

Wartime Letter Left Unopened for 65 Years

Tales of Earlier Days
By Bob Dewel

Easter was early in 1945, but it was an important date in the family. Mrs. Curry of Baraboo spent another three cents for an airmail stamp on a letter, so the Easter wishes would reach their destination in time. The stamp featured an American bomber, and she posted the letter on March 17.

Two months later, on May 13, the letter was returned to the Curry home by an apologetic postman--these were tough days for postmen too. Stamped on the front was a cryptic message: "USMC REPORTS UNDELIVERABLE --RETURN TO SENDER" The postmark, only partially decipherable, included the word THEATRE, and WASH. D.C. The word theatre probably referred to the Pacific Theatre of military operations.

We don't know, but we believe the postman muttered a few stumbling words, and Mrs. Curry remained silent as she accepted the letter. She had already learned that Marine Pfc Harlan Page, only son of their close friends, the Harlan Pages, had fallen on March 9 in the extremely difficult Allied assault on Iwo Jima.

Harlan, the fifth in a proud line of Harlan Pages, had died 8 days before the card was mailed--communication was slow in those days. This was the postal department cleaning house. But it also re-opened the Curry's slowly healing wounds from the news of the

loss of Harlan. The nineteen-year old Marine was like a son to the Currys, and good friend to their grandson Bob Curry, only one year Harlan's junior.

Indeed the boys shared many interests, including golf and a jointly owned "flivver" as old cars were known then. Bob missed by only one day seeing his friend at the Marine base at Pearl Harbor before Harlan shipped to the battlefield.

The Opening

There seemed no need then to open the letter, sealed only two months previously. They recalled their short but chatty note inside, and knew there could be no reassuring return note inside from Harlan. But it seemed wrong to cast aside their last attempted contact with their young friend, so it remained unopened but cherished through the years, carefully preserved by the Curry family.

Finally, on May 22, 2010 it seemed that the time had arrived to come to grips with the unopened message. The elder Pages and Currys had long since passed on, as had Harlan's sister Patricia and his uncle, Curt Page Sr. The immediate living persons of interest were Bob Curry of Lake Forest IL, and Curt Page of Baraboo, Harlan's cousin.

So the two men met this year on Friday May 22 along with spouses and friends, and opened, with respect, the long-hidden message. It was an Easter card, with news of friends and other family servicemen, along with the assurance, "Know that our prayers are with you, Harlan".

There was more: "The little old town was much excited when we knew where you were and what you were doing for the good of people all over the

world--hope your work will not be in vain"

Comment

Indeed, the sacrifice of Harlan and over 6 thousand young men on Iwo Jima was not in vain, for now the Japanese were not just defending islands in the Pacific. Iwo Jima was essentially a part of the homeland, of Japan itself. It was the only battle in which American casualties were greater than those of the homeland defenders, a harbinger of the future.

Thus the extremely difficult fighting and the terrible toll in Iwo Jima helped convince Allied military and civilian authorities that should the war drag on in this manner, Japanese home island by home island, up to a million American soldiers would lose their lives. Even more Japanese would die as the invasion dragged on.

The Japanese soldiers virtually never surrendered, and their toll alone would greatly exceed a million. Powerful though it was, the decision to use the atomic bomb is thus credited with sacrificing a few at Hiroshima to save a generation of millions on both sides.

Harlan Page V was a part of that fated generation of young Americans called to serve in WWII. Had he survived, he might now have been the aged editor emeritus of this newspaper, with his son, Harlan VI at the helm. Perhaps a Harlan VII would be writing copy. But it was not to be.

I thank Bob Curry, Kurt Page, and Joan Litscher for this story.

