Hugh thought for a moment, his body moving in unison with the rolling of the boat. "Brother, I wasn't going to say this quite yet, but make some plans to evacuate Sarah and the baby from London. Hitler has plans to invade, but he'll send in his bombers to destroy our airfields first, probably in the summer. If that doesn't satisfy the bugger, he'll start bombing our cities. London is his first priority. I doubt if he will care about civilians by that point. According our authority, they're considering bombing us during nightfall. I think Churchill is considering that option also. You know, tit for tat. You bomb London, I'll bomb Berlin. And so it goes in the second Great War. Bloody awful, I would say. This may be the 20th Century, but we're still bloody barbarians, and barbarians with too bloody many explosives at that."

"You have this information from quite reliable inside sources, I presume. It's not at all uplifting information, especially for a seasick sailor."

"Sorry about that, mate. But it's time to tell it quite like it is. Nobody out here but you and me and the fishes will hear

REMEMBRANCES

anything important. Take a good look when we reach Dunkirk. It's to be a damn sight worse if the Jerries bomb London at night. Doesn't Sarah have more relations in the North?"

Feeling considerably better, at least physically, with his mind taken off the nauseous movement in choppy seas, William considered the options. Sarah had family near York, to the North, Dorchester, far to the West but near the channel. "She has an auntie in York, a sister in Dorchester. Which do you prefer?"

"Neither are preferred brother. However, Dorchester is small, not a likely target. Just stay away from the east. Too bloody many aerodromes down Suffolk way, and plans to build more if the bloody Yanks ever get sucked into the war. That'll be the Jerries' first target in the summer."

"So, what's the feeling about the Yanks? They hardly seem interested in British tea drinkers on a small island across the Atlantic."

"This is just between you and me, brother. Understand? No repeating things said out here. I'm flying to New York after this Dunkirk thing is taken care of. Our boys are feeling out some of the possibilities when things get worse. Churchill's watching what we do these days. He's a bloody bulldog, and even the old chaps are thinking different. It's that or all of us learn to speak German."

"What are Churchill's ideas on surviving a German attack without help from the Americans?"

"Learn the German language! The Yanks are a supposed democracy, or something like it. Their voters hardly think us Europeans are worth the trouble. They see us as constantly fighting with one another . . . which isn't exactly too far off. We have to bloody well hope the Japanese stir up things, out in the

Pacific. That's likely, but not anytime soon. Roosevelt knows the truth of all this, but he answers to the voters and their congress. It could be nip and tuck for us . . . for a bloody long while."

"You're not making me feel much better, Hugh. Not a good time to have a child, I would say."

"It's too late for that kind of talk, brother. Make do with that you have. Another half hour and those bloody Stukas will make our lives miserable, along with the boys on Dunkirk. It's time to keep a sharp eye."

"Thanks for the . . . uplifting information. A rather poor choice of words, wouldn't you say?"

"Words are cheap these days, William. Keep watching for Stukas."

July 1940 London

Less than two months following the successful rescue of British and French forces on Dunkirk, the ominous mood of impending defeat had been replaced with steadfast resolve and a can-do spirit. For the most part, the rescue had gone much better than Churchill and his staff had expected. For nine days the ragtag flotilla, easing close to the beach while sometimes being strafed by German dive bombers, had fearlessly gone in and plucked thousands of frantic soldiers, wading in water up to their necks, from the sea onto their decks. Upon returning to England, passengers, sometimes wounded, were deposited on shore then the boats quickly began the return trip to Dunkirk.

As far as the hearty British were concerned, *Operation Dynamo* was a resounding victory even with retreat, proving

REMEMBRANCES

beyond a doubt that England, whatever it took, would survive this other war. However, as Hugh Thatcher had predicted on that first of several seafaring ventures toward Dunkirk with his brother, the month of July would become known as the beginning of *The Battle of Britain*.

The frightful year of 1940, it seemed, was only just beginning as spring became summer. The British fight for survival was no longer a nagging fear that war might happen. The horrible reality of it all was instead escalating to a fever pitch while the German forces occupied France and much of Europe, all the while planning for even more expansion to the east and across the channel.

All across the British Isles, busy preparations for war were taking top priority. Rationing of war critical items, although not popular among civilians, was largely accepted and, like it is when humans fight wars, obtaining some of those items created many opportunities for those in search of profit before the good of the country.

Fearing German bombers would eventually drop their deadly cargos on the city of London; those with space for more protection began digging into their gardens and backyards to install Anderson Shelters. These shelters, rather simple in design, were little more than metal huts buried in the ground, and then covered with an ample layer of earth. Other areas in London, including the vast subway system, were being designated as bomb shelters and wardens were assigned to oversee evacuees. Blackout curtains were either purchased or sewn together with black material for use in covering windows during anticipated night time raids by the Germans.

A BRITISH AND AMERICAN TALE

William Thatcher would be among the first in Forest Gate to dig up his rather narrow backyard, once the pride and joy of Sarah and her green thumb. Several others on Monega Road would help with the effort, gain experience as well as blisters, then those wishing their own shelters would move on to the next project. As the air war over England became hot and heavy with dogfights between British fighter planes and marauding German warplanes, most people on Monega Road could boast of having air raid shelters by early summer.

Other defenses being thrown up around the city, besides strategically placed anti-aircraft guns, included huge barrage balloons, suspended on the upper end of long cables. This, in the minds of those planning London's defense, would likely discourage the Germans from taking aim at lower altitudes or dropping bombs from higher above the city. For a while, at least, there was an uneasy but confident feeling that London and all of England was adequately prepared for the worst of what would soon come to the British Isles.

In mid-June, although not entirely happy with being uprooted from her home, Sarah Thatcher and baby Susan, almost two years old then, left the city on the railway toward Dorchester. Convincing his somewhat stubborn wife proved be a challenge that eventually led to insisting Hugh come to dinner and, if need be, divulge much the same information, with some limitations, as had been passed along on the Dunkirk adventure. To that point Sarah was steadfastly refusing to be swayed in her preference for remaining in London with her husband. Not even William's "for the good of our child" argument had been effective. Sarah was simply refusing to budge, and certainly had

REMEMBRANCES

little or none of the same understanding of war as her husband and Hugh.

During dinner, Hugh said little, content to be with his brother and sister-in-law while they doted over Susan, sitting in a high chair and making a mess of vanilla pudding. Eventually, however, the subject of Sarah leaving the city came up. Sarah's happy mood quickly changed into something . . . well, more reminiscent of past discussions on the subject. This time Sarah spoke as if she knew the reason for Hugh's visit all along, and nothing, short of a visit from the prime minister himself, would change anything.

Sarah sipped at her tea then eased the cup back on the saucer. She looked directly at Hugh, with an occasional glance at William as she spoke. "I wanted to marry you, William, even before you went into the Army, back in 1918. That was . . . let's see . . . more than 20 years ago. Then, you were wounded and sent home, and I thought then we might marry, start a family. But, no, then the bloody flu comes along. You're near death, then, like a miracle, you recover. I'm ready to marry you then . . . for sure. We, at last, can become man and wife. But, no, I'm soon to become the first woman in English history to be rejected by someone she loved, simply because her bloke lost his hair and was forced to wear bloody glasses!"

Both men sat rather silently, listening, hardly recognizing this Sarah, speaking with such unusual resolve. It was if the female version of Mr. Hyde was surfacing before their eyes. Neither dared speak until certain she'd finished with every possible thing on her mind.

"Five years passed . . . more time than any woman dares wait for a man to realize the only woman who loves him doesn't

care about his balding head. Nor does she care about anything as daft as wearing glasses. Finally, just when I'm certain Sarah Harris will soon be too bloody old for anything, besides being a barren, unhappy, seamstress, William has taken his head from his backside, just long enough to ask me to marry him. Bloody, hell, what took you so long, I'm thinking. Finally he's pushed aside the nonsense and we may very well do the unthinkable."

"Then, wouldn't you know it, several more years, almost too bloody many, will pass until Sarah Thatcher is carrying a child. Now, two years after that lovely child is born, both of you think it's best I take that child and go north or west to live with relatives until . . . god knows when."

"I will say this just once . . . to the two of you . . . I will not leave my husband . . . and especially not toddle off to York and live with an aunt whose husband I detest. I will also not, by any means, go to Dorchester. Elaine's husband, while certainly providing my older sister with all she could possibly want, is an overbearing jerk. Or at least he was. I know they've consented to take Susan and I in and they have plenty of space for us, but that just isn't possible. We will be quite well, here in Forest Gate, thank you. Didn't we say, William that this marriage is, for better or worse?"

When she'd finally finished with her speech by reaching rather dramatically for another sip of lukewarm tea, both men noticed Susan had fallen asleep in her high chair, she too probably mesmerized with the unusually resolute tone of her mother. It was only then that Hugh, with an unusually serious look on his face, began passing along what he almost certainly expected was likely to happen in London for the next several

REMEMBRANCES

weeks, maybe longer. His words came from a deep part of his being, slow and well chosen.

"I know exactly how you feel, Sarah. Let me say, however, that you're so very fortunate to have such a lovely child as Susan. That is gift Hugh Thatcher will never experience. The bloody first war saw to that. And, William and I can tell you that Dunkirk erased any doubt that the Germans will eventually bomb our city, and with little consideration for harming women and children. The Great War, as bad as it was, will, as time passes, pale in comparison. In the trenches, you could see the enemy; understand he was not unlike yourself . . . just trying to survive amidst so much insanity. Insanity, I might add, that was not started by him, but the madmen who ran his country and insisted he fall in step. Seeing him face to face, as William and I sometimes did, as daft as it sounds, kept your morality alive, maybe also your faltering trust in the goodness of humanity."

Hugh paused a moment, catching his breath. "Now, like it was on Dunkirk, in Poland, anywhere the Germans will go, their planes, flown by men who will never see their victims face to face, will be the key to destroying their enemies morale, to pave the way for their ground forces."

Hugh took another deep breath, raised the teacup in front him and swallowed the lukewarm mixture. Neither William nor Sarah spoke, each glancing toward the sleeping Susan, then their eyes returning to Hugh, somewhat enjoying this rare outburst from one normally more reserved.

"Should this be three years ago, I would think you to be quite admirable for remaining in London with William. Now, quite frankly, Sarah, you hardly understand the realities of this war, and your decision is not admirable, but somewhat insane in

itself. All of us have a responsibility to protect those who will follow the insanity we've created, maybe start a better world. Stay, if you like, but since William knows exactly where this war will take us, you only lend to the pressure he will feel because he didn't insist you and Susan be removed from such danger. It's your decision, Sarah. But remember, you won't bloody well be helping William concentrate on what he has to do for all of your survival."

Only the sounds of sleeping child interrupted the new silence. Finally, after what seemed like a minute, Sarah stood. "Let me put the kettle on the fire. My tea's grown bloody cold. And, Hugh, you should be in Parliament. You are, like Churchill, a bulldog on two legs. You know, of course, that I will miss my husband. I'll pack our cases and take a weekend train. If you're not right about all this, Hugh Thatcher, you'll forever regret it. And, for your information, I take your remark about insanity rather personally."

Hugh smiled then winked toward William. "Not to worry, Sarah. It's been my experience that insanity is most certainly a human requirement for becoming an adult."

Alone for almost a month, it seemed to William that, although he was lonely, the increased demands of wartime, including his work on the docks, building shelters, as well as keeping abreast of volunteer duties left him with little time to lament. It was true that he had also grown quite fond of his daughter, the little tyke speaking sentences and walking with ease.

Watching Sarah and Susan's departure left William feeling emptier than he had anticipated. Since he'd never had a phone

REMEMBRANCES

installed, despite Sarah's wishes, the nearest neighborhood phone was three doors down on Monega Road, making regular contact with wife and child difficult at best. Since her arrival in Dorchester, only an occasional letter, usually upbeat, elevated his moods when he fell exhausted into bed each night. Of those letters, although he planned upon doing better, only two of his own compositions had been posted.

A late July, Saturday morning, on Monega Road was at first nothing special. By now the radio reports of the ongoing air war over the skies of Great Britain were often good news of British air conquests and downplaying British losses, which were many. Quite often, dogfights above London were quite visible as Londoners interrupted their daily routines to watch the spectacle of English Spitfires and German fighters engaged in sometimes mortal combat.

A late morning sun was shining down on William Thatcher's back yard as he and his next door neighbor, Walter Moore, paused from their morning activities in the rear of their homes. High above the city, another dogfight was taking place. At first, some half dozen planes jockeyed for position, but after ten minutes or so only two doggedly remained within sight, sometimes firing on one another, the machine gun rounds surely falling into the city itself. Since it was difficult to tell from the ground which was German and which English, none witnessing the spectacle from the ground knew which aircraft had finally been bested when a thin stream of black smoke trailed behind the loser on its way to crashing into the city.

Suddenly, high above, and slightly to the north, a parachute appeared from the stricken fighter, which, to the best of William's knowledge, appeared to be from a German aircraft,

probably an ME-109. "I think it's bloody German," William shouted out to Walter from his side of the fence."

"Bloody, hell, I think you're right, mate. And it might just fall somewhere near. You have a rifle?"

"Not since the first bloody war, Walter. What possible good would that do, anyway? We couldn't hit anything if we had one."

"Never know about the bloody Krauts, mate. Their flyers must have pistols. I hear they sometimes take cyanide tablets before they bail out of those things. Maybe we should go to a phone and call the Bobbies. Bloody, hell, it looks like he is drifting toward Monega Road. Let me round up my cricket bat . . . just in case."

"If he has a pistol, what good can a cricket bat do, Walter? Bloody hell, I think you're right. I can almost see his face!"

For a few seconds, William was almost certain the parachutist would land in his own back yard, but a sudden light gust of wind took him more toward Walter's place, next door. Mesmerized now, William watched as the man and his chute fell into the backyard of the house on the other side of Walter, apparently making a safe and silent landing. The apparent quiet, however, was soon interrupted by shouts from Walter and others, some probably rushing toward the backyard of John and Stella Gibbons, an older couple in their seventies.

William quickly discarded the spade in his hands and rushed toward the back door of his house. Upon reaching the front door, he pushed outside in time to see three other men slowing to a gallop then turn into the Gibbons house. Not pausing, William rushed to the scene, following the others on inside without bothering to knock on the Gibbons front door. He

REMEMBRANCES

could hear mumbling coming from the backyard, but the shouting had ceased. Once at the back door, William could see a crowd of some dozen men had gathered while Stella Gibbons stood well behind, just watching. William moved into the front of the gathering where Walter stood, gazing at the fallen parachutist who was busily removing the chute from his person.

Once the chute was safely on the ground and unattached, the airman raised his hands in apparent surrender while forcing a crooked smile. "Guten Morgen."

"What the bloody hell's he saying" Walter mumbled. The man beside Walter, someone William didn't recognize, was quick to speak.

"I think he's saying 'good morning'. Anyone here speak German?"

None answered the inquiry, the crowd continuing to stare ominously toward the German, some obviously hoping for a reason to attack, but also fearful of being shot by some yet unseen weapon. It was then that William took a good look at the man, his blonde hair showing beneath his flight headgear. Closer scrutiny revealed someone very young, almost appearing to have run away from a German high school, maybe twenty years old if you stretched your estimate a bit.

"Speak any English?" William asked, now feeling sorry for the boy, despite the entire gathering's distaste for the Germans, and especially German airmen who were killing British boys over the skies of England on a daily basis, as well as running roughshod over the skies of the continent.

"Some," the boy mumbled in broken English, a wan smile spreading across his face; a face that obviously hadn't reached

the point of needing a razor on a daily basis. He then made a gesture toward his mouth, "Zigarette, Die?"

"What's he saying this time, William," Walter mumbled?

"I think he wants a cigarette. Anyone have a cigarette?"

Someone stepped forward with a pack of Players, handing it to William rather than the airman.

William took one step nearer to the boy, his hand outstretched. "Cigarette, yeah?"

"Yes," the boy mumbled. "Yes . . . cigarette. Danke . . . Thank you."

Seeming to relax a bit, the man with the cigarettes handed William a box of matches, which were tossed to the boy.

As the airman lit the cigarette, three policemen stepped to the front of the gathering. The one in charge was the first to speak. "What do we have here, boys? It looks like a bleedin' Jerry has fallen from our glorious morning sky. You boys sure he fell from a German aero plane? Looks to me like the bloke isn't old enough to have liquor, much less fly an aero plane. Probably still a bloody virgin. Pat him down for a pistol. We have a proper place for you Jerries. Your war is now over, whatever your name is. Or maybe your Kraut mother hasn't had time to name you yet."

Some muffled chuckles could be heard among the gathering. Then, as if the show was winding down, some with cricket bats, maybe with a shovel in their hands, began to disperse as two Bobbies searched the boy, finding nothing that amounted to danger. William watched intently, now feeling indeed sorry for the boy, whose composure had broken into something more akin to his youthful age.

REMEMBRANCES

Not quite sure what would happen next, maybe a beating from the policemen, possibly worse, the boy's hand shook a little as he took another drag on the cigarette. As the two uniformed Bobbies took an arm on each side to guide the boy from the Gibbons house, the third policeman finished gathering up the chute. As they neared, William couldn't help but offer a narrow smile, perhaps a gesture to assure this enemy airman, now obviously less than dangerous, that he was safe now.

The boy looked directly at William as the trio passed by. "Danke . . . Auf Weiderschen . . ."

William gave a quick salute, then turned and watched as the German airman and the policemen walked through the open back door of the Gibbons house. The remaining gathering followed slowly behind, the excitement for one Saturday morning apparently finished.

Later in the evening, Hugh arrived on Monega Road. William hadn't seen his busy brother for a few weeks, and was eager to catch up on what had been going on in what William once described as, "The other half of English society." First, Hugh asked about the 'visitor' that had fallen on Monega Road that morning.

"How did you know about that, Hugh?" William asked while pouring tea for the two men.

"I have my connections, old boy. Employment privileges, you know."

William then proceeded to describe to his brother what had occurred, particularly detailing the German airman's youthful appearance. "Bloody young, I would say. Certainly the boy was too young to be flying airplanes Is that wild man Hitler kidnapping school children now? Just like the old bugger."

Hugh chuckled. "That child, as you called him, is twenty-five years old and the bugger shot down one of our boys before his unscheduled arrival in London. The Air Ministry has obtained some valuable information, although he wasn't eager to divulge much. They know his name, where he flew from, and he is, in fact, a veteran flyer, with two confirmed kills before today. For a child, he's bloody dangerous."

"I should ask his name. However, I don't think I want to know," William noted. "Rather shocking information. How, may I ask, did you obtain such information? This war is making you a man of . . . shall we say . . . intrigue."

"You don't want to know that, either, brother. Certainly doesn't give one a warm feeling when overage children operate weapons capable of destroying cities. Compared to what we saw in the Great War, I'm afraid the destruction one fuzzy faced airman can be responsible for these days boggles the bloody mind. There's also word that the Germans are working on weapons that make ours seem like no more than swords. Frightening times, wouldn't you say?"

"I would say so. And what do you hear about the Americans coming into the war? Do you have more war news since your flight across the pond?"

Hugh rubbed at his well shaved chin, and then took a sip at his warm tea. He replaced the cup onto its saucer. "I'm afraid, brother, it will take a bloody miracle, but they are providing materials, sort of under the table, you might say. We may be on our own in this fight for a bloody long time. That is, unless Hitler escalates his bombing campaign."

"I suppose you mean London?"

REMEMBRANCES

“Righto, William. I would say the odds of that now are about 90 percent in favor of the old bugger bombing London and other cities. He didn’t figure our boys would put up such a fight with their Spitfires and Hurricanes. Hold onto your hat, William. Don’t even think about bringing Sarah and Susan back to the city. Isn’t life wonderful, here in our island paradise? What’s really bothersome is what happens after this war is over. Better weapons will not ensure better people for your Susan and the next generations. It’s all too bloody frightening when you look past all this nonsense going on.”

“Let’s bloody well hope for the best, Hugh. You seem to worry a good bit about what happens after this war. Personally, I simply hope we survive to see an end to all of it.”

“Worrying about the bloody future is part of my job these days. If I was still a religious sort, I might just start praying again. I’m afraid that it will take more than prayers to win this war. And, even if our side wins, it may take a miracle to keep mankind from destroying itself.”

As September revealed the first signs of autumn in the British Isles, it was becoming obvious to the Germans that their strategy of bombing military related targets as a precursor to invasion had not budged the British resolve. The frenzy of the Battle of Britain had, essentially and despite the odds, proven that Churchill’s gruff but uplifting words had been heard and heeded by all of England. However, more than a week into the month of September, an unintended act of war possibly changed the way the war in Europe was to be conducted, and possibly history itself. What followed for people like William Thatcher, living near the Thames as well as others living nearer the heart

of London, would become a nightmare few had envisioned, but so many had feared.

What began as Luftwaffe mission to bomb an airfield on the outskirts of London eventually ended in an inadvertent and deadly mission failure. One errant German bomber mistakenly dropped its bombs on a church in the heart of London, killing many, including several people leaving pubs during closing time. Some would argue that what happened next was inevitable from the first day of warfare. Others might insist, then and long after the war, that Churchill had long hoped for just such an event to lure the Americans into the war. Undoubtedly, both scenarios would find merit among historians and probably carries with it more truth than fiction. Whichever has the most merit is now of little value.

One small error of judgment, by one almost insignificant German airman, would open the door to many more monumental errors in judgment by all sides involved, and kill or maim more civilians than any war in history. After this blunder, World War II, essentially, would then begin in earnest, and would inevitably bring the United States into the European War. Civilians, once considered off limits in air war planning, would also be fair game. The days of chivalry among men, especially men waging war upon one another, were quickly disappearing into antiquity.

The British act of retaliation for the bombing of its civilians began almost immediately. The fuming Prime Minister wasted no time, quickly ordering his Air Ministry to bomb the city of Berlin in retaliation. Tit for tat, as long feared, had thus begun. After hearing bombs had fallen on Berlin, Hitler then ordered the Luftwaffe to send its bombers, some 250 each day, to assault

REMEMBRANCES

London's East End, vowing a hundred bombs for every bomb dropped on his capital city.

On the night of September 14, 1940, that almost unending wave of German bombers flew into a clear sky over London, their sights set on creating the worst havoc the world had ever seen. And havoc there was, the city of London virtually on fire, the light of which turned night into day. Out in Forest Gate, to the west, less than a week would pass until a line of German bombers dropped incendiaries on Monega Road, starting rooftop fires that lighted the way for another wave of bombers with explosives in their bellies.

When the smoke had cleared the following morning, many roofs on Monega Road had been burned through by falling incendiaries, causing fires inside some homes which had been quickly extinguished during the attack. However, William Thatcher's newly installed toilet lay in virtual ruins. But, for the most part, the house itself, like most of those on Monega Road, had little more than broken windows, roofs to repair and minor fire damage to clean up inside. The terror was far from over, but for the time being William and his neighbors had dodged a German bullet. Sarah and daughter Susan Thatcher, thankfully, remained in Dorchester, but had cancelled any plans for a Christmas reunion with her family and William.

The city of London, unfortunately, hadn't fared nearly as well. After a week of bombing, the central city was still burning and virtually destroyed. In some areas entire blocks of row houses had been leveled, factories bombed to into rubble, while bomb craters, broken glass, and piles of other debris were everywhere to be seen. Amid all that, the smell of burning wood permeated constant efforts by thousands of workmen to clean

up the mess. And, even if the mess was somewhat swept up to make commercial and living areas more livable, the next night's raid would bring equal or worse messes to clear away, as well as adding to the constantly escalating casualty numbers. The Londoner's worst nightmares, it seemed, had proven to be more prophetic than anyone could have imagined.

Across the Atlantic, thanks to efforts by American newsmen like Edward R. Morrow and others risking their lives amid the chaos, the American public's isolationist attitudes were shifting more in favor of a massive effort, whatever it took, to help in the British fight for survival. Even American citizens with somewhat fractured loyalties, like George and Gretchen Hammer who served in the Great War on different sides, and certainly remembered more than their share of the terrors of war, were beginning to see that leaving the British to fight alone would be deserting a hearty friend and ally in desperate need.

While the Nazi blitzkrieg seemed to be winning the war, its leader's decision to wreak havoc on the British Isles had sealed the eventual fate of the madman at the helm. Sadly, however, it would take more than four more years and an uncountable number of lost lives to rid the world of the obsessive German Fuhrer's many errors of judgment.



Two families with widely differing perspectives, and more than 5,000 miles apart but destined to share in a common bond, struggle with hard times, personal problems, and war during three of the deadliest decades in human history. This adventure, set amid constantly changing historical events, will test the souls of these families but prove that tenacity, laughter, and the undeniable spirit of working together can and will overcome even the worst that mankind can throw their way.

Remembrances

A British and American Tale

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