

Grandma's Letter
A Mother's Expression of Grief and Faith
(Grandma's letter is reproduced exactly as written.)

By James Anderson

I had tears in my eyes and my voice was breaking as I introduced myself and offered condolences to the Gold Star Mother, who was an honored guest at our Veterans Memorial dedication at Mitchell. I stood there wondering – if I am this emotional, how do these mothers hold up, what are they feeling after learning of their son's death? I was a Gold Star nephew, had never met my Uncle, but I had my Grandmother's gold star, the telegram from the War Department and also a letter my Grandmother had written after learning of her son's death in combat during WWII. Her letter answered a few of my questions.

My grandmother, Ida Anderson, sent this letter, dated March 5, 1944, to her daughter Irene, who was living in Sioux City, Iowa. The letter was discovered by Irene's daughter – Lavonne, (my cousin) after her mother's death in 1996. It begins:

"Thank you for your letters and the sympathy they gave."

Just two weeks earlier, Grandmother had learned that her youngest son, Walter, had been killed in action, on February 4, 1944, on a Pacific island named Kwajalein. Irene had been notified of her brother's death by a postcard my mother sent on February 21, 1944, the same day the dreaded telegram from the war department arrived in Murdo, South Dakota. Irene sent condolences (this does not appear to be her first letter) to her mother as soon as she learned of the heartbreaking news about her brother. Grandmother's letter continues:

"It was a awful shock for us to know our baby boy lies somewhere on a lonely island in the far away Pacific. Of course I've had that dread and fear that something like that might happen to him but there was always that hope and prayer in my heart that he mite be spared and someday come back to us. But the Good God has willed it otherwise and we must bow our heads and say Thy Will be done. And even if few can't see it now we know that it is all for the best. God says in his word "for what I do, you know not now, But ye shall see it hereafter." And let us all earnestly pray that God in his mercy will soon put an end to this horrible war."

I picture Grandmother writing this letter, at night, because sleep will not ease her pain. She's sitting at her oak secretary, which stood in the corner just outside her bedroom, a kerosene lamp her only light. Her twenty-six-year-old son, dead, under circumstances too horrible to think about. How many times did she dry her tears before she could complete it? This is a heart rending, outpouring of grief, but at the same time, an expression of faith that God's will has been done. Grandmother was a devout Christian as this letter shows. Her son, Paul (my Father), told me several times that Grandmother had read the Bible in its entirety more than once. I think her quoting John 13:7 proves that. The letter continues:

"Walter was an obedient and loving child and a dutiful son and I know believed in God and the Savior and Life. God has taken him home where we shall some day meet again."

The Andersons were Lutherans, having moved to South Dakota from NE Iowa in 1906. Grandfather had purchased a relinquishment from a homesteader who had given up and gone back east. Shortly after arriving at the acreage five miles north of Draper, SD, they became acquainted with other Lutherans about 15 miles to the NW – a family there by the name of Monson had donated land for a church and cemetery. Attending services at that time – traveling by horse and buggy – sometimes meant overnighting with families on the way to or from church. Grandpa and Grandma's oldest son, George age 6, died in 1909 from spinal meningitis and was the first grave in this rural cemetery. Walter was baptized at Monson, later called Emmanuel Lutheran Church, in November of 1917 and was confirmed in 1933 at St. Paul's Lutheran in Draper, a church much closer to their farm. The boys attended high school in Murdo where Walter

was a boxer, singer, and an athlete. Grandma was evidently confident that she and Grandpa had done their Christian family duty through baptism and by introducing their son to God's word and sacrament through catechism – that they would meet again in heaven. The letter continues:

“We have had a lot of sympathy shown us and have gotten a lot of cards. Even got a letter from the Catholic Priest. Rev Graves of the M.E. church walked down here in the snow to offer his sympathy and also read from the bible & offered a prayer. Sure that it real good of him.”

News that Paul and Irene had lost their youngest son in the war spread quickly in this small community, and they or maybe my father or a daughter living close by, provided a picture of Walter and a short bio that would appear in the surrounding papers. It was probably also common knowledge that their pastor, Reverend Wuerfel, was muddied and snowed in at Presho, SD, thirty-five miles east. Could it have been that Pastor Wuerfel asked his Methodist colleague Reverend Graves to help him out? We will never know, but Grandma and Grandpa received comforting words and prayers from clergy outside of their own church, because at that time in rural America it was the Christian and neighborly thing to do. The letter continues:

“The word of that hymn came to me so often. “We share our mutual woes, Our mutual burdens bear, And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”

Grandmother was talented musically – she played the organ and piano in church and at other functions. She knew her hymns and yes, knew the words to **Blest Be the Tie that Binds**. And yes, rural America then and still is, known for supporting each other in time of need. Grandmother continues:

“Our Pastor Rev Wuerfel was up from Presho last Sun and planned to hold a memorial service for Walter when the roads get passable again. The roads have been so bad we have had only two services in Murdo since n years. They are still pretty bad with no change in sight. Would sure be glad if you and Selma could be here too. We'll let you know in plenty time so you could come if possible.”

A memorial service was held for Walter on June 18, 1944. The old black and white pictures taken on that occasion tell us that the remaining son (my father) and Walter's four sisters, including Selma who lived near Huron, SD, were able to attend. And then we read:

“Edna and Esther both came and stayed with me a few days and I sure was glad.”

Grandma's two daughters – Edna and Esther – lived close by and came to help. I wonder if the two daughters had to sleep in the cramped and drafty upstairs of the old house, which incidentally, still stands and was used as my hunting and fishing headquarters. We continue:

“Marjorie is feeling ok now again. She went home to her mother's a few days and Paul is fetching her back tonite.”

Marjorie, my mother – was six months pregnant with my older brother, who was named Walter, with a middle name of Burton for mother's brother who was in the service in the Pacific. Mother's widowed mother lived in Chamberlain, having moved there from Kennebec, where mother grew up. The final few lines of the letter:

“I went to Draper with Paul and Marg Fri evening to see Ida perform in a HI School play. It was pretty good. Mr. Tobiassen gave us a picture from the Life Magazine of the Kwajalein Island showing part of the cemetery there and probably you could get hold of it too if you wanted to. It's this last one.

We will be sending you some of the pictures etc. that Walt has been sending home when we get things looked over a little better.

Hope all is ok at your house. Love Mother”

Life goes on. Grandma is bearing her grief and attempting to carry on as usual, but even while attending her granddaughter's play she is reminded of her son when she receives a Life magazine picture from a well-meaning friend – a picture of the cemetery on Kwajalein where her son is temporarily buried. My Grandparents elected to have their son remain with his comrades in the National Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. Uncle Walter sent many pictures home before his death; treasured memories of a life that ended much too soon; a reminder of a Mother's grief and enduring faith.