

RAY & BETTY WHIPPS  
WITH CRAIG BORLASE

# 'TIL WE MEET AGAIN

A MEMOIR OF LOVE AND WAR



WAR DEPARTMENT  
THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE

IN REPLY REFER TO:

WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

AG 201 Whipps, Ernest R.  
PC-N ETO 102

20 April 1945

Mrs. Ida Whipps  
493 Maynard Avenue East  
Columbus, Ohio

Dear Mrs. Whipps:

This letter is to confirm my recent telegram in which you were regretfully informed that your son, Staff Sergeant Ernest R. Whipps, 35,293,631, has been reported missing in action in Germany since 1 April 1945.

I realize the distress caused by failure to receive more information or details; therefore, I wish to assure you that in the event additional information is received at any time, it will be transmitted to you without delay. If no information is received in the meantime, I will communicate with you again three months from the date of this letter.

Inquiries relative to allowances, effects and allotments should be addressed to the agencies indicated in the inclosed Bulletin of Information.

Permit me to extend to you my heartfelt sympathy during this period of uncertainty.

Sincerely yours,



J. A. ULLO  
Major General  
The Adjutant General.

1 Inclosure  
Bulletin of Information



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## *Preface*

GETTING OUT OF BED IS NOT EASY this morning. It hasn't been easy for years. My heart isn't what it used to be, my hand's still a little stiff, and my knees seem to ache more and more each time I get up. But today I don't want to stay here a moment longer than I have to. So I push and pull until I manage to break free from the sheets that have curled themselves around me. The nightmare is over, but the raw emotions still linger at the edges of my mind. I look over at the other side of the bed and see that it's empty. *She must be awake already*, I think.

I need to get up.

It was the same dream I've had countless times in the past seven decades. There are men beside me, and they're *my* men. It's my duty to keep them safe, to keep them alive. There are Germans up ahead, a full squad of them—maybe two or three of them for every one of us. I know two things in the dream: that we are outnumbered, and that I have to get my men back alive.

Even though in the dream I know I am young and fast and strong, as soon as the first bullet zips past my head, I feel my limbs suddenly turning to stone. It takes everything in me to put one foot in front of the other and to call out to the men as I fire on the enemy.

I'm not aware of what's happening to the Germans, and I don't feel particularly scared or troubled. What I mostly feel is the mighty responsibility of these young men's lives. If I don't do my job right, their deaths will be on me.

So I have no choice but to press on and fire my rifle until the Germans turn and run. The harder I fight, the louder it gets. The clamor of rifles, machine guns, and grenades gets so loud that I think it's going to deafen me, until finally the Germans retreat. The dream is over.

This is not the only dream I have, and it is not the worst. There have been other dreams over the years—dreams where I have watched, frozen, as men died next to me. Those dreams are the worst, and I'm thankful they don't come around much anymore.

Even so, this nightmare was bad enough to make my body feel a little hollowed out. I close the bedroom door behind me and walk down to the kitchen. I stand at the sink as I wait for the coffee—a morning ritual I've come to rely upon these past few years.

My eyes move across the room, reading the story it tells. I study the photos that crowd the refrigerator door—an endless sea of bright faces belonging to children,

grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I smile at the crayon pictures that are pinned to the wall, a series of princesses and robots and rather abstract animals. There's also a picture of Betty and me, taken at a wedding one summer not too long ago. *This is a good story*, I tell myself.

I'm careful to pour the coffee over the sink so I won't spill on the counter. I take the half-full cup over to my chair, where I can reach for my Bible. When I close my eyes to pray, I can still feel the dream. I keep my eyes open.

These days this is about the worst of it. It was so much harder when I first came back from the war. All it took was the sound of a revving engine and I'd jump for cover. Every year when the Fourth of July approached, I felt a knot of anticipation growing inside me. I thought I'd left the war behind, but it followed me all six thousand miles home.

Even so, I never went through this alone. I've never gone through any of this alone.

I hear a noise outside and turn to watch the door slide open. And there she is—my Betty. The only woman I've ever loved.

"Good morning, Ray." Her smile hasn't dimmed one bit in the seventy years since I first saw it. "You had a rough night?"

"A little," I say. "But not so bad. Did I kick you?"

"Yeah. But not so bad."

"You know, there can't be too many ninety-four-year-olds who swim every morning and walk a mile each way to get there."

She just shrugs in that way she does, smirking a little at me. “I don’t want to get fat,” she says with a grin.

“Oh, Betty.” I smile back at her.

Betty settles in to the chair next to mine, and I pull out my Bible. We have so much to be thankful for.

# I

## *TOO NIMBLE TO DIE*

I LAY STRETCHED OUT on the limbs of a beech tree so solid I believed that even a tornado couldn't shake it. Unlike the tree, though, I was small and light. Years later I would be glad that my thin frame and light bones made me quick on my feet, able to scramble out of harm's way. But back then, all I knew was that while most of my friends would have thought twice about climbing quite so high, I had no fear of going as far and as fast as possible.

My parents' home was four houses away, but this tree—standing in the middle of a small strip of land between the end of the street and the railway line beyond—was mine. At least that's what I said to the bare branches that filtered

out the sunlight. The tree and I were made for each other, and nobody knew the routes up or down the way I did.

It was a sunny winter afternoon in the final days of 1929, and even though the tree was bare, I knew I was almost invisible. Below me, the afternoon carried on as usual. In the distance, streetcars unloaded and restocked their human cargo, ferrying them in and out of downtown Columbus, a five-cent ride away. Every once in a while, trains passed on one of the two parallel lines that ran through town.

Though it had been a month since the start of the Great Depression, I was almost totally unaware of what was going on in the world. For the eight-year-old me, perched above the street, everything was just as it was supposed to be. I lay back and stared at the sky beyond the branches.

There was a breeze, but nothing like the kind of wind that sometimes blew through my Ohio hometown. On those gusty days, my friends and I would fashion paper and sticks into kites and then attach secret messages to the tails before releasing them to the skies. We'd let the winds take them higher and higher, eating up the string that unleashed from our hands until the kites were barely visible. When we'd had enough of watching the bird-sized dots wrestle in the wind, we'd begin the long task of reeling them back in. Finally, with arms and hands aching, we'd examine our downed kites, eager to see which messages had been taken by the clouds.

Lying on the thick boughs of the beech, I thought about the skies. But that day I wasn't thinking about kites; I was

contemplating a different sort of flying. *What would it be like to be a fighter pilot?* I wondered. *How would it feel to sit above the battle, waiting and watching?* I pictured myself swooping down from above, picking off the enemy planes one by one. Then I imagined the thrill of landing, knowing I'd done my duty, that I'd played my part.

"Hey there, *le Raymond!*" The shout pulled me out of my daydream. It was my oldest brother, Bud, back from his Saturday job in the city. "And at which fine establishment will you be dining tonight, young sir?" he yelled.

Bud was always talking like that, adopting a bank manager's voice when he called me "young sir" and a French waiter's accent when he said *le Raymond*.

"Will you be joining us at home?"

"Maybe," I called as I slid from the thick branch. "But Goffie's cooking roast beef, so I don't know."

I edged along the limb as far as it would allow, just as I'd done a hundred times before, until the branches of one of the smaller trees were almost close enough to reach out and grab. Leaning forward, I let myself fall, pushing off from the beech with one hand while reaching out and grabbing onto the smaller tree with the other. It bent over gracefully, delivering me to the sidewalk in front of my sixteen-year-old brother.

To my satisfaction, Bud gave a little whistle of appreciation when I landed. "Not bad for an eight-year-old."

"Thanks," I replied. "Maybe I'll just come back with you and see what Mom's making."

Bud was twice my age and twice my height. I always had to skip along when I walked with him, frequently falling behind as he led the way past the timber houses with their wide verandas, filling up almost every inch of their narrow lots. At last we stepped off the street and onto the lane between two houses. To the left was 495 East Maynard Avenue, with the scent of slow-cooking beef coming out of Goffie's kitchen. To the right, in 493, there was the familiar smell of oatmeal hotcakes warming in the pan, almost ready to be drowned in honey. It was a difficult choice for a young boy to make.



Ever since I was small—too young to really remember—I had been able to eat from whichever kitchen I chose. It was an honor bestowed on only me. My three elder siblings weren't fed at Goffie's table—not even Bud. And as the years passed and three more Whipps children were added to the clan, none of them was given the open invitation either.

Goffie, a spinster of German origin who lived next door with her younger brother, had always had a sweet spot for me. She made me feel like her house was my second home. I had no way of knowing for sure, but perhaps the reason I was special to her was because she knew how lucky I was to be alive.

In the summer of 1924, as I was approaching my third birthday, I fell ill. My body ached and grew stiff, and a fever raged inside me. I lay sick for days, and nobody knew

what was wrong with me or, even more important, how to help me recover. When the doctor finally diagnosed spinal meningitis, the only thing my parents and my worried neighbors could do was to make me comfortable and pray.

I don't have any memories of this time, but I was later told that when the fever was at its worst, I grew delirious. I began calling out, my voice filling every room of the house. I'd been ill for weeks, yet there was no mistaking what I was saying as I lay confined to my parents' bed: "I see Jesus."

Over and over I repeated the phrase. As I did so, the intensity of my parents' prayers increased. Finally, several weeks after I fell ill, I made a full recovery. God had saved me, plain and simple.

In time, Goffie's generosity extended beyond the occasional free meal. I was seven by the time my youngest sister, Jeanie, was born, and the struggle to fit the whole Whipps family in 493 East Maynard Avenue became virtually impossible. My eldest sister, Rite, had a tiny room of her own, and the next two boys, Bud and Glenn, took the second bedroom. That left just one room for me; my younger brother, Carl; my younger sister, Lois; and baby Jeanie—as well as my parents. It was Goffie who came up with the solution.

"Why doesn't Ray come and sleep over at my house," she said to my mom and dad. "He can have his own room, and we'll feed him as well, if that helps."

Everyone agreed that it was the perfect solution, and that was that. Overnight I became a dual-home boy, blessed

with a large and loving family, a room of my own, and the freedom to choose between what was being served by the two best cooks in the neighborhood. The only problem with the whole arrangement came on days when both oatmeal hotcakes and roast beef with mashed potatoes were served. Faced with such an impossible decision, I was left with only one option: I'd have to eat both.

There was another advantage to moving next door to Goffie's. As 1929 came to a close, the Great Depression began to squeeze our family's finances. My dad, Carl, worked hard to provide for us, but it was difficult to raise a family on a machinist's wage. The fact that Goffie didn't charge my parents a cent made a small difference to the family budget, and in those days, small differences could have a big impact.

Having dual residences meant that I was expected to do chores at home as well as chores next door. At Goffie's it was my job to gather the eggs laid by her Rhode Island Reds, being careful not to get pecked. I was pretty good at it, and my ability to dodge the angry beaks led to my family's nickname for me: Speedy.

That was about all I liked of poultry care. I felt nauseous whenever Goffie or her brother Dutch took one of the birds down to the basement, chopped off its head, and dipped the pulsing body in hot water before pulling out the feathers. I tried to shield my eyes as much as possible, and when it was time to undertake the mighty task of cleaning up after the killing, I still felt the urge to run

outside for air. But I have to admit: when I sat down at the table to eat the bird, it was all worthwhile.

Apart from eating, sleeping, doing chores, and going to school, my life was centered on my family. Most Sundays we took the streetcar to the Baptist church downtown, where Dad was an elder. The only exception was when we were visiting with relatives in the Ohio farmland. On those Sundays we would visit my grandfather's small country church, crammed into the pews beside my cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandmother as my grandfather preached.

We weren't rich, but we had enough to get by. Goffie's generosity helped, as did the little plot of land we all worked to grow vegetables. I soon picked up both a paper route and a magazine route, and I started mowing lawns in the summer. I was busy, the way a young boy should be.

Though we were cushioned from the worst of the Great Depression, we weren't blind to it. The two railway lines that ran parallel to each other through town carried two very different types of passengers. One track hurried the wealthy all the way to New York, while the other limped along, hauling freight to and from Pennsylvania. As the boxcars rolled by, slowing down for their approach to the Columbus station, the stowaway passengers were in plain sight—sometimes inside the cars, other times on top of the train.



After I said good-bye to Bud and followed the smell of roasting beef into Goffie's house, I went upstairs and peered

out my bedroom window into the backyard. What I saw made me stop: there were unfamiliar people on the Whipps property. Tumbling downstairs and leaping across the yard, I found my second-oldest brother, Glenn, in the kitchen, staring outside.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Now that I was closer, I could see that the three strangers weren’t entirely unfamiliar. I’d seen others who looked like them riding in the boxcars. Maybe they weren’t the exact same ones, but they were hoboes, all right. Their clothes were all ragged, and their faces—though clean shaven—were lined and tired.

“I don’t know,” Glenn said. “They just showed up and asked Mom if she could feed them.”

I watched as my mother moved among them. First she handed out plates and spoons, then she gave them stew from the heavy black pot that was always on the stove. The guests ate in silence. Once they finished, I heard them offer their thanks and leave. That was it.

In the months that followed, these meals became a familiar ritual. Every couple of weeks there would be a thin-looking stranger or two at the back door, asking for food. Mom gave them whatever she had, while we kids stood and watched. And though we never knew what prompted those first visitors to knock on our door—or how others after them knew to stop—we became convinced that there was some secret hobo sign along the railway track telling the weary travelers that a free meal

was available up ahead. Whatever it was that brought them to our home, Mom always made them feel welcome. She never said no.

It wasn't just hoboes who edged into my world through the cracks of a failing economy. Mom was a teacher before we kids were born, and then she stayed home to take care of us. But when I was little she took on part-time work as a housekeeper for the head trainer at Ohio State University. His son and I became friends, and I was soon invited to join the coach's son in watching football games from the bench. Even though I was far too light to be a football player myself, watching the games unfold just yards from my eyes ignited something within me. I could see the way some of the smallest men on the field were able to dart and dive, avoiding the giants who thundered toward them. So from then on, whether I was playing football, basketball, or baseball with the boys in the neighborhood, I concentrated on moving deftly to avoid the tackle, hustling into perfect scoring positions, and scrambling to the base. I willed myself to be light and fast, as if somehow I could escape the basic rules of the universe.

In some ways, I guess I was right. Not only had I pulled through my bout of spinal meningitis when the odds were against me, but I also managed to escape another potential brush with death a few years later when I was thirteen.

I had taken on a little extra work helping Goffie's youngest brother, Howard, with his milk deliveries on the weekends. Howard had started out with a horse and cart,

but by the time I was ready to join him for a few cents a day, the horse had been replaced by a truck. Life was starting to move a little faster, and Howard always said that my quick feet and steady hands were a big help.

Rain or shine, snow or gale, Howard made his deliveries. Whenever there was no school, I went along to help him. At first it wasn't easy balancing on the running board on the passenger side, but I soon got the hang of it, jumping down before the truck stopped and then skipping off to deliver the milk. Howard barely had to idle the engine before I stepped back on and he drove to the next house.

One Saturday I was too sick to join Howard on his route. That was the day something went wrong.

I remember Goffie's face as she walked into my room later that morning. I was half asleep as she entered, but by the time she reached my bed, I could see that she was upset. Her face was tight and pale, her steps heavy. I sat up straight, waiting for the news.

"Howard's in the hospital. He had an accident," she said. "He had to swerve to avoid another vehicle and lost control of the truck. It rolled and ended up on the other side of the road."

I was silent, though I was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. I knew that if I hadn't been ill, I would have been on that truck too. Would I have stood a chance on that running board when the truck rolled over? I couldn't imagine a version of this scenario where I would make it out alive.

I silently thanked God for keeping me home that day and saving my life. But almost immediately this thought came into my mind: *What if I had been there to warn Howard? Could I have stopped him from rolling the truck?*

This brought me to the one question I could speak out loud. “Is he going to be okay?”

“We don’t know.” Goffie stood to leave the room. I knew she loved her brother, but she wasn’t one to sugarcoat the truth.

It turned out that the injuries were severe but not life threatening. Howard stayed in the Ohio State hospital for months, but the doctors said there was nothing serious enough to prevent a full recovery.

I was profoundly affected by the accident, and every day I made the thirty-minute journey on foot from East Maynard Avenue to the hospital. Each time, I found Howard smiling at me as I approached his bedside.

“You know you don’t have to visit me *every* day, Smiley,” he told me on more than one occasion.

“I know,” I said. “But it’s the least I can do. Besides, I want to make sure you get better soon and start working. It’s not good for a boy like me to see his income fall like this!”



Most of my memories from my childhood were much less dramatic, however. I was just an ordinary kid growing up in an ordinary neighborhood, and my days were filled with the simple pleasures of being a kid. But as I look

back now, I can trace some themes that ran throughout my childhood—themes that would collide and connect in years to come.

As bare-kneed elementary school kids, my friends and I formed our very own marching band. I was often out front, assuming the lead as drum major while the rest of the crew marched behind, clanging wooden spoons on dented cooking pans. The adults leaned out the windows to clap and cheer, but I wasn't paying attention to our audience. I was focused on the important task of leadership.

A number of the members of the East Maynard Marching Band, as we called ourselves, were also members of the Knothole Gang. A group of ten of us guys would meet by the baseball stadium that was home to the Columbus Red Birds. We'd peer through the holes in the wooden fence so we could catch telescopic views of some of the legends of the game: Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and others. At times we were allowed inside the gates free of charge, but even without our faces pressed against a rough-hewn pine fence, we were still the Knothole Gang. Back then, a gang wasn't a group of troublemakers, and it was nothing to be afraid of. A gang was like a family, and family always stuck together.

Every year the Ohio State Fair brought a touch of the exotic to Columbus. Lions with their tamers, elephants, trapeze artists, and clowns would parade through the city, drawing people to the circus tent. The crowds would exit

wide eyed and open mouthed, already anticipating the circus's return the next summer.

But the circus didn't impress me all that much. The animals were interesting and I appreciated the athleticism of the acrobats, but even when I was young, there was one sight that would steal my breath like no other. While most of my friends were captivated by the circus, in my eyes, nothing could compare to the marvel of flight.

I'm sure my fascination with the sky was partially credited to a town that lay about a hundred miles to the northeast of Columbus. For it was up in Akron that America's battle plan to dominate the skies was being put into action.

The period between World War I and World War II was the golden age of airships, and when I was a child, these helium-filled whales of the sky were largely considered to be the future of air travel. And when the giant hangars at the Goodyear Airdock outside Akron produced the USS *Akron*, then the USS *Macon*, the world marveled. Human beings had never made something that could fly that was so large. But that wasn't all: these airships were loaded with machine guns and four or five Sparrowhawk biplanes. What better fuel could there be to fire a young boy's imagination?

Yet while these behemoths grabbed my attention, they didn't win my heart. I had no desire to climb into an airship and be so vulnerable to the elements or the enemy's bullets. No, I wanted to be a biplane pilot, a flying ace who could thread his French-made SPAD fighter plane through the clouds to dismantle the opposition. On land

I was lithe, agile, and able to twist away from any hands that would try to grab me as I played football on the street. Why wouldn't I want to move the same way in the sky?

It was my Uncle Daniels who undoubtedly—though perhaps unwittingly—played the biggest part in fueling my imagination. After he returned from the Great War—what many believed was the “war to end all wars”—my siblings and I peppered him with endless questions.

“Tell us about the war again, Uncle Daniels,” we'd beg.

“Yeah! Like the time you found Germans in a trench . . .”

“And about how you'd take them prisoner . . .”

“Or how you'd shoot them!”

And so, without complaint, Uncle Daniels would drag his mind back to the muddy fields of the European countryside. He'd clamber back into the earth, into the filth and death of the trenches, and again face the horror of stepping out into no-man's-land. Sifting through his memories, he'd limp back to those times he'd stood face-to-face with an enemy soldier. None of it was appropriate or even possible for children to understand, but he humored us. Perhaps turning these traumas into children's stories and comic book adventures lessened the pain a little somehow.

I didn't grasp the magnitude of what he had experienced, but there was still a lot I was soaking in. I liked looking at the scuffed helmet my uncle kept hidden in a box, and whenever he pulled it out, I pictured the Germans with their hands in the air, meekly obeying the orders to stand down and fall in line.

But I also had a sense that war wasn't quite like it was in the games I played with my buddies. There was something about the way Uncle Daniels looked just before he'd stop answering questions. I may have been young, but I could tell that there was a terrifying side to war. It wasn't a game; it was dangerous and real.

I couldn't imagine ever having the courage to face war myself, but I figured I'd never have to. After all, we'd won the war to end all wars, right?