

Bernice Delores Slawter

Brief Memories of a Long Life

A eulogy given by Bruce D. Slawter during his mother's graveside memorial service at Los Angeles National Cemetery, December 9, 2010

I'd like to share with you a little about Mom's family background and some of the events in her long life. Perhaps it will help us understand her a little better and appreciate the values that she lived by and passed on to her family.

Bernice Delores Lewis Slawter was born in rural Atwood, Kansas, in 1924. Her mother, Martha, was an American-born daughter of two German immigrants who had come to the United States from Brandenburg-Prussia, prior to the unification of Germany. Her father, Don Lewis, was the son of William Lewis, an immigrant from Wales. William had come over to the U.S. at the age of 14 during the years right after the American Civil War. Don (my grandfather) was born in a sod dugout in Ludell, Kansas, after his parents had moved to the "Great Prairie" from Pennsylvania. The Lewises considered themselves pioneers in a new land, and Will "the immigrant" later became a successful judge and was elected several times to the Kansas state legislature.

The Lewis family originated from the coal mining region of southeastern Wales. At times, their work was no doubt in support of the mining operations; but the men of the family were usually listed on the censuses as "hoopmakers" or "woodsmen."

While researching the history of late 18th Century Wales several years ago, I discovered that these old Welsh "hoopmakers" did *not* make barrels or hoops for women's skirts as later members of the Lewis family had come to believe. Hoopmakers in fact produced, through their highly sought-after skills, the *nautical* hoops used to rig the masts of British warships. These woodsmen and hoopmakers possessed the necessary knowledge and proficiency to pick out the right type of trees from the forests and fashion the lumber with steam instruments into durable products; moreover, they had to exhibit a great deal of precision in their work. The nautical hoops that these early Lewis men crafted in Wales provided one of the technological advantages that helped the Royal Navy retain its naval supremacy during the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Don Lewis, Bernice's father and my grandfather, was initially a farmer in Kansas; however, his farm eventually failed during the disastrous dust bowl of the 1930s, as did the farms of many others living on the Great Plains. Don managed to keep his family fed while working in several other lines of work, such as serving as a deputy sheriff and a laborer for the railroad. It's interesting to note that Don Lewis's final vocation when he moved to the state of Washington many years later was making furniture. So you might conclude that he ended up relying on the innate Lewis talent working with wood in order to pay the bills before he entered retirement.

The Welsh are known for their love of music – especially singing in groups. According to my mom, her father did play the piano (and probably sang); and this love of a strong melodic strain was passed on to his children and successive generations.

Now, you're probably wondering where I am going with all this family history. The answer is that, as I see it, these simple family virtues – a sense of responsibility, persistence, honesty, and precision when taking on new challenges (whether working with hardwoods or just dealing with life's hard knocks), and a love of good music – best characterize those values which Bernice cherished the most.

Some of you may know that Bernice loved to sing when she was younger. She evidently received a lion's share of her family's talent in this respect, singing with a clear, pure voice and learning how to play the piano. I still remember Mom playing some of Jerome Kern's songs at night to lull my brother and me to sleep.

Bernice really enjoyed performing in a "girls trio" when she was in high school, and she continued with that passion during her brief flirtation with college.

She was also thrilled to have lived through the "big band" era – and took great pleasure in all the dancing associated with that period. After my dad died in 1975, she picked up ballroom dancing again for several years, and enjoyed that pursuit immensely.

Mom recently told me how, once upon a time, she had been asked to audition for one of the big bands as they passed through the Tacoma area in the 1940s. Due to happenstance, she missed that audition, and the band moved on. She said that she always wondered how her life might have been – if she had been hired as that band's vocalist.

Bernice was very proud of her role building B-17 bombers during the Second World War. She was the quintessential "Rosy the Riveter" – a well-known icon symbolizing factory workers eager to do their bit on the home front. In the summer of 1944, Bernice was selected in a beauty contest of sorts to christen one of the first B-17s assembled at a satellite Boeing facility – a plane dubbed "Miss Tacoma."

About a year ago, Mom began pestering me – in a kidding way (that is, I think she was kidding, as one didn't always know) – to "use my influence" as a former Air Force officer to find out what happened to "her" plane.

Over the subsequent months, I went about gathering information about *Miss Tacoma* – such as the aircraft's tail number, the unit to which it was assigned, and some of the overseas combat missions it flew. I exchanged e-mails with both the Boeing historian and the Air Force Office of History. I gathered together a number of photos from various sources (including my aunts).

Mom continued to prod me over the months, and I kept up the illusion that I was completely disinterested in doing the research, as the detective work continued.

Finally, last June, during one of several visits I made out to California over the last year, I steered one late evening's conversation back to her experiences in Tacoma during World War II.

As she was laying on her couch (which had become her bed during the last few years of her life), she suddenly perked up and spent about 30-45 minutes relating to me all the stories of her youth – which of course, I had already heard several times over.

I listened. . . I marked my time.

Finally, she got around to the part about being chosen to christen *Miss Tacoma*. She paused for a brief moment and said once again with a look as if she were trying to combine a joke with a bit of scolding, “Gee, Bruce, why can't you find out what happened to *my* plane?”

I replied to her: “Mom, just hold that thought.”

I then went back to a bedroom to retrieve the presentation I had assembled, which I titled “The Saga of Miss Tacoma.” The book (which was more like an album) presented – through photos, maps, and a narrative – the story of “her” plane as it was deployed to the European theater during World War II.

Mom's jaw dropped as I returned to the living room and handed her the album. She burst out, “Bruce, why did you let me go on like that?” I just grinned.

She read through the presentation with studied interest. You could tell she was really pleased.

The “book” included information about the aircraft's assignment to Sudbury Station in the United Kingdom during the summer of 1944. It featured a portion about a particular bombing mission the aircraft flew to Germany on New Years Eve 1944/1945, which included the list of its aircrew members, a map of its route to Germany and back, and several photos. I chose to highlight that specific flight of *Miss Tacoma* because I thought that Mom was probably out dancing that night at some Big Band concert and would surely remember this last New Year's Eve bash of the war.

When she got to that part in the album, I ventured to ask Mom whether she recalled what she was doing that night of December 31, 1944, when her aircraft was on its combat raid to Germany.

She replied, “I haven't the foggiest idea.”

I then said laconically, “Gee, Mom, that must have been *some* New Years Eve party.” She laughed.

A few minutes later, as she was slowly reading aloud each crew member's name, she silently stopped – and gently touched the list of “bygone boys” with a solemn gesture of reverence. I'd like to think that, at that moment, she imagined her life as having come full circle.

As she approached the end of the album, she noted a welcomed statement from the Boeing historian that I had been working with, thanking her for her service.

I will never forget what happened when she read a passage just before that. . . which I had intentionally written to sound like one of hundreds of military citations I had seen (or written) during my Air Force career. She grinned with pride from ear-to-ear when she read it:

With various sections of the airframe secured precisely by Boeing riveters such as Bernice Lewis, "Miss Tacoma" managed to withstand the brutal effects of enemy fire, and always brought her crews safely home.

Mom suddenly looked up at me with a stern look and said, “Bruce, you must have made that part up.”

I remained silent. After a few moments, I replied “Yes, Mom; the aircrews that flew your plane *always* made it back.”

Mom's eyes slowly descended back to the page. As she re-read the passage, I noticed a pleasant half-smile forming on her face. . . . then a barely discernable nod, as if she were agreeing with a quiet confidence that the compliment was indeed justified.

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I'd like to close my remarks with one final item. As you all know, Bernice's top priority was her family, and she always tried to help us in various ways.

Some of you may know that I continue to pursue many seemingly unrelated interests, and that I have managed to head off in several unusual vocational and avocational directions during my lifetime. I suppose that this characteristic of mine is due in no small measure to Mom always encouraging me to seek out new experiences when I was growing up – that is, as long as they were legal, moral, and honest.

As I remember, whenever I became excited about some concept which one might consider a bit odd for a typical teenager – interests ranging from seeing a Shakespeare play, to getting into an archery class, to learning about aviation – that she always indulged me. She tried her best to gather more information; and she always instilled in me a sense of optimism that, in this country, nothing was out of anyone's reach.

Growing up riding my bike with friends through seemingly endless rows of airplanes parked at an airport located two blocks from our house, I always dreamed of

becoming a pilot. Given our family's humble means, I knew early on that the only pathway to fulfilling this dream was through the military. While Mom encouraged me, I noticed my dad always seeming dismissive of this notion of becoming a military pilot. Years later I understood why.

As a senior in high school, I was offered an appointment to the Air Force Academy. That was right during the middle of the Vietnam conflict, about the same time as the Tet Offensive. It was highly probable that I would eventually find myself in that or another war (and I did end up flying a dozen combat missions in Vietnam at the very tail end of the conflict). Mom was nevertheless supportive of me going into the service; but I don't recall Dad speaking to me for months after I accepted the appointment. Then slowly understanding of the world-class education I was receiving and with Mom's unswerving support, Dad eventually became a proud parent as well, attending key milestone events in my early career, such as Academy and pilot training graduations, with great joy.

While Mom always "kept the faith," I later realized how worried Dad was about my decision to follow a military career, and I began to see why. "Bernie" was a World War II vet and had fought across the Pacific after being called up in his mid-30s, which was rather late in life for a draftee. In 1944, he nearly had been blown to bits when his vehicle hit a mine during the invasion of the island of Leyte. Left for dead, burial personnel noticed his hand twitching as they were digging his temporary battlefield grave. With the help of a lot of prayer and the army medical corps, Dad eventually recovered; but it took him a very long time to get back to normal. After enduring several operations to repair a couple of lost ribs and remove shrapnel from his torso, followed by months of rehabilitation, he was finally discharged from the Army at the end of the war.

Years later, Dad followed my deployment to southeast Asia in 1975 with great interest (no doubt praying throughout). He and Mom drove several hours across southern California to see me the day after I returned from Vietnam. He was overjoyed that I had escaped combat without a scratch. Insisting that he had to get back to his small auto repair shop for his expectant customers, he and Mom drove back home later that night.

The next day, I received a phone call that Dad had passed on.

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During our final conversation, just before Mom slipped into the last stage of her journey, I reminded her about this earlier time in our relationship. I thanked her for always supporting my decisions; for never poking fun at my enquiries and pursuits when I was a kid; for always encouraging me; and for doing what she could to help me get the information I needed by looking things up, taking me to museums, and dropping me off at different libraries.

She said that she really appreciated me mentioning this. "I wasn't an educated woman," she concluded, "but I tried, I really did try."