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Life Review of
Boyd G. [REDACTED]

by

[REDACTED]

Good
introduction

Author's Note: My subject for this life review project was Boyd G. (Jack) [REDACTED]. Jack turns 72 in a few days, but looks closer to 60. He is tall and trim, and has a healthy, distinguishing head of gray hair. He's cheerful and possesses a ready sense of humor, making it a pleasure to interview and write about him. He made my work easy, in that he is alert, articulate, and has an excellent memory.

Boyd G. [REDACTED] was born February 26, 1922, in Des Moines, Iowa, the first child and only son to Boyd L. and Lora Agnes (Evans) [REDACTED]. His parents, originally from the farming regions near Cape Girardeau, Missouri, had been married only a few weeks before going to Des Moines where his father was enrolled in government sponsored educational courses for disabled World War I veterans. Four years earlier, Boyd L. had suffered a total permanent loss of hearing when stricken with spinal meningitis while serving as a private in the U.S. Army. He had already completed studies in lip reading and sign language; now he was going to learn about agriculture so that he might make a living at farming.

The family returned to Missouri later that year and settled in Farmington, where Boyd Sr. completed two years of farming and agricultural studies under government auspices. Afterwards, he raised chickens and supplemented his WWI disability pension by doing carpentry work. He also provided agriculture and poultry assistance to local farmers, often without pay. His wife Lora held occasional jobs of nursing, cooking, and housework to bolster the family income. In December 1923, a daughter Naomi Dean was born. A second daughter, Wanda Colleen, was born seven years later.

Boyd G., nicknamed "Jack" after an uncle, attended public schools in Farmington. Admittedly, he was no whiz kid in the classroom, but he liked group singing, class plays, and marbles and baseball at recess. After school he and his friends would skate on a frozen St. Francis River, and then rush home to hot cocoa. On weekends he went to the town's only movie house. There he would sit on the floor, up front by the piano, and be fascinated by the silent movies. Like most kids, he especially enjoyed the summers. He recalls camping and hunting, fishing in a clear stream, family picnics "with no one else around for miles," county fairs, berry picking, church-sponsored weenie roasts with large bonfires, horseback riding (mostly bareback), and his favorite sport of baseball. And he remembers how he and his friends would run through the fields

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of neighboring farms, where they would break open large, ripe, watermelons still planted in the earth. "Nothing ever tasted so cool and so sweet."

From the age of 7, Jack held odd jobs such as delivering newspapers, selling magazine subscriptions (Colliers and Saturday Evening Post) door-to-door, peddling sassafras for 5¢ a bunch, delivering milk by means of a horse-drawn wagon, and polishing the merry-go-round for summer traveling carnivals that came to town. This is how he earned the money for his first airplane ride when he was 8 years old -- in an open cockpit of a barnstormer's biplane. He recalls it cost \$5 for 10 minutes of flight.

Jack had boyhood dreams of becoming an opera singer, but gave up the ambition after a bout with the whooping cough which affected his vocal range. That's when he switched his ambition to becoming a major league baseball player. He practiced and played every chance he could. The most exciting day he remembers from his childhood was the trip to St. Louis with his dad to see Babe Ruth and the New York Yankees play the St. Louis Browns at Sportman's Park in 1929.

Upon the insistence of his parents, he took piano lessons for two years. They finally relented and permitted him to switch to the clarinet, which led to his playing with the town band. Among his fondest memories of these times in Farmington were the concerts his band gave on the town's Court House lawn and at the annual County Fair. He recalled, "I thought we were pretty good, but no one ever told me so."

Several historical events occurred during these times, which Jack remembers well. In 1927, the whole world was following the celebrated Lindbergh solo Atlantic flight from New York to Paris ~~in 1927~~. That same year, Jack and his family excitedly listened to the Dempsey-Tunney fight on the radio, along with much of the rest of the nation. And he has a clear recollection of accompanying his mother to purchase a newspaper with front page headlines, "Hoover Wins Over Coolidge," announcing her favorite GOP candidate's victory for the U.S. Presidency in 1928.

Jack's dad was having health complications as a result of the spinal meningitis he had suffered while in the army. So, to be near the veterans hospital, the family moved to St. Louis in 1934 when Jack was 11. They would remain there for the rest of Jack's adolescent years, living in

rental flats in south St. Louis. Jack maintains that this was the saddest time of his early life. He missed his friends and classmates back in Farmington, and his pet calf, two white rabbits, and two pigs. He missed the woods, the never-ending summers, and the smells and sounds of the country. Most of all, he missed the security of "home."

But in time, Jack adjusted. He and his sisters attended public school and made new friends. Like most young adolescents in those times, Jack spent much of his time playing sports, going to the movies, and just "hanging out." Baseball continued to be his favorite game, and he still dreamt about playing major league some day. That ambition escalated even more when he helped root on the St. Louis Cardinals (Gas House Gang) at the 1934 World Series against the Detroit Tigers.

A typical evening at home would be spent with the family gathered around the radio. In this fashion, he remembers hearing the live broadcasts of the crash of the German dirigible Hindenburg in 1937, and the skuttling of the German pocket battleship Graf Spee in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1939 (Three years later, Jack's ship would pass within a few hundred yards of the rusting hulk which was still resting in mud on the River Plate). His favorite radio shows were the evening coast-to-coast ~~radio~~ network broadcasts of "Big Bands" -- and Jack became the "#1 Fan of Artie Shaw."

To supplement the family's income, which consisted on ^{of??} his father's disability pension and his mother's earnings from occasional jobs, Jack worked weekends and after school. He was an errand boy, grocery store clerk, and produce truck peddler. He recalled, "On Saturdays I went to work on the produce truck at 4:30 a.m. and got home around 9 p.m. Once my boss gave me a Christmas bonus with my day's pay. The total, both pay and bonus, was \$3.50." He also worked as a popcorn boy in a neighborhood theater, where he developed a love for the big screen movies, and a special fondness for the grand MGM musicals. His favorite star was (and still is) Fred Astair.

Jack completed high school in June 1940. At that time, joining the service right after high school was common for those without the money or inclination to go onto college. The military was an opportunity to earn a living, see the world, and learn a trade or skill. So, days after

graduation, Jack left for the U.S. Naval Training station in Great Lakes, Illinois, to begin a six-year active duty tour. Jack remembers his navy days fondly, and with surprising clarity and accuracy. His first sea-duty was on the USS Milwaukee, a light cruiser which visited Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. While there he was able to board ships like the USS Oklahoma and New Mexico and the cruiser Minneapolis to see old friends. Two of those friends would be lost a year later when the Oklahoma capsized during the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941.

His ship then joined the Atlantic fleet and performed neutrality patrols out of Recife, Brazil. This duty included searching for Axis blockade runners (two were captured) and protecting the shipping lanes from German U-Boats. On a number of occasions, submarines were detected and depth-charged by accompanying destroyers.

Later, Jack was assigned to the USS Memphis, flagship of the South Atlantic Squadron, which took him to Bahia (Sao Salvadore); Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (about which Jack remarks, "It is truly the most beautiful place in the world."); Montevideo, Uruguay; Lagos, Nigeria; the Canary Islands; and Ascension Island. He was then assigned to the destroyer Claxton in the Southwest Pacific Theater. Here he experienced a great deal of action in the Solomon Islands where the squadron earned a Presidential Unit Citation -- the only destroyer squadron to do so in WWII.

Shore leaves and extended leaves were always special and greatly anticipated. The sailors went all out to enjoy them. Jack fondly recalls USO dances featuring the big band sound and jitterbug dancing, the bustle of train stations crowded with service men and their loved ones, 5¢ beers, the friendliness of strangers toward servicemen, and the feeling of "always wanting to get home."

Jack ended his naval career aboard the light cruiser USS Vicksburg which served at Leyte Gulf, Philippines; Iwo Jima; and Okinawa. When the Japanese surrender was signed aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay in September 1945, the Vicksburg was just off the Japanese coast and entered the harbor the following day.

His saddest recollection of the war occurred while he was aboard the USS Memphis in the South Atlantic ocean: The BBC broadcast announcing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Conversely, he vividly recalls the happiest, and most noteworthy, event of

those days: The official announcement of the end of WWII with Japan in August 1945.

Jack was 24 when he got out of the navy. Soon after, at the urging of an old navy buddy, he traveled to Patlaka, Florida, to try out for a New York Giant affiliate team. To his disappointment, he didn't make it. "But," he recalls, "At least I gave it a shot, and that's all you can do." So, he returned to St. Louis and his family, and held brief jobs with the U.S. Post Office, Monsanto Chemical Company, and St. Louis Fire and Police Telegraph.

That same year he met Mary Theresa [REDACTED], seven years his junior, at a Christmas party. They were married six months later when she graduated from high school. After living with relatives for a year, they purchased a small bungalow in the west end of St. Louis. Soon after, Jack went to work for the U.S. Army in a civilian capacity. He was to remain there for the next 32 years.

Jack was a marine equipment specialist. He worked with army marine watercraft and equipment, frequently traveling to military installations in the U.S. and overseas. He enjoyed his work. Since his navy days, he had a great love of boats, ships, and salt water. His greatest on-the-job pleasure was working with the soldiers in the field. He recalled, "I liked what I was doing and I wanted to try to help the troops."

Jack and Mary had seven children, four boys and three girls. In the early 60s, they moved to a neat, clean, middle-class neighborhood in south St. Louis county, of which many parts were still somewhat rural. They were glad to "get out of the city," where crime was increasing and neighborhoods were deteriorating.

The next twenty years were spent raising the children, who attended Catholic schools. Although Jack never really had any religious affiliation, Mary was Catholic and there was never any question as to how the children would be raised. At Jack's encouragement, the kids were all active in team sports, especially baseball, softball, football, basketball, and soccer. He spent many an evening and weekend practicing with the them, and often served as a coach for one of their teams.

Mary was always busy with the cleaning, cooking, shopping, laundry, chauffeuring the kids, and, in general, running the household. In retrospect, Jack joked, "I was the lucky

one...getting out of the house and away from the kids for 8 hours a day."

There were, of course, the usual worries, disappointments, and distress that go with parenthood. As youngsters, the kids endured their share of the usual childhood diseases, cuts, bruises, and broken bones. There were plenty of disagreements over the years...between children and parents, sibling and sibling, and parent and parent. And, there were times Jack and Mary didn't think they were going to make it: "The teen years were the worst. And we had to go through them seven times!"

Jack remembers the best times to be those when the family was well and together: holidays, birthdays, picnics, sports events, annual days/trips to his old hometown of Farmington, and other family-centered events.

The worst times came with the untimely deaths of family members, friends, and relatives. Jack's youngest sister, Colleen, with whom he had always been close, died from cancer in the mid 70s while in her early 40s. His oldest son, Jack Jr., was killed in an accident in 1979 when he was 32. His youngest daughter, Elizabeth, succumbed to leukemia in 1984 at the age of 21 after a painful, year-long struggle. Jack's mother passed away in 1983; his father died in 1986 at the age of 93.

In 1979, Jack retired at the age of 57. Retirement took a little getting used to at first, but it wasn't a lengthy adjustment. During his fifteen years of retired life, Jack has been able to pursue hobbies and past-times he seldom had time for during his career. The children are all living on their own now, so he and Mary enjoy the freedom, quiet time, and slower pace of their days. Jack leisurely pours over the daily newspaper. He's an avid reader of historical books dealing with the U.S. military (especially the navy), and enjoys watching old movies. They both watch CNN, following current events closely. And, there are still a lot of family activities. Of the five remaining children, all but one are living within a few miles. They visit often. Most Sundays are still spent focused around Sunday dinner. There are four grandchildren, all boys, ranging in ages from 2 to 19. The oldest grandson enjoys hearing Jack's navy stories. The men in the family spend much time watching and discussing sports.

Since Jack's retirement, he and Mary have traveled frequently to U.S. coastal cities where

they tour historical sites, maritime museums, and national monuments. They also visit their son and his family in Los Angeles each year.

Much of Jack's time today is still devoted to the military. In recent years, he has joined several WWII naval veteran organizations, including the Tin Can Sailors and ship and squadron reunion committees. He made his first reunion several months ago in San Diego: "It was an emotional roller coaster, a bittersweet experience. I wasn't quite ready for it. Suddenly I was 22 years old again, out on the sea with these shipmates of mine." But now he is ~~not~~ anxious to attend three more reunions this year. He is also becoming increasingly involved with ship associations by contributing his time to recruit active members and writing articles for newsletters.

Jack thinks often about moving, either back to Farmington, or somewhere with a warmer climate, like Florida. Mary wants to stay in town near the children, but would like to move to a condo. Although the idea of no yardwork appeals to Jack, he won't live "with some stranger just on the other side of the wall." They talk about this subject ~~about~~ every six months or so, and never agree. Mary jokingly suggests that she'll get a condo, and he can go ahead and move back to Farmington. But I suspect he never will, at least outside of his memories.

Excellent
concluding
remarks!!

Author's Note: I am grateful to Boyd G. (Jack) [redacted] for having shared so much of his life with me. When I look at him now, I see so much more than when we sat down to our first interview. I still see the man I interviewed, relaxing in his recliner, cheerfully reminiscing about old times and old friends. But I also see the young 8-year old proudly playing the clarinet at the town concert, and the teenager tapping his feet to big band music. I see the young man on board a ship, shocked and saddened to learn we've just entered the war. I see the young married man and his bride, happy and full of hopes and plans; and a young dad enthusiastically cheering on his boy who's rounding 3rd base. I see the worried father, watching out the window for his teenage daughter, and an older, wiser father grateful that the kids are all on their own. I see the newly retiree, first uncomfortable in this new role, but now enjoying the freedom and leisurely pace of his golden years. I see all of these now as I look at this man, and fortunately for me, I also see my dad.

*I was not really
anticipating this.*

(over)