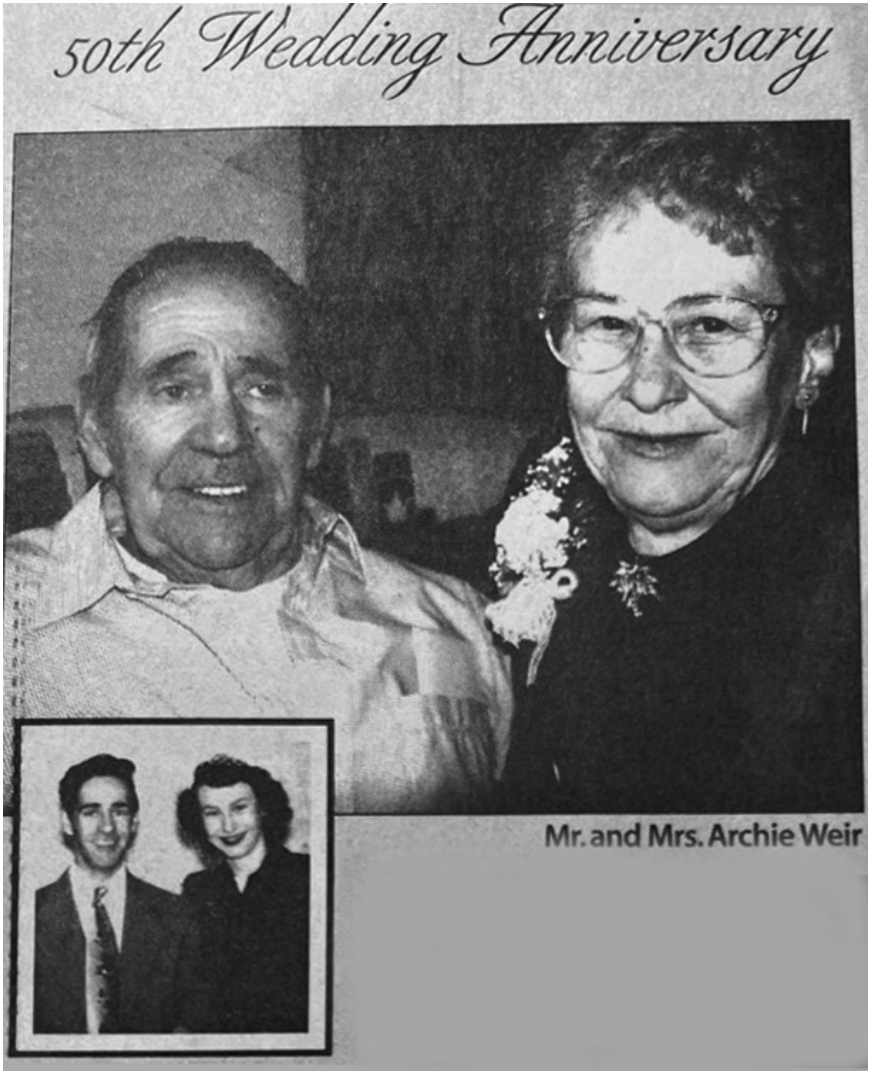

Archie and Sarah Weir:
1950 Wedding and 50th Wedding Anniversary Photos
Source: Public Opinion (Chambersburg, PA) January 2001

"My Father Died Twice":

Family History, Memory, and the Life of a WWII Veteran

Robert Weir

Editor's Introduction: *The two major themes of* HJM*'s 50th anniversary issue are assessing recent historical events and/or reinterpreting and reevaluating traditional historical topics. The following article does both. In popular culture the generation that lived through the Great Depression and World War II is often mythologized. Dr. Robert Weir challenges us "to move beyond myth-making and generalization." In this exploration of his father's life, Weir reinterprets and complicates popular stereotypes regarding the romanticized "Greatest Generation" and addresses topics that we rarely associate with this cohort.*

It is unusual to hear accounts of WWII veterans who did not revel in recounting their wartime experiences or regale their families with war stories. Similarly, in popular culture we rarely encounter WWII vets who struggle with PTSD or alcoholism. Nor are we likely to hear stories about the Veterans Administration's failures during the early postwar decades. And we seldom hear of veterans who did not become part of the new middle class but instead struggled financially and maintained their working-class roots and identities. Yet not all WWII veterans returned home to prosper during the 1950s and '60s, whether economically, psychologically, or personally. Some were also deeply dismayed and

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affronted by their children's values and actions during the 1960s. The generation gap could deeply divide families for decades and could leave lasting scars.

HJM *doesn't typically publish family history. However, Dr. Weir has turned his family's personal story into an illuminating generational history. Throughout, he seeks to view his family's experience through a wider lens: to what degree were these shared generational experiences? What critical lessons do we lose from popular culture's mythmaking? He also raises probing questions about historical knowledge itself: how do we reconstruct the past when the evidence, documents, and memories may be lacking, contradictory, or partial? What are the questions we never think to ask our parents during their lifetimes, and/or what questions go unasked because we have been taught not to ask and not to probe these psychological landmines?*

Weir warns that "we should neither forget the past nor reduce it to easy-to-digest heroic tales." He concludes with a powerful and arresting quote from President John F. Kennedy: "The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic."

* * * * *

My father died twice, once on June 9, 1944 and again on April 11, 2002. The specifics of his first "death" depend upon who told the story. This is a tale in which family lore, documents, oral history, and secondary sources intersect; but the lacunae in each are such that determining the incontrovertible truth remains elusive. Historians rely heavily upon documents and records. But what does one do when those are maddeningly incomplete? How much can one read between the lines of military records that hint but do not elaborate? Oral histories can help but memories are often unreliable, especially when a lot of distance lies between events and retellings. Misremembering includes both embellishment and diminution.

Family lore is perhaps the most mediated of all historical sources. It is a *type* of oral history, but an intimate one whose details can often shift from raconteur to raconteur. Similar to many veterans, my father seldom spoke about his World War II experiences and, when he did, his stories came out in isolated bits and pieces, not all of which pass historical muster. I learned key aspects about his experiences through secondhand accounts from my now-deceased uncle and mother. Much was left unsaid.

The following account has been pieced together from a patchwork of memories, records with missing pieces, and inferences drawn from secondary sources. It is ultimately a reconstructed narrative that communicates a *kind*

of truth whose particulars might be wrong in a literal sense. It is, in essence, a war story whose impact on family members lasted more than a half century, long enough to pass through cycles of generational clashes, admiration, insight, forgiveness, healing, delayed curiosity, and connections beyond the grave. At its center is my father Archie Edmond Weir (1924-2002), a native of Worcester, Massachusetts, who served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. His military service left him with physical woes and psychological conditions that were not officially recognized at the time. My father served well, but was in turn served poorly once he mustered out.

THE PASSING OF A MYTHOLOGIZED GENERATION

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), just 325,574 of more than 16 million World War II veterans remained alive in 2020, before Covid-19 dramatically thinned their ranks. The passing of this generation exacerbates the romanticism attached to those who endured both the Great Depression and world war. Glamorization began while the war was still in progress through movies such as *Bombs Over Burma* (1942), *Casablanca* (1942), *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943), *Since You Went Away* (1944), *Watch on the Rhine* (1943), and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944). War action and drama films proliferated, as did military-themed musicals, comedies, and commissioned propaganda films.

My father reveled in watching these, as well as postwar offerings such as *A Walk in the Sun* (1945), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* (1957), *The Great Escape* (1963), and every Bob Hope/Bing Crosby comedy or Gene Kelly musical in which these actors appeared in uniform. Such films were regularly recycled on television, where my father viewed them numerous times.[1] In 1998, he made a rare trip to the cinema to see *Saving Private Ryan*, although he had been cautioned not to go as he was suffering from heart disease. His succinct review was, "The reality was way worse."

There have been many fine books about World War II, but two have had profound impact on popular perception. In 1985, journalist Studs Terkel won a Pulitzer Prize for his collection of World War II oral histories tellingly titled *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II.* More dramatic still, in 1998, another journalist, Tom Brokaw, dubbed those who lived through the 1930s and 1940s *The Greatest Generation*.[2]

In 2020, the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II sparked a six-part series on television's *History* channel and a spate of newspaper, journal, and online articles. World War II movies haven't gone away either—think films

such as *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), or *Greyhound* (2020)—but shifting demographics mean they do not carry the memories of my father's generation. More than half of the American population is under the age of forty, which makes the conflict that ended in 1945, almost as distant to them as the Civil War was to the combatants of World War II.

If anything, the passage of time has cemented a tendency to oversimplify the war. Both Terkel and Brokaw subsumed the war in a "triumphalist" narrative that emphasized military victory and downplayed the struggles of survivors–-unintentionally in Terkel's case and deliberately so in Brokaw's.[3] Such romanticism shortchanges social nuances and fosters secular deification. World War II veterans have been transformed into figures analogous to ancient Greek demigods, a process that robs its subjects of both their human virtues and blind spots.

My remarks are not aimed at denigrating the courage or perseverance of those who lived through the collective sacrifices of economic catastrophe and global conflict. Nonetheless, historians are highly suspicious of labels such as "good war" or "greatest generation." Although many of those who experienced combat felt their service was necessary, few would adorn warfare or its attendant horrors with adjectives such as "good." Nor is there is any such thing as a "greatest generation." The white majority that weathered the Depression and went to war largely failed to grapple with racial bias and other social inequalities.[4]

Feel-good labels and celebrity-studded films also obscure a reality of all wars: they are fought by the young. To twist a pat phrase, wars turn survivors into "men," but they were still "boys" when they entered. My father was eighteen, neither old enough to vote nor drink (although he did plenty of the latter during the war).

Novelist Tim O'Brien uttered a profound truth in *The Things They Carried*, as he was musing upon the Vietnam War. In a chapter titled "How to Tell a True War Story" he writes,

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie…. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity.[5]

Had he been a literary man, my father could have written O'Brien's words decades earlier.

THE ROOTS OF A WORKING-CLASS NAVY VOLUNTEER

The first part of the story involves issues of immigration, religion, and social class. Archie Edmond Weir was born in Worcester on April 12, 1924. His paternal roots were Scottish and working class, the latter of which defined his postwar employment. This traditional history of nineteenth-century immigration to Massachusetts, however, is heavily tilted toward Irish, Italian, and French-Canadian newcomers. This is understandable given that in 2020 nearly one of five (19.77%) Massachusetts residents were of Irish descent and 12.2% had Italian ancestry. Another 3.75% came from French-Canada, although the number of those of Francophone roots was closer to 10%, with many Canadian arrivals hailing from other French-speaking areas in the Maritimes and Manitoba.[6]

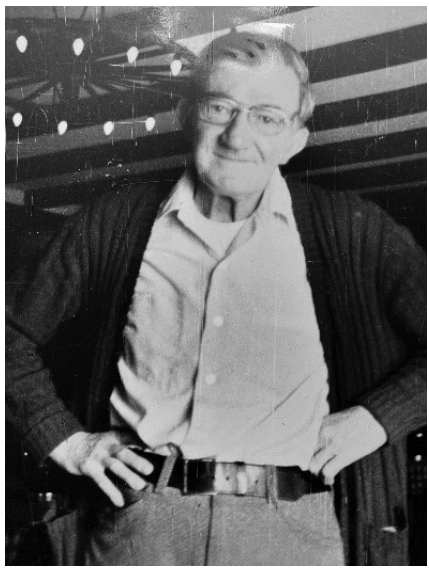
Scottish immigration was a different matter. In the Bay State, only 2.14% have Scottish heritage. An accurate counting is difficult to achieve given a problem linked to "British" identity. Nearly 1.85 million individuals from the United Kingdom (UK) came to the United States between 1830-79, but this group encompassed peoples from England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Scots became part of the UK via the 1707 Treaty of Union and all of Ireland was part of the UK until 1921.[7] Immigration data is unclear regarding how many "Irish" immigrants were actually Presbyterian Ulster-Scots (or Scots-Irish). Many of those from Scotland proper were Roman Catholic crofters (farmers on rented land) and victims of the Highlands Clearances (1750-1860) that saw more than 70,000 tenant farmers thrown off lands to create sheep pasturage.[8]

My paternal family's ancestry is from Scotland, not Ulster.[9] Family lore holds that they came from the village of Blackwood, South Lanarkshire, about twenty-three miles southwest of Glasgow. This is probable, given that Blackwood has historically been a Catholic village, the faith of most Weirs until the current generation. Records indicate that members of my father's family emigrated from Scotland's West Lothian region between 1852-1872. Insofar as can be determined, the Weir family tree bore humble fruit. The most famous individual to bear that surname was Major Thomas Weir, a seventeenth-century individual accused of being a wizard. It is certainly the case that the Weirs who came to Worcester came for economic reasons, not adventure.[10]

My father's great-grandfather, George Weir (1829-1914), who is buried in Worcester, arrived in time to fight for the Union during the Civil War. He and his wife Agnes (Young) Weir had six children, two of whom were born in Scotland in 1850 and 1852 respectively. Their eldest son James Wright Weir (1865-1936) married Elida Lucy Harvey in Worcester on July 7, 1887. They had four children: the third was Archie Francis Weir (1891-1964), my paternal grandfather. On September 7, 1914, Archie Francis married Rose Eugeniè Mineau (1892-1980) who was of French-Canadian ancestry.[11] They had six children; my father Archie Edmond (1924-2002) and Uncle Richard (1931-2021) were the youngest of the brood.

The Weirs were of working-class stock. James was a machinist and my grandfather was listed as a "wage earner" in the 1910 census, which placed him in a boarding house on Chandler Street where his sister Lucy was also a resident. For many years Archie Francis worked for the Royal Worcester Corset Company as a laborer, a foreman, a clerk, and a supervisor. At the time, the Royal Worcester Company was the largest producer of corsets in the world and 90% of its workforce consisted of women. It was there he met my grandmother. On September 7, 1914, he and Rose, a line worker, married.

They moved frequently. The 1930 census listed them as renters living on Douglas Street. By that time three of their children remained at home, including my father, who was five.[12] The birth of a sixth child, Richard in



Archie Francis Weir

Rose Mineau Weir

1931, necessitated larger lodgings, and the 1940 census places them at 275 Kirby Street, where they housed four children–including my 16-year-old father–plus a longtime boarder, Clarence Reiser, a shipper.

I barely knew my paternal grandparents and thus can add little more first-hand information to their story. I grew up in Pennsylvania, my father was estranged from his parents (who disapproved of his drinking), and did not meet my Worcester grandparents until I was eleven years old, shortly before Archie Francis passed away in 1964. At this time, he and Rose lived in a repurposed, domed Quonset hut in Millbury. In total, I saw my father's parents just twice in my life. I remember that Rose, who died in 1980, spoke with a decided Quebeçois accent, and I recall my Aunt Evelyn (1920-2009) and her husband Al Hamilton (d. 1988), a recent Scottish immigrant who ran a small grocery in Millbury. How he succeeded is anyone's guess: Al's brogue was incomprehensible even to those used to Scottish dialects.

The Weirs were Roman Catholics and Grandma Rose devotedly so. My father's childhood tales were typical of working-class Catholics. He recalled that the living-room wall sported three pictures, no doubt cheap chromolithographs: Jesus, Pope Pius XII, and the decidedly Protestant Franklin Delano Roosevelt.[13] My father also had one of Joe DiMaggio in his bedroom (peer pressure from the many Italian-Americans in his neighborhood helped in that selection). Archie was a lifelong New York Yankees fan, a source of good-natured sibling rivalry with Uncle Dick, a Red Sox devotee and the only family member with whom I knew my father to keep in touch with any regularity.

At the time my father entered the Navy, his family had moved to 8 Thenius Street in the North Quinsigamond Village section of the city. It was a thoroughly blue-collar neighborhood located near the now-drained Quinsigamond Pond and close to the Middle River tributary of the Blackstone River. Worcester is sometimes dubbed "Wire City." Thenius Street was quite near industry giant Washburn and Moen's South Works plant. Its 3,000 workers produced wire for everything from fencing, piano strings, and hoop skirts to corsets, telegraph wire, and electrical circuitry. It was the largest of several wire producers whose production dovetailed with a thriving machine tool industry and metal fabrication plants. Worcester was also a center of textile and shoe manufacturing. In his classic study, historian Roy Rosenzweig quotes a 1914 report: "More machine tool builders, machinists, and metal trades people are to be found in Worcester and suburbs than any other county on the American continent."[14]

1942: JOINING THE U.S. NAVY

My father came from a tradition of military service. As noted, his great-grandfather George saw combat in the Civil War and grandfather James had also served in the military. My grandfather was too old to fight in World War I, but my father was keen to answer the call for WWII, as were Massachusetts men in general. The commonwealth's wartime military enrollment of 284,716 was the 9th highest in the nation, though it was effectively tied for the 5th highest: all three states above it had only marginally higher participation rates.[15]

As forewarned, not all war tales are true. My father had always claimed that he lied about his age to enlist in the U.S. Navy; a "fact" which proved to be untrue. He was four months shy of age eighteen when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Many young men caught patriotic fever and rushed to enlist. Perhaps Archie *tried* to do so, but records indicate that he began his service on September 18, 1942, 125 days after he turned 18 on April 12, 1942. In all likelihood he exaggerated to impress his sons, but he was definitely eighteen when he went to war. He and his best friend, Eugene Aucoin, volunteered at the same time, although my father went into the Navy and Aucoin the Army.

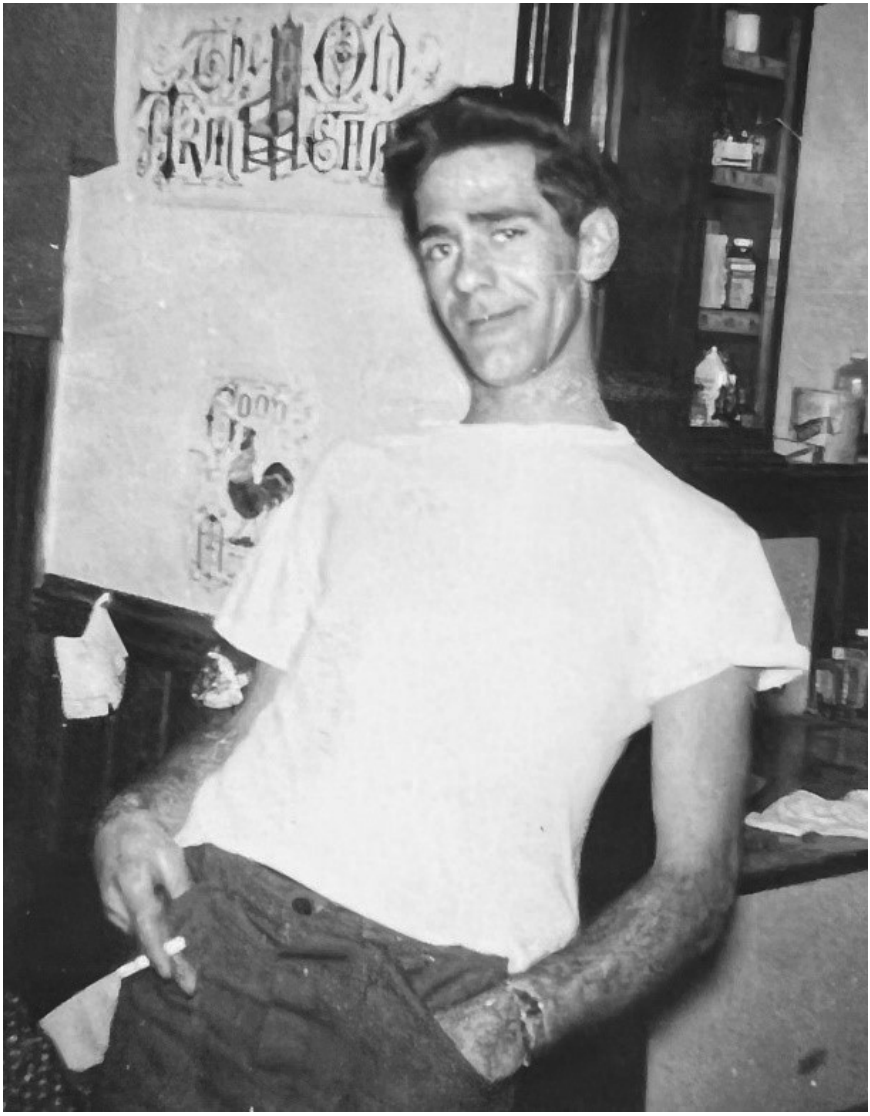
Archie had just eight years of formal education, having last attended Boys Trade School–now known as Worcester Technical High School–where he learned the rudiments of the plumbing trade. He had a series of blue-collar jobs, the last of which was with the Warren Steam Pump Company, a manufacturing concern that made commercial pumps and fittings for the U.S. Navy. He continued living with his parents, although Warren is twenty-eight miles southwest of Worcester.[16] He probably commuted on the Boston and Albany Railroad.

Warren Steam Pump was formed in 1897 by a group of investors and former employees of the Knowles Steam Pump Company, which decamped to East Cambridge. During both world wars, the firm put aside commercial lines and outfitted destroyers for the U.S. Navy. Warren pumps were used for everything from delivering on-board fresh water and powering boats to firefighting and cooling gun barrels. Archie honed his plumbing skills—a trade he plied off and on after the war–-and received more training in the Navy despite his desire to learn electrical skills instead.

When I and my younger brothers Randy and Jeffrey were boys, Dad boasted that he played football when he was in school. However, he would have been a scrawny player as he was listed as 5' 8 ½ and just 135 pounds when he entered the Navy.[17] He reported to the Naval Training Station

(NTS) in Newport, Rhode Island, for basic training and possibly spent time in submarine school. His personnel effects contained a framed photo of a sub, the *USS Lionfish*.[18]

Archie, however, was not destined for under-the-surface service. He was transferred to NTS Bainbridge, Maryland, a hastily assembled center on the grounds of the private Tome School for Boys. There, a large dummy ship



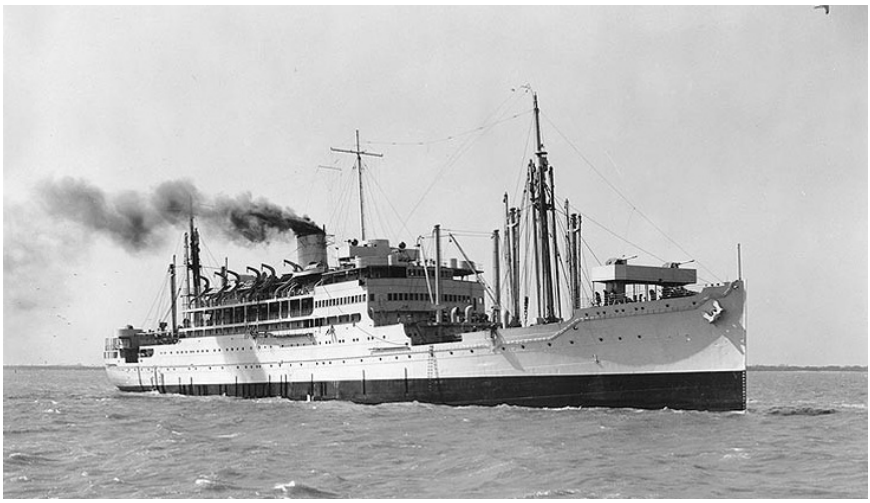
Archie Remained Slight

dubbed the *RTS Commodore* trained Naval personnel to serve on floating vessels. From Maryland he was shipped to the Navy's Amphibious Training Base at Little Creek, Virginia, part of the Navy's sprawling complex in the Portsmouth-Norfolk-Virginia Beach area.

THE *USS BARNETT*

On May 1, 1943, Archie Weir sailed on the *USS Barnett*, his ship for the duration of the war. The *Barnett* itself is a World War II story. It was built in England as a passenger ship and first sailed in 1928 for the Grace Steamship Company. According to company history, the 4,000 horsepower *Santa Maria* and a sister ship "were the first large motor passenger ships to sail under the U.S. flag."[19] On July 29, 1940, the U.S. Navy purchased the ship and rechristened it the *USS Barnett*. Its namesake was George Barnett (1859-1930), a Marine who served in the Spanish-American War. It was refitted as an APA (amphibious assault ship) and was first used in the Caribbean where it served as a training ship for Marine and Army shore landings. It was later sent to Norfolk and transferred to the Atlantic fleet. It was there my father boarded the ship.

The *Barnett* was bound for Oran, a city and province in western Algeria, liberated in November, 1942, during a campaign to dislodge Axis troops from Northern Africa. The United States entered the war after some of the worst fighting had already taken place in the region. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill tried to pressure the U.S. to launch an assault on France,



USS Barnett

which President Roosevelt and his military advisors deflected, arguing that the time was not ripe and that the U.S. was heavily engaged in the Pacific. Roosevelt also agreed with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin that a landing in France would not alleviate pressure on Russia. From this discussion was born Operation Torch, a 700-mile three-pronged assault on North Africa that saw troops land in Eastern Algeria, Western Algeria, and Morocco.

U.S. forces met vigorous resistance in Oran, but it was in Allied hands by November 9, 1942, although German and Italian troops remained in Tunisia. The *Barnett* arrived in Oran on May 17, 1943, just four days after Tunisia was finally liberated, although pockets of resistance persisted across North Africa. The ship was equipped with guns, but the *Barnett*'s major task was to embark and disembark amphibious assault troops.

My father's first look at combat gave rise to a tale that perhaps blended fact and fiction; it is a story impossible to verify. He claimed that one of the *Barnett's* assignments involved transporting ethnic tribesmen to a remote beach. During the voyage, the tribesmen sharpened fearsome blades. When the *Barnett* returned to pick them up several days later, severed German heads littered the beach.

My father referred to the tribesmen as "gooks," a derogatory slur used in 1943, although even then it was generally used against Asian peoples. His use of the term might have been influenced by its reuse during the Vietnam War. Perhaps his naval comrades applied it to Tuaregs or some other Algerian group, any of which would have appeared exotic; but my father's most vivid memory—his baptism by fire—was of the decapitated heads. One can only

Archie's Seaman's Cap

imagine what a shock that would have been for a then 19-year-old Seaman 1st Class who had seldom ventured far from Worcester before joining the Navy.[20] It would not, however, be his most harrowing experience in the war.

OPERATION AVALANCHE: ALLIED INVASION OF ITALY

The *Barnett* was in Oran as part of Operation Husky, the Allied invasion of Sicily. Rather than launch Churchill's desired western front, the Allies opted for a southern route to take place in stages, with Northern Africa the staging point for a jump across the Mediterranean to Sicily. The *Barnett* arrived at Gela on July 10, 1943, where troops were transported to beaches code-named Yellow and Blue. It was a challenging operation as the town was located roughly 150' higher in elevation than the beach. As renowned naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison noted, the waters were so rough that landing craft "spanked up and down, undulated, careened, and insanely danced on the throbbing, pulsing, hissing sea."[21] Numerous sailors and soldiers were nauseous before they ever made landfall.

I do not know what my father's landing craft was, but given his inexperience at the time it was probably a Higgins boat. Flat-bottomed Higgins boats were infamously unstable in heavy seas; their major virtue was that they were cheap to produce. In essence they were disposable floating barges for a small crew and about three dozen troops who exited through a drop ramp in the

Operation Husky

Building Higgins Boats

bow. *Barnett* crafts were strafed and, although minesweepers had cleared where it and other transport ships anchored, mines remained closer to the beach.[22] Numerous landing boats ran aground, were bombed, or hit mines. My father's boat was damaged by enemy fire, and the *Barnett* itself was struck by a bomb that killed seven aboard and wounded 35 others.[23] It also helped bombard the landing area. According to Morison, this was the first time naval guns supported a land battle.

The *Barnett* withdrew to Algeria for repairs before steaming toward the Salerno, where it arrived after nightfall on September 8, 1943, and made preparations to unload troops the next day. It would have been an uncomfortable anchoring, as the German Luftwaffe bombed throughout the evening the entire time the convoy lay off the coast. Fortunately, air cover was much better and the *Barnett* was in less danger, the percussive echoes of bombs notwithstanding. Salerno was a key landing site for Operation Avalanche, the Allied invasion of mainland Italy. In nine days, the United States saw more than 500 military personnel die, with another 1,800 wounded, and 1,200 reported missing.[24]

Landing at Salerno

The objective of Operation Avalanche was to knock Italy out of the war. Although King Victor Emmanuel III arrested Mussolini in July and the Italian military surrendered on September 3, 1943, German troops remained entrenched. After Salerno, the *Barnett* had another important task. It ferried Allied troops from Naples to beaches near Anzio. It dropped off its last load on December 12, 1943. The Battle of Anzio did not officially begin until January 22, 1944 and would take 136-days to complete. This, however, was the job of the Army and Marine Corps. Their blood-soaked task took until May 3, 1945, before all German troops in Italy capitulated.

Uncle Dick told me that Archie's boat was shot out from under him in Italy. He never specified, however, whether this occurred in Sicily or the Apennine Peninsula, but naval records indicate it occurred at Salerno, despite optimistic ship reports that "casualties taken aboard were less in number than at Gela."[25] At Salerno several landing craft sunk on the beach; one was hit by a mine, and another barely made it back after taking on water from mechanical malfunctions.[26] One of the sunken boats was my father's. He was placed on a brief sick leave for a concussion and a brain bleed, both of which would today have sidelined him for extended periods of time.

The *Barnett* steamed to Liverpool on December 18, 1943, and then to Gourock for an overhaul, before heading to Norfolk, Virginia, where it

docked on January 2, 1944. At this point, my father was complaining of stomach distress, a harbinger of the bleeding stomach ulcers from which he would suffer for many years. The extent of his injuries remain shrouded, however, as his naval records used vague terms such as "nervousness."[27]

NORMANDY: ALLIED INVASION OF FRANCE

After time aboard the hospital ship *USS Refuge*, he was returned to duty. Archie was in Gourock in February, 1944, where the newly refurbished *Barnett* and its crew spent several months preparing for the invasion of Normandy. The Navy's part of the invasion was dubbed Operation Neptune and was part of the larger plan Operation Overlord, the long-awaited third front in the Allied campaign against Nazi Germany.

D-Day is rightly recorded as a landmark event and it was one that changed the course of my father's life. What is recalled far less often is that U.S. military officials were correct in their assessment that attempting a landing in France in 1942, as Churchill wished, would have been foolhardy. During that year, German submarines decimated both merchant and Allied naval fleets.[28] These enemy submarines had to be neutralized before France could be invaded from the sea. By 1944, the Germans had lost 699 of 1,179 submarines. They built more, but Allied bombers took their toll and improved convoy procedures made submarines less effective.[29]

By D-Day, the situation at sea had improved dramatically, although dangers remained. The invasion was launched on June 6, 1944. The *Barnett* anchored off of Utah Beach in the Manche region of Normandy, a location closest to the important port of Cherbourg. My father was by then a Seaman 1st Class, Coxswain, which meant he steered his landing craft, although no date was recorded to clarify whether his was a pre-landing promotion or one that occurred during one of six waves of troop and equipment shuttling.

According to Maurice Isserman, Allied troops landing at Utah Beach met "light resistance," but this understates reality.[30] The deadliest action for American military personnel occurred at Omaha Beach, but Utah Beach was treacherous in its own right. The nine-mile landing site was narrow, "featureless," and enemy armaments were well hidden behind a concrete wall. Morison notes that "landing craft coxswains could not even see the beach until they were more than halfway" in.[31] Unlike Gela and Salerno where naval bombardment aided troop landing, at Utah Beach naval guns and Air Force support complicated matters: "Nothing but smoke and dust could be seen from the sea, and radar was of no use for distinguishing one beach from another."[32]

A *Barnett* report noted that many of its boats took "heavy fire," including one that was hit 15 times. Several had to retreat before totally unloading and others suffered casualties.[33] The *Barnett* finished offloading at 12:43 p.m. and sailed back to England, but my father was not aboard. His boat, a landing craft, tank (LCT) transport, was sunk and its victims remained in the water "for several hours." An appended note reported "the entire crew but one, were either dead or seriously wounded."[34] Make that two who didn't die.

According to Uncle Dick, my father was reported as having been killed in action and a memorial service took place for him in Worcester. However, in reality Archie had been plucked from the water after the *Barnett* had left the area. If not, he would have ended up as one of 53 Massachusetts servicemen officially listed as missing in action. His naval records note that after his rescue he suffered from "brief amnesia," a statement that hardly scratches the surface of truth.[35] This "brief" amnesia was several months in duration.

Weeks after the beach was secured and battles moved inland, two naval officers came to my grandfather's home in Worcester. They asked him to fly to France to identify a man they believed was Archie Edmond Weir. According to family lore, my grandfather replied, "Sonny's dead."[36] After being told the man in question had no "dog tags," my grandfather went to France and identified his son.[37]

Although the naval officers must have been fairly certain that their amnesiac patient was my father, one can easily imagine the emotional roller coaster the family experienced. According to Uncle Dick, my grandfather recognized his son instantly, but "Sonny" did not recognize him.

One military record claimed that my father returned to the United States aboard the *USS George W. Woodward* at the end of June, 1944. This was wrong and later corrected. He came back to the United States aboard a hospital ship after his hospital stay in France. Archie then entered a US Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia, on July 29, 1944 to complete the slow process of regaining his memory. However, dealing with this trauma would be a lifelong process.[38]

My father's war was effectively over. He was awarded several medals and commendations, including those handed out for service in the European and African theaters, three stars for his part in the Sicilian/Italian campaign, a commanding officer's commendation, and three more stars for taking part in the Normandy invasion.

The *Barnett* spent six more weeks transporting troops in and out of France before being reassigned to the Pacific fleet. It returned stateside in January 1946 and was awarded a total of seven battle stars for its service. The ship was decommissioned on May 21, 1946, and was later sold to Italy's

Achille Lauro line and became the merchant ship *MS Surriento* before being scrapped in 1966.[39]

POST WWII: NO HEROIC ENDING (1944-50)

Whenever my father spoke of the war, he tersely ended most stories with the phrase, "All the heroes are dead." He certainly never credited himself with any sort of excessive bravery. To return to author Tim O'Brien, my father's war tales were neither uplifting nor brimming with rectitude.

Archie regained his memory, but complained of weight loss, "headaches, nervousness, and abdominal pain." Doctors at the navy hospital in Virginia diagnosed "startle reaction" and "FATIGUE" (caps in original). Given such a benign report, he was declared "fit for limited duty," with a recommendation that he be "returned to shore duty for a period of not less than 6 months following discharge from this hospital."[40] He spent time at Portsmouth, Virginia, and was eventually transferred to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. While in New Hampshire, he visited Worcester on leave and, on October 21, 1944, married 16-year-old Elaine Helen Salo. He finished unspecified duties in Groton, Connecticut, although his tasks took place in naval yards and were probably maintenance jobs. He was honorably discharged on November 3, 1945, and mustered out with $100 pay, plus a $4.90 travel allowance.[41]

Once again, his brother offered a more dramatic version of the story. In late 1945 Archie returned to his family home on Thenius Street. His thirteen-month marriage was already in dissolution, hardly surprising as his young bride probably had little idea about how to cope with Archie's problems. At his parents' home, he suffered debilitating nightmares and awoke screaming, "Incoming! Incoming!" His father and brother Dick sat on him to protect him from physically injuring himself until he realized where he was. These were behaviors well beyond simply being fatigued. Even the report that deemed him fit for limited duty noted that he was "pale," "apprehensive," and "complained that sudden noises make him shake and tremble."[42] He saw Dr. Fred Williams twice in February, 1946 and again in April, who opined he was too weak to work. He was also examined by Dr. Raymond Gadbois in Worcester in June 1946, who at least was on the right track when he wrote that Archie was suffering from "gastro-intestinal neurosis," a diagnosis indicating that his physical and emotional conditions were linked.[43]

It is important to consider the state of psychological care in 1945. All of my father's symptoms were consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder. However, no such diagnosis existed in 1945. The concept of PTSD only made its appearance during the waning days of the Vietnam War and it took

longer still to gain acceptance.[44] In the late 1940s, Freudian analysis was a dominant treatment modality among military psychiatrists. I once overheard a bitter outburst that a navy psychiatrist had asked Archie a question that set him off. That psychiatrist at least dabbled in Freudianism: he had asked Archie if he ever dreamt of sleeping with his mother. My father ended his rant with the angry remark, "I just about cold-cocked that bastard."[45]

Few military doctors were that insensitive, but Archie would spend the remainder of his life being treated at Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals and by civilian doctors to whom he was referred. His military service ensured that he received a lot of care, but of a kind that was more extensive than helpful. Another misdiagnosis occurred during a 1946 visit to a VA facility. Doctors there ruled out stomach ulcers, although he indeed had them. He experienced similar frustrations concerning disability benefits.

Incredibly, when he was discharged, his "nervous condition" led to a ruling that he was just 10% disabled. Thanks to intervention on the part of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), on December 9, 1947, this was increased to 30% retroactive to June 26, 1946. At the time, this amounted to $41.40 per month, the equivalent of just over $487 in 2020 dollars.[46] Immediately after the war Archie held a series of dead-end jobs, but he had trouble keeping them. He later told me that he decided to leave Worcester because there was "nothing there" for him. It was easy to see why he felt that way given his medical woes, lost jobs, and a collapsed marriage that ended in divorce on January 10, 1947.

My father's struggles with the VA mirrored that of many veterans. As two medical historians explain, World War II:

> fundamentally transformed health care provision nationwide. By rewarding physicians' board certification with rank and pay, the military catalyzed medical specialization in post-war America. Equally important, it remade the Veterans Administration hospital system. Whereas the VA had previously focused on patients with tuberculosis and mental illness, after the war, it came to manage a range of acute and chronic conditions. Increasingly affiliated with academic medical centers in the 1950s, VA hospitals proliferated and broadened their capabilities to create a functionally parallel, government-run health care system.[47]

This sounds positive, but the VA system failed Archie. And, as we shall see, he was not alone.

PENNSYLVANIA: WAR WOUNDS, ALCOHOL & FAMILY, 1950S-60S

In either late 1948 or early 1949, Archie headed off to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where he worked in construction. In retrospect, Atlantic City was on the cusp of decline. In 1949, however, it remained a vibrant place that hosted nightclubs, conventions, entertainment piers, and thriving hotels and restaurants.[48] As fate would have it, two sisters, Sarah and Evelyn Kessinger, decided to leave behind farm life in Southcentral Pennsylvania to experience something different. They ended up waitressing in Atlantic City, where Sarah met Archie. After a brief courtship, they were married in a Protestant ceremony on December 23, 1950; he was 26 and she had just turned 19. Shortly thereafter, they moved to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where my brothers and I would be born and raised. In good Scottish fashion, Archie dubbed her "Bonnie," and addressed her as such for the rest of his life.

Chambersburg was chosen because postwar construction and plumbing jobs were plentiful there. It was also just 15 miles from the village of Upton, where Sarah's mother Rosa and her second husband, Fairman Fair Lytle owned a small, mixed-use farm. My brothers and I considered Fairman–whom we called "Pappy"–to be our grandfather. My maternal grandparents were destined to play a key role in shielding my brothers, and especially me, when my father's war-related troubles brewed.

In 1952, Archie was working in a local railyard, but complained of pain. He was shifted to perform lighter work with the depot's insect and rodent control unit, but eventually lost his job. There were appeals to the VA to revisit his disability status that took on urgency when, on September 26, 1952, the VA informed him that his "nervous condition" was downgraded from 30% disability to just 10%. In December 1953, the VA finally acknowledged that he indeed had duodenal ulcers, though doctors declined to revisit his anxiety disorder. The latter lingered into January, 1954, when he was reclassified, but his payment was just $31.50 per month rather than $41.40.[49] In the years to come there were numerous appeals, but those documents have been lost.

One of my earliest childhood memories was of parental friends crowding into our small four-room apartment. Those evenings featured canasta, chain-smoking, and free-flowing booze. In retrospect, this was probably the turning point for a problem that would plague Archie for the next 40 years: alcoholism. It was one that drained family coffers and led to severe domestic trauma.

The family moved to larger, although cheaper, quarters shortly after Randy was born: half of a side-by-side concrete block house that was literally

on the wrong side of the tracks. Western Maryland Railroad freight lines bisected the town; and we lived in the West End, a working-class district of bars, fire departments, and substandard housing. For West End kids such as us, the only way to have lived closer to the tracks would have been to pitch a tent *on* them. I developed a pattern such that I could not fall asleep until the clatter of the late freight lulled me to dreamland. Sleep did not come easy in a home where loud arguments took place and my father's medical woes spiraled.

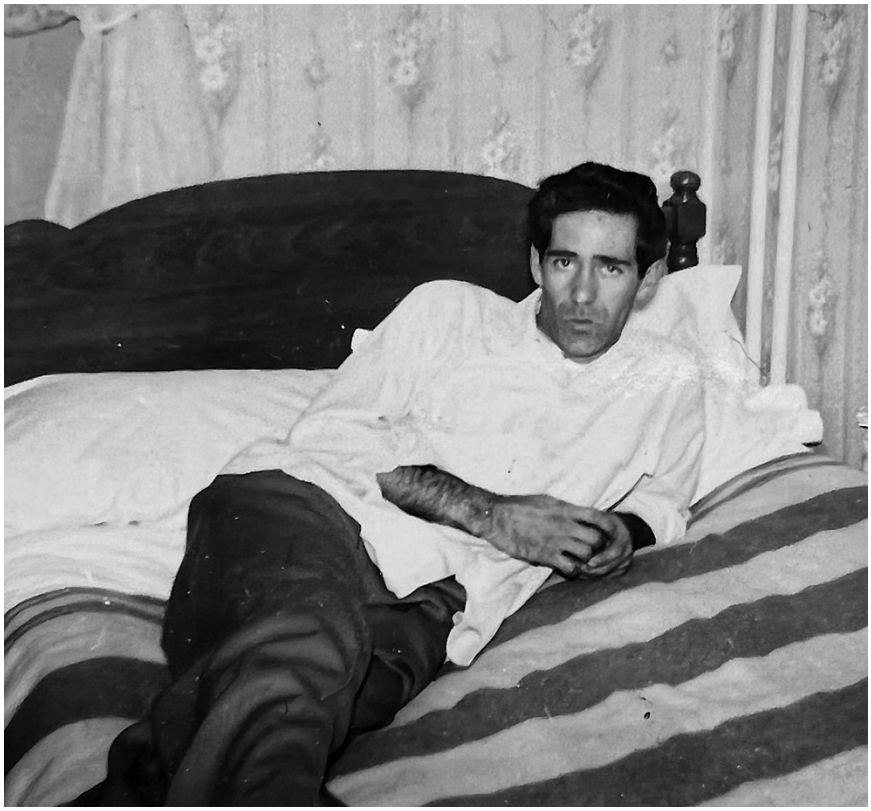
The late 1950s into the mid-1960s could be labeled the "Mylanta Years." My father's ulcers got worse, but numerous trips to the VA yielded only a recommendation to drink Mylanta and chew antacid tablets. Both arrived in the mail by the caseload, along with various pills whose nature I seldom knew. No one in the neighborhood lacked for digestive remedies; not even a person with bleeding ulcers could drink that much Mylanta. It did little to alleviate his pain and his alcohol intake (beer was his favored drink) elevated. Archie

Rosa and Fairman Lytle

was literally drinking to anesthetize himself, a foolish but understandable course of action given the inability of VA doctors to offer viable alternatives.

My father was fired on a regular basis; but in the postwar economy, a job lost in the morning could be replaced by the afternoon. Many were hard-labor placements such as construction, pouring concrete, operating a jackhammer, and plumbing. All took a toll on his wiry body. He tried less strenuous employment such as selling vacuum cleaners and driving a milk delivery truck, but the money wasn't as good. Soon, he suffered from two shoulders that frequently dislocated. When that happened, he screamed and thrashed in agony until help arrived and wrenched his shoulders back into place. These were terrifying scenes for a child to witness, and his recovery often involved more beer to take off the edge.

My father's shoulders were the first of his medical problems that led to surgery. His upper body was crisscrossed by angry roadmap-like scars, as microsurgery was not yet in widespread use. Once again, he battled the



Archie (late 1950)

VA. One shoulder injury could have reasonably been traced back to youth football games–although it didn't disqualify him from entering the Navy–but mostly the cause was performing jobs his body couldn't handle. In 1968, he underwent more surgery and this time the VA was forced to grant a larger increase in disability pay. His ulcer problem, although certainly exacerbated by alcohol, grew so severe that surgeons at a VA hospital in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, removed about 60% of his stomach.[50] For many months, he could not work and had to eat tiny meals that his reduced stomach capacity could handle.

Despite the alcohol, when we were boys, my father appeared heroic to my brothers and I. He played ball with us in the back alley and threatened bodily harm to anyone who treated us unfairly. In fourth grade, I was kept after school for arriving at the playground too early when he was on his way to his job. Dad went nose-to-nose with the male principal and told him he had no right to punish me for something that was his fault. Before grabbing me from detention and storming out the door he told the principal, "If you ever pull a stunt like that again there will blood on the floor. And it won't be mine!"

He was fiercely protective of his sons and, in a stoic fashion in keeping with 1950s-style masculinity, supportive in silent and surprising ways. If anything happened that landed one of us kids in a medical facility–appendicitis, broken bones, high fever–he'd often be called at his workplace du jour, yet beat medical transport to the hospital and was the first person we saw when we were wheeled out. There were always numerous presents at Christmas that entailed great financial strain.

In fourth grade, students underwent a battery of IQ and achievement exams. Apparently, my test scores were high and my parents were told that I had the ability to go to college someday. In a family in which no male member had ever graduated from high school and it remained rare for working-class kids to pursue higher education, this was a big deal. One day a set of *World Book Encyclopedias* showed up in the house. I'm sure they were paid off over a long period of time and, in retrospect, sacrifices were made to procure them.[51] From that point on, whenever I'd ask to be taught carpentry or plumbing, my father refused with the succinct rationale, "You don't need to know that stuff, boy. You're going to college."

The flip side was that alcohol led to family trauma. Money was in short supply and in pre-food stamp days we often ate government surplus food along with squirrels, rabbits, and venison donated by one of Archie's friends who hunted. When I was in junior high school, we got welfare checks. I don't know how long that lasted, but I recall that wardrobes were often ragged and that utilities were sometimes shut off until payments were made.

There are jolly drunks and nasty ones; my father was one of the latter. He sometimes struck my mother and occasionally launched into beer-fueled racist rants, including a threat to shoot anyone who showed up at the door, an alarming declaration as one of my best grade school friends was Black and he had several Black friends and work colleagues. As a kid, it never dawned on me that there had never been a gun in our home! I recall one particularly awful night that left me so shaken that the next morning I was unable to work the combination on my locker and had to ask a sympathetic teacher to do it for me. My salvation was that my mother shuffled me off to my grandparents in Upton. I spent entire summers on the farm, an island of peace. Needless to say, I idolized "Grammy" and "Pappy," the latter the most important male role model of my impressionable years. My brothers Randy and Jeff were four and six years younger and do not remember those years in as much lurid detail.

1960s: MY TEENAGE YEARS & THE WAR AT HOME

At some point, children begin to grasp things they didn't comprehend before. As we entered our teen years, my brothers and I had to face the fact that our father was an alcoholic, not just a guy who drank too much beer. I later learned alcoholism has been recognized as a disease since 1956, but few in the West End saw it that way. I also came to understand why my mother used to send me to the neighborhood watering hole to tell my father to come home. The 1950s and early 1960s were a paternal era in which the firehall and tavern were male preserves. My father would have lost face among his peers, perhaps to the point of violence, had my mother dragged him from a barstool.

Along similar lines, I realized that my mother was the one who kept the family together. In hindsight, that's probably why I had trouble relating to suburban sit-coms; most of the women in my neighborhood had jobs and none of them prepared meals in a dress, white apron, and high heels. Mom worked to keep food on the table that didn't come from a government surplus can.

Archie was popular among other men, quite a few of whom enabled his drinking or got him out of scrapes. (It helped to have a best buddy who was a cop!) Among male peers, most of whom were volunteer firefighters like him, Archie was charitable and proffered loans even when they gutted the family budget. He loved to gamble at the firehall. He was a superb card player, but also a reckless one—still another drain on the family coffers. I subsequently wondered why so few of his friends attempted an intervention and can only

conclude that that was not part of the town's blue-collar culture. However, I suspect that a Catholic priest tried unsuccessfully.

It didn't take a genius to discern my father's enemies. I exaggerate only slightly when I say that in elementary school, I didn't know that Eisenhower's first name was Dwight, not "that son of a bitch." My father blamed Eisenhower for not ordering more airstrikes before sending landing craft to the shore and held him personally responsible for the deaths of those with whom he served and that of his best friend. In addition to Republicans, he also hated the Baltimore Orioles, bosses, "stuck-up" rich people, and Monsignor Hubert McGuire, the priest at Corpus Christi Church from 1961-75. Although I was baptized Catholic, Archie and Father McGuire had a falling out that I suspect occurred when McGuire read him the riot act about smoking, drinking, cursing, gambling, and womanizing (another vice he had developed). All I know for certain is that my father refused to set foot in a Catholic Church unless it was for a funeral of someone he knew.

If a child overlooks serious problems because he knows no better, surly teens tend not to, especially if they live through turbulent times like the 1960s. My father finally secured a stable full-time job at the Marathon Paper division of American Can.[52] His broad experience landed him in the maintenance department where he had a potpourri of tasks, including plumbing, electrical repair, painting, roofing, and tool care. He was, however, in considerable pain for much of the time. The plant had concrete floors, which were not ideal for someone with circulatory problems that were the precursor of atherosclerosis. He made numerous trips to the VA for checkups, but these mainly meant more boxes of pills shipped to our home. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that he was finally referred to the Hershey Medical Center, where bypass surgery essentially re-routed circulation through his legs. The result: more scars.

The most visible scars I saw, however, manifested themselves as abusiveness. In high school, I became aware of and denounced the Vietnam War. In 1968, I declared myself a pacifist, which infuriated my father.[53] He hurled invectives, and called me a coward, which I tuned out when he was drinking; but I did not ignore his treatment of my mother. In one inebriated incident, he struck her and I intervened. He tried to push me aside, but I backed him toward the refrigerator. There, he dared me to hit him: a test of my pacifism. I was tempted, but defused the situation by *refusing* to strike him. I suspect that did more to challenge his manhood than a fight would have.

During my senior year of high school, I developed an interest in politics, learned a lot about the Vietnam War, and had reasoned retorts to Archie's assertion that the military would "make a man" out of me. Pappy was my

model of what a man should be, not my father. (My best friends liked Archie more than I did.) College was on the horizon and one of the best things my father did for me in those years was finagle me summer jobs at American Can. I had been a mediocre high school student largely uninterested in anything taught at Chambersburg High.[54] The combination of Vietnam, working swing shifts at American Can, and amazing teaching and mentorship at Shippensburg University turned me into a dean's list student.[55] At home, I supported my mother's decision in 1973 to file for a legal separation from Archie, a logical thing to do as, in addition to his out-of-control drinking, he had another mistress.[56]

Much has been written about the 1960s "generation gap" that opened fissures between the "Baby Boomers" and their parents. Battles ensued over cultural styles, music, politics, interpretations of freedom, and even affluence. Sociologist Todd Gitlin explains, "Parents could never quite convey how they were haunted by the Depression and relieved by the arrival of affluence; the young could never quite convey how tired they were being reminded how bad things had once been, and therefore how graced and grateful they should feel to live … in a normal America."[57]

The TV sit-com *All in the Family*, which aired between 1971-79, wrung comedy from the generation gap in the form of a family headed by patriarch Archie Bunker, a prototype of a loud-mouthed, working-class bigot. His

Archie and Sarah Weir in the 1970s

favorite sparring partners were his quasi-hippie daughter Gloria and his ultra-liberal son-in-law Michael.

I never understood how my father and I could share a distrust of authority and end up in such different places. He shared my contempt for conservative politicians and never had a good word for another politician after President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. Yet he bought into the Cold War fear of communism and the cult of machismo. He applauded when New York City construction workers beat up antiwar protestors during the so-called hard hat riots of 1970, thought the "little bastards" at Kent State got what they deserved, and laughed at celebrity infidelities.

The result was that by the time I was in college in the 1970s, I began to withdraw from my birth family. Part of this was a natural development for any adolescent on the cusp of adult independence, but it was also defensive as I needed to put emotional distance between myself and family turmoil lest I too become a psychological victim. Put simply, my values and intellectual life veered sharply left of those of my father's generation. Although my parents reconciled, I was sick of my father's drinking and its attendant chaos, anger, and physical challenges.

Much of the psychological burden shifted to my brothers. Randy, always the closest to my mother, took the chaos pretty hard. He, too, found solace in higher education. He had a bad first marriage, but it yielded my nephew Ryan (b. 1974) and niece Lacey (b. 1983). They became the center of another family maelstrom, as Randy's wife refused to allow them to visit Chambersburg because of Archie's drinking. Jeff, who never cared much for school, ran wild for a time and got into some minor trouble before pulling out of it. He graduated from high school, married well, and held a job at American Can/James River before moving on to other better blue-collar offerings. He also had two children, Shayna (b. 1986) and Janelle (b. 1989). Jeff saw my parents often, as he remained in the Chambersburg area.

Grandchildren were a turning point, as was an incident with my wife and I. Emily and I married in 1978 and moved to northern Vermont, where I was a high school teacher for six years. My parents visited several times. In 1980 we took them to a nice restaurant in Burlington, where my father got very drunk and embarrassed us publicly. It was not easy and we felt terrible for my mother, but we told them that as long as my father continued drinking, they were not welcome in our home.

1980-90s: RECONCILIATION & DISCOVERING MY FATHER'S PAST

Until 1984, I knew very little about my father's war experiences. Like many World War II vets, he was uncomfortable speaking about what he had experienced. A total of 16,112,566 Americans served during the WWII, but it wasn't until many of them began to pass away that the Department of Veterans Affairs began to track PTSD among them. In 2009, the DVA estimated that one in twenty suffered from it. By then my father was deceased, as were roughly 85% of his peers. I was, however, gratified that he had lived long enough for our relationship to heal.

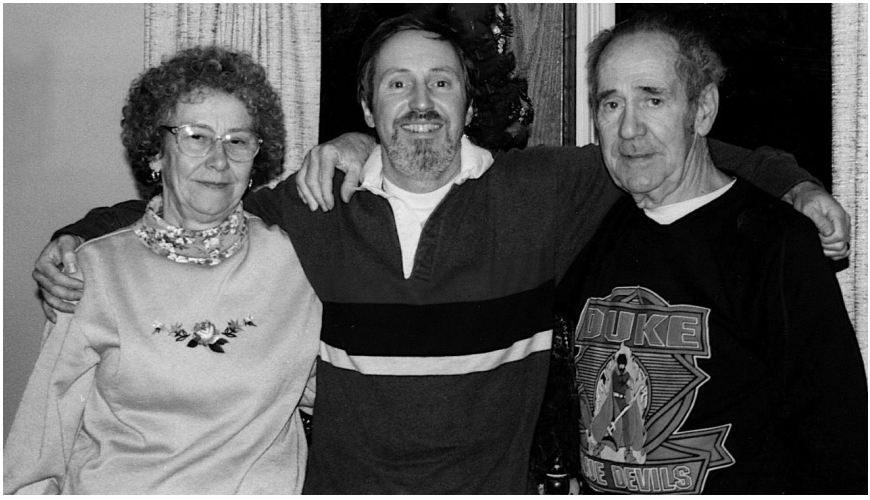
During a 1982 visit to Chambersburg (where we always stayed with Emily's family), I witnessed an event that substance abuse experts would label nearly impossible. In the midst of a drunken weekend, my father staggered to the sink, dumped his beer, and proclaimed, "F*** it, I'm not drinking anymore." Miraculously, he never touched another drop of booze for the remaining 20 years of his life. Not long thereafter, he also gave up smoking cold turkey. (My mother followed suit by chucking her cigarettes, although she drank more coffee than I thought humanly possible!)

It sounds clichéd, but the difference was night and day. However, an episode in 1983 drove home the extent of my father's physical suffering. I invited my parents to visit a year after Dad quit drinking. As a day trip from our home near the Canadian border, I took them to the Maisonneuve section of Montreal so my mother could enjoy the botanic gardens and my father the site where the Olympics had taken place and where the Montreal Expos played. (Even at our worst, we bonded over baseball.) A sudden downpour sent us scrambling for cover, but Archie hobbled unsteadily on legs held stiffly and his face contorted. He leaned into my 31-year-old self and said, "Boy, don't do what I did and don't get old."

The next year, I paid a rare visit to Aunt Mary and Uncle Dick in Northborough, Massachusetts, where Uncle Dick first told me some of what happened to my father during the war. I was astonished. I desperately wanted to ask my father for more details, but my mother asked me not to do so. Perhaps she feared it would stir memories that would lead him back to alcohol; I honored her wishes. I did, however, experience a pang of jealousy when I witnessed another seemingly miraculous transformation: My father became a kind, doting, and fun-loving grandparent. My brothers and I sometimes muse that we wish we had seen more of that side of him when we were growing up.

In a visit several years after my wife and I moved to Northampton in 1985, I drove my father to Northborough to visit Dick. We drove through Worcester as I wanted him to show me some of the places of his youth. He was shocked to find a housing development near Clark University that was once a pond. Overall, Worcester was so deep into its postindustrial slump that he didn't recognize much of it. I gently tried to open a discussion about the war, but he was having none of it, reiterated that "all the heroes are dead," and that was an end to it. He did, however, partially clear up an old mystery. He frequently complained about Pennsylvania and announced he should have never left Massachusetts. I did not yet know about his first marriage, but he said that he no longer knew anyone in Worcester other than his brother. All of his friends were in the Pennsylvania town he purported to dislike, although most were not World War II vets and the only thing Dad ever did in a VFW was use the bar. I would later learn another reason why his trip to Worcester was such a painful one.

It was joyful to relate to my father with boyhood blinders removed. I slowly came to appreciate that he was akin to Karl Marx's definition of an "organic" intellectual, one who saw the world in class terms and had an analysis of his views. Despite just eight years of schooling, he read a lot, especially newspapers. On Sundays, at least three papers came into the house, the *Harrisburg Patriot,* the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *New York Daily News*, the latter for its sports coverage. Often a Hagerstown, Maryland, paper expanded the triumvirate. He watched a lot of television, but he knew malarkey when he heard it and often swore at those on the screen who, in his



Author Rob Weir with His Parents, c. 1995

blue prose, "couldn't tell his ass from a hole in the ground." We even went to baseball games together, something we hadn't done since I was a boy.

Alas, the human body simply isn't built to absorb more than four decades of abuse without latent consequences rising to the surface. There were more trips to the VA, where he made more appeals until his disability rating was so high that he could retire from James River (previously American Can) in 1986 at the age of 62, after more than 20 years of continuous employment. In addition to existing woes—his shoulder, leg, and stomach pains abated but never entirely went away—new medical problems surfaced. In 1994, the VA authorized quadruple bypass surgery at a hospital in Harrisburg. Two years later, he was treated for prostate cancer. By then, he could barely walk, a condition that worsened as he aged. Emphysema flared, he suffered a stroke on May 13, 1998, and had his right heart artery cleaned out. Quadruple bypass surgery was performed on June 5. Those heart woes were why we (unsuccessfully) implored him to avoid watching *Saving Private Ryan*.

That film did, however, provide a revealing and deeply meaningful accidental flashback. After a brief chat about what he thought of it, he changed the subject. I then casually mentioned that I never liked my middle name of Eugene and wondered why he and mom had saddled me with it. He turned beet red and swore before yelling, "You're named after my best friend who was killed in the war!!!" All I could do was plead that I never knew. That friend's name was, as careful readers might surmise, *Eugene* Aucoin. When my wife and I visited France in 2007, five years after my father's death, I failed to find Aucoin's grave in the U.S. military cemetery in Normandy. I subsequently learned that Aucoin served in the Pacific, not the European Theater, and is buried in Worcester.[58] This revelation underscored why my father was uncomfortable visiting his hometown.

My father's conditions grew worse in the late 1990s and by the turn of the twenty-first century he suffered from dementia, fell often, and was in such poor shape that my mother, also in frail health, reluctantly admitted him to the nearest VA hospital in Martinsburg, West Virginia.

My father died in Martinsburg on April 11, 2002, hours before what would have been his 78th birthday and before my mother could deliver the birthday cake she had baked. The official cause of death was coronary artery disease, but his final medical report ran seven pages. It cited numerous medical issues: a pacemaker, gall bladder removal, vascular disease, urinary incontinence, hemiparesis (partial paralysis) from his stroke, hypertension, diverticulosis (stomach wall weakness), elevated cholesterol, carotid artery disease, and a small hernia. Several of his medical problems had been noted several months before he died but had been declared to be either old news

or not "serious" new developments. Once again, VA examinations were extensive, but the prognoses were wrong. It was, however, hard to fault the Martinsburg VA, as the overall report left the impression that it was amazing that my father had lived as long as he did.

My father was cremated and a memorial was held in Chambersburg in advance of a funeral mass at Corpus Christi officiated by a kind Latino priest who had never met my father. By then, a lot of his old friends had predeceased him, but I was deeply moved by a remembrance of an African American colleague of his from James River who spoke of how much he liked Dad and what a trickster he was. The most moving part of all occurred at the cemetery where some of his ashes were buried. I was composed until we approached the entrance and saw that local fire departments had parked trucks alongside the road, their lights flashing in tribute to Archie. At that moment, I began to sob uncontrollably. Back in New England, I fulfilled my father's wish of scattering the rest of his ashes in the Atlantic Ocean.

THE HISTORIAN'S CHALLENGE

To return to a query posed earlier, how does a historian reconstruct events with so many holes? It is especially difficult when freighted with the historian's own gap-riddled memories, the death of human sources, and personal emotions. My father's physical and psychological struggles were just one among the estimated 670,846 cases of Americans wounded during World War II. Is there anything special about his case that's not true of others?

To be cold-hearted, maybe not. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing to learn. Not only is the World War II generation quickly disappearing, but so too is collective memory reinforced by formal education. Veterans' groups and military history aficionados lament the thought, but World War II is "ancient" history today.

Or is it? It would behoove us to remember a time in which the march of international fascism, the horrors of the Holocaust, and other attendant horrors were halted, lessons all-the-more poignant at a time in which American democracy is under internal assault, racist incidents are on the rise, and domestic unity has been shattered. Today, video games, f/x-laden movies, and slick recruiting ads glamorize military interventions that ultimately serve power elites but seldom those who serve.

During his last coherent days my father groused that the deck of postwar American society was stacked against working people in favor of an assortment of "bigwigs." He duly voted for Democrats, an unpopular thing

Archie's Medal for Mediterranean Campaign (top) and WWII Victory Medal (bottom)

to do in Chambersburg, and was a union member in every job he held that had one, but he also felt that a lot of union leaders had "sold out" workers. Union membership peaked at 35% in 1954, but each passing year power shifted from workers to employers. Although some unions were indeed corrupt, that problem took center stage in the mainstream press, rather than inflation, the misuse of injunctions, a gathering open-shop movement, or the stagnant minimum wage. When Ronald Reagan broke the air traffic controllers' union during a 1981 strike, my father added Reagan's name to what he colorfully called his "shit list," those he couldn't stand. But he also blasted union officials as "pencil pushers" isolated from actual workers and in bed with management. Today union membership stands at under 11% and is disproportionately concentrated in white-collar professions.[59]

My father's battles with the VA also reflect the erosion of a working-class ethos. The VA was also on his "shit list." He went to their facilities because it cost him no money to go to them, but he complained that there was a different doctor every time and "none of them know their ass from a hole in the ground." He correctly identified a social class gulf between GIs and the NCO professionals who staff the VA. Why did it take so long to recognize PTSD as a combat-induced condition? It is impossible to know whether such a diagnosis would have prevented or shortened my father's struggles with alcohol.

Nor is there any way to gloss the VA's failure to deal with war-correlated alcoholism. A 1996 study revealed than a shocking 53% of institutionalized WWII vets suffered from alcohol abuse, and another found vet hospital deaths linked to alcohol at 12.8%, the highest single cause. *Washington Post* writer Tim Madigan correctly headlined his revelations of lingering problems, "Their war ended 70 years ago. Their trauma didn't."[60] -

The record of both Democrats and Republicans has been one of rhetorical support for those in active service and little for vets out of uniform. Vietnam War vets and those from the two Gulf Wars and Afghanistan know well the parameters of serving without being served well.[61] In 1976, Vietnam vet Ron Kovic told of conditions at the VA so harrowing they could have been lifted from a Charles Dickens novel. In 2014, the VA was rocked by another scandal involving subpar treatment of veterans, understaffed facilities, data manipulation, and delayed care that had fatal consequences. Here in the Bay State, 76 vets at the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke died of Covid-19 in 2020, roughly one-third of its patients. Many of the same problems identified in 1976 and 2014 remain. Nor has the VA made substantial progress in its battle against alcohol abuse. According the National Institutes of Health, 38% of

active Marines struggle with alcohol, and among Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel the levels are 33%, 31.8%, and 24.5%.[62]

We do well to remember that no nation exits a war unscathed and few individuals who experience it return home completely unmarked by their experiences. To evoke Tim O'Brien a final time, the ultimate "obscenity" of war is that many do not return at all, which was true of more than 291,500 World War II combatants, including 2,996 from Massachusetts. My father made it home, but because his injuries were deemed psychological, he is not counted among the 3,365 Bay Staters who were wounded during the war. This means his story is inextricably linked to O'Brien's "larger waste."

The saga of Archie Edmond Weir, whether unique or not, is an American tale. It challenges us to move beyond myth-making and generalizations. The ways we tell history and the labels we apply are at best imperfect descriptions of *general* patterns that are frequently incorrect in individual cases and sometimes blur even the proverbial "Big Picture." Historian Marc Bloch, a French Jew who died in a World War II concentration camp, averred that the very definition of history is the event plus the various interpretations of that event. No one can grasp *all* the possible interpretations, but we should neither forget the past nor reduce it to easy-to-digest heroic tales. As John F. Kennedy observed during a commencement speech at Yale University in 1962, "The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic."

HJM

Notes

1. Many film studies deal with how World War II is depicted. Among them: Mark C. Carnes, ed. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995); Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, *Hollywood's America: United States History Through Its Films* (St. James, NY: Brandywine Press, 1993); Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); and Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: How the Movies Changed American Life* (New York: Random House, 1975).
2. Studs Terkel, *The Good War* (New York: The New Press, 1997 reprint of 1984 original); Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998). Brokaw's work was partly inspired by numerous books penned by Stephen Ambrose.
3. Tom Englehardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusionment of a Generation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).

4. Elizabeth Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2021).
5. Tim O'Brien, *The Things That They Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 76.
6. Claude Bélanger, "Agriculturalism," *Quebec History*, Oct. 2006. Farm crises in Quebec had precipitated an exodus to New England where factory work seemed a more viable alternative. Bélanger links the exodus to fallout related to mechanization, government policy, and the Catholic Church's dominance over land ownership. An even larger exodus took place 1920-29.
7. There was great resistance to integration into the United Kingdom by both Scots and the Irish. In the case of Scotland, this was made manifest by the Jacobite rebellions during the 17th and 18th centuries.
8. John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1983 reprint of 1963 original). Crofters were booted from lands when wool for the English textile industry proved more valuable than agricultural products and rent. One could compile lists of Scottish-sounding names from ship manifests, but they would be speculative, as many boats routinely called in England or Ireland before their Atlantic crossings. Moreover, the number would still be inaccurate. We know little about the children and grandchildren of Clearances families that drifted into United Kingdom industrial cities, failed to thrive, and subsequently emigrated.
9. Although it is dated, a good source for Scottish immigrants is D. MacDougall, *Scots and Scots' Descendants in America* (New York: Caledonia Publishing Company, 1917). Note: Some records render Weir as Ware, the latter more likely to be Irish.
10. I am grateful to my late Aunt Lucile Sleighter for her genealogical work. A good capsule of the colorful and cantankerous Thomas Weir can be found in Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Famous Scots* (Edinburgh: W & R Chambers, 1992).
11. Her surname was often misspelled as Menau. Although his mother was of Quebecois stock, my father identified most with his paternal Scottish roots.
12. Their first child, a daughter named Barbara, died before her first birthday. According to family lore, Nina, the second child whom I never met, was briefly in domestic service.
13. Pius XII served as pontiff from 1939-1956. His papacy has been hotly contested. His supporters claim he helped the Church survive fascism, and that he secretly aided Jews and spoke out against communist totalitarianism. Detractors accuse him of being "Hitler's Pope" who exchanged the safety of the Church for Vatican silence on the Holocaust. They also assert he was an anti-Semite.
14. Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers & Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 12; See also Richard Tremblay, "The Worcester Wire Industry," Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Open Access, https:web.wpi.edu Accessed Jan. 16, 2022.
15. The 284,716 Bay State combatants represented 6.60% of the population, just slightly lower than New Jersey, Tennessee, and New York whose percentages of the total population were, respectively, 6.63%, 6.64%, and 6.65%.

16. The 1940 census incorrectly listed him as Archie E. Weir Jr.
17. He demonstrated ability as both a placekicker and a punter and did both barefooted.
18. The Lionfish is currently on display in New Bedford.
19. It is now better known as W. R. Grace and Company. "The Grace Line History," https://www.cruiselinehistory.com/the-grace-line/ Accessed Nov. 21, 2021.
20. During the war, the Navy had different rankings for non-commissioned (NCO) and commissioned (CO) personnel. Draftees and enlisted men such as my father entered as a Seaman 2nd class and were promoted to Seaman 1st class once they completed training.
21. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Volume IX: Sicily-Salerno-Anzio: Jan. 1943-June 1944* (Boston: Little-Brown and Company, 1954), 99. Morison, a preeminent maritime historian, remains a key source for naval operations during World War II, a conflict in which he served as a Rear Admiral.
22. Ibid.
23. Barnett II.
24. Maurice Isserman, *World War II* (New York: Facts on File, 2003); Craig L. Symonds, *World War at Sea: A Global History* (New York: Oxford Press, 2018).
25. "Invasion of Europe," *U.S. Barnett* newsletter. Found among Archie E. Weir personal effects. Hereafter such documents will be cited as personal effects.
26. *USS Barnett* boat reports, July 10-12, 1943, personal effects.
27. Report of Medical Survey, U.S. Naval Hospital Portsmouth, Virginia, Sept. 23, 1945, personal effects.
28. According to Morison, a staggering 1,027 military ships were lost in the North Atlantic during 1942. He argues that, "From the Allied point of view, victory was not even in sight" in 1942-43. Merchant ships suffered horribly, as defensive convoy plans–including how to space boats for maximum protection, communicate between them, and refuel–were still in a state of trial-and-error development. Morison, *Volume I: The Battle of the Atlantic Sept. 1939-May 1943,* 1948, 403, 410-11.
29. Morison, V*olume X: The Atlantic Battle Won May 1943-May 1945*, 1962.
30. Isserman, *World War II*, 150.
31. Morison, *Volume XI: The Invasion of France and Germany 1944-1945*, 1964, 98.
32. Ibid, 100.
33. *USS Barnett*, "Individual Boat Reports," ND, personal effects.
34. Ibid.
35. Report of Medical Survey, U.S. Naval Hospital Portsmouth, Virginia, Sept. 23, 1944, personal effects.
36. Sonny was my father's nickname, a way for the family to differentiate him from his father who was also named Archie.
37. A dog tag is military slang for the metal identification worn around the neck.
38. Report of Medical Survey, op cit. Differing dates on records no doubt reflect the fact that the war was still raging and reports were hastily filed by various military personnel.

39. Barnett II.
40. Report of Medical Survey, op cit.
41. Notice of Separation from the U.S. Naval Service, Nov. 3, 1945, personal effects.
42. Report of Medical Survey, op cit.
43. Fred R. Williams, M.D. to City of Worcester June 11, 1946; Raymond W. Gadbois, M.D. to Whom It May Concern, June 17, 1946. Both letters in personal effects.
44. Max Cleland (1942-2021), a triple amputee, was instrumental in getting the military to recognize PTSD when he was the Administrator of Veterans Affairs under President Jimmy Carter from 1977-81.
45. Cold-cocked is a slang term that means to strike a blow to the head to knock someone unconscious.
46. Veterans Administration to Archie E. Weir, Dec. 9, 1947.
47. Justin Barr and Scott H. Podolsky, "A National Medical Response to Crisis — The Legacy of World War II," *New England Journal of Medicine* (April 29, 2020).
48. Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford Press, 2006).
49. Charles Yoho, M.D. "To Whom It May Concern," Sept. 30, 1952; James Carson, "To Whom It May Concern," Oct. 2, 1952; Archie E. Weir to Adjudication Officer, Oct. 3, 1952; VA Regional Office (Wilkes-Barre, PA) to Archie Weir, Sept. 26, 1952; VA Board of Veterans Appeals, Dec. 16, 1953; VA Regional Office (Wilkes-Barre, PA) to Archie Weir, Jan. 14, 1954. Personal effects.
50. The stomach is one of the few body organs that can "grow back" in the sense that what's left stretches to near its original size.
51. One measure of how little we knew at the time was that no one really understood what a reference book was, so I read *World Book from A through Z* as if they were any other book!
52. It was later purchased by James River, a Richmond, Virginia-based corporation that also had a plant in South Hadley Falls, MA.
53. I eventually converted to Quakerism.
54. The exceptions to my disinterest were a course taught by no-nonsense Jessica Smith, who piqued my curiosity about the world, Pamela Erickson's political science class, and Youth Against Pollution, a group of which I was a cofounder.
55. I owe professors such as Paul Adams, Paul Gill, Richard McLeod, and Jack Morrison more than I could ever repay. Above all is R. Charles Loucks, mentor, friend, and inspiration.
56. Court of Common Pleas of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, Nov. 5, 1973.
57. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 19-20.
58. Biographical material on Eugene Aucoin (Jan. 4, 1921-Nov. 14,1943) is scant. He was born in Spencer, MA to Clair (1893-1978) and Florence (1894-1968) Aucoin, Canadian immigrants.

59. West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Certificate of Death and Medical Record, April 11, 2002.
60. See works such as Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History, 8th Edition* (Wheeling, WV: Harlan Davidson, 2010).; Robert E. Weir, *Workers in America: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013).
61. Nathan Hermann and Goran Eryavec, "Lifetime Alcohol Abuse in Institutionalized World War II Veterans," *American Geriatric Psychiatry* 4:1 (1996), 39-45; C. Dennis Robinette, Zdenek Hrubec, and Joseph Fraumeni, Jr., "Chronic Alcoholism and Subsequent Mortality in World War II Veterans," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 109:6 (June 1979), 687-700; Tim Madigan, "Their war ended 70 years ago. Their trauma didn't," *Washington Post*, Sept. 11, 2015.
62. Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976); Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); David Goldstein, "'Nearly All' VA Claims for Gulf War Illness 'Improperly Denied,'" *The War Horse*, May 20, 2021.
63. Amelia Sharp, "Alcohol Abuse Among Veterans," American Abuse Centers, https://americanaddictioncenters.org/veterans/alcoholism Accessed Jan. 17, 2022.