

In Memoriam

Sara Beth Henson • 9 • nonfiction



It was the worst day of my life, December 22, 1944. I received a telegram saying Private First Class Joe Waggnor had been killed in the line of duty. PFC Waggnor had been running toward a foxhole when a bombshell hit him in the back, killing him instantly. We would not get my brother's body back for another four years, much to my parent's dismay.

Joe enlisted in 1942 at the age of seventeen, and I enlisted a year later.

I quickly rose to the third-ranking officer on the USS Nutmeg while Joe was in the 398th infantry stationed in Fort Bragg, North Carolina and later in France. We were very close growing up, which made the next phase of our military career a hard one. Serving in different parts of France and Germany meant that our communication would be limited.

December 22 started off as a regular day, well as regular as any day during World War II. We began with the weekly meeting where we would get our assignments and turn in the letters we wanted to be sent out. I had just sent a telegram to my high school sweetheart whom I planned to marry one day after this war was all over. I also tried to keep in touch with Joe, but that was very difficult since we never knew where the other one would be. His station was easier to predict,

but I would be in the North Atlantic one day and across the ocean the next. I did not receive a telegram at the normal delivery time, so I did not expect to receive one that day. This was common for sailors. Sometimes we went weeks on end without ever getting one. However, I had received a telegram from Joe saying that the fighting was really bad, and he wasn't sure that he was going to make it.

Teary-eyed, my great-granddad, Sam, retold this story many times during my childhood.

Death in the line of duty was never something I feared for myself because when I signed up for service I accepted my life was no longer my own but my country's. I may not have feared losing my life, but it was always on my mind that my young brother may lose his. That was a difficult thought for me, but it was much more difficult for

my mother, Lizzie Ruth, knowing that both of her sons were constantly in danger. She was proud of us, but I know it was difficult for her. That is why when she learned that her nineteen-year-old son was killed, it broke her. It broke me as well.

I was in my office when I heard a knock on the door. I let the telegram boy in. He handed me the letter and quickly left. The telegram was from my dad. My brother was dead.

Silence.

The gunfire, the tension of the fight, the bangs that deafened our ears did not destroy me.

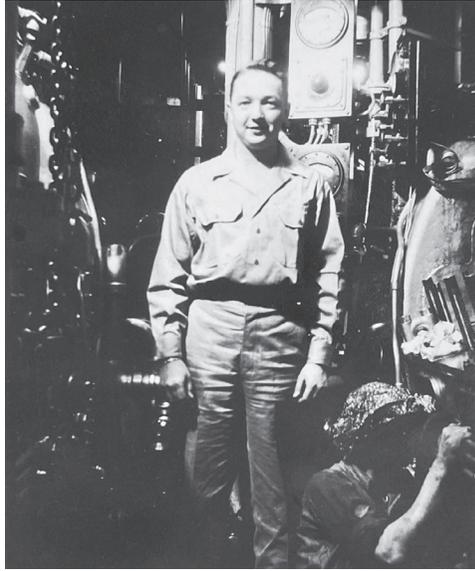
But this, did.

My family was hurting, but I could not go home. I was needed here with my men. My soldiers had to be my top priority. I could not get distracted. Now more than ever I had to go home at the end of all this. My dad would have to comfort my mom. This would have and could have destroyed me, but I knew

that Joe would not want it to. I had to stay strong for the sailors on the boat, my family, and myself.

Teary-eyed, my great-granddad, Sam, retold this story many times during my childhood. He wanted to make sure Joe's memory lived on through us. That's why he named his son Joe. (Joe had asked him in his last letter to name a son after him if he did not survive.) Sam also asked his high school sweetheart to marry him before the war was over, and they had two children, five granddaughters, and five great-grandkids that he met and three after he died. At the age of eighty-eight, he died of natural causes.

While Joe's loss continued to be a tender memory, my great granddad lived a full and happy life as a testament to his brother. He went on to become Mississippi's Central District Transportation Commissioner, an engineer on the Ross Barnett



Reservoir, and the founder of Engineers and Surveyors, Inc. He served as state commander of the American Legion and on the board of the American Cancer Society. He also received the "Engineer of Distinction Award" and the Hall of Fame award for outstanding engineer from The University of Mississippi, where he was instrumental in the Corridor Road Program.

With pride, my great-granddad told me this story, and now, with the same pride, I tell it to you.

Friday night- 1-20
My darling -
I sent a wire to you at 8 tonight - but you asked for a letter too if anything happened - Joe is missing in action - Dec 20 - that is all we know now - this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life - Try to be brave, precious, for we've got only you now -
Is there a chance of you coming home? I can't write any more - Daddy and I are together in this, and we know you need us now. And we need you -
Will write again tomorrow -
Love to you - Mother & Daddy
Try to come home if possible