



Memorials and Memories

by Joseph A. Pratt

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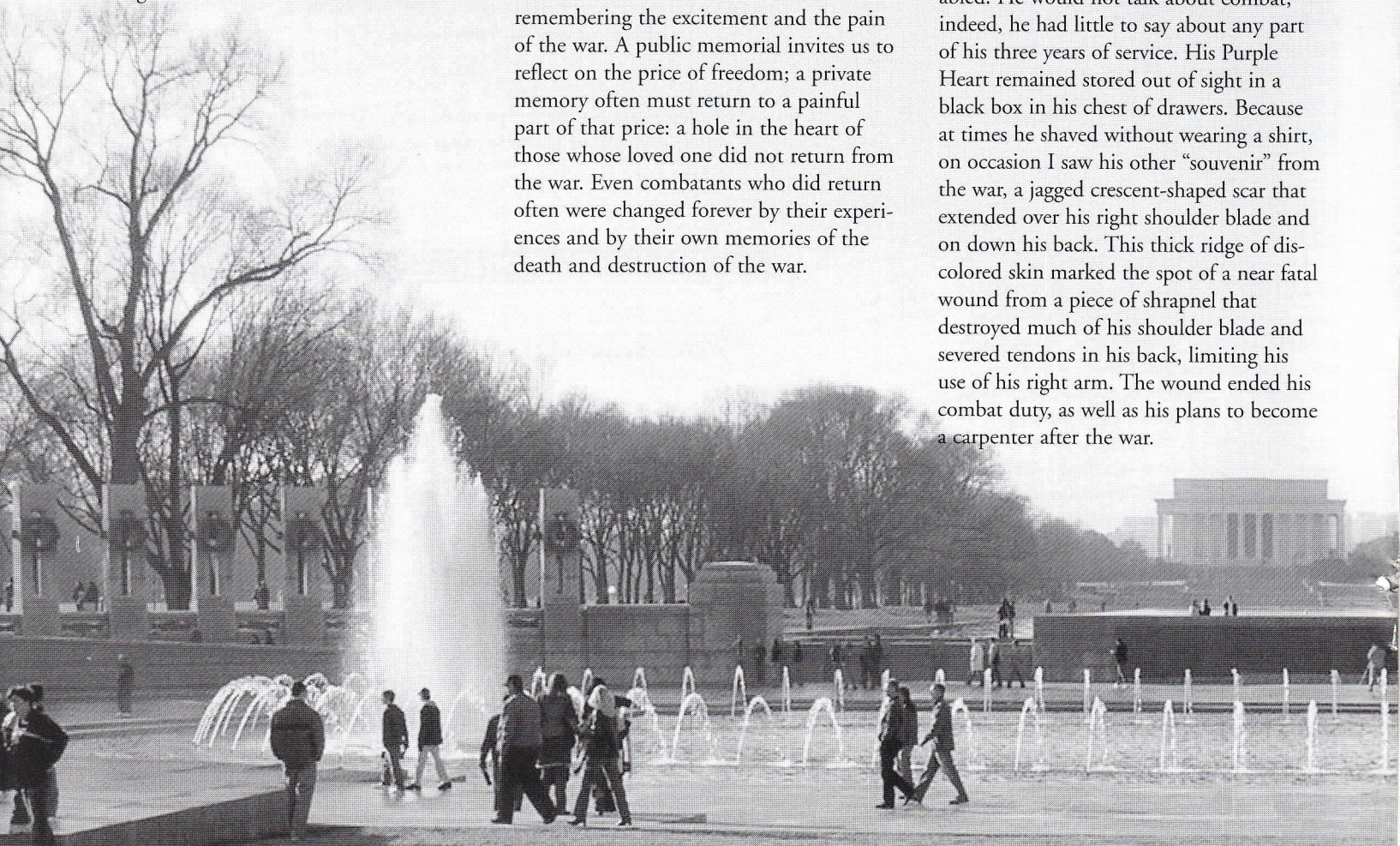
Four hundred thousand Americans died in World War II; an estimated fifty million died worldwide. Millions of others fought in the war and returned home, often with serious physical and mental wounds. The war also altered the lives of most other Americans, since the battle on two fronts around the world required sacrifices at home as well as in the armed services. Sixty years have passed since World War II ended, but its impact on Houston and on Houstonians remains strong. This issue of *The Houston Review*

of History and Culture looks back at our region's memories of World War II, including the memories of those who returned, those who did not, and those who supported our troops on the home front.

Although Houston lacks a major monument to those who served in World War II, we have constructed a variety of war memorials in our region. They remind us of the collective courage of soldiers who "paid the ultimate price" in defense of our liberties. Our private memories honor the sacrifice of individual soldiers while also remembering the excitement and the pain of the war. A public memorial invites us to reflect on the price of freedom; a private memory often must return to a painful part of that price: a hole in the heart of those whose loved one did not return from the war. Even combatants who did return often were changed forever by their experiences and by their own memories of the death and destruction of the war.

Four Who Returned

In my case, understanding the impact of the war meant coming to grips with my dad's experience as an infantryman in combat in France. Once I began to understand my father's refusal to talk about these pivotal years in his life, I also began to see the impact of World War II hovering all around me long after the war had ended. My father came home from France with a serious wound that left him partially disabled. He would not talk about combat; indeed, he had little to say about any part of his three years of service. His Purple Heart remained stored out of sight in a black box in his chest of drawers. Because at times he shaved without wearing a shirt, on occasion I saw his other "souvenir" from the war, a jagged crescent-shaped scar that extended over his right shoulder blade and on down his back. This thick ridge of discolored skin marked the spot of a near fatal wound from a piece of shrapnel that destroyed much of his shoulder blade and severed tendons in his back, limiting his use of his right arm. The wound ended his combat duty, as well as his plans to become a carpenter after the war.



BACKGROUND PHOTO: The new National World War II Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., honors the 16 million who served in the armed forces during the war, the more than 400,000 who died, and the millions who supported the war effort on the home front. Fifty-six pillars stand tall to represent each state and territory that contributed to the war effort. This majestic memorial, constructed of granite and bronze, representing superior strength and durability, is open to the public 24 hours a day.

Before dying of cancer in 1970 at 52, my dad never volunteered information about his wound or his army service. I never asked. It seemed forbidden, closed to me in the same way that I had known without asking as a child that I could never take the Purple Heart out of the drawer and use it to play army. After his death, I quickly went off for active duty in the National Guard before moving away to pursue a career as a historian and a teacher. Even though I taught about World War II in my classes, the personal saga of my dad's experiences in the war remained unknown to me, and somehow still off limits.

This changed in 1997, when I received an invitation to lecture in Delft, Holland. Realizing that this would put me near the places where my dad had spent his tour of duty in France, I decided to retrace some of his steps. To do so, I learned all I could about his service record. His discharge gave me the basics. He had served in the 320th Infantry Regiment, reaching the rank of staff sergeant. He entered the service on January 7, 1942, from a job as a service station attendant. He arrived in Europe on May 27, 1944, and departed on December 27, 1944, after being severely wounded in action on September 29, 1944.

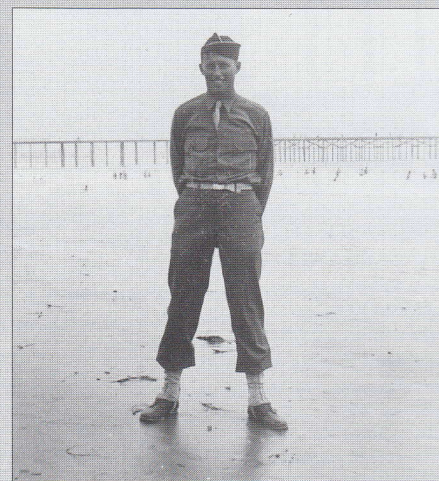
Conversations with his younger brother and sister filled in other facts. A unit history of the 320th written just after the war recounted its training in the states and voy-

age to England and provided a day-to-day account of action by the unit in Europe.¹

Reading the stories about his unit's training solved several small mysteries that remained lodged in my brain from childhood. Some old photographs showed him in his army uniform on a broad, beautiful beach; the unit history placed him in San Luis Obispo, California, where he patrolled the beaches looking for Japanese submarines in 1943. Once as we watched a broadcast of a football game from the Los Angeles Coliseum, he had pointed to a spot in the end zone from which he had watched a football game; this must have happened on a weekend pass while he was stationed near Ventura, California. When I was preparing to go off to college, my dad, who had dropped out of school after the seventh grade during the Depression and who seldom had occasion to visit a college campus, mentioned out of the blue that I should consider Duke University. His unit history recalled fondly a "carefree period" in January 1944 at "pine-treed Camp Butner, North Carolina," where the troops had a "liberal leave policy" and "found Raleigh and Durham pleasant places."

They then enjoyed leaves in New York City before shipping out for Liverpool. Once there they took trains to southern

England to await duty in France. One week into their training, news of the D-Day invasion made clear to them that they were destined for the newly opened front on the Normandy beaches. As they waited to join the action, they visited London on passes, and were inspired by visits by Generals Eisenhower and Patton. Several months later in France, my dad used a short pass to visit recently liberated Paris. Except for a stint in Arizona in a C.C.C. camp in the 1930s, before the war this East Texas country boy had rarely ventured far from Hemphill, Texas. After the war he lived most of his days in the small, hundred-mile wedge of land between Hemphill and Port Neches, Texas. But during the year and a half that ended in September of 1944, he



Woodrow Wilson Pratt patrolling the beach in Ventura, California in July 1942.



traveled across America and sailed the Atlantic while visiting Los Angeles, New York, London, and Paris. The war years provided his one and only true adventure, the highlight of a hard life growing up on the family farm during the Great Depression and then securing shift work in a petrochemical plant after the war, struggling to support a family of five. Why, I wondered, had he never talked with me about these years?

The rest of the unit history answered my question. His great adventure took a dark and deadly turn in July 1944. The 320th sailed across the English Channel, landing on Omaha Beach in Normandy on July 6, a month after D-Day. For the next 85 days, my dad was in combat or preparing for combat. His harsh introduction to the life of a rifleman came quickly. Days after reaching France, his unit was thrown into a fierce ten-day battle in the hedgerows to capture St. Lo.² Moving one small step at a time against entrenched German troops, the 320th suffered heavy casualties before finally taking St. Lo on July 19. After a brief, bloody detour to Mourtain to relieve a "lost battalion" of American troops cut off and surrounded by Germans, the 35th Infantry joined Patton's Third Army as it surged across France.

In August and September, the 35th Infantry took town after town in a sweep south of Paris from Normandy to Orleans to Nancy. "Clearing towns" of enemy troops was a regular challenge. The unit history records that, on at least one occasion, my father's company [consisting of about 100 soldiers] took part in a bayonet charge into machine gun fire, artillery fire, and mortar rounds to capture a town. The unit history quotes one soldier as commenting that the charge was "like Hollywood." Reading this pulled from my memory the only remark I ever heard my dad make about combat. As I watched a John Wayne army movie on late night television as a teenager, he looked at the screen for a moment, muttered "Bullshit," and walked out of the room.

As the advancing Third Army reached Nancy in the northeastern corner of France near the Rhine River, German resistance stiffened and counterattacks intensified. On September 29, in the Gremecey Forest just northeast of Nancy outside the village of Chateau-Salins, soldiers of the 320th sought to clear the woods of Germans. They met "savage opposition" that included

"some of the most severe and accurate shelling of the war."

One of many casualties that day was Staff Sergeant Woodrow Wilson Pratt. One of his "ole army buddies" who visited our family from Arkansas after the war laughed as he supplied a chilling detail. When the shelling stopped, medics tending my dad's mangled body assumed him to be dead, and



"To the children of Chateau-Salins killed in the wars 1914-1918 and 1939-1945."

went on to help other wounded soldiers. Those who came after to collect his dog tags, however, discovered that he was in fact still breathing. He was then quickly evacuated and shipped to a hospital in England. After months in a body cast, he returned to the U.S. a few days after Christmas, about the time the remainder of his old unit joined Patton's tanks in relieving the 101st Airborne to end the German siege of Bastogne. As he began rehabilitation at Fort Sam Houston near San Antonio, the 320th pushed deep into Germany before V-E day.

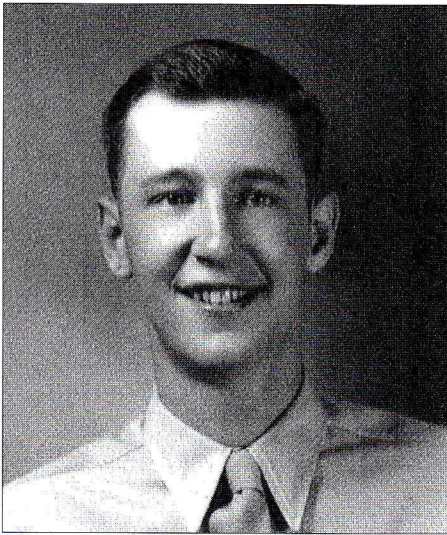
Armed with my newfound information about his unit, I began my quest for the battlefield where my dad had been wounded. A friend from Holland volunteered to drive me on my own adventure down into France. We easily found the town of Chateau-Salins, but the smaller villages listed in the unit history proved difficult to locate. As I searched a map for them while sitting on a bench in the town square, I noticed a small monument. Drawn to it, I found an inscription that gave a sad reminder of the impact of two world wars

on this region: "To the children of Chateau-Salins killed in the wars 1914-1918 and 1939-1945." After finding our bearings, we traveled through several smaller villages on ever-narrowing roads. A one-lane gravel road finally brought us to the northeastern edge of the Gremecey Forest identified in the unit history as the site of the attack on September 29.

I had arrived at the epicenter of my father's life. I could see the line of the artillery fire from the high ground held by the Germans. I could almost see the flight and hear the sound of the artillery shell. One click more on the artillery, and my dad might have fought his way into Germany and returned home injury free. A half step more before the shell exploded, and he might have died on this lovely piece of French countryside—four years before I was born. A hardened combat veteran, he must have tensed as the sound of the shell came nearer. As the hot metal entered his back, he must have wondered, however briefly: "Is this how my life ends?" He would not find out that the answer was "No" until he woke up in the hospital days later.

Standing in the Gremecey Forest, I felt closer to my dad than I had since his death twenty-seven years earlier. I realized instinctively that I would now begin to mourn him in a way I had not been prepared to do as a young man. Once I returned to my job in Houston, I realized that another, less predictable transformation had occurred on my visit to the battlefield in France. I had become much more aware of World War II and its impact on individuals around me. I now understood that talking about the war had not been forbidden to me; it had been forbidden for my dad. He could not revisit carefree days in New York and London without the threat of reviving deeply suppressed memories of death and dying in France. His great adventure during World War II had at its center the nightmare of combat, which a decent man did not talk about with others and a good father carefully shielded from his son.

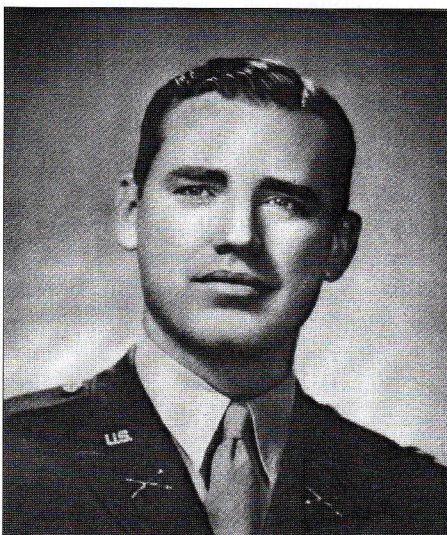
Once my eyes were opened, I realized that such decent men probably had passed in front of me regularly in the years before 1997. I had known a history professor named John King for over thirty years and taught with him at the University of Houston for more than a decade. This kind and gentle man from small town Ohio had gone out of his way to help me



John King



Ben Love



J.H. Freeman

and others. At his memorial service in 2001, I listened in astonishment with others from our department as the pastor described John's military record, including a Bronze Star that he earned in the Battle of the Bulge. He had simply never talked about that part of his life.

Ben Love, a man I had worked closely with for several years in the early 1980s while writing a history of Texas Commerce Bank, now reentered my life as we began work on his autobiography. I had known that he flew over Germany during World War II, but as I read for the first time his diary of his twenty-five missions as a 19-year-old navigating a B-17 in the Eighth Army Air Corps in 1944 and 1945, I saw him in a new light. He talked in an interview about how he had applied lessons on organization and leadership learned in the Eighth Air Corps in his business career. But his diary entry about his tenth mission, which took him over Ludwigshafen, Germany, on September 4, 1944, spoke of a different sort of wisdom:

"Our plane violently lurched as a flak burst hit us. Both right engines and the right wing caught on fire. We immediately began a slow, out-of-control spin, burning as we fell... Every second seemed an eternity as we fell. I had seen too many other B-17s explode as they had been shot out of formation not to know how near death we were. [The captain] gave the order to 'bail out' as we helplessly spun down. But the spin toward earth was so steep that centrifugal force held us in our seats. None of us could move toward our escape hatches despite superhuman effort. We were certain the plane would explode at any second."

After the plane fell 13,000 feet, the fall snuffed out the fire, the captain regained control, and the plane limped back to England. Written after he had returned to earth, the final line of the diary entry proclaims: "At age 19, I was joyous and thankful to be alive." This is not a thought normally associated with a 19-year-old in peacetime. Indeed, the experience of combat at such an early age made men prematurely old. Those who lived through such times before they could vote were not likely to be convinced when someone after the war described a pending merger or a loan application as a

matter of life and death.³

And those who lived through such times were not likely to forget their comrades who did not. My friend J.H. Freeman, a thoroughly decent man who helped me write a history of Baker Botts law firm, served as a forward observer in an artillery unit in the Pacific, taking part in the landings at Leyte in the Philippines in October 1944 and Okinawa, Japan, in April 1945. He later collected his letters and published them in a book for his family and friends. Before my trip to France, I had looked through the book without really understanding it. J.H. died last summer, and at his memorial service, one of the eulogists quoted from his book of letters. I went home and reread it, now understanding a bit of the foreign language in which it was written, the language of the combat veteran.

The preface says simply: "I am not the same person I would have been had I not participated in these events...I felt like one person went into battle and an entirely different one came home." Later in the book he comments, almost as an aside, about a Japanese shell that hit nearby: "One foot closer and the entire section would have been killed." Randomness was a fact of life that had to be accepted, as was death. In one hour of fighting on Okinawa, five line officers in J.H.'s company were wounded or killed.⁴

Woodrow Pratt, refinery worker; John King, history professor; Ben Love, banker and civic leader; and J.H. Freeman, counselor to lawyers. A short list of men I have known who came out of the Great Depression, fought the war, and came home marked by an uncommon decency. Could it be that their intense wartime experiences as young men made them appreciate the gift of life? Or did the randomness of battle make them understand, perhaps too well, the limits of our control over our own destinies? Maybe the thing I am searching to understand is simpler: Perhaps the war gave these men too much knowledge of themselves and of the darkest side of life at an unnaturally early age. Their precocious understanding of courage and cowardice, of life and death, was tinged by a profound sadness and perhaps even a measure of guilt for surviving when others did not. Then the truths taught by combat had to be pushed deep down within them—controlled if not forgotten—so

they could get on with life after the war.

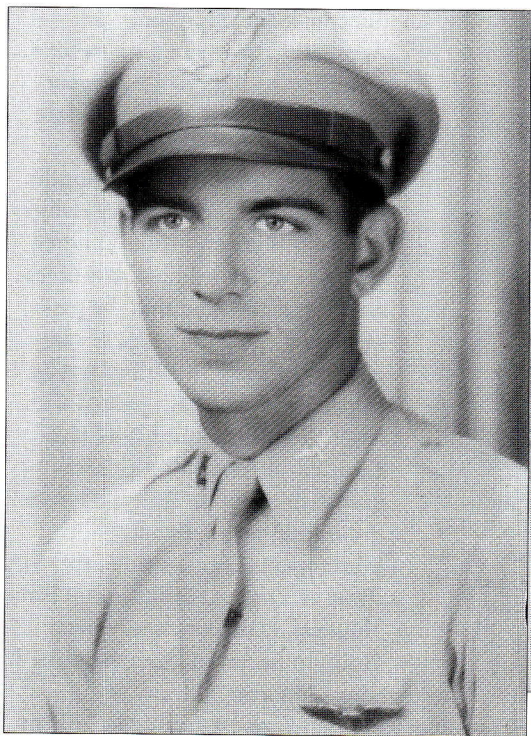
My father was wounded roughly midway between the day he was born and the day he died. He came home with wounds and memories that plagued him for the rest of his life. But he did come home and lived half his life after the war, giving me the gift of a good father in my formative years. I trust that he has rested in peace, free of memories of death and dying from his days of combat in France.

One Who Did Not Return

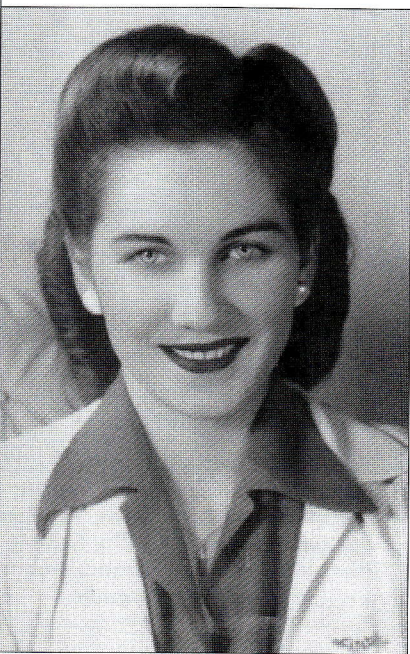
The memories of the fifty million people who died in World War II are lost to us. We, the living, can only imagine their last moments. They heard a shell or a machine gun burst, sat pinned against their seat as their plane spun downward, realized their ship was sinking. Or they heard a V-2 rocket coming toward their home, huddled with their parents as opposing armies fought for control of their village, felt the heat of an approaching wall of fire from incendiary

Those who loved that individual carried forward painful wounds: an empty place where that person once stood; memories of a life cut short; thoughts of the life that might have been; quite simply, sadness. This heartache reaches down through generations to children with a missing parent or grandparent or other relatives who "died in the war," their lives cut short in the mass killing of World War II. Because those who did not return cannot speak for themselves, we must rely on the memories of family and friends to recall their stories.

Robert E. ["Bob"] Murphy of Orlando, Florida, was killed in action in the Pacific at age twenty-two. A year and a half earlier, as he prepared to enter the Army Air Corps in the summer of 1942, he had met Virgie Breaux of DeLand, Florida, a small town about forty miles north of Orlando. In a story often repeated during the war, they courted briefly and then married as he completed his training. She became pregnant before Robert departed for overseas duty in August 1943. Little more than two months later he was dead; two months after that, his son was born. The memories of his



Robert E. "Bob" Murphy



Virgie Breaux Murphy Rowland

bombs, saw an intense flash at Hiroshima, trudged toward the gas chambers at the death camps. Many no doubt wondered "Is this the way my life ends?" And the answer came back, swiftly for some and slowly for others: "Yes."

wife and his son, along with a scrapbook created by his long-deceased mother, recover for us his story, which is presented as a memorial of sorts for all those who did not return from the war.

Virgie Breaux Murphy Rowland is now eighty years old and lives near Port Arthur, Texas. Sixty-one years after her husband's

death, I interviewed her and her son, Robert [Bob] E. Murphy, Jr.⁵ As we talked before the interview, Virgie said with tears in her eyes, "I still think of him every day." She remained composed and wistful as she remembered the fifteen months she spent with her husband, and her lifetime of reliving memories of him.

"In the summer of 1942, my mother let me go spend one week with five other girls in Daytona Beach, Florida. It was the first time my mom had allowed me to go off with friends. In those days, we did not have much money, you know, to do stuff like that. All of us had to pitch in and all of us had to work and do things.

We rented an apartment.

One of the girls knew Bob Murphy, who played in the band at the Martinique. It was a big nightclub. You could have your bathing suit on there because they had a sawdust floor. Bob played the trombone in a big swing band—"Begin the Beguine" and all those songs. He was a very good trombone player, and he loved to dance. But when he played, I didn't get to dance. I had to sit it out. But I used to sit and stay there with him, sit it out with him. During his 15-minute break every hour, we would talk. Then, we would go to the beach whenever we could.

We became pretty good friends by the end of the week. After I went home, he started coming to see me in DeLand from his home in Orlando. He would drive his mother's Mercury. Just up and down the road. And then, he met my mother. Well, that went on during some of the summer until he had to leave. But that is the way we met.

He was 21 at the time. It was a break in the summer, and he was home from classes at The Citadel [which he attended for two years]. He was interested in going into the service. He wanted to get into flying in the Air Force. I knew that.

[In early July, he received orders to report to Kelly Field in San Antonio for Aviation Cadet training by July 15.] He went to Kelly, and then we corresponded, and in his letters is when he asked me to marry him. I had only known him just that summer, you know, until he went into the service, which was not very long. Of course, my mother took a long time. I had to talk her into it, too. She was against

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it. But that is the way it started.

I had to ride the bus to San Antonio. Luckily, when I got there, I found a room in a private home with Mr. and Mrs. K.M. Bass. She was a nurse. She was not working. He was retired. I got a room for \$18 a month. She got me a job in a local cleaners measuring clothes, so I could make a little bit of money. We got married in her house in San Antonio, with a reception and everything. It was the people in her house and friends of hers, next-door neighbors or whatever. She was real nice, just one of those special people.

We went from there to Houston, where he got his wings at Ellington Field. I lived on a porch in Houston because places were hard to get. I have forgotten the address but it was in Houston, not at Ellington Field. The owner rented out this whole house and I rented out that porch. It was cold, cold, cold! [This was in January, February, and March of 1943.] I mean, it was a screened porch. And I only had one outfit. I had to wear that outfit every day and wash it at night because I had no washing machine.

I got me a job at Ellington Field working in a plant that built primary training planes [PT-19s] for girls. They had a crash there while I was there, too. One of the girls got killed. I guess they were in the WAACs [Women's Army Auxiliary Corps]. I had to get up at five o'clock in the morning and go to the boarding house across the street to eat, in a boarding house with about eighteen men. Then, take a bus and go to the airport, do my job. I was a parts girl, where we had a little board and there were twelve lights. And when those bulbs flashed, I would go to that department and ask them what they wanted. So, I would save them time and stuff. And I worked there for about one month or more, I guess.

Bob [who lived on the base] did come and visit me while I was there. He would just come when he could. We did not do much of anything. Had enough trouble just trying to get to see each other.

We stayed at the Rice Hotel the night he got his wings. It was real nice.

The graduation ceremony [March 20, 1943] was in a big auditorium at Ellington Field. They filled it, too. Bob felt like a million dollars when he got his wings! He thought he had conquered the world!

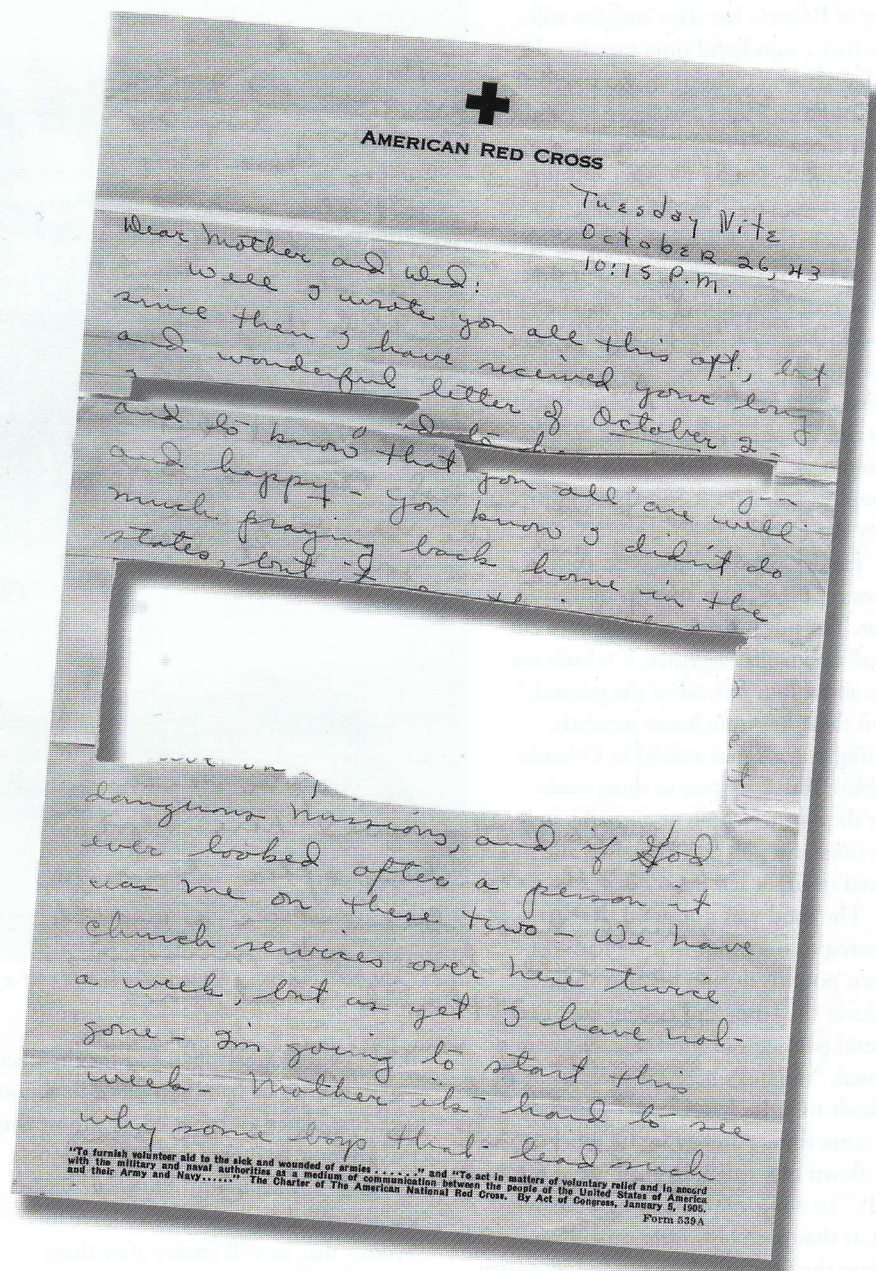
From there we went to Columbia, South Carolina, where he completed his training. All I know is I got pregnant there. He used to come home every day there.

We rented a room in this lady's house and had access to the kitchen, but we never used it. We just went out for meals. I got a job at the PX [Post Exchange] for a day or two. That is when I felt faint one day, went to the doctor, and found out I was pregnant.

Bob bought a car in Columbia and we decided to go see his brother, Billy, in Montgomery, Alabama. And we took off

long enough to go down to Montgomery to see Billy, who was also in flight training. [He later flew in Europe.] We also did go to Orlando, and "Muddie" [Ellie Murphy, Bob's mom] had a room fixed for us there, Catherine's [Bob's older sister] room. She had the wedding bells and all of that fixed for us.

Oh, Bob was anxious to go [overseas]. He was ready to go. In fact, I do not think you could have held him back with a ten-foot pole. I do not think you could have held him back over anything. I do not know why, but he wanted to go so badly.



Robert wrote this letter home to his mother just days before his plane would be shot down. He writes in astonishment about the "good Christian boy" who was killed on his previous mission. On his next mission, he would be among those who would not come home.

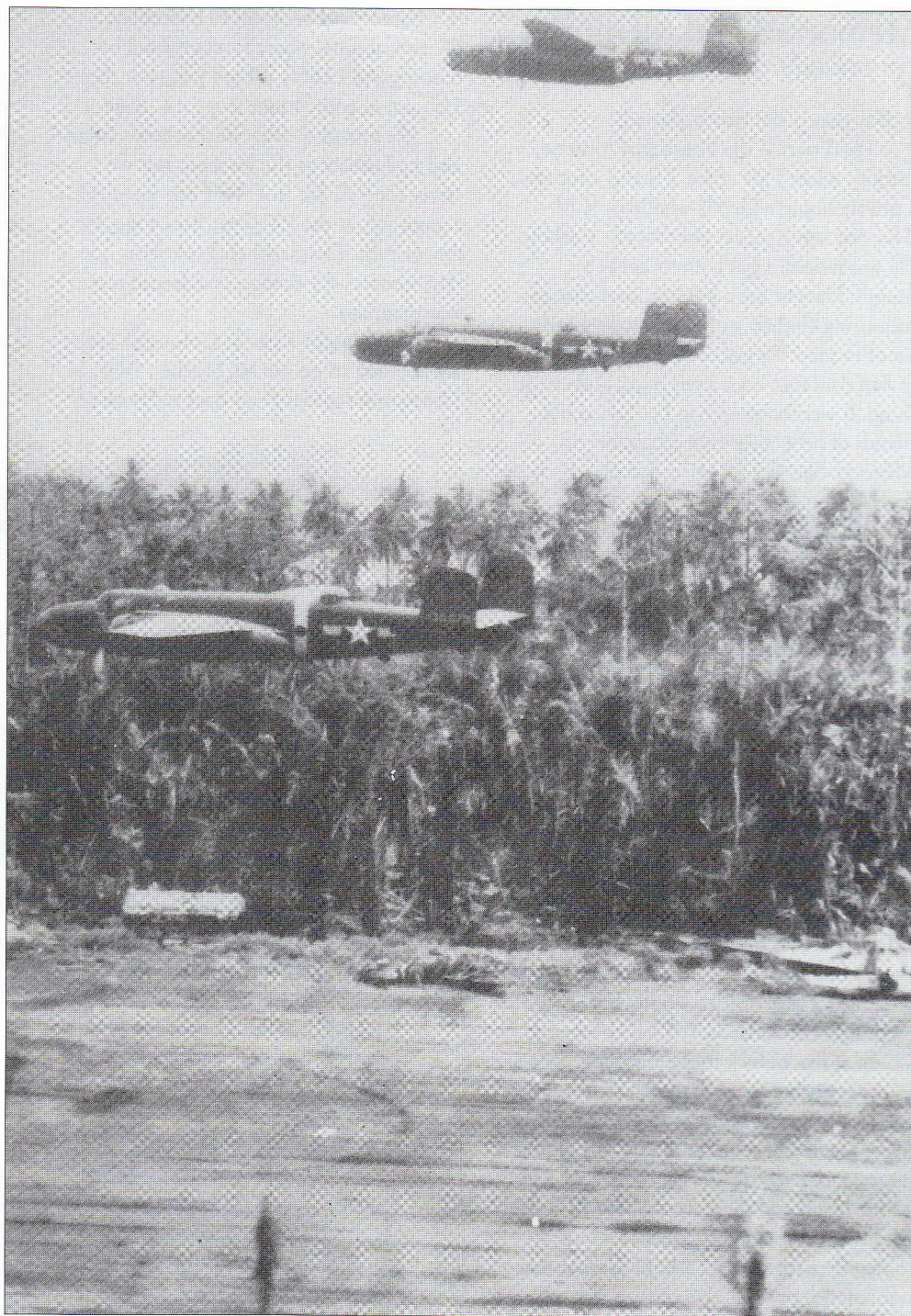
I do not remember the details of when and how he left for his overseas duty. I stayed behind. I went to DeLand and stayed with my mother. I had two smaller sisters. My two brothers had already gone into the service. We met in June 1942. We were married in December, and he left for overseas duty in August 1943."

From this point, the letters and articles in a scrapbook put together by Muddie, Robert's mother, take up her son's story.⁶ A letter home from a troop train passing through Texarkana, Texas, fills in the story of Robert's last days with his wife. "We had a wonderful time together the last few days in Columbia. We stayed at the Columbia Hotel and had our meals in our room, and they were really good." In Columbia, Robert boarded "the dirtiest troop train ever" on August 21, 1943, and traveled across country. After a brief visit to Los Angeles and a pleasant short stay at Fort Hamilton, California, he sailed to Australia, "the oddest place you could possibly imagine." He finally arrived on September 26 at an air force base near Buna in New Guinea, where he began service with the Third Bomber Group, Eighth Attack Squadron, Fifth Army Air Corps.

He described his living quarters as follows: "I live [with another officer] in a hut. The hut is made of small trees cut in half and nailed together. It is built on stilts about four feet off of the ground." From there he wrote home regularly, sending v-mails that arrived in Orlando via New York City two to three weeks after they were written or airmail letters that came through San Francisco and arrived in about ten days.

The food was not good. Robert reported to his mom that he had lost fifteen pounds during his first three weeks at the base, and encouraged her to send packages of food. He also complained, "the bugs here eat me up." It was difficult to write letters and "slap them" at the same time. Already by October 11, he had flown two missions that "were not bad at all." In a buoyant spirit, he observed that at that pace he would quickly accumulate the fifty missions needed to return home.

His last three letters home are heart wrenching. He wrote these airmail letters in



B-25 "Mitchells" conduct a "coconut-level" raid over a Japanese air strip.

the last week of October, and they reached Orlando after he had been killed in action. The first, dated October 23, is almost cheerful. He now has three combat missions, leaving "only 47 to go." He writes with excitement about a seven-day leave in Sydney that he will receive after three months of service.

His tone changed in a letter written during the afternoon of October 26. He now has five combat missions, and reveals

that the sixth will be "very, very soon. You all have read about all that we have done, and by the time you get this will have heard of a lot more. Things are really buzzing here now and it looks like I might get home sooner than expected." He admits that the last two missions have been "action itself," and reports that he is "dead tired as I've been up since 4:30 and flying all morning."

Yet despite his weariness, he wrote one final letter home later that night. This last

communication with his parents arrived in Orlando the week after his death. He obviously is on edge after his most recent combat missions. Parts of the letter are literally cut out, presumably by a censor, but the passages that remain are haunting. After thanking his parents for their "wonderful letter of October 2," he reveals a troubled mind: "You know I didn't do much praying back home [and then a segment is excised with only the words "dangerous mission" remaining], "and if God ever looked after a person it was me on these two [missions]. We have church services over here twice a week, but as yet I have not gone—I'm going to start this week. Mother, it's hard to see why some boys that lead such a clean Christian life must die in this war, but I've seen one of the finest and cleanest living boys I've ever known shot down. His ship blew up when it hit the ground. And yet God saw fit to save me."

Clippings in his mother's scrapbook tell the story of his sixth and final mission. As part of the American push back toward the Philippines, the Fifth Air Force mounted a massive raid on Simpson Harbor at Rabaul, New Britain, a major supply base for Japanese forces throughout the region. In what one article described as "a second Pearl Harbor," more than 300 aircraft—including B-25 ["Mitchells"] and B-24 bombers and P-38 fighters—swept over Rabaul, inflicting massive losses on Japanese shipping and aircrafts. The raid helped turn the tide of war in this region, since the Japanese never again could make full use of this excellent natural harbor.

A pamphlet later published by the Fifth Air Force summarized the results of the attack. In twelve minutes of fighting, the Fifth Air Force destroyed a reported 85 enemy aircraft and over 100,000 tons of enemy shipping. "This was accomplished with the loss of nine American bombers and ten American fighters." The impact of the raid on American morale was "incalculable: the aggressor was once again given a taste of barbed American steel, was once again shown how our determination, courage, and singleness of purpose have made us the great nation that we are." The account concludes, "Never in the long history of warfare has so much destruction been wrought upon the forces of a belligerent nation so swiftly and at such little cost to the victor." The back page lists the human cost in a "roll of honor" that includes the names of seven fly-

ers known to have been killed in action; third on the list is "Second Lieutenant Robert E. Murphy."

The notification of his death came first to his parents, since their names and address were on his permanent record. His mother then called her daughter-in-law's home. Virgie's mom answered, and when Virgie saw the expression on her mom's face, she knew that bad news had come. Fearing the worse, she asked her mom, "Please, tell me the truth." The truth changed forever the life of the pregnant 19-year-old widow.

Muddie took the news very hard. She exhausted every means she could imagine to find someone who could give her hope that somehow her son had survived. Her scrapbook contains one article about three members of a downed American bomber crew who were rescued after living ten months in the jungles of the Japanese-occupied island of New Britain, where her son had been shot down. But in the scrapbook also are three letters with first-hand descriptions of the battle over Rabaul on November 2 that left little room for hope.

These accounts told her that her son had flown that day with Major Raymond Wilkins, "one of the aces of the southwest Pacific." Robert had replaced a co-pilot who was on leave in Australia [and who himself died in battle seven months later]. Leading a squadron of Mitchells in the dramatic "coconut tree-level" or "mast-level" assault developed to take advantage of the B-25s lightning speed, Robert's plane attacked and hit a destroyer and several other ships while under fire from anti-aircraft guns. The man who shared a hut with Robert reported, "Just as their plane came into the harbor, they made a left turn to go over a cruiser. As they did, their right wing was blown off and the plane burst into flames, crashing into the water." One other pilot who saw the crash said simply, "He died a real hero," a conclusion seconded by the award of a Medal of Honor for Major Wilkins and a Silver Star for Second Lieutenant Murphy.

One final response to Muddie's inquiries bluntly removed any doubt that her son had been killed in action over Rabaul: "Several of the pilots and the gunners in the Squadron saw the crash and there were no survivors due to the violence of the impact and the fact that the plane landed on its back, thus barring the use of escape hatches." The writer noted, "it may

seem rather heartless of me to present the facts so baldly, but it is my sincere belief that the knowledge that he is dead is to be preferred over the suspense of wondering hopefully if Robert will ever come back." The concluding paragraph offered solace: "I wish there was something I could say or do to aid and comfort you and his wife. I can only hope that Robert's child will somehow fill the absent place in both of your hearts and will grow up to be proud of having a father who gave his life for his country."

Virgie recalls that she "held up pretty good. They were afraid that if they told me the truth, I would break down or something, but I knew I had to hold up. And so, I held up until Robert, Jr., was born and then I really let it out. I mean, kind of let go more."

Her son grew up surrounded by people who kept the memory of his father alive. Virgie believed that "you start when they are little. You do not hold anything back and you tell them the truth." She also tried to keep him in contact with his father's family. "I used to let him go on the train [to Orlando] by himself with the conductor when he was three and four years old, and Muddie would meet him over at the other end." This was partly for her son's sake, but also for her mother-in-law:

"I took him over there all the time because I had two brothers in the service and my mother, I could see what she was going through. I am so glad I did what I did. Muddie was very religious, very religious, and she depended on that religion. But I do not care—no one knows what it is to lose a child until you have lost one." She continued this after she remarried, three years after Robert's death, and even after her new family later moved to Texas.

Her son Robert [Bob] E. Murphy, Jr., now 61, lives in Beaumont, Texas, where he owns Industrial Power & Rubber, an industrial supply company. Throughout his life, he has carried the memory of a father he never knew.

"Well, I really do not know how my dad's death may have affected my life. I have often thought about what my life would have been like had he lived but, I mean, you just have to take the good with the bad and this was the bad.

From childhood, I was acquainted with his life by not only my mother but also his parents, who I visited with quite often. I

lived with my grandfather my senior year of high school, along with my aunt Catherine, my dad's sister. So, I got to know a whole lot more about him in conversations with them and also with my uncle, his brother Bill, who was also a pilot in World War II in the European theater. Everybody spoke highly of him, just as I had expected.

My grandmother died at 66 in 1956, I believe, when I was about 12 years old. So, I knew her as a child but really not as an adult. My grandfather, of course, I knew well. As a matter of fact, he passed away while I was in basic training. So, I did not even get to go to the funeral. I had become pretty close to him, but he did not talk much about my dad. Like I say, my aunt filled in some of the gaps, but she was not privy to everything that he did. And my uncle, I knew him pretty well, so it was not like I did not have people around me or anything to keep me filled in and offer tidbits of their memories and some of the times that they had together.

Most of the answers I got to some of the questions I had were from Aunt Catherine. She and I were very close and we talked all the time prior to her death in 1989. Things like the fact that my dad had his private pilot's license when he was 19. So, he was interested in flying at a pretty early age, and the Air Force was kind of a natural for him. And I did have some records where he was playing, the old 45 make-it-yourself type records. That, and these collections of scrapbooks and photographs. She let me know just how much fun they had together as a family. They all liked to sing; they liked music. And so, I guess that is how my dad got involved in jazz. But all in all, I had a pretty good feel of the lifestyle that he had prior to the military and was comforted by the fact that his family was pretty unified.

You had asked my mother a while ago what she thought he would have done had he come back from the war. My grandfather was a criminal courts judge. He had been that for I do not know how long, and was proud of that. They called him county solicitor there, which is the same as a DA here in Texas. He did that for about fifteen years and then ran for judge and was elected and had a civil practice on the side. And Uncle Bill later joined him after he got out of the service. He went back to school, got his law degree at University of Florida, and they formed a partnership. So,

I assume that my dad probably would have, if he had wanted to pursue that profession, he would have joined the two of them. Or since he was a jazz player, he might have started his own band. You can only speculate at this point.

I think about him all the time. I mean, not every day maybe necessarily like mother does, but it is hard to envision what it would have been like growing up with him. I know it would have been different. I had a stepfather who brought me up probably as good as most kids under the same circumstances. Mother has always been as good a mother to me as she would have been whether she was with him, my real dad, or my stepdad. So, I mean, I have got nothing but love and appreciation for the way she raised me. Beyond that, like I say, I think about him periodically, but it is something that we just have to live with.

Some of the mementos I have of my dad I got after my aunt passed away and my grandfather passed away, from the Murphy family. And some of it, I got from mother. She has given me most of the stuff. And we have kind of a memorial at home for him. We have a picture of him and a picture and some articles and things of that nature, along with the Murphy family in general. So, he is well remembered at home. And I named my two sons Robert and William after my dad and his brother."

One of his keepsakes is the Silver Star posthumously awarded to his father. Virgie remembers the ceremony: "Yes, there was a ceremony [in January 1945] to award the Silver Star in Orlando. Muddie did not want to go, so I had to go with Robert [her son, Bob, who was then 13-months-old]. I had it pinned on Robert. A soldier carried a chair behind me all the way, because I was carrying Robert during the ceremony. So, if I wanted to sit down, I could sit down. It was a huge ceremony. It was a big one. There were a lot of people out there. I do not know how many people." She continues: "I think he would have been a wonderful father. Oh, he wanted that baby so badly."

The remainder of our interview follows:

Joe Pratt: Does the memory of your first husband still have the power to make you really sad, kind of like when you first heard about the death?

Virgie Rowland: Yes. Especially if I see anything violent on TV. I do not like to watch any kind of war.

JP: You said earlier that you had a chance to go to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, the memorial to all American soldiers killed in Pacific wars that sits in the hills above Honolulu against the backdrop of a sweeping view of the ocean.

VR: Yes, I went in about 1979. I also went on the boat ride to the *Arizona*, and all of that down below. My brother went to Manila and saw a memorial there that had Robert's name on it.

JP: Did going to that beautiful cemetery and memorial above Honolulu make you feel any better about all this? Was that a pleasant thing to do or was it painful?

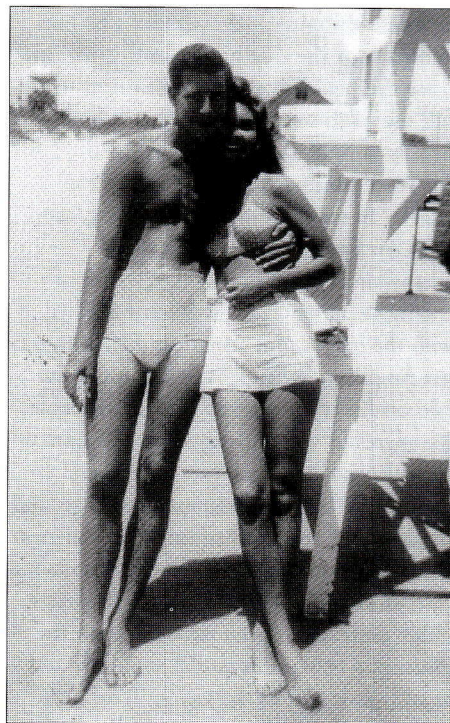
VR: It was more pleasure than pain, to think, you know, that they can remember him, that they are not all forgotten.

JP: Before we turned on the tape, you said that not a day goes by that you do not think of Bob, your husband? Has that been true ever since his death?

VR: Yes. Just memories of different places we had been and things we had done more than sixty years ago.

JP: What is your favorite memory of him, the one you like best to remember?

VR: [Her face brightens as she answers.]
Us sitting at the bandstand at the Martinique. ★



Virgie and Robert at the beach in Orlando. A fond memory that she recalls to this very day.