



Maria

Carmelite Spiritual Center

12-00

8433 Bailey Road * Darien, Illinois 60561 * 630-969-4141

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Life is Worth Giving

CHRISTMAS FAREWELL TO COUSIN JOE OFF TO WAR

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Farewells were seldom easy in our family. Mom often recounted her tearful farewell from her mother in Ireland back in 1927 when Mom set sail for America to join my Dad and to begin her new married life. ^(MOTHER) and daughter never met again in this world.

Dad, too, was reluctant to return in later years to his native Ireland. "It was too difficult to say good-bye once," he explained, "so I don't want to do that again."

But when World War II came to America in 1941, farewells became more than routine among families and friends. Too often people felt that they would not see these men and women for years until it was "all over, over there." Even more poignant was the knowledge that some would return from battle badly wounded, and some might never return at all.

Almost every family in our neighborhood proudly displayed the blue star service flag as a proud reminder that someone in the family was away fighting for freedom. And sadly there began to appear gold stars announcing that some family member had made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of liberty.

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Our older cousin, Joe, was one of the early volunteers in World War II. Although born in Ireland, he was determined to fight for his adopted country and the cause of peace. He soon completed his basic training as an infantryman at nearby Fort Dix and was ready for war, probably in the European Theater of Operations.

But before being shipped overseas, Joe was given a brief leave to say farewell to his family and friends.

As youngsters, we had gotten to know Joe well because he was the mechanic for the local Sunoco gas station in our neighborhood. On the way to and from our classes at nearby St. Aloysius School, he would often admonish us: "Study hard now and you'll be a great success in life. There's nothing like a good education." And this from a man who had spent as little time as possible in school himself!

My brothers and I accepted his admonitions without fully understanding what it all meant.

Favorite Aunt

He also told us to send his best regards to my Mom. She was not only his favorite aunt, but also his god-mother ~~was~~ who was his baptism sponsor years ago at Fairview Church in Dublin before his coming to America as a small boy. They were especially close because Joe's mother, my Mom's favorite sister, had died when he was just a small boy.

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As Joe grew to manhood, my Mom always seemed to be there with an encouraging word or a small gift to make Joe feel special, and to help him understand that he was also very loved by his aunt and god-mother. In later years, Joe would try to reciprocate by helping Mom in any way that he could. Having one of the few cars in the family, he was always willing to drive Mom, and all of us, on vacations to the seashore, or any other place.

Christmas Leave

It was just before Christmas of 1942 when Joe arrived at our flat to say farewell to Mom and all of us. America had been at war about a year, and the tide of victory had not yet begun to turn ~~for~~ ^(in favor of) the Allies. We knew that there were still grim years of fighting ahead for the Armed Forces.

As youngsters we were so proud of our cousin Joe in his neatly pressed khaki uniform, all spit and polish, especially his combat boots which he tapped nervously on the kitchen linoleum as he sat in a big wooden chair.

"I've been assigned as a rifleman in the Dixie Division," he explained to Mom and all of us. He really didn't know his overseas destination, or just couldn't tell us.

But we were happy to know that he would be joining a famous infantry division that had fought with distinction in World War I, and probably a lot of other conflicts through the years.

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Unusual Combination

Stangely enough, the Dixie Division was composed mainly of Southern Baptists and Northern Catholics from the New York-New Jersey area. Their first battles in basic training involved just trying to understand the unusual speech accents of each other, and to learn to accept the differences in their religious faiths.

Cousin Joe would later win the respect of his men when, as a staff sergeant at the Battle of the Bulge and other conflicts in Europe, he risked his life a number of times for his men. They learned to respect both his courage and his Faith. Both were more than important to Joe.

As youngsters enamored with the glory of war, we excitedly asked him about tanks and guns and the great adventure of battle. He only smiled quietly and promised to tell us all about his experiences when, please God, he returned safe and sound at the end of the war.

Time for Farewell

But mostly Mom and Joe spoke softly to each other about adult things such as praying, keeping faithful to his religion, and to be assured that he would be remembered in her prayers each day. She also gave him a religious medal to wear with his Army dog-tags.

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We had so many ^(other) questions to ask Joe but there just wasn't time for all that. Our questions would have to wait for years to come, and were sometimes answered when I began writing him with Victory Mail (V-Mail) letters through the encouragement of Sr. Francis Baptista, our 7th Grade teacher at St. Aloysius.

"I'd better be going now," said Joe as he rose from the chair. Trying to be brave, we smiled as we shook hands manly with Joe. We thought he was off to a great adventure that would be filled with excitement.

But we noticed tears in Mom's eyes as she kissed her favorite nephew good-bye. "God keep you safe and sound, and come back safely as soon as you can," she said softly.

Then, almost as suddenly as he had arrived, Joe was out the door and off to war. It wouldn't be until Christmas of 1946, after World War II had ended, that Joe returned to the Family with ~~war-time~~ wartime memories that often seemed to haunt him for the rest of his days.

But we remembered Joe from that Christmas of long ago when love and prayer were much more important than war or words. (Fr. Kevin Shanley)