

My Father and His Father: An Analysis of World War II Correspondence

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This paper considers the transition from “boyhood” to “manhood” through an examination of my father’s World War II correspondence and related material. My father, born in 1925, served in the final battles of the war in Europe. During his time in the army, he wrote many letters home, and the 302 letters saved were used as the basis of this analysis. My father’s transition from boyhood to manhood was conditioned by his depression-era childhood, by his experiences in basic training and battle, and by his father’s sudden death in 1945. Through these experiences, my father developed a belief about what it means to be a man that was rooted in the overarching concept of responsibility – to self, to family, to values, and to others.

While I was still in the army, he died. On my emergency furlough, I saw him that last day at County Hospital. His last words were, “Boy, you’re the man of the house now. You gotta take care of your mother” . . . Those four years in the army are the turning point in my life. I learned something about men . . . I learned something about myself.

From oral history of Dempsey Travis in Studs Terkel’s “*The Good War*” (Terkel, 1984, pp. 158–159)

It is widely acknowledged that the infantry battles in northwestern Europe during World War II were populated by very young men (see, e.g., Ambrose, 1997; Kotlowitz, 1997). As Paul Fussell notes in his book, *The Boys’ Crusade* (2003), “the European ground war in the west was largely fought by American boys 17, 18, and 19 years old. At 17, you could enlist if you had your parents’ written

permission, but most boys waited until they were drafted at age 18 ... These infantry soldiers, if they weren't children, weren't quite men either" (pp. 6-7). These "boy soldiers" were conscripted after high school graduation or perhaps a semester of college. They were introduced to M1 rifles, C-rations, and bivouacs at camps around the United States. They were shipped to the shores of England or France on crowded troopships. They were thrown into battle with as little as 17 weeks training. They watched their buddies die, learned to both respect and resent their superior officers, and "saw the world" and some of its people in ways they never imagined. And all of this before they were allowed to legally drink or vote for the leaders who were sending them into war.

My father was one of these boys. He was born November 14, 1925 in rural Illinois. He was a smart student, the valedictorian of his high school class. He was drafted during his first semester as a journalism student at the University of Illinois, and began his training at Camp Blanding, Florida in January of 1944. He was trained in code and as a radio operator at Camp Blanding, and was transferred to Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi in June of 1944. He continued his training there, and shipped out from New York on November 25, 1944, landing in Marseilles, France on December 8. As he noted in the heading to one of his letters home, he was "With the Radio Section of the Communications Platoon of the Second Battalion of the 254th Regiment of the 63rd Infantry division of the 21st Corps of the Seventh Army of the European Theatre of the U.S. Army." His unit earned a presidential citation for their role in fighting at the Colmar Pocket, and my father earned a Bronze Star for his work in the final push through the Siegfried Line. After hostilities ended in Europe, he was part of the Army of Occupation, stationed in Paris and Versailles, France, and in Hochst, Germany. He finally shipped back to the United States aboard the S.S. Ernie Pyle in late March of 1946. He was 21 years old.

After he returned to the States, my father re-enrolled at the University of Illinois, finishing his degree in three years with the help of the GI Bill. He was successful in college, and his name adorns one of the "Bronze Tablets" that hang in the University of Illinois library. But his life as a college student was not carefree, for he was also playing a major role in supporting his mother and his younger sister. My dad's father had died while he was in Europe and he was now the "man of the house." He continued to help support his mother as he launched his journalism career with early jobs in San Antonio and New Orleans. He spent the majority of his career as news editor at the *Detroit Free Press*. It was there that he met my mother (a journalist who worked for the Associated Press during the war) and they raised a family of four daughters in the suburbs. I am the third of those daughters.

My father died on March 6, 2006. He had been ill for a number of years with diabetes and had experienced two strokes in 2001. At the end of his life, he

was bed-bound, incontinent, and suffering from dementia. In short, he was ready for the massive heart attack that struck in early March. In his last few months spent in a nursing home, the caregivers asked him what his job had been before he retired. In spite of his long and highly successful career in the newspaper business, his only answer to this question was “I was in the Army.” This is an interesting response for a man who rarely wanted to talk about his army experiences, who never participated in organizations like the American Legion or VFW, and who was generally cynical about all things related to military life.

In going through his effects after his death, my mother, sisters, and I came upon the letters he wrote home during his time in the army. I had always known these letters existed, but I was unaware of the sheer number of them or of the breadth of experiences they communicated. My sisters and I sat on the floor and read from these letters, marveling at the experiences of our father, reveling at this look at him as a teenager and young man, and regretting that we hadn’t spent more time talking with him about his experiences when he was alive. My sisters and mother were excited when I told them later that I wanted to write about and from these letters, and they promised to support me in the process.

In this paper, I consider one of the most central aspects of how my father “became a man” during his World War II experiences. Specifically, I examine the transition from “boyhood” to “manhood” through a consideration of how the letters address his relationship with his mother and his father, especially with regard to his father’s death in June of 1945. In the next section of this essay, I consider the corpus of material examined and the methods used in this analysis. I then present results of my narrative analysis of the transition from boyhood and “good son” to manhood and “head of the family.”

CORPUS OF MATERIALS AND METHOD

Early in his correspondence, on February 3, 1944, my father writes to his parents, “Like you suggested, Mom, I’ve decided to keep a diary – but in a different way. I’ll write you a letter each night, if possible, and then you can save the letters – that is, if you want to do so.” Over the next 25 months, my father kept this promise. He didn’t write every day – especially once in Europe and engaged in battle – but he wrote very regularly. And although I don’t know if all of his letters were saved by my grandmother, I do know that 302 letters survived over 60 years. These letters include 178 letters written during stateside training and 124 letters from Europe. Early stateside letters are handwritten on stationery embossed with his name and “U.S. Army” provided by my grandfather’s small print shop. Letters from Europe are on whatever paper could be found – usually

plain copy paper or onionskin, but occasionally letterhead from the USO or Red Cross, or “found” stationery from a French or German home. These letters from Europe are sometimes handwritten but more often typed, as my father worked in the Communications section of his unit. Some letters are single pages, but most are multiple pages. I have now transcribed all 302 of these letters.

The letters my father wrote reflect on many aspects of his life in the military. In the letters, my father frequently discusses food (both the C-rations and the good meals), items bought at the PX, and movies seen during off-hours. The letters provide short biographies of friends and platoon-mates, discussion of training activities, and complaints (and a bit of admiration) of officers. There is some discussion of actual battle experiences, but these are limited (perhaps by choice, likely by the prospect of censors). When he is moving or on leave, my father provides travelogues of what he sees. The letters are replete with yearnings for home and filled with affection for “the best darn people around.”

My father occasionally waxes philosophic in these letters, sharing ideas about the war effort, bureaucracy, cultural differences, and the meaning of life. My father’s journalistic leanings are clear in these letters, as he often reports with objective detail on his experiences, but his feelings are far from hidden as he expresses frustration with army life, a mix of fear and gratefulness that he isn’t at the very front line, and homesickness for his family and all things American. Indeed, it is clear from these letters that the value of Pepsi-Cola could not be underestimated for the GIs.

The analysis for this paper specifically considers portions of the letters that reflect on my father’s relationship with his father and mother. Thus, all of the letters were reviewed for comments specifically directed to “Mom” or “Dad” and for comments on life at the home front. After these comments were isolated from the larger corpus of the letters they were analyzed with specific attention to over-time changes in tone and topic. The next two sections of this paper, then, consider my father as a “boy” and as a “man” through a consideration of both life events and war correspondence. My grandfather’s death (in June of 1945) is used as a turning point that divides these sections. In this analysis, material from the letters is supplemented by information I learned through recent discussions with my mother and with my aunt (my father’s younger sister), through material included in a childhood memoir my father wrote several decades before his death, and through documentation regarding the experiences of my father’s unit during the final battles of the war in Europe.

Before beginning this analysis, however, it is important to comment on my position as a researcher in this project (Denzin, 1989; Steir, 1991). I am writing about my father, so I am clearly not an “objective” investigator in the scientific sense, nor can I look at these materials with the distanced and analytical view of a rhetorical critic. Though I never knew the teenager and young man who wrote these letters, I do know the father and man he became and my view of

these materials is colored by that knowledge. However, this essay is not “about” me, but about my father and his relationship to his parents, as seen through the prism of his letters. My understanding of these letters is conditioned by his other writing, by discussions with my aunt and mother, and by my knowledge of my father in later life. My understanding of these letters is also conditioned by my investigation into that era of American history and by scholarship in the social sciences and humanities on relationships between fathers and sons and the transition from boyhood to manhood.

In recent years, several communication scholars have written about their families and their histories. For example, Nick Trujillo (2004) examined the meanings of his grandmother’s life through interviews with family members, correspondence, and family artifacts. Bud Goodall (2006) considered experiences of growing up in a family immersed (though not necessarily knowingly) by the clandestine practices of the CIA. In both of these projects, the author’s thoughts and feelings are intimately and intricately woven into both the analysis and narrative. My project is similar to those of Trujillo and Goodall in that I am an academic examining my family’s history, making it necessary to be aware of the ways in which my role as a daughter influences my role as a scholar. However, by design, I will attempt to keep the focus clearly on the relationship between my father and his father and on my father’s developing values.

MY FATHER AS “BOY”

Growing Up

Born in 1925, my father grew up in rural and small town Illinois during the depression. He had two sisters, one 10 years older and one 6 years younger. The family finances were typical for that era, ranging from “poor” to “barely getting by,” and the family made several moves as a result of these hard times. For example, in a memoir my father wrote in the late 1980s, he recounts that “My Dad had lost his printing job and sought to find another elsewhere. We had no car, so Dad started hitchhiking west, stopping in Champaign and Urbana and in each little town – Fithian, St. Joe, Gibson City, Monticello – to ask about printshop jobs. It must have taken a lot of courage for him to do this. But then, in those times courage was born out of desperation. When you can’t feed your family, you will do nearly anything.”

His father eventually found work in the small town of Bement, and later the family moved to the larger city of Champaign. In 1940, they moved “across town” to Urbana as his father had decided he was able to start his own print shop. In his memoir, my father writes, “The shop was in the rear and we had

living quarters in the front, curtained off from the shop. There was not nearly the room we had had in Champaign, and I imagine Mom was distraught about the whole thing. But Dad had the start of his dream. It lasted only five years and never was a success. When he died he owed money to various people, including the postman. Mom went to work to pay off the debts, and gave the postman our gas kitchen stove for the interest.”

My grandparents had little formal education, but my father reports that they were very smart and very much wanted their only son to be successful in academic pursuits. He largely was, earning high grades, winning spelling bees and Latin contests, and working on the high school and local newspapers. My father’s parents also clearly wanted to raise their children with high moral standards (though they were not church-goers) and with clear expectations of how one should behave and treat others. These standards were sometimes reinforced with spankings and “the strap” (though these recollections were much stronger for my father than my aunt), but the underlying current that both my father and aunt recall is of a good and loving family. When asked to describe her parents, my aunt’s first comment was, “they were kind.” There was lots of fishing and hunting, play with friends and family, and trips to the movie theater when family finances would allow. As my father concluded in his memoirs, “Growing up poor certainly did not mean growing up unhappy for me.”

The War Letters

In his early letters home from Camp Blanding in Florida and Camp Van Dorn in Mississippi, my father’s letters to his parents largely serve as both a reflection of and a reflection on his childhood. Especially in comments directed specifically to his father, my father writes a great deal about his favorite activities from growing up – hunting and fishing. Consider these two examples from basic training letters:

March 5, 1944: By the way, Dad, I think you’d really love that carbine we fired Saturday. (I’m also a sharpshooter in that.) The thing is a powerful .30 caliber up to 600 yards. It is real light – 5 pounds – has very little kick, and is semi-automatic, just keep pulling the trigger. An ideal deer rifle, one of the boys told me.

April 2, 1944: Of course, no fishing is allowed, but, Dad, I saw some of the largest catfish & bass in that Silver River I have ever seen. And perch – they swarm all over the place. We had some popcorn – all you do is hold a grain in your fingers, & a perch will come right up & jump for it. . . . In spots, though, the river made me very homesick. I could have sworn, at times, I was downriver from the bridge at Rocky Ford on the Saltfork.

The references to hunting and fishing continue in letters throughout basic training, and even from just behind the lines in Europe. For example, in a

letter from “somewhere in France” he writes, “You should be over here, Dad, to go hunting. Great, huge rabbits play in the fields in groups of 5 & 6. I’ve shot at several, but missed.” These references to hunting and fishing provide a clear and ongoing connection to home life – especially to his father.¹ And my father’s reminiscences about his childhood were not just about hunting and fishing. Indeed, his letters included many passages about everyday life, games of local and national sports teams, meals his mother cooked, and friends and relatives who inhabited his “before war” life. A letter from March, 1944 gave the details of an off-base meal with a buddy and his cousins: “If I wasn’t sure I was in Florida, I’d have sworn that dinner came from the wonderful hands of the best cook in the world – you, Mom. We had roast beef, just like you fix it. Potatoes & carrots together – you know how you do it. Salad, with avocados. Graham cracker pie. HOT ROLLS – (HIGH ONES) WITH PLENTY OF BUTTER AND JELLY.” Later, in a letter sent very soon after he arrived in Europe (December 15, 1944), he referred to the general pattern of his adolescent days before the war interceded: “For some strange reason, the past two days I have been really homesick for the first time since we’ve been over here. I think a lot about the way I used to spend the evenings back home – with you folks, with J.J. at games, at the shop, at the office, at the movies, etc.”

In addition to these reflections of his childhood, however, my father’s letters are also clearly reflections on his childhood. During basic training, my father was living and working with people quite different from him, and his letters are filled with reflexive ruminations on how he has been raised, and sometimes how he is changing. These musings begin in early letters from the beginning of basic training, like one written on February 4, 1944:

This army is teaching me many habits, some good some bad. I take a shower every night, I drink one or two cups of coffee per meal (I’m getting to like it, Dad), but worst of all I now swear occasionally. At the chow table, you just about have to do it in order to get salt or butter or bread passed to you. It’s a funny thing, but I never appreciated all the fine things my Dad and Mom have done for me until now. After seeing some of the uncouth characters around here, I am sure glad I had Mr. & Mrs. O.F. Miller to bring me up correctly.

Later, when he moves from basic training at Fort Blanding to his advanced training at Fort Van Dorn, he is beset with perhaps the worst homesickness of

¹When he had his own family (four daughters) my father continued his love of fishing, and some of our most cherished memories involve a cabin where we fished on the lake and hung out with dad as he cleaned the fish outside the cabin. However, to the best of my knowledge, my father never hunted later in life (perhaps because this was not an activity he thought should be shared with daughters or perhaps because of moral reasons developed after the war).

his time in the army, and he attributes much of this to his childhood life and how it sets him apart from others. In a letter written July 16, 1944, he says:

I think I feel worse down here than I have ever felt in my whole life. But I suppose you have guessed that. At the end of basic at Blanding I was beginning to feel like a man, but down here among these vets & noncoms I feel cowed, & seem to be just a child, not yet matured in mind – or body, either, for that matter. The men's interests are so much different from my own. They want to be drunk all the time, forever be with women, married or otherwise, & have no interest at all in reading or education.

Then, after his final furlough before shipping off to Europe,² my father sums up some of these reflections in a letter dated October 21, 1944:

As you know, I'm not much at talking. I guess I don't write much better letters, but I want to tell you right now how much I enjoyed my furlough. That last day I was too sick at heart to express myself to you, but I feel mighty lucky to have parents such as you folks are. If I ever have to go into the actual war (as I don't think I'll have to), you folks will be what I'm fighting for. (Does that sound mushy? Well, it's true, nevertheless.)

Thus, these war letters represent both reflections *of* everyday life from boyhood and reflections *on* that boyhood that emerged during life away from home, while living with very different others, and through the realities of training and war. These two strands come together in a poignant letter written by my father to honor his father on his 54th birthday (written July 29, 1944). The entire letter is included here:

Dear Dad,

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!! I hope this reaches you on Monday in time for your birthday. A little token of my esteem³ was routed through Chicago to you. I hope *that* reaches you in time too. Birthday cards are scarce around here, so I'm letting this letter act as a birthday card to you.

You know, Dad if I can only be as good a man as you are someday, I'll consider myself a success in this world – because with me YOU'RE a tremendous success. I hope I've lived up to your expectations as a son. I know I'm no good as a soldier, but I hope you still consider me o.k. as a son. This is the first – and last, I hope – time I've missed being home for your birthday. In 1945 we'll go fishing

²In his memoirs written more than 40 years later, my father recounts the end of that furlough. "And I loved my Dad a lot, too. I remember my last sight of him. I was on a passenger car of the Panama Limited, headed back for Camp Van Dorn, Miss., after a brief furlough. He waved as the train pulled out of the station, and I knew he was crying because I had told him we were due to be shipped overseas and that this would be my last furlough. I never saw him again."

³A telegram reading: "Greetings to the best of fathers. I wish we were together on this special occasion. All my best wishes for a speedy reunion. You are more than ever in my thoughts at this time."

TOGETHER on your birthday. At present you are right in the prime of life, with many more happy birthdays ahead of you.

Well, you can get the news from the family letter – just consider this a little personal greeting from your ever-loving son.

Sadly, my grandfather died about a month before that next birthday, as my dad participated in mopping up operations in Germany. It could be argued that there are a number of rites of passage that can mark the transition from “boy” to “man.” Clearly one of those is participation in a war. Another could be argued to be the death of a father. Thus, it is not at all surprising that the boyhood recollections of my father’s letters home largely stopped in the spring and summer of 1945. The next section of this paper, then, considers the transition to manhood, first through a consideration of events on the home front and at war and then through my father’s letters.

MY FATHER AS “MAN”

The Home Front and the War

It is strange to say that I really don’t know how my grandfather died. I knew growing up that he had died while my father was in Europe, but I knew little beyond that and for some reason I never asked. In a family tree my father prepared in the 1980s, his father’s date of death is listed as June 19, 1945, and the program from my grandfather’s funeral indicates that he was laid to rest on June 21, 1945. In talking to my mother and my aunt in recent months, the consensus is that he died of “heart problems,” though the exact nature of those problems isn’t clear.

Indeed, my aunt remembers very little about the time surrounding her father’s death (she was almost 14 at the time). When asked about her father’s death, she said, “According to mother, they said he died of heart failure. So that could be anything. Because we called the ‘poor house’ that’s where he had to go because we had no money. So he died there.” What caused the heart failure is less clear. My aunt didn’t remember illness or distress before his death (“It was kind of sudden. I remember he was there, and then he wasn’t”). When pressed, she attributed the heart failure to the stresses of that portion of his life. “I think worry and stress because he was so worried about, you know, Joe being overseas and everything, and taking care of the rest of the family and all of that. I think it just got to him.” Indeed, my mother very recently told of a conversation she had many years ago with her mother-in-law. My father’s mother recounted that during the war years her husband was often unable to sleep. She would find him staring out a window, smoking, saying “he’s out there, that kid is out there.”

Another explanation for my grandfather's heart failure can be found in my father's letters. In letters sent in the winter through and early summer of 1945, it is clear that there are health and dental problems at home. For example:

- February 13, 1945: "I received word today of your illness, Dad. *Please* get well as soon as possible, Dad – I hope by the time you receive this you will once more be on your feet – down at the shop working & joking with Tom."
- March 12, 1945: "I'm sure you won't have any more trouble after you get those bad teeth out, Dad. Say, you'll have nice bright new teeth when I get home, eh Dad?"
- May 29, 1945: "I hope you get your new teeth soon, Dad – I want to treat you to a big dinner when I get home in July (I hope). Sure like to be home for your birthday."
- June 21, 1945 (the day of the funeral): "Say, Dad, I want you to get those teeth in. Gee, I don't want to come home to a 'toothless' Dad. Besides, I know you'll look and feel a lot better when you have your false teeth. You know, Mom does all right with hers."
- June 27, 1945 (6 days after the funeral): "Received your letter of June 19 yesterday, and was certainly surprised to learn of Dad's being in the hospital. I certainly hope he is better now – you tell him to get those bad teeth out and quit worrying. I think if he did those two things he would be much better."

These dental problems may have directly contributed to the "heart disease" that killed my grandfather. A recent article from the *AARP Bulletin* (Moffat, 2004) advocating for better dental care (and increased dental insurance) for the elderly notes that:

Some researchers believe that that bacteria shed by chronic oral infections can spread through the bloodstream and contribute to disease in the heart and other parts of the body. Other researchers believe that chronic gum infections may trigger a chain of chemical events that causes inflammation – swelling – throughout the body. When plaque lining the arteries become inflamed, blood clots can form, leading to heart attack or stroke.

Of course, this kind of medical research had not been conducted in 1945. Further, it is unlikely that a man who had to receive care at the "Poor House" would have access to even the medical advances that were available at that time. What is clear, though, is that whether the major contributing factor was periodontal disease or the stresses of wartime America, my grandfather died of heart failure on June 19, 1945. My father did not know about his father's death until at least a week after the funeral.

During the time period of my grandfather's illness, my father was involved in several of the most important battles of the late portion of WWII in Europe. He landed in Marseilles, France, in early December, 1944. His unit, the 254th Infantry Unit of the 63rd "Blood and Fire" Division, was a key unit in several important battles – the attainment of the Colmar Pocket (in late January of 1945) and the final break through the Siegfried Line (in mid-March of 1945). A unit history, *The Trail of 254 Thru Blood and Fire*, written by one of my father's buddies (Peel, 1945), recounts the activities of the unit in often heroic terms. Although my father's letters occasionally mention battle (often after the fact in referring his parents to where he was several weeks ago), there are not details of battle activity. This is in part because my father's role as a communications specialist in the message center and on the radio kept him away from the frontline. Indeed, in a letter written Christmas night of 1944, he says:

I've been doing some thinking, and come to the conclusion that I am pretty lucky in some ways. There are a heck of a lot of men lying in foxholes who would love to be sitting by this little stove as I am doing now, typing by the light of a portable generator. I had plenty of food, I have a nice soft straw mattress to retire to, and I am in no immediate danger. From here we can hear guns rolling all the time from the front, but none of it reaches us.

Instead of battle descriptions, my father's letters during this time period recount moving from town to town, often on a daily basis, with long marches and sometimes very uncomfortable conditions. Although there are still consistent references to life at home, these references take on a nostalgic tone rather than the abject homesickness of many stateside letters. Consider this missive from January 9, 1945:

I think about home practically all the time I'm not busy. But, peculiarly, I don't get homesick. Most of the time I reflect warmly about the life I led as a civilian. How you, Dad, used to willingly give me the car on Sunday night to go to a show with J.J.P. (I wonder where he is now – haven't heard from him since I left the States) – about a nice warm bath, dressing up in my good suit – picking up John – returning home at 12 or 1 o'clock & tossing the keys on the table downstairs. And, naturally, as every other doughboy does, I dream of a soft bed, a hot shower, plenty of good food, Pepsi-Cola – and mostly you folks, the ones I love most in this screwed-up world.

The letters of this time period also clearly show that my father is much less judgmental about the behavior of his fellow soldiers. He no longer passes moral judgment for lewd interest in women or for drinking. In fact, on March 24 he notes that, "I even went so far as to drink a glass of beer to wash down the French Fries." The largest shift in his letters, however, can be seen by examining his correspondence during the period after his father's death in June of 1945. The next section of this paper considers markers of "manhood" in these letters.

The War Letters

When I first began examining my father's war letters, I was startled by the content and tone of his letters in the summer of 1945. During this period, the hostilities in Europe were officially ended and my father was engaged in "mopping-up" operations in Germany and stationed with the Army of Occupation in France. Thus, there was much less to write about the "business of war" than in earlier correspondence. Further, given the close relationship between my father and his father evident in earlier letters, I would have expected the news of his father's death to hit my father *very* hard as it was clearly unexpected.⁴ Moreover, my father's ongoing letters had been quite open and had not shown any shyness about expressing feelings. However, the letters from the summer of 1945 include absolutely no "processing" of his father's death.⁵ There are only two letters in this period that suggest any type of mourning, and these references are either off-hand or oblique:

July 7, 1945 (while on leave in Paris): As you women would say, the "shoppes" in Paris are "exquisite." Cool, with deep rugs, columns of mirrors and all glass display cases. And it's always quiet. And the prices are sky high. I saw what would be perhaps \$20 handbags in the states selling for \$120 here. The cheapest perfume is around \$8 – 10 per bottle. And they sell some of the most ultrathin hankies I've ever seen. And there are a lot of pipe stores. If Dad were still with us, I'd certainly have purchased one for him. Gee, I know Dad would have loved to hear about Paris.

July 14, 1945: I'm enclosing a letter I got from Claudine a few days ago. I think it is one of the most beautiful letters I have ever received. Believe me, coming when it did, it was certainly appreciated, too.

Later in same letter: By the way, do you know something? I love my family so.

A major shift in tone and content of my father's letters occurs after his father's death, however. This difference clearly involves the notion of taking on the mantle of "man of family" and is manifest in several ways. First, the letters deal quite frequently with the details of money and possessions that follow a death and with the possibility of a hardship discharge. For example, on July 15, 1945, he writes, "By the way, what do you plan on doing with the car? Selling it, or keeping it and letting PC drive it?" On August 15, 1945, he writes, "As for that account of mine – I want you and Judy to have enough for everything you need. If necessary, don't hesitate to use it." On August 31, 1945, he writes, "Received

⁴Although there had been references to the dental problems, my father clearly thought these were minor issues. Further, actuarial tables indicate that a man of my grandfather's age in 1940 could have expected to live at least 20 more years.

⁵It is possible, of course, that there were letters that included this kind of content that were not saved or were saved in a different place and have now been lost. However, given the diligence with which my grandmother gathered and saved the letters (and then passed them on to her son) I think this is unlikely.

the affidavits, etc., today ... and at present deem it advisable to just hang on to the papers and not take any action till I see how the point system is going to work out. If I took a discharge on those papers, it would not be possible to go back to school right away.” And on September 18, he spends a long paragraph explaining the ways in which his father’s death influenced various pay systems and allotment checks.

A second major content area of my father’s letters following his father’s death is the issue of his mother’s employment. My grandfather’s death left my grandmother with a number of debts and the continuing responsibility for a 14-year-old daughter. Not surprisingly, she found it necessary to go to work. However, my father was clearly not happy with this decision, and he discusses his mother’s employment often in his letters during his last months in Europe. His tone varies in these comments – sometimes discouraging, sometimes jocular, sometimes patronizing – but it is clear that he has taken his role as “man of the family” to heart and feels that it is appropriate to pass judgment on his mother’s employment activities. Consider the following excerpts:

- July 21, 1945: I reiterate my statement in previous letters (How you like those 10 buck words?) you do not go to work, Mom. Doggone it, do you think I want my Mom working?
- August 22, 1945: Mom, I don’t think you’d better go to work. As you say in the latest letter, there is too much for you to do at home to afford to go to work.
- August 31, 1945: So you are going to work? I don’t like that, but inasmuch as I am here and you are in Urbana, there isn’t much I can do about it. I really don’t believe you should, though, Mom.
- September 7, 1945: So you’re a sales clerk now, Mom. Just turn on that old personality of yours, and I’m sure you’re bound to charm the most particular customer into buying your goods. By the way, what do you sell?
- October 3, 1945: Listen, Mom, if you can’t get a decent job, don’t take one at all. Let’s have no more of this “dishwasher” nonsense. I don’t see any reason why you can’t be one of the “estimated ten million unemployed in the United States.”
- November, 26, 1945: You know, Mom, somehow you never struck me as being the type of woman to make a good light-bracket or heating element wrapper. What do you wrap these things in – just regular paper?
- December 19, 1945: I want to see some of the satin jerseys you make when you get home, Mom. I’ll bet they are the best made in the shop.

The letters during this period also indicate his newfound family role in the way he addresses his younger sister. For example, he talks about the need to

take care of his sister, and he even offers to pay her for good grades on her report card. In a letter dated September 27, 1945, he takes on this role (and shows off a bit): “Mom tells me you are studying about King Tutankhamen (only she said Tut) of Egypt, Judy. If I were home I might give you a little help, but I sure wouldn’t write it for you. The only way you can learn anything is by doing it.”

Finally, my father’s letters during this period communicated to his mother that he had matured in many ways, and that he understood the world beyond rural Illinois. For example, after exchanging letters with his older sister about a racy novel of the time, he writes to his mother, “So, you think *Forever Amber* is trash, Mom? But you’d like to read it, though, wouldn’t you, Mom? Haven’t you heard, your son is a big boy, now, who does not blush easily due to a year and a half of army life.” And, on September 27, 1945, he explains to his mother why the Army employed many civilian English women in post-war Europe:

You seem concerned about the English girls, Mom, so I’ll tell you exactly why the U.S. army hired them at high prices, when they have beaucoups men in the army and beaucoups French girls who would work at much lower prices. These English girls get officers’ privileges for doing enlisted man’s work. And that is what they were hired for, as anyone with any sense can figure out. To provide entertainment for the brass, if you know what I mean.

Thus, my father’s correspondence to his mother in the final months of his time in Europe indicates that he has matured in several ways. As a man, he now understands the sometimes unseemly ways of the world. As a man, he is able to deal efficiently with the bureaucracy of army paperwork and with economic decisions. And as a man, he is willing and able to take responsibility for his mother and his young sister.

DISCUSSION

The transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood can be marked in many ways. Some of these are seen as “natural” processes in the life history of an individual and a family – going away to college, getting a full-time job, marrying, the birth of a child. At other times, there is a rupture in family life that is the catalyst for such a transition – death or serious illness, major financial problems. Further, these family transitions take place within a cultural, political, and economic context. “Growing up” is a very different experience for individuals of different socioeconomic strata, of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and at different historical periods. Consider, for example, the contrast in the transition between childhood and adulthood for a child in the sweatshop culture of the industrial revolution, for a baby

boom child in the American suburbs, and for a child today in war-torn Iraq. Clearly, the events in our lives are tempered by the times and places where we live.

For my father, the transition from boyhood to manhood was conditioned by both history and family events. Historically, my father was a child of the Depression, and this clearly influenced his ideas of what it meant to be a man. His earliest memories are of his father looking for work, struggling to keep food on the table. These struggles clearly continued even after my grandfather had achieved his “dream” of owning a printshop, as he died in the “poor house” and left his wife with numerous debts. The historical fact of World War II also impinged on my father’s transition from boyhood to manhood, as he had only one semester of college before the army claimed him. On a personal level, the possibility of a “natural” transition from childhood to adulthood was negated by the sudden death of his father. As the only son in the family, it was clear that my father needed to take on the trappings of manhood.

Research on the process of “growing up” provides several alternatives for constructions of manhood that could be adopted given these events. For example, scholarship considering the effects of the Great Depression on the transition from youth to adulthood (Scheibach, 1985; Suzik, 1999) suggests that because men had been “demoralized” by economic hardship in the 1930s, the transition to manhood came to be defined largely through the ability to work, especially in manual labor. As Suzik (1999) argues in his analysis of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930s:

Learning to work, therefore, remained the determining factor in a boy’s transition into manhood. Bigger bodies might make men feel more manly; but work, quite simply, made one a man. The overwhelming emphasis on the value of work – and, in this case, on low skill-level manual labor – reveals how narrowly the socially acceptable roles for working-class men were defined. If a man were not a worker or a man were not a provider, then that man could not really be a man at all (p. 168).

World War II, as well, offered alternative constructions of manhood for those growing up in that era. For those left working in the factories of the home front, a version of “rough manhood” developed in the aggressive subculture of manufacturing and industry (Meyer, 2002). Jarvis (2004) argues that the vision of American masculinity during World War II was shaped by images of the soldier’s youthful, muscular, and typically white body. She argues that this embodied construction contributed to “the creation and maintenance of a hegemonic militarized masculinity that emerged in and across U.S. institutions” (Jarvis, 2004, p. 8). Susan Faludi, in her book *Stiffed* (1999), argues that the most prevalent construction of manhood during World War II was the one propagated by Ernie Pyle in his writings from the front. His columns from

Europe downplayed the glamorous “flyboy” in favor of the beleaguered private in the foxhole. As Faludi writes:

Pyle’s view became the official one. Government radio propaganda dubbed the conflict the “little guys’ war.” At war’s end, General Dwight D. Eisenhower pronounced: “All in that gigantic fighting machine agree in the selection of the one truly heroic figure in that war. He is GI Joe . . . He and his platoon leaders have given us an example of loyalty, devotion to duty, and indomitable courage that will live in our hearts as long as we admire those qualities in men.” By Eisenhower’s voice and Pyle’s typewriter, the foot soldier was elevated into a masculine emblem – a man who proved his virility not by individual feats of showy heroism but by being quietly *useful* in conducting a war and supporting the welfare of his unit (Faludi, 1999, p. 17).

The literature on father-son relationships also provides useful insights into my father’s transition from “boy” to “man.” My father’s relationship with his father was a very close and affectionate one, which was perhaps typical of the early part of the 20th century that Marsh (1990) has labeled a period of “masculine domesticity.” This close relationship – and the amount of time my father spent with his father – bodes well for my father’s development. As Morman and Floyd (2002, p. 396) summarize, “a growing body of research indicates that men who are actively involved in raising their sons can have an overwhelmingly positive impact on the life course their sons pursue.” Indeed, though Kindlon and Thompson (1999) found that most men want to do a “better” job in parenthood than their father, my dad expressed in his letter that if he could only do as well in life as his father, he would have a truly admirable life.

Finally, scholarship on parental death offers an additional view of the transition into adulthood. For example, Petersen and Rafuls (1999) write about parent death as a time in which the child “receives the scepter” and assumes a leadership role in the larger family system. They write that “fulfilling their obligations was extremely important to most of the participants” in their research (Petersen & Rafuls, 1999, p. 514). Umberson (2003) discusses parent death as a time of reflection and re-evaluation in which the child must create a new identity as a fatherless, motherless, or orphaned adult.

For my father, a confluence of several of these factors clearly defined his transition from boyhood to manhood. Given his childhood experiences in the depression and his close relationship with his father, the notion of taking care of family was an important facet of my father’s developing definition of manhood. In terms of war experience, my father largely rejected the hyper-masculine version of manhood and embraced the hard-working vision of Ernie Pyle though in a less idealized form than the classic “GI Joe” persona promoted during and immediately after the war. Further, my father in some ways embraced the notion

of “taking on the scepter” after his father’s death, but clearly did not have the time (or perhaps maturity) to engage in much self-reflection about the meaning of that new adult role. These ideas of care-taking, hard work, and duty to family coalesced for my father into what I believe defined his idea of “manhood” throughout his life – the concept of *responsibility*.

As my father entered into manhood during and after the war, as he and my mother raised their family of four daughters, and as those daughters were launched into their adult lives, he clearly defined manhood as an acceptance of responsibility for self and family. This responsibility was multifaceted. Responsibility meant behaving in a “moral” way. Responsibility meant taking care of others. Responsibility meant owning up to obligations. Responsibility meant disciplining these values in others. These various meanings of responsibility permeated the rest of his life through his decisions about child-rearing, family economics, friendship, and politics. Though he had only a few close friends, those friendships were marked by fierce loyalty.⁶ Throughout his life, he carefully tracked family finances, to the point of recording every purchase made during early retirement. And I recall the great pride my father showed in talking about his four eventual sons-in-law (after two of us had first husbands that he clearly did not like). His pride in these men was in their sense of responsibility to their wives, themselves, and their children. These were men he was proud to have as part of his family.

Of course, this identity and these beliefs about manhood were not held without change or contradiction. Though in his early adulthood my father felt it was his responsibility to take care of his mother and derided her need and desire to work, in his marriage, politics, and family, my father clearly valued the role of women in the workplace and encouraged his daughters to aspire to successful careers. Thus, he held his view of responsible manhood in conjunction with a view of independent (and responsible) womanhood. And though in early manhood his beliefs about responsibility led him to eschew alcohol, during his working years he drank socially and during his retirement developed a dependency on alcohol that proved troublesome to self and family.

But throughout his life, my father maintained the core of his beliefs about manhood developed through his depression childhood, his war experiences, and the sudden death of his father. His belief in the importance of responsibility endured and his life experiences reflected that belief. Recall the words from my father’s birthday letter to his father: “You know, Dad if I can only be as

⁶The concept of “loyalty” as central to war-related definitions of manhood has also been noted by Nielsen in an analysis of the ideology of patriotism in the “Red Scare” that followed World War I. Nielsen (2004, p. 240) notes that “[t]hose who defined themselves as patriots praised forms of masculine patriotism that exalted loyalty to family, loyalty to war veterans, and loyalty to employer as the traits of an ideal male citizen.”

good a man as you are someday, I'll consider myself a success in this world – because with me YOU'RE a tremendous success. I hope I've lived up to your expectations as a son. I know I'm no good as a soldier, but I hope you still consider me o.k. as a son." I think there's little doubt that in seeing the value for responsibility held throughout his life, my grandfather would have judged my dad as even better than "o.k."

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