

Buffalo Tales

November/December 2012

Lifelines (pt. V)

By Nathan Piper



After making the landing at Anzio, Italy, in January of 1944, Allied forces became mired there. As Shada related, the situation was “a real messed up deal... At one point, we were literally living off the land, our supplies were that low. I was in hole about this size,” indicated Shada with outstretched arms, “with four other guys.” At its conclusion, the Anzio Invasion generally has been seen as a botched attempt by the Allies to gain a major foothold in Italy and to secure Rome. Here at Anzio, over 29,000 German and Allied casualties were recorded in the months from January to March of 1944.

It is during Shada’s time in Italy that Del wrote his final letter. A very close personal friend of Shada’s, Del was also native to Kearney, Nebraska. Prior to his enlisting in the U.S. Army, Shada had worked for Del at a local grocery. Del eventually became a member of the 36th Texas Division which, in January of 1944, was ordered across the Rapido River in Italy. The attack that occurred there in 1944 later became known as the Battle of Bloody River. Shada explains, “They walked right into an ambush—the river literally run red, so many of ‘em got shot in the water.” Immediately after the attack, Shada, who had been stationed close by, went to search for his friend. He would later discover that Del had been killed in the attack. “I broke down,” Shada labored to explain during his interview. “I couldn’t help it. I just broke down.”

Tony was then directed by an officer toward a group of men who had been with Del when he had died. They explained with great pain that a mortar shell had exploded directly in front of Del and had blown his legs from his body. These men went on to share that when the medics had come to his aid, Del courageously replied, “Just leave me be. I’m not gonna make it.”

Shada evidenced more emotion and pain during his discussion of Del than any of the other topics he so willingly shared. He carefully explained in simple, brief detail, a small portion of Del’s last letter. In the well-preserved envelope were the folded pages from the 36-year-old man declaring he had become too old for infantry. Del believed he would be reclassified to a less dangerous unit. This apparent transfer, however, came too late.

The difficulty with which Tony Shada shares his memories of Del reflects one of countless heartbreaking memories surviving American soldiers struggle with as they remember World War II. But the degree to which Shada reluctantly discusses this

single letter also demonstrates the gravity and import of war correspondence, particularly between soldiers. With his unwillingness to allow his friend's letter to be examined comes an understanding that war letters were not simply sources of news or expressions of support at the time they were written. Today these letters are relics of great importance. War letters between soldiers are not just conversations from the past. They are the means of carrying and preserving words--tangible reminders of the experiences of war and of the men with whom soldiers shared these experiences. Holding on to these letters, then, is to hold on to those loved ones now gone.

Tony Shada was more willing to share another incident which occurred in 1944--an incident with far more levity. Shada's unit, while in Southern France, found themselves dangerously positioned behind enemy lines and cut off from Allied assistance, some soldiers became as concerned about getting their correspondence as they were for their own safety. "I'll never forget," remembers Shada with humor, "I had this buddy of mine... Here we are behind enemy lines and all he wants to know is how the hell we're gonna get our mail." Shada, with his interview concluded, carefully returned his relics of war to their home in an old trunk. Along with Del's letter were a variety of artifacts, maps, photos, and numerous medals--including Tony Shada's Purple Heart.

While Nebraskans like Brott, Farley, Murphy, Harper, Davis, and Shada were all enduring their own hardships, Robert Sinkler was battling the threat of Japanese invasion and the Aleutian's harsh climate. Continuing his correspondence with Evelyn Burson, who in 1942 had left the family farm for Omaha, Nebraska, Sinkler struggled to keep alive his relationship with Burson, which soon had grown more complex.

With a promise of greater autonomy and higher wages, women from across Nebraska mobilized and entered the work force. Many, like Evelyn Burson, undertook the arduous task of staffing industries that were driven by wartime production. Burson became one of the thousands of Nebraska women flooding the labor fields, filling the occupational void left behind by the men now serving in the military. It is during her time working in an Omaha factory that published war-related pamphlets--and while Robert Sinkler was away in the Aleutians--that Evelyn Burson became involved with another man and became pregnant.

The relational complication her pregnancy posed for both Robert Sinkler and Evelyn did not, however, discourage Sinkler's affections nor change his intentions to continue as Evelyn's suitor. During this period, between his first and second furlough, a great quantity of letters were produced between the two. The bulk of these correspondences, unfortunately, have since been lost. Evelyn burned them at the request of her husband following his death from cancer in 1977--all but three: the first letter he wrote her and the last two he wrote before coming home at the end of

the war. A fourth, which survives now only in the archives of *The Greeley Citizen*, was written to Evelyn describing Robert's involvement in post-war celebrations in New York City. But the three letters she retained--Evelyn could not bear to destroy them. Like Shada, the letters had become for Evelyn relics of great importance connecting her to her beloved husband.

What is known about the contents of these letters survives only with the daughter that was produced from the unplanned pregnancy and the marriage that resulted from Robert and Evelyn's war-time relationship. Sinkler's affections led him to ask for Evelyn's hand in marriage. Sending an engagement ring in a letter--a ring Evelyn initially returned--Sinkler was able to get her to agree to the marriage. On January 18, 1945, during Sinkler's final furlough from the Aleutians, and two months after the birth of her daughter, Robert Sinkler and Evelyn Burson were married. On January 25, 1945, Sinkler appeared personally in the Sherman County Court to file a petition to adopt Evelyn's daughter. Because of the war, the judge allowed him to waive his right to be present at the final hearing on February 26, at which time he became the child's legal father.

The precise words written in the letters that led to this marriage can only be guessed at. But what can be surmised is that these letters contained an intimacy and affection sufficient in creating and maintaining a bond that linked Robert and Evelyn together for the remainder of their lives. Furthermore, the three letters that were retained by Evelyn Sinkler represent the correspondence which she could not bring herself to destroy, despite Robert's wishes. These surviving words, and the manner in which they were written, became essential--too important to Evelyn for her to part with. In essence, these letters became lifelines for Evelyn. As these letters had allowed Robert to remain connected to Evelyn while away at war, they later became for Evelyn a substantial means of sustaining her connection with the departed husband she had loved so dearly.

May God watch over you for me, darling, and keep you well for I worry so about you. All my love to mamma and daughter - I love and miss you so. Your loving, lonely husband, Daddy

As the war progressed, Sinkler juggled the roles of adopted son sending money home, a suitor in an increasingly meaningful--if complicated--relationship, and finally as husband and father. Consequently, the written word became for Robert Sinkler, like so many Nebraska soldiers at war, an absolute necessity--a lifeline--while awaiting the conclusion to the global conflict.

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About the Author



Nathan Piper is a world history teacher at Horizon Middle School in Kearney, Nebraska, where he has taught social sciences for the past thirteen years. Piper is a Nebraska native raised on the edge the Sandhills by secondary public school teachers. In addition to world history, Nathan offers specialized exploratory courses at HMS in Irish history and culture, classical mythology, and the Viking history. Piper resides in Kearney with his wife, Jana, and two sons.

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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2012 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

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Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

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2012 Calendar of Events

All of November: Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours)

Saturday, December 1st from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 25th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

First two weekends in Dec. (1st/2nd & 8th/9th) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: 25th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Education notes:

Ghost Hunting classes with the Midwest Paranormal Investigators-check web site for more info.!

Fabulous Fridays will continue to be held on the 2nd Friday of each month. Check web for topics.

Kearney Public Schools have the museum reserved for two weeks in May Annually!!

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

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We appreciate your support!

Director's Report-Highlights of 2012

-Trails & Rails Museum hosted several special events throughout the year. Some of them included: "Journey Stories"-the Smithsonian traveling exhibit; six mini-events during the Smithsonian exhibit; the 5th annual ½ marathon, the KPS KCLC (after school program) each Friday during the Smithsonian; Wild Science Thursdays throughout the summer; MPI's ghost hunting; Fabulous Fridays; the 2nd annual Halloween event; and the 25th annual Christmas Tree Walk.

-The Buffalo County Historical Society signed on as a co-author for an Images of America book with Brian Whetstone and Jessie Harris. They came up with an idea to research and share the stories about local historic homes. This is the same company that Dr. Ellis and Heather Stauffer went through for the Kearney pictorial book; Dr. Ellis went through for the UNK Sports book; and Keith Terry for the World Theater Book.

-The "BuffaloCountyHistoricalSociety" Facebook page allowed interaction with a new market. Friends have sent in questions about our special events; questions on how they can donate things to BCHS; and how they can put their building/property on the National Registry. The Museum's special events were also publicized this way. As of December 12, 2012, we were reaching out to over 1,400 people on Facebook.

Be sure to join the Buffalo County Historical Society group or the Buffalo County Historical Society/Trails & Rails Museum fan page on Facebook!



Trails & Rails Museum

Buffalo County Historical Society

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