

Dad: Francis (Frank) "Moose" Dressen
b. 1889, Victoria, MN d. March 23, 1933

Mom: Mary Martha "May" Martinson Dressen
b. March 17, 1898, Prior Lake, MN d. March 28, 1991

Sister: Lilalee Dressen Volker
b. February 9, 1922, Scott County, MN d. May 16, 1994

Early Years Before Dad's Death

Among the things I remember most vividly from my early childhood are the great Christmas celebrations we always had. Each year, we hung our stockings on an old, closed fireplace and Lila and I would go to bed early. Once we were in bed, Mom and Dad would trim a big "real" tree and we would be completely surprised by the decorated tree and the presents underneath when we woke up on Christmas morning. I remember one special present that Lila received was a new doll with wonderful clothes that Mom made herself.

When I was five years old, my Dad took me to "Berens" store to get my first baseball suit and hat. You could get clothes for everyone at Berens, and they were displayed on the "street side" of the store; in the back they stocked food of all kinds. Not much canned food, but large pieces of meat and cheese and big sacks of potatoes. Anyway, I remember so well that special day when I walked with my dad to Berens. I can tell you every house and the name of every business we passed along the way. I walked beside my dad holding onto his little finger, and I remember that it was so big I could barely get my small hand around it.

During the summer months, Lila and I had a room upstairs that we shared. Sometimes, it would get too hot that we would go to sleep outside, laying down on a couple of blankets, side by side, once the sun had gone down. We loved going to sleep outside; once we had fallen asleep, my dad would carry us inside and we would wake up in our own beds. I had a nice tent to play in when other kids came over, and we also loved playing in the very big house next to the “Pop” factory.

In the wintertime, we did lots of ice skating at the rink. My mom was an excellent skater and kept skating until she was about 80 years old. During those cold Minnesota months, I would always sleep with my dad at night, and Lila slept with our mom. There were two big beds on the south end of the large bedroom with a mirror and a dresser in between that had big drawers for our clothes.

My dad’s death from pneumonia in March of 1933 when I was only 8 years old changed everything. Suddenly, I was a boy who didn’t have a dad; I did not know of any other boy that I played with or went to school with who didn’t have a dad. As the years went on, Ed Huber took me to all Father/Son gatherings at the school and the Knights of Columbus, which was very, very good of him and I was very grateful. But it wasn’t quite the same, of course, as having my own dad with me.

During the next two summers after my dad died, my sister and I went out to Prior Lake to stay on “Martinson Island” where my mother’s family lived. They grew “pickles,” and I had to pick them on my hands and knees in what was sometimes 100 degree heat. Lila, however, got to lie in the summer sun as the doctor was just a little concerned about something he had noticed in her lungs and wanted her to get lots of sunshine and rest so that she would heal. She did. I really didn’t hate being on the island and working the pickle patch, but oh how I missed playing baseball and going to the town team

games! I loved the “Shakopee Indians.” “Lefty” Odenwald had actually been a pitcher for the Cleveland Indians for a short time, but the pay was so lousy back then for the average player that he made more money playing for the town team. The Rock Springs Bottling Works also gave him a job.

Later Childhood

Even though Lila and I had a happy childhood and always felt loved, we were very poor when we were growing up. The house we lived in had no running water and no inside toilet. There was a small little toilet outside, called the “Outhouse,” so nobody ever said, “I have to go to the bathroom.” Instead, we said, “I have to go to the outhouse!” When it was cold, my mother would always say, “Don’t forget your coat!” We had a supply of old, Sears & Roebuck catalogues to tear up so that we could use the pages for toilet paper. In the house we kept a big pail to hold our drinking water and in the winter when you wanted to get a drink, you would have to knock through the ice on top first. Everyone used the same dipper. My mom also had a larger tin pail that was filled with water for household chores and cooking. Often, I would have to go across the alley and ask the people who lived in the large house there — they owned the Rock Springs pop factory - if it was ok to use their outdoor water faucet to fill up my mother’s large pail. I didn’t at all enjoy the part of the job that included knocking on their door like that, but my mother insisted that I never fill the pail without asking permission first. Also across the alley in another large, beautiful house lived J.B. Reise and his sister, who were much better off than we were. They had a maid who would cook their meals and when they had finished supper, the maid would would often bring us their extra, leftover dinner food and we would get to enjoy a “second” supper. I would sit by the kitchen

window, looking over at their house, and wonder what they were eating and what we might get. At the same time, though, I was embarrassed that we needed the food they shared with us and always hoped that no other kids would see or find out. I also felt self-conscious at church sometimes because, even there, people were separated based on how well-off they were. The pew your family sat in was determined by how much money you gave to the parish. Even when my dad was alive, our family could only afford to give ten cents a week, and so we sat in the very last pew.

Because we were so poor, especially after my dad died, we received some public assistance money to help us live — what today people would call “welfare.” I will never forget the time a social worker came to our house and demanded to speak to my mother. She was upset because she had seen Lila and I at the movie theater and thought my mother was being extravagant or irresponsible with her money. Mom explained that her brother, our Uncle Jim, had given Lila and I a quarter as a gift, and told us we could spend it any way we wanted to. So, we went to the movies — tickets cost ten cents a piece, and we had spent the extra nickel on popcorn. For us, it was an incredible treat. The social worker still scolded my mom; she said that the next time we were given a quarter, our mother should use that money to buy groceries. I have never forgotten that experience — my “Quarter Story.” To this day it makes me more understanding and sympathetic toward people who don’t have much money and receive “assistance,” then are criticized and looked down upon by others.

One of the hardest times for me in those years was when Mom and Lila both had Scarlet Fever and were very, very sick. We were quarantined, and I remember that I worried and worried every day that Mom would die and then they would send me to an

orphanage to live and go to school. I was terrified. Fortunately, both my mom and Lila recovered.

Even in the toughest of times, though, people in our town were generally very good to us, and to each other. Sometimes I am simply amazed and humbled when I look back and realize how very good they were. I remember one time that my mom gave me a dime to go the meat market for some hamburger. The butcher gave me the meat I asked for, but when it came time to pay, I couldn't find my dime. I was in tears, but he told me not to worry about; he was sure he would find it somewhere and he let me take the meat home anyway. At other times, I would go to Barney Jensen's food store and my mom would give me an extra five cents to get a few cookies. I especially loved the chocolate and marshmallow ones. Well, Mr. Jensen would give me a whole bag of cookies — many more than a nickel would buy — but I would simply say "thank you" and be on my way. I never realized or understood how kind and good he was being until much later. And I vividly remember how during one Christmas when I was in the fifth grade, something extraordinary happened. About two days before Christmas, a "Maurice Rothschild" van came to a stop in front of our house and a delivery man came to the door with two large packages. One was addressed to "Lila Dressen" and the other to "Jack Dressen." We couldn't believe they were for us. We were so excited to open them up, and when we did, what we discovered inside was wonderful. Lila got a beautiful dress, and I got a pair of corduroy knickers, a matching sweater, a shirt and a pair of plaid dress socks. We were speechless, and so very happy. We never did find out who paid for those presents and sent them to Lila and I. It certainly was an example of the Spirit of Christmas love and generosity at its best.

Since my dad was German, before he married Mom he went to the “German Church.” Mom, being Irish, went to St. Mary’s, the “Irish Church.” Once they were married and my sister and I came along, my dad had the whole family go to St. Mary’s. Unfortunately, St. Mary’s had no school when we were young, so we attended school at St. Mark’s, the German parish. My first grade teacher was Sister Anita and she was great. I actually had her for two years and during that time, I loved to go to school every day. I would draw and paint a lot, using chalk and water colors. Sister Anita thought I should enter one of my pictures in a contest at the Scott County Fair, which was held every September in. For the contest, I drew a picture of an apple, an orange and a banana free hand and shaded in the colors. Sister Anita entered it in the “Free Hand Drawing and Tracing” competition for first, second, and third graders. When Sister Anita opened my prize envelope at the end of the competition, we discovered that I had been given the second place award for “Tracing.” She was upset and said, “That’s not fair! You didn’t trace those pictures and you only got a \$5 award!” She wanted to call the organizers of the contest and protest, but I told her that the \$5 prize was ok by me — \$5 seemed liked an awful lot of money to me back then.

After Sister Anita left, I continued in the third, fourth, and fifth grades at St. Mark’s, but those years were not nearly so happy for me. I remember one day, fairly early on, I found myself surrounded by a circle of older boys. I guess that since I was an “outsider,” they had decided to make me prove myself. They sent in Claudie Lenzmeir to take a swing at me. I ducked a couple of times, then took a swing at him. I wasn’t trying to hurt him, but I ended up giving him a bloody nose and I guess that was what it took, because from that time on I was “ok” and they left me alone. Finally, a few years later,

St. Mary's opened a school of their own at long last. Father McGraith replaced Fr. Lee, built the new school, and invited the School Sisters of Notre Dame to come and teach there. Fr. McGrath made many other positive changes as well. I remember vividly how he told the whole parish one Sunday that the Sisters worked hard all week long and should not be expected to take care of all the children who came to mass on Sunday, as had been the tradition for a long time. Families — adults and children — should sit together and pray together, said Fr. McGraith. I remembered that lesson and tried to put it into practice my whole life, when Jo and I were married and taking our own children to church each week.

My sister and I started to go to St. Mary's School once it opened and I had Sister Cynthia for a teacher — oh, what a great change that was! I was happy once more, and could once again enjoy going to school every day. Sister Cynthia praised my art and encouraged me in many ways. I also loved being in school activities and I had a lead role in one of our school plays. I was “Mr. Brown,” the narrator of the play, and I got to wear a suit and introduce all the characters. I worked hard to memorize all of the names and I practiced over and over again. I also got to be in the Boy Scouts and went to Boy Scout camp for three years. Ed Huber was so kind and paid all of the fees for me. I learned lessons there that I never forgot in the Boy Scouts, and those lessons really served me well later in life. Even when I was a soldier in World War II, I knew more than many people about how to live out in the open and I remembered quite a few valuable Boy Scout tips that helped me a lot — like how to get my socks dry for the next day (sleep on them), and how to put pine boughs under a “pup” tent before pitching it so that when it rained, the water would be kept away from the bottom of the tent and we would stay dry inside.

After fifth grade and our change to St. Mary's school, things became better for our little family all the way around. Mom worked at the "Gambling Joint" and we began to have more money for food and clothes. We moved to an apartment above Arnie's Bar and finally had an indoor bathroom with a tub, a large living room, and a nice bedroom that Mom and Lila shared. I had a cot in the kitchen where there was a gas stove, and sometimes my friends and I would use the kitchen table as a ping pong table.

My years at Shakopee High School were very busy and filled with fun activities. I was on the football team, the baseball team, and the basketball team and I liked all of my teachers — especially my art teacher. One year, the theme of our prom was "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves" and I painted all the music stands for the band with decorations to match.

I think you know most of the rest of the story - how I worked for a year at the Savage Tool Company after graduation from high school, then joined the army and went off to fight in World War II as soon as I was old enough. All of those stories I have written down for you in another "Memories" book, including the incredible tale of how I got to come home early, start school at St. Thomas on the GI Bill, and meet the most wonderful woman in the world, Josephine (Jo) Schmelzle, who started out as my math tutor and became my beloved wife. We had 64 fabulous years together and raised a wonderful family. We had our share of tough times and were pretty poor in the beginning, which was nothing new for either of us, but by the time we retired things were much, much better. During our time in Browerville, I had had the privilege of campaigning, and then working, for Congressman Bob Bergland for about seven years. I really enjoyed the work I did in the 7th District, and even got to go to Washington D.C.

with him several times. Early on, Jo and I decided that we would invest the money I received for that job in an IRA we opened for our retirement. Every year, we would put whatever extra I earned from Congressman Bergland into our “Ameriprise” account up in Parker’s Prairie. Well one day, about six years or so after we both had retired from our teaching jobs, we decided to call Parker’s Prairie and find out how our Ameriprise investments were doing. The person I got on the phone told me that our account was now worth about \$100,000. I didn’t believe him. In fact, I said something like, “Don’t play games with me!” and hung up the phone. I can still hear your grandma saying to me, “Now Honey, don’t be like that. Call them back and be nice.” So I did, and sure enough, they had been telling me the truth. We were so thrilled; in addition to our good pensions, we also had enough “fun money” to start taking trips to Florida in the winter and to share our good fortune with all the members of our family. I think the fact that Jo and I both had been through difficult times and understood what it meant to be poor and struggling helped us to be more understanding and compassionate with others, and convinced us of how important it is to be as generous and giving as possible.

I thank the good Lord every day because Jo and I were blessed in so very many ways throughout the course of our life together — especially by the family that we watched grow up around us. I dearly love all of my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and I know that Jo is looking down from heaven at all of you, filled with the same kind of pride and love. When I look at each and every one of you, I simply couldn’t be happier, or more grateful, for the unbelievable goodness and the extraordinary blessings that have been a part of the first 92 years of my life.

Forward

The following events which I, John “Jack” Joseph Dressen, share with you are not in any particular order, but they are all true. They are not dated because I am describing all things from memory — at the time, we were all too busy fighting to take notes on the specifics of what was happening. Exact dates never hit me. Even when I look back, I think only of the weather. I can clearly remember whether it was raining or muddy or snowing. I assure you that I was no big hero - no landing on D-Day, no jumps behind the lines. I came in with General Patton’s 3rd Army, after the soldiers who landed on D-Day and during the weeks that followed had made it safe for the army tanks, ammo trucks and the big guns to move in. It is still hard to think of what the soldiers who landed on D-Day had to face — all of those Germans who were dug-out and dug-in and waiting for them to come. Those soldiers made it possible and safe for units like mine to bring in equipment and start to move across northern France and into Germany. The D-Day soldiers should never be forgotten. Had it not been for them clearing the way for the rest of us, it is scary to think where I — and where we — would be today.

Beginnings

I was inducted into the army in late January of 1943. I was part of a group that was not drafted; we volunteered to go before we would be called to service. You had to pass a physical to go into the army, but there used to be a joke about that: there were two doctors - one looked in one ear and one looked in the other, and if they didn’t see

each other, you passed. Most people passed the physical. We left Shakopee, Minnesota by regular Greyhound bus. The group consisted of Lyle Gelhaye (my cousin), Bill Delbow, Bob Monnens, and Howard Toronto who were good friends, and a person from Jordan, Minnesota. Luckily, we all made it back safely. Bill and Bob remained very good friends of ours and we saw them many times after the war. But I digress.

After we were inducted, we were dropped off at Fort Snelling where we stayed for about a week before being sent to different army camps throughout the United States. I was appointed acting corporal and my job was to take care of the roll call attendance of 15 men (boys) every morning and every night. I left Fort Snelling by train early in February for a three-day trip to Marysville, in the center of California. We were then picked up by truck to go to Camp Beale, California, to become part of the 273rd Field Artillery Battalion. The unusual thing about the 273rd unit was that all of the soldiers were new recruits; no experience of any kind for any of them. The 273rd unit consisted of A Battery, B Battery, and C Battery. The Service Battery took care of cars, jeeps, food, and the mess hall. Headquarters Battery included the top ranked officers - the lieutenant colonel and such. We each had a large barracks in which we lived and where we washed, showered, and kept all of our equipment — row after row, two deep. There, I was appointed full corporal to take care of 8 men and four 50-caliber machine guns. This was a good deal: no special duties such as KP (kitchen work) or night patrol. I must mention that for the first three months I had one 50-caliber machine gun and 4 rifles. We had no big guns, certainly not the 105 guns which we were supposed to have. We had four guns per battery for a total of 12 guns. We were so unprepared to fight a war; for the first six months, we trained and pretended with “guns” such as telephone poles

leaning on sawhorses and made up to look a lot like big guns. We trained for over a year as all American troops were getting ready for the big rush and the big push of World War II in Europe. I weighed 208 pounds when I went into the army and was down to 169 pound by the time I finished training in California. We received no special orders other than what we thought were special.

Off to Europe

From Camp Beale, California, we had a 7 day train trip to Boston Massachusetts. On July 2nd, we set sail on a very large ship called the “U.S. Wakefield” which had nine decks. I was on 7E single deck, three deep, and for seven days the only time we came out on the top deck was for our exercises in the morning. The English sailors took care of the boat and the food which was bad, bad, bad. Movements of troops across the Atlantic Ocean always took many days as we never went in a straight line; if we had, the German subs would have tracked us too easily and been able to hit and sink us. So, our ship zigged and zagged across the Atlantic and finally landed in Liverpool, England, on the 9th of July. From there we took a train to Chepstow, Wales.

We received some new guns to train with - the 105 and the 155mm, called the “Long Tom” — two of the largest guns we could get for land fighting. I was in a 155 unit that would be part of General Patton’s 3rd Army. We called Patton “Old Blood and Guts.” Our blood and his guts. We stopped training as we left Wales to cross the English Channel, and we landed on Utah Beach in Normandy, France, on August 27, 1944 at night fall. This day was really the starting point of World War II for me, with long marches and battles that would continue until we ended our fighting in April of the

following year. We fought in the hedgerows of France and moved through the northern part of the country, arriving in Cloyes on August 30, 1944 and in Rogeville on the 5th of September, 1944. We continued on and reached Sorneville on September 25th and then Achen on December 10th, 1944. The artillery was always behind the infantry. I take my hat off to every single individual who was an infantry person. They were doing the hand-to-hand fighting. We dug a foxhole every night or every time we moved. We shot over the infantry to try and kill the enemy's infantry people. Somebody would tell us to put a certain elevation on the gun and the shell would then land in a certain position and explode. The Piper Club airplanes would be flying above during the day and they would tell us where the shells were landing. Sometimes, you would shoot so that the shell would explode above the ground. The technicalities that they can figure out today are so much different from what we worked with in World War II. We thought we were very technical and sophisticated at the time. Actually, I never had to take a gun and shoot somebody. But I suppose the rounds that we fired killed many, many people. You just never saw it from where we were.

The last great German counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge began on December 16th and by December 18th the Germans had made a powerful thrust into the Ardennes sector. We were alerted for movement on December 20th and headed for Luxembourg to attack the flank of the German offensive. I spent Christmas Eve at a church in Luxembourg, an evening mass. I always tell the story of how my mother sent me two cans of food for Christmas. She had said in her letter, "I sent you a can of chicken and a can of fruit cake." I thought, well, this is going to be really good. I heated the can marked chicken in my army helmet over an open fire and

opened it up. It was fruit cake. I said, "My mother must have sent us two fruit cakes instead of a fruit cake and a chicken." So we opened the other can thinking it had to be another fruit cake. It was chicken and it was cold! So we ate the chicken cold and the fruit cake hot.

We kept moving and fighting throughout those winter weeks and we finally crossed the border, moving into Germany, on March 2, 1945. We crossed the Rhine River at Cologne. 5With other units of the 3rd Army we took Frankfurt, Germany, on March 27, 1945. We fired our last rounds with the 155mm Long Toms at Lichtentanne, Germany, on the 13th of April, 1945.

At the height of the fighting in France, Luxembourg, and Germany, I took part in a most unusual event. The men in our battery, Battery C, were told to line up, and the all the married men with children were told to step forward and leave. Then all married men were told to be prepared to leave. That left behind a certain, smaller number of people in the line, including me. From this group they picked three individuals: a good jeep driver who ran a bazooka gun that was an anti-tank gun, one man to help him fire the gun, and one man who was a good machine gunner. That third individual was yours truly. We were told by our officers that a German Panzer Tank (the best German tank) division was moving on a road toward our area of defense. Our small unit of a jeep, an anti-tank gun, and a machine gun was to get set up at a crossroads about 4 miles from our battery so that we could let the others know when the Panzer division was coming close. When the German tanks got close enough to fire upon, it was our job to fire at them. They would then fire back and this would be the signal for the big guns of C Battery and B Battery and A Battery to open fire and wipe out the German tanks.

We took our jeep to the spot where we were supposed to be — the jeep driver, Clarence Hinsberger, the assistant bazooka shooter, Ray Beaty, and yours truly, Jack Dressen, the machine gunner. We dug in as deep as we could and camouflaged as best we could. Hinsberger hid the jeep to the left of our hole in a group of trees near the crossroad where we had been told to go. I don't remember the exact date. It was in January and it got dark early and light late in the morning. We waited and we prayed. I couldn't hear Hinsberger but I saw his lips moving so he must have been praying softly. I was saying the rosary. I must have been loud enough for Beaty to hear me, because he asked me what I was doing. I told him I was praying on my beads. He said, "Teach me how to do it." I said, "Just listen, Ray. That will help. We don't have time to do any teaching."

We stayed awake all night waiting for the German Panzer division to come our way so that we could identify them as the enemy and start firing, allowing the rest of the Battalion to know, as planned, that the tanks were at our spot and they could commence firing. It was very dark when we started to hear the sounds of tanks approaching; we could hear them coming, but we could not see them. It was not hard to decide that they were not trucks, but tanks, and we were sure they were coming our way. We had to allow them to get as close as possible, though, so that we could be certain that they were the German tanks we were waiting for. As it started to get lighter, we could see the outline of the tanks and their shape, strangely enough, looked similar to that of U.S. tanks. But we still didn't know for sure whether they were German or American. Then I yelled, "They're U.S. tanks!" Beaty and Hinsberger were not so sure and asked how I knew. I told them that I could honestly see the white stars on each tank. Yes, truly, they were our

tanks. We were blessed. If we had fired on those tanks right away, instead of waiting for them to get close enough to be identified, our own American tanks would have been destroyed and I would not be here to tell the story.

I remember well the bright day in March that German planes flew over us and strafed us for the first time. Each time we stopped to set up the guns, we were supposed to be ready for German planes, but we had never before seen any planes. The 50-caliber machine guns were turret guns, so we could fire on the enemy as they moved. C Battery and every other battery did the same and had about the same amount of guns and ammunition. About noon on this March day, a large group of planes came over from the north, firing on our troops. I ran to my machine gun and kept firing at them until I was out of ammo. I was congratulated by my captain for doing my duty. My gun was the only one in C Battery to fire, and not many were fired in the other batteries. The rest of the soldiers had probably jumped into their holes next to their guns. I only knew what I was supposed to do. As I look back, I think that maybe that event (or perhaps the one with the German Panzer tanks) helped me to receive my Bronze Star medal. I can honestly say that I did always try to do the best I could.

The next thing I recall is probably one of the toughest things I went through during the war, and it continues to be a tough memory to relive, even to this day. Truly, the way we were trained was that we were always to do what we had been trained to do, but in the midst of doing it, some very difficult things happened. My mind always goes back to the death of John Kristofko, a young man about my age. He was with me on a hard day and a hard night of work, firing off our big guns. Kristofko and I were firing and loading on one of C Battery's 155 Long Toms. I fired the guns for about 30 minutes.

We were supposed to have a lanyard (a rope) of about 10 to 15 feet, jump back, and pull the end of it in order to fire. But as the fighting became much more intense, we did not always find the time to use the lanyard. Instead, we would hit the trigger site on the guns and jump back; the gun powder and the bag would then go off. I hit the trigger and jumped back for the whole 30 minutes I was firing. Because it was harder work to load the gun with powder, the next man to do it would be the one who had been the firer. So, when it was time to switch positions, I moved to the powder loader spot, and John Kristofko went to the firing spot. After he had fired two or three rounds, maybe even after only one round, the back of the gun blew up where he was standing. It actually threw him out of his shoes. Now, as I look back, I think so often that, had it been me firing that gun and John loading, as it had been only two rounds before, you would never be hearing of this particular event.

As I mentioned earlier, we ended our fighting in Lichentanne, Germany on April 13, 1945. The details of many of our movements and battles in Europe up to that point can be found in the “yearbook” of the 273rd Artillery Battalion, which I have in my possession and will gladly share with anyone interested. The war in Europe had finally ended. Our unit, the 273rd, started now to train for the the war in the Pacific.

Fortunately, the war in the Pacific was over by mid- August. I was awarded a Bronze Star Medal at the conclusion of our work, and have attached a copy of the citation at the end of these pages. All that was left for us then was to wait to go home. It was while doing this waiting that the most important event of my life occurred.

A Very Special Event

Once the fighting was over, army life became very easy. In October of 1945, our battalion received a new, young chaplain - a Catholic priest. He must not have understood clearly at first what he could and couldn't do as our non-denominational, christian chaplain; in pretty short order he put up a poster in our area which asked soldiers to participate in a novena to Mary the Blessed Mother of Jesus by joining him to pray twenty Hail Mary's for nine days in a row. Well, the signs pretty quickly came down and the novena was canceled, but since I was Catholic and thought the novena was a pretty good idea, I decided to do it anyway, on my own.

On the very day that I completed my novena, over the public address system came this announcement: "Corporal John J. Dressen, Battery C of the 273rd Field Artillery, has won the lottery. He can make one of the following two choices — he can go to Paris, France, for two weeks with all expenses paid, or he can head home immediately by boat tomorrow morning." Though many of the other guys thought I was crazy to pass up a free trip to Paris, I, of course chose to go home.

What a difference that chance to come home early made in my life! The other soldiers in my unit did not come back to the U.S. until February of 1946. Though it took 7 days for me to cross the Atlantic, and 3 more days to get to Shakopee after we landed in the States, I arrived home on November 4, 1945. I went back to work for a brief time at the Savage Tool Company, where I had had a job before the war, but I wasn't happy there and decided to follow the advice of my cousin, Gordie Gelhaye, who told me to take advantage of the G.I. Bill and go to college for free. He even arranged for me to have a ride to St. Thomas College from Shakopee. At St. Thomas, I had to take a math class

that wasn't very easy for me at all. Joe Novak, trying to help, introduced me to Jo Schmelzle, a beautiful young woman who was a math teacher in town. She became my tutor and the rest, of course, is history. Though I eventually dropped the Algebra class that was giving me so much trouble, I definitely didn't want to drop Jo — I was beginning to fall in love with her. As it turned out, she definitely didn't want to drop me, either. We married in 1949, had four wonderful children, and built a wonderful life together that lasted for 64 years. None of that would have happened if I hadn't had the chance to come home early. I thank God every day for that miraculous, grace-filled event, and for all the years of goodness and grace that followed as a result.