

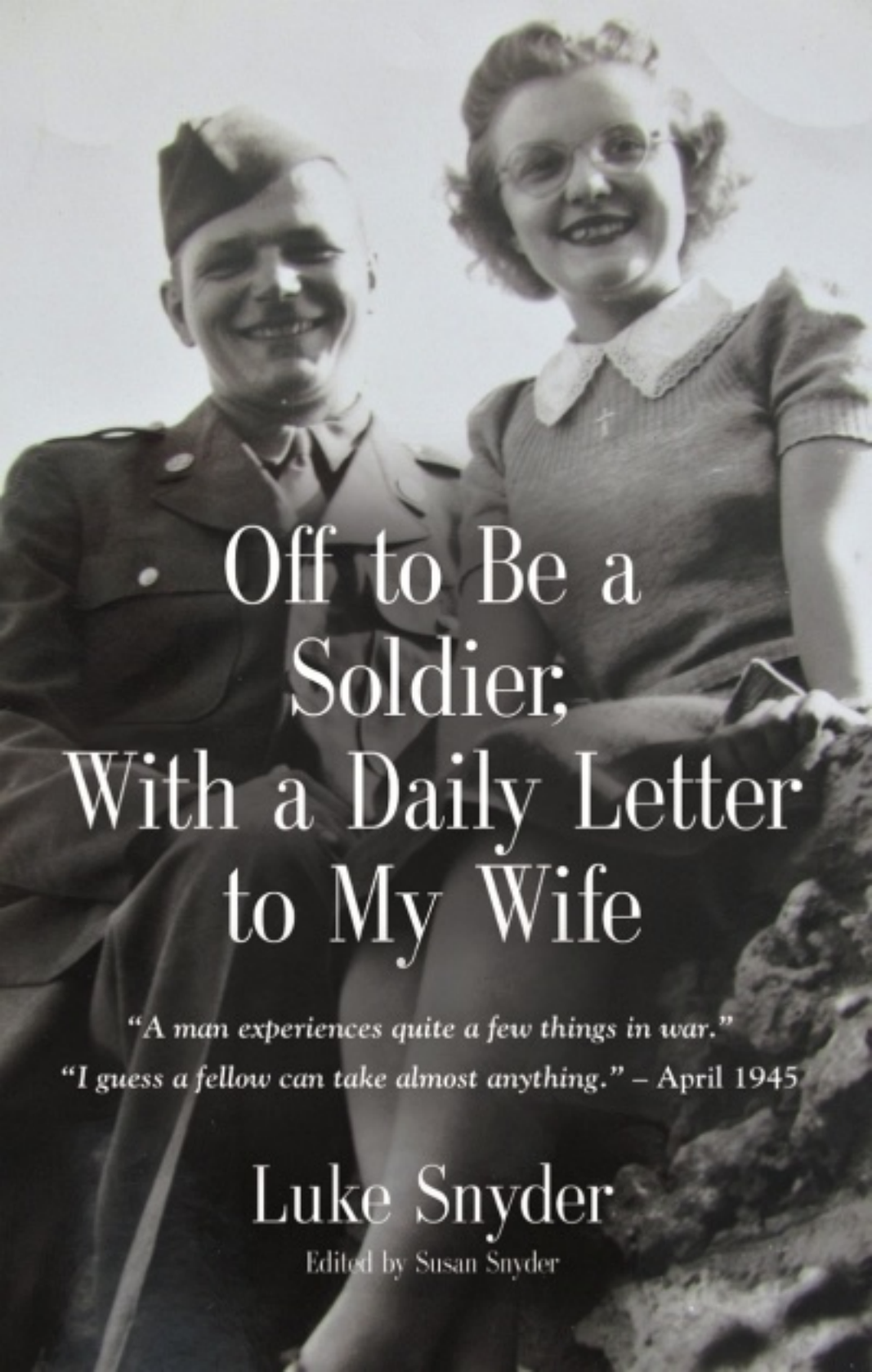
Luke Snyder joins the Army in 1944. In a daily letter to his wife Ruth he takes us through his Basic and Medical Training at Camp Barkeley, Texas, his assignment to the 10th Mt. Division, deployment to Italy then to Camp Carson, Co. October 1945.

Off to Be a Soldier, With a Daily Letter to My Wife By Susan Snyder

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Off to Be a
Soldier,
With a Daily Letter
to My Wife

"A man experiences quite a few things in war."

"I guess a fellow can take almost anything." – April 1945

Luke Snyder

Edited by Susan Snyder

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Each of us creates history. We live out our lives in ways that reflect on others. We can reflect on our lives through stories told by family and friends, photographs, and documents. It's when we are gone that we can no longer edit that story and now it's left to others to reconstruct and interpret the experiences we may have kept private.

My Father-in-Law, Luke Snyder died in 2004. He and his wife Ruth lived in the same house for over 60 years, accumulating their history and the history of their four children. When it was time to sell the house and close this episode of their lives, it was also time to reflect on and consider what to do with the items they had collected over the years.

One of these items was a small, brown plaid, cardboard suitcase with scuffed edges and metal clasps. Found in this suitcase were approximately 330 letters, dated from July 12, 1944, to November 27th, 1945. They were all addressed to Mrs. Luke M. Snyder, Reading, Pennsylvania. They were all sent from Luke during his service in the Army during World War II; almost a letter a day for over 16 months.

To understand and appreciate the letters he wrote I feel you need to know Luke's upbringing and who he later became. He was born in 1919 in a small town founded in 1759 called Emmaus in Pennsylvania. This borough took its name from a biblical connection, a place where the disciples saw Jesus after he was crucified. Its history reflects many years of Moravian, Lutheran, and Reformed Church doctrine as well as Pennsylvania Dutch heritage; all of which influenced Luke.

Luke kept a journal during his teen years that, mundane as it might seem, documented his daily activities. He worked in his family store after school making 5-10 cents an hour and did home deliveries on his bike. He liked to play board and

card games, like Parcheesi, Flinch and Rook with his Mother and Grandma. He was active in church and Sunday School plus played the clarinet in the school orchestra and band. He belonged to the Science Club and on May 17th “took a field trip to Philadelphia to visit the Hall of Natural Science, the Franklin Institute, and the Planetarium.” He was also a good student, elected Class President. “Had a test in Latin. Got 100%.”

Although he didn't seem to excel in sports, he took a big interest in baseball. “Listened to the All-Star game between the American League Stars and the National League Stars. The game lasted 3 hours. The American Stars won 9-7.” May 28th, 1935, “The whole morning and part of the afternoon I umpired baseball games at school.”

In 1936 he graduated from Ontelaunee High School, in Leesport, Pa. and went on to Ursinus College to get his Bachelor's Degree in Chemistry in 1941. From there he was hired at Carpenter Technology Corporation which made specialty steel and worked there for 43 years.

For more than 60 years he was a devoted church member of Trinity UCC in his hometown of Leesport, Pa. He took on roles of Sunday School teacher, Consistory member, and church elder.

He recognized his civic duty in politics and became a committeeman for Ontelaunee Township and later served as Vice Chairman of the Berks County Democratic Committee for several years. In 1985 he served as acting Party Chairman for a month. He also served as Township Auditor for 10 years and worked-part time as a tipstaff at the Berks County Courthouse.

Luke's umpiring career took off right after his return from the war where he began umpiring scholastic baseball games

in 1946. He averaged 150 scholastic, collegiate, and sandlot baseball games a year. This passion went on for 33 years.

I'm including this accolade because it reinforces his "love of country" and his fellow man. He was a 32nd Degree Mason and more than a 50-year member of the Patriotic Order Sons of America. He was also a longtime member of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

Amid all the above passions and careers, his greatest passion was his family. He married his "Sweetest, Dearest, Darling" Ruth in 1939. There's some speculation that they eloped to Virginia, but neither of them would ever go into detail on the subject. They had difficulty starting a family but went on to have 3 sons and a daughter. His children, grandchildren, and in-laws will attest to his exuberance in announcing his love of family, wherever he went, and to whoever would listen.

I'm not trying to portray Luke as someone who gained great acclaim, he wasn't. Just a simple man living out his dreams and doing what he felt was expected of him. He was a small-town man; before the Army, he hardly traveled farther than New York City. He didn't want to leave home but accepted fully his duty to serve and believed he would try his best to do it well.

His words here are written exactly as he wrote them. His spelling and most times his penmanship were spot on so it made it pretty easy to interpret. His letters could run sometimes 7 pages, and I needed a magnifier to read some of the small print, especially on his V-Mail.

I did choose to shorten the letters in two ways. One was to omit many of his long and repetitive salutations, expressions of love, and closings of endearment he added to every letter. Some of these would include "Gee, but I love my Honey so very much," "I wish you knew how much you mean to me,"

“Gosh, I'm thinking of you all the time” and “I love you with my heart and soul.”

The other omission is related to his daily roll call of the letters and packages, he received. He would describe how many letters, from whom, all packages, and what the contents were. I felt this was more than anybody would want to endure reading, but add it to your thoughts when reading each day because it was a significant part of almost every letter written. The only exception would be when he was short of time or too exhausted, then it might be V-Mail which limited greatly the message he could write.

The Selective Service and Training Act was a peacetime draft enacted in September 1940 and revised after the U.S. entered World War II, whereby men aged 18 to 45 were subject to military service for a term of duty that could be longer than twelve months. Since Luke was attending Ursinus College from 1936 to 1941 he was probably classified 1-D (deferred student) fit for general military service.

Army Induction then Basic Training at Camp Barkeley

[Sunday] July 9th, 1944 (written on a postcard, picturing the Reception Center-Final Inspection After Clothing Issue-Cumberland, Pa.)¹

Dear Hon,

Just got back from chow! Must soon get some more tests. Visitors are allowed 7-9 PM weekdays and 9 AM to 9 PM on Sundays. Everything O.K. Don't write while I'm here. Love Luke

¹ Fort Indiantown Gap Reception Center processed more than 90% of Central Pa. inductees. Civilian skills and aptitude tests were given and entered onto a qualification card and sent to respective training centers.

[Wednesday] July 12th (9:30 AM)

Gosh, I sure do love you, I think you're the grandest wife in all the world.

By gosh, they keep you busy. Didn't get to bed until midnight and got up at 4:45 and we were going all day Tuesday.

I think I'll call up tonight if I get the time and if you want to you can give me an idea of when you can come up if you do at all.

How's driving coming? Did you get your learner's permit yet?

Did you hear anything yet in regards to Howard?²

My interview was quite good. They gave me special mention as a chemist in the organic or inorganic line, also a skilled musician and a postal clerk. After all that I guess I'll get in the ground forces. Ha! Ha!

Eats are good.

Enclosed find allotment papers and insurance copy. Keep them.

Love and Kisses Luke XXXXXXXXXXXX

[Thursday] July 13th

My Dearest Sweetest Hon Bun,

Gosh, but they really keep you busy. There's a rumor that a number of us will be on K.P. tomorrow.

Gee whiz, you'll never know how glad I was to see all of you last night. All of you seemed so very nice and congenial. I hope your parents didn't mind coming up.

² Howard Snyder is the brother of Luke's wife Ruth. He enlisted in 1943 as a member of the 157th Infantry which was part of the 45th Division and had been missing in action since February 8th 1944. He had landed behind enemy lines at Anzio in Italy, January 22nd.

This morning the whole outfit got our shots. They didn't hurt so much then but my arms are pretty stiff this evening. I saw one fellow pass out.

I, together with 17 other fellows, was ordered to scrub a whole barracks. That was really something but I got a kick out of it.

This morning I was told to come up to see Major Weidner. I classed in a very special group known as a chemical laboratory technician. He thinks I'll be put in the Medical Corps or some other specialized branch.

[Monday] July 17th (Pvt. Luke M. Snyder-Camp Barkeley, Texas³ 4:50 PM)

This is it, Ruth, Camp Barkeley, Texas. I'm not sure I know my correct address yet so don't write until I say it's O.K. We left New Cumberland at 8:45 PM Friday and arrived at Abilene, Texas at 5 AM Monday. (Pardon this writing, I'm using someone else's pen, mine is dry.)

When they say Texas is hot, they're not lying. The sun bears down. This will really take some of that excess weight off. Ha! Ha!

Today we did very little thus far. After breakfast, we were put on detail to police the grounds surrounding the barracks. After that, we were told a little about what to expect in the next few months. We get 6 weeks of military basic training

³ Construction began in 1940 on a temporary U.S. Army base, southwest of the town of Abilene, Texas named Camp Barkeley. It was named after David B. Barkley, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor during World War I, but an error in spelling occurred during formation. When in full activation it became twice the size of Abilene with about 60,000 men. Divisions here were trained in infantry and armored warfare and it was also a medical replacement training center. This base was declared surplus on March 21, 1945.

and 11 more weeks of medical basic training. Boy, what a pull!

This afternoon we're just waiting to be assigned to a barracks. They haven't decided yet where to put us.

We certainly saw the scenery coming down on the train. We had a special car that the Pullman people built especially for the transfer of troops.⁴ They have three births from top to bottom, 30 men in a car. During the day they can make the beds into chairs. We came west to St. Louis on the Pennsylvania R.R. There we had a slight layover. Left there at 10:30 Sat. night. We cut across Missouri, a little of Kansas, through Oklahoma, and into Texas. We came from St. Louis to Fort Worth, Texas on the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas R.R. From Fort Worth to Abilene, we came on the Texas and Pacific R.R. It was a long ride.

How's my Honey by now? Your vacation is over too! Were you in church yesterday morning? You must go every Sunday just as before. How are your parents and grandparents? Are my parents alright too? I don't know if I can get a letter written to them tonight yet. If I don't, I'll write tomorrow.

Honey, now be sure to take care of yourself while I'm not at home, and don't worry about me. Everything is fine.

I just got the correct address and I'll put it on the envelope so you can contact me there. Ha! Ha! You know how important I am. Tell my parents I wrote and am well, safe, and healthy.

⁴ Pullman cars were dark green with Pullman Troop Sleeper printed in gold letters. They were essentially mobile barracks which reduced time spent transporting troops. They slept 29 plus the porter, had four wash stands with hot and cold running water, bunks stacked 3 high, a drinking water cooler and two enclosed toilets. They traveled with a kitchen car which prepared the meals, the men eating at their seats or bunks.

Gosh, but I love you. I certainly know now how much I love you and need you. All my love to everyone.

[Tuesday] July 18th (7:30 PM)

Gosh, but it's hot in Texas. I believe it hit 110 degrees today. I certainly haven't lost my appetite so I don't know whether I'll lose any weight or not. The sun has reddened me quite a bit.

This morning after chow, we were issued our rifles. I now feel like a soldier. I took one apart, cleaned it, and put it together again. That took us all morning. This afternoon we had a lecture for an hour on chemical warfare.⁵

They even tell you how to fold your handkerchiefs and socks. The Army has a way for everything around here. It really keeps you on your toes. It's a wonderful thing.

I want you and my parents and Sister and Grandma to be very close and congenial with one another.

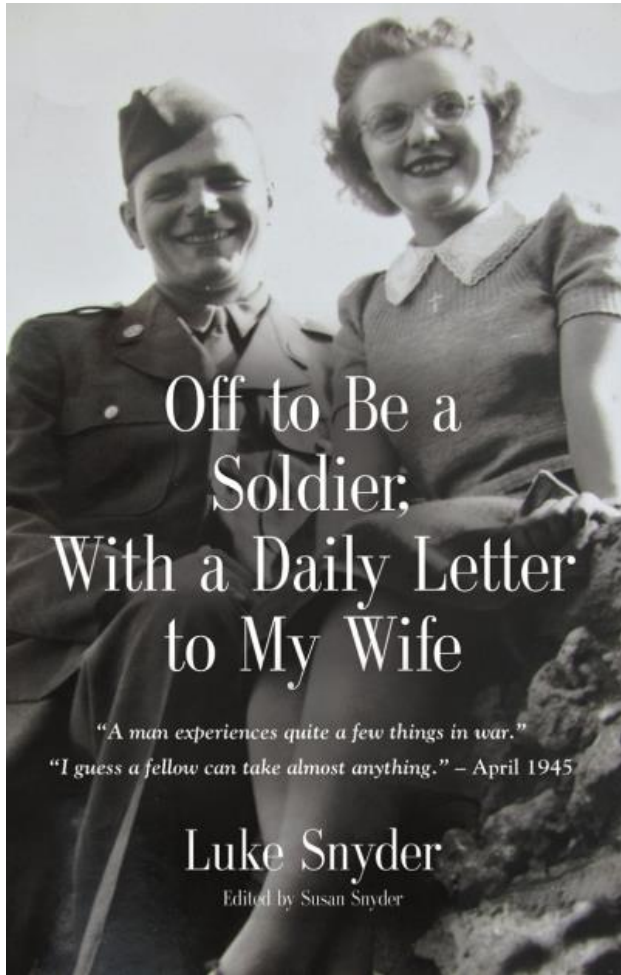
P.S. You go to that doctor. We want some additions to the family. Ha! Ha!

[Wednesday] July 19th

By gosh, I think I'm pretty good to you. I've written every day so far and it keeps me busy. I've only written to you and my parents. They certainly keep you on the go.

We get up at 6 AM which isn't bad at all. We wash, make our bunks by 6:40. Then we must stand revelry and eat at 7 AM. From 8-9, we had drilling with our rifles. From 9-10, we had lectures on maps and scales. From 11-12, we had lectures on Personal Hygiene.

⁵ Chemical warfare was not used significantly in World War II. There was some use of phosphorus grenades that caused burns and napalm that released chemicals into the air. The troops were trained to prepared for things like mustard gas.



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