

A black and white portrait of a young man, Lawrence DeWolfe Kelsey, looking slightly to the right. He has dark hair and is wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark jacket. The background is dark and out of focus.

LAWRENCE
DEWOLFE KELSEY:
THE LIFE OF THE
EXPLORER

Jane-Alexandra Krehbiel

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Chapter Three: Early Life

My father was only three when the *Great Depression* occurred. I realize now that he was perhaps both impacted and influenced by this event greatly. During the Depression, my grandfather lost his job as a civil engineer, and despite a diligent broad job search, a willingness to relocate his family, and networking with his siblings and his large extended established family, he was unable to secure either work as a civil engineer, or work in a related field. As time went on, the Depression deepened and broadened and became a world issue, as well as a national one. Not unlike some of us in contemporary times, Lawrence Sr. and his wife “Madge” feared civil unrest in California. Now living on their savings, they decided to travel to Papeete, Tahiti with their sons, to wait out the Depression. Their money would last longer there. It would be an educational trip for their sons, and it might seem like an extended vacation. Since Lawrence Sr. had served in France in World War I, he spoke French which could be useful in Tahiti. Tahiti is the largest island in what is now called French Polynesia. In addition, my father had significant food and respiratory allergies and was missing school due to frequent illnesses. The family likely believed that going to Tahiti might also help him regain his health. His mother knew Tahiti, because in 1921, she had been there with a film crew as they made a film called *Moana*. This is the original “docu-fiction” piece set in the South Seas, which was released in 1926. It was claimed to have been filmed in Samoa, but we know that at least some of the film was filmed in Tahiti. Ethel May Easson Young, as she had been named at the time, had been the stenographer on the film. The film was not well known, but Robert J. Flaherty, the producer of *Moana*, was also the producer of *Nanook of the North* (1922). He also went on to make *Louisiana Story* (1941) which was more successful.

Although my father was only five and a half when he boarded the ship to go to Tahiti, the ship board portion of the trip, in particular, made an indelible imprint upon him. Much later, he spoke at length in interviews about why, from that point on, he was enamored with ships, ship’s

communications, and with the sea itself. He has said, in those interviews, that everyone from the officers to the sailors had a task and worked together to complete a common goal. He has said that it was the first time he'd ever seen people working together in a productive and interconnected manner. He was also fascinated by the office of the ship's radio officer. He asked many questions as to exactly how messages could be sent from ship to shore and then back again. Newspaper interviews of my father after the war, called him a prodigy with regard to radio electronics. If indeed this were true, the trip to Tahiti is where this all began. Of course, he was enamored as well by the beauty of the sea, the big waves, the broad beautiful and varied skies, the sunsets, and the occasional sea creatures they saw while making the journey. Tahiti itself was also quite beautiful, and the family lived well there, even on very little money. My father said that his father took both boys swimming daily. They ate cooked sweetened rice with milk for breakfast in lieu of cereal. The family may never have been happier. After a couple of years passed, his father was called back to work as a civil engineer in California, and the family, once again, made the trip back to California via ship. At that time, my father had no way of knowing that his own turn to go to sea aboard ship, would come only a shade more than ten years later.

One day, when my father was ten years old, and in grade school in California, his class listened to a speech on the radio by Hitler, as a current events assignment. My father has said that listening to Hitler was one of his life's most defining moments. For many people in the U.S., at the time, Hitler was a European phenomenon, and many believed that involvement in European affairs was something we, in the U.S., needed to avoid. However, after listening to Hitler's speech that day, even at age ten, my father believed that the United States would inevitably be drawn into war with him. My father said he had a sense of profound doom that day, and that the only control he would have, would be to choose the manner in which he would serve, to fight against Hitler. Even at ten years of age, as a result of his time spent on ships, his choice was to join the *U.S. Merchant Marines*.

Chapter Four: An Ending

My grandparent's marriage suffered the stressors of a long stretch of his unemployment during the Depression. They were also very different people. My grandfather was one of ten children who grew up on an 8600 acre ranch, which eventually grew to be 9600 acres. He loved rural life, horses, and the outdoors. He and his eldest sister Dora were both very accomplished horsemen. They both spent time caring for horses, and helping their father repair literally miles of fencing on the ranch. Lawrence Sr. liked new cars and had a few of them, even during the Depression. He also enjoyed carving fairly large figures of wood. I am pleased to own a few of the works he produced as an amateur sculptor. People who knew him said that he was charming, sociable and an extrovert. As I mentioned, his wife, Ethel May or "Madge", as her husband called her, had grown up being raised by an aunt and uncle when her own father died suddenly, and had known a life apart from her mother and her siblings. Ethel May had known a much darker and less secure world, in childhood. Consequently, as an adult, she was more pragmatic, detail-oriented, less emotional, less trusting, and less nurturing, than many women might have been. She was also a saver in sharp contrast to my grandfather, who enjoyed spending, especially on those he loved. Ethel also enjoyed foreign travel, but valued saving for it. I am sure that there were challenges not only between their personalities, their outlooks on life, their philosophies of money management, but also with regard to the communication styles between them, as well.

In all, my father's parents were married a total of thirteen years. During that time, Ethel May had been a housewife. My father remembers that in the last years of the marriage, she sat at the kitchen table with a rented typewriter working to increase her typing speed and brushing up on her stenography. Even at age eleven, my father was apparently very well aware of the deterioration of his parent's marriage. Because Ethel May had provided the savings in order to purchase the marital home, it was awarded to her when the divorce was final. Afterward, she did not choose to continue to live there with her sons, even though it may have provided some added security to them, in the wake of the divorce. She

Chapter Six: The War Brews

Things were not always rosy within the *Benvenue House*. My father very much wanted to talk about, and to receive reassurance concerning the situation in Europe. As any thinking reading child would have, he feared the Germans taking over England and then coming to the U.S. to do the same. His cousin Adela's father, Felix, was a school principal, and he would discuss the war in Europe. However, his wife, Grace, would not. Despite the fact that Lawrence Kelsey Sr. had served in France in World War I, he too would not discuss the war, let alone the atrocities that Americans were hearing about, and that his son needed to talk about.

I know also that my father spent considerable time trying to receive the acceptance and approval, if not love, from his mother. One day, when I was a teen, my father gave me a china replica of a woman in a blue and white dress with colored fruit on her head. He related that he had gone without lunches at school for a considerable period, (I think he said a month), in order to buy this present for his mother. He gave it to her and she told him it was horrible, and that she didn't want it. He kept it himself, and thirty-seven or so years later, he gave it to me, in the hope that someone would like it. I honestly thought it was fairly primitive and that it did not show amazing workmanship, but I saw something else as well. I saw the sacrifice of a young boy who wanted to give something special to his mother who was having a challenging time as a newly divorced woman, in an era that saw divorce as an abject failure. I still have it in my home. It is at least seventy years old now. It may not be prominently displayed, but it is kept as a remembrance of my father, and of the trials of his early life. I remember he was pleased when I accepted it. "At least now, someone will love it", he said.

My father didn't seem to connect much better to his father who was either unavailable due to working out of town, or was lecturing him on the nuances of dressing well as a gentleman. I know that some of his sisters regarding Lawrence Sr. as an odd bird. Although he seemed to function well, we know that he had significant heart valve damage from rheumatic fever in childhood, and he may not have felt well at many times in his life.

This may also have impacted his connection to his son and may have been part of his being considered twenty-five percent disabled on discharge from the *Army Corps of Engineers*.

My perception, as a young person, that my father was left unsupervised for large stretches of time, was borne out by some of his cousins, uncles and aunts. Since I grew up in the East, while they remained in the California, I certainly did not know them as my father did. However, we did receive multiple visits, during my youth, from George Powers Kelsey Jr. and his lovely wife Josephine, when they were in the East. I also once received a visit from my father's aunt Mimi, and her daughter Margie. I did enjoy occasional phone and letter contact with others. One relative confided that my father was remarkable in that with the low level of supervision he received, and the manner in which he was left to his own devices, that it's miraculous, in their opinion, that he didn't become a juvenile delinquent!

As a pre-teen and teen, my father continued living at the *Benvenue House*. At a young age he was encouraged to work in addition to go to school, and so he had a rather thriving business mowing local lawns and gardening. He also had a job as an inventory factotum at an electronics company. In the late thirties, which was pre-Pearl Harbor, my father attended a local high school. He also spent time listening to radio as a hobby, often writing down things that were said, particularly concerning European news of the war. He was not yet old enough to study radio communications in school.

In the Summer of 1941, in the hope of becoming one of the radio officers he had seen, just ten years prior, on the trip to Tahiti, he began to spend time as a non-registered student in the program to become a Radio Officer/Telegraphist. At the time, all that was necessary in order to sit in on the classes, was to receive the approval of the instructor. After Labor Day that year, he returned to regular high school in Berkeley.

Some months before Pearl Harbor, my father wanted to buy a new or used short wave radio. He wanted to listen to the broadcasts of other nations in order to improve his understanding of the international situation. He also wished to receive some very rudimentary training as a radio operator. He explained this to his father carefully. He received

permission to begin to shop for such a radio. It didn't take very long to find a Sears Console with very good tone which would also be helpful in covering a number of ship to shore communications in the San Francisco area. He found exactly what he wanted for \$13.95. His father provided the \$7.00 down payment, and promised to provide the remainder the following week. Because my father was acquainted with the seller, the man agreed to deliver it to my father's home, and receive the remaining \$7.00 the following week. So the radio appeared in my father's bedroom and he rigged a radio antenna. His father took one look at the radio and blew up. There were apparently many such occasions where his father lost his temper. These outbursts are important to his story because they set the stage as to why a teenager would make so many plans, and achieve so much, without including either of his parents in his decision making.

Lawrence himself, considered the short wave radio the best purchase he had ever made. He was delighted to receive Radio Saigon, Radio Tokyo, broadcasts from Hawaii, and to eavesdrop on trans-Pacific radio transmissions. It was much harder, from his location, to receive broadcasts from Europe, but he did manage to receive BBC, on occasion. One morning, he was able to receive a weak transmission of DBC or the *German Broadcasting Co.* There was a lot of static. Aunt Lily, who suffered migraines, was bothered by the static. One afternoon, she asked Lawrence's father to ask him to turn off the radio. Lawrence's father appeared in the doorway.

"Turn off that static!" he said.

"But it's Radio Berlin!" said Lawrence Jr.

"I don't care if it's GOD talking. Turn him off !" was his father's reply.

With that, Aunt Lily's face fell a foot. It was as if she couldn't believe that her brother would engage in such blasphemy. Lawrence Jr. went back to his room laughing. His father's intense dislike of radio, and the amount of time his son spent on it, never abated.

Chapter Seven: Following the Attack at Pearl Harbor

By June of 1942, now post Pearl Harbor, things had changed. Federal monies poured into programs in which my father had an interest. At the *Central Trade School* in Oakland, California, he was finally old enough to register as a student. Such programs were now government subsidized and therefore quite inexpensive. The school was open from Monday to Thursday from seven am to six pm, and then after a break for dinner, the school reopened until eleven pm. The school had an open admissions policy. Students who ranged in age from, as early as age sixteen to seventy, sat side by side. Some students had been former railway telegraphers. Some students were interested in broadcasting. He not only made friends there, but he plugged what he believed to be his own educational shortcomings. The school was happy to assist students who had other educational gaps. My father resolved some issues he'd had with mathematics and algebra while he was there. Despite the good quality of the tutelage, the student failure rate, at the time, was tremendously high. Of course, a committed student could repeat courses if necessary.

By September of 1942, my father was working as a part-time gardener in his own business, attending the local high school, working as an electronics company factotum, and officially attending the *Central Trade School*. All at once, he remembers that he began to receive emergency calls for gardening work. Sometimes such calls were received at the *Benvenue House* up to eleven pm. My father began to have to take the unprecedented step of turning some work down. It took a little time for he and the family to realize that the reason so much gardening work was now urgently available, is that the large numbers of Japanese gardeners in Berkeley, were being interned in camps. Some of his friends were also disappearing from school, for the same reason. He was upset about this, and thought it was unfair to isolate those who were simply Japanese Americans.

By 1943, he had progressed enough in his studies of radio electronics, that he was ready to sit for FCC exams in San Francisco. At sixteen, he walked alone to Battery Street with its arc street lights. He related that

there were a number of homeless people fighting and that he found this quite upsetting. He arrived at eight am, believing that he would need time to study, and that he might need all day to take the exam. Somehow, he passed the exam and was ready to leave by eleven am. He went from Battery Street to the *Golden Gate Bridge* and then, thinking that he was tall for sixteen, decided to buy a pack of cigarettes with which to celebrate. His father had been a heavy smoker. With courage from the cigarettes, he decided to enter the next bar he saw, and get a beer. He did so, and they happily gave him his beer. He drank it fairly quickly and was on his way. It wasn't until he left the bar and looked back at it that he was mortified, as unbeknownst to him, he'd entered a gay bar!

After learning that he had passed the federal exams, he applied to *The Coast Guard* in order to receive the certificates that would allow him to go to sea, even at sixteen. He also needed to get a passport. He had the fare to travel from Berkeley to San Francisco, but when he arrived and filled out the passport paperwork, he did not have the requisite dollar. He tried to convince the clerk to begin to process the passport application, and that he would arrange to send the dollar as soon as possible, but the clerk told him that the application processing could not even *begin* without the dollar. All at once, a Chinese welder, in welding leathers, handed him the dollar. My father tried to make arrangements in order to pay him back, but the man had returned to the ship yards as quickly as he had appeared.

Throughout his life, whenever something truly providential happened, with amusement, he would say,

“Must be that Chinese welder.”

On another day, he applied to the necessary union, *The American Radio Association*, and paid a twenty dollar initiation fee. This was a membership he never relinquished. In 2008, such membership would cost thousands of dollars.

By February and March of 1943, my father still had a six week wait before receiving a ship's assignment. He continued mowing lawns while his father was on a civil engineering assignment in Los Angeles. Aunt Lily was still running things at the *Benvenue House*. He chose to keep quiet about his successful licensure, his passport, and the fact that he was

simply awaiting a ship assignment, because he believed that someone there might interfere with his plans. If they did and he could not get to sea, in future, he believed that he would be drafted for another branch of service that he might not like, and where he would eventually be killed. Eventually, he received word that he was to report to *Richmond Shipyard #2* (Richmond, California) for his first job. He had bus fare to get there, but no additional monies. He had believed they were to depart that night. Unfortunately, when he got there, the furniture and the rest of the crew had not yet arrived. Then he learned that the galley had not yet been set up and stocked, and that there would be no food served for four days! The captain asked, "Do you need money, Sparks?" He answered "No" with the true arrogance of youth, that would rather starve than admit he wasn't prepared for the days which preceded his first assignment. Originally, because ship's communications involved high voltage, ship's radio officers were referred to as **Sparks**. The moniker still stuck later, even when much lower voltage was used in radio equipment. My father has said he does not recall ever being as hungry as he was during that four day period. Eventually, the ship boarded, and the voyage began. The next stop was San Francisco. My father was amazed when they arrived in San Francisco and he was given one hundred dollars, as an allowance for port pay. He went ashore, and bought clothing, some beer, and cigarettes, all to place aboard ship. Even at sixteen, he loved smoking, and it was a habit he did not relinquish until after reading the Surgeon General's report in 1964. It still took him two years to stop.

Once he had loaded his supplies in the ship, and saw the galley was running, he learned that it would take ten days to load the ship at this location. Although he still had some worries that he would be stopped from leaving, he went to the *Benvenue House* where he told his cousin Adela his plans.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"India", he replied.

With that, she gave him a book of Kipling stories for him to read, which he said, he never returned to her, mostly because he read them repeatedly. He left her to pass this news on to the rest of the family, knowing that he would send all of them letters, at the first opportunity.

With that, he returned to the ship, which as it set sail, slowly sailed under *the Golden Gate Bridge* on April 13th, 1943. As they were passing through, he saw a U.S. Navy submarine on the water. The child who'd sailed the seas at five and a half was once again, very happily out to sea.

Chapter Eight: A Sixteen Year Old Out to Sea

Being a radio officer could be lonely and challenging work. First, the radio equipment was more primitive than the equipment he'd seen in school. He had asked to check all the equipment before setting sail, but was told this had already been done, and was unnecessary. He began a very busy phase of life. It took thirty-five days to go from San Francisco to the first port, in Sydney, Australia. During that first month, there were frequent submarine reports which often concerned enemy location, which were to be transmitted to the Captain. At first, he was not permitted to decode such transmissions, but was told he would be permitted to, in the future. For now, decoding was to be done in the office of the Captain. Often, to catch all the reports, he needed to stay up all night, or most of it. This was probably difficult for a sixteen year old, even in wartime.

Then, the ship passed the Cook Islands. This was very good news indeed. The ship had a magnetic compass but no gyro. Seeing the Cook Islands exactly as they expected, was proof of their reliable navigation. There was no electrical navigation because it could be used by enemy vessels to determine their location. Instead, they used radio navigation finders or radio direction finders. This was also part of his job. At the time, merchant radio officers worked hard to receive transmissions but to remain radio silent, because it would have been a shout-out to the Japanese, who could have located them in the same manner in which they were navigating. The most important part of his job was to monitor radio broadcasts. Each broadcast was repeated three times, so that ships could get the message in its entirety. It was easy to miss the beginning or later portions, due to static. He could not ask for repeats, as they were to maintain radio silence. This meant that in those first thirty five days, he could not sleep more than four hours without interruption.

Finally, they arrived in Sydney. He could not wait to get off the ship, and explore the port. The Australians were very cordial. The first thing the dockworkers saw was a sixteen year old and a seventy year old, and so the dock workers thought the ship was a U.S. Navy armed raider. These are commerce/merchant ships which are fully armed, and disguise themselves

in wartime, to appear non-combatant in order to get their cargo through. Such ships were also known as Q-ships or decoys. This certainly wasn't true of this particular ship. My father's ship, the *SS Hugh McCullough* was traveling at twelve knots, and armed raiders must be capable of much faster speeds. If you don't immediately recognize the name of the ship, it is due to the fact that it is named for a Secretary of the Treasury during Abraham Lincoln's presidency. Secretary Hugh McCullough also served in Andrew Johnson's administration which followed. Thinking that the ship was a disguised navy raider was probably an easy mistake for the Australian port workers to make because at the time the ship did have anti-aircraft guns, a gun crew and a cannon. Of course, the crew was not to discuss the purpose of the voyage or the cargo it was carrying to anyone, and my father followed orders to the letter. The ship's deck cargo was indeed heavy armaments.

From Sydney they traveled through the *Bass Strait* which is south of Australia and north of Tasmania. All at once, my father, whom I shall henceforth call Lawrence for ease of following the story, awoke with a start. The ship had run aground! It was stuck on the mud in wartime. They would be sitting ducks! They had no choice but to break radio silence and call a shore station to report, via coded message, that they were on the mud. Lawrence was then authorized, by the Captain, to break the seals on the transmitter. It turned out that the transmitter had been amended with coupling straps allowing it only to broadcast at ten watts, which Lawrence considered nothing more than a peanut whistle. Following the pre-voyage inspection of the transmitter, someone else had amended the radio to broadcast at only ten watts which is minimum power, in order to thwart any spy activity that might occur on the ship itself. Lawrence thought that attenuating the transmitter in wartime situation was dangerous. Fortunately, they had been close enough to the shore that their communication was received. The Australian lighthouse had the wrong lights on that evening, and again, this was a ship with no electrical navigation in order to avoid detection. Running aground had therefore been an easy mistake to make, under such circumstances. At this point on the journey, the young radio operator had proven his worth to the Captain, and was permitted to decode messages himself in the radio room, prior to bringing them to the Captain.

Soon they saw an Australian fishing vessel coming toward them to help, and so they gave the vessel beer. The *SS Hugh McCullough* eventually got off the mud and went on to Melbourne, in order to check the ship for damage. In Melbourne it was quickly determined that the ship had escaped the grounding with only a dent, and so they were on their way. Next, they proceeded to the southern coast of Australia, and to Western Australia to *Fremantle Harbour*. Then, it was on to Ceylon. By now, they were six weeks from San Francisco. Lawrence could not help thinking that this was certainly the long way to India.