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A Little Girl, A Great War, A Baseball Triumph

RUTH HANFORD MORHARD

The year was 1946.

Life in the United States was slowly returning to normal. The war in Europe had ended in May 1945. By September the War in the Pacific was over. Soldiers like my Dad were returning from World War II and reuniting with their eager families. More than five hundred had been Major League baseball players.

Months before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Major League Baseball had reached new heights of popularity. In Philadelphia's Shibe Field, home of the Philadelphia Athletics, Boston Red Sox slugger Ted Williams crushed a ball into the right field speaker to lift his average to .406, winning the batting title and, unknown to him at the time, becoming the last Major Leaguer to hit over .400.

In Cleveland's League Park, Yankee centerfielder Joe DiMaggio set another record, hitting safely in his fifty-sixth consecutive game. At Fenway Park, forty-one-year-old Red Sox pitcher Lefty Grove got his three-hundredth career win.

The war changed everything. Detroit's Hall of Fame slugger "Hammerin'" Hank Greenberg was one of the first to be drafted, giving up his \$55,000 yearly salary for \$21 per month Army pay and telling the *Sporting News*, "If there's any last message to be given to the public, let it be that I'm going to be a good soldier."

The Cleveland Indians' Bob Feller had a family-related draft exemption. He was on his way to Chicago to discuss his 1942 contract when he heard the news of Pearl Harbor. Instead of negotiating a new contract, he told Indians General Manager Cy Slapnicka that he was enlisting in the Navy, giving up a \$100,000 salary to become a Chief Petty Officer aboard the USS Alabama.

Ted Williams enlisted in the Navy in May 1942, became a second lieutenant and a Marine fighter pilot, setting records for aerial gunnery. Warren Spahn fought in the Battle of the Bulge after pitching just one Major League game. Yogi Berra was a minor leaguer for the Norfolk Tars with a .396 batting average when he was drafted. He became a gunner's mate and volunteered to pilot the rocket boats that led the landing craft on D-Day.

Team owners scrambled to find replacements for the hundreds of Major and Minor League players they lost. When New York Giants Manager Leo Durocher found he had only two regulars left on the team, he put himself in the lineup. A forty-six-year-old named Hod Lisanbee pitched for the Cincinnati Reds. Former prisoner of war Bert Shepard pitched for the Brooklyn Dodgers with an artificial leg. One-armed outfielder Pete Gray was a St. Louis Brown. Former Red Sox slugger Jimmy Foxx came out of retirement to play for the Philadelphia Phillies. Women also played pro ball when Phillip K. Wrigley founded the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League.

The war had changed everything for our small family, too. I was five years old when my Dad left, wrenched from his desk at the Travelers Insurance Company at thirty-six years of age, exchanging his well-worn pen for a dangerous rifle, his warm front porch for the frozen trenches of Alsace, his much-loved wife and child for the company of bloodied soldiers he'd never met.

With my childish reasoning, I blamed my mother for his going, believing the bacon and eggs she'd cooked for breakfast the day of his physical were the reason he'd been classified I-A. When the officer asked what branch of the service he preferred, he said the Navy—so they promptly put him in the Army infantry and sent him to the front lines in France.

I didn't understand why he couldn't stay with us. He'd been supporting the war, taking a second job making rifles at the Underwood Typewriter factory, and serving as an air raid warden. I remember him tapping at our kitchen window while my mother read me a book by candlelight. No lights were allowed, even for your own wife and daughter.

He was sent to Camp Croft in Spartanburg, South Carolina. After basic training, he was off to Europe on the Queen Mary, then a troop ship where he slept, crushed among other draftees, in a line of cots on top of a platform constructed over the swimming pool. He was in the second wave of soldiers to land at Normandy, a replacement for the thousands who had died there.

We'd been living in a two-family house on Hillside Avenue in Hartford, CT around the corner from the drug store on New Britain Avenue. I'd been in kindergarten. My teacher was Miss Finnegan. But we couldn't live there anymore. The Army allowance for families was slim, and my mother could no longer afford the rent. We went to live with my grandmother and Uncle Bill on the second and third floors of a large three-story white house on Hill Avenue in Yalesville, about forty minutes away.

I understood my father would be gone for a long time and that our lives would not be the same as they had been. I knew there was a war, but somehow my young mind distanced me from the horror of it all. I saw pictures of soldiers in uniform. I looked for France on the globe. That was pretty much all I knew.

I couldn't imagine the constant terror my Dad must have experienced. Or how my mother must have felt to send the love of her life off to what could have been his untimely death. Or what it was like for her to uproot our lives. Or how we survived on the meager Army earnings. Or the burdens the two of us must have put on my aging grandmother.

I adored my grandmother and the comforting aroma of the scones, saffron buns, fig-filled cookies, and meat-potato-turnip pasties she'd bake on the huge iron stove that took up most of the kitchen. They were just like she'd made back in her native Cornwall, England.

Uncle Bill would take me with him to get newspapers on Sundays and give me horsey rides on his foot and let me watch the six-inch screen on the first television set I'd ever seen, even though it mostly showed test patterns and, later, an occasional wrestling match. He never complained about having a little girl around to bother him. I think he liked it.

My mother's other brother, the oldest in the family, was Sid. He and his family—Aunt Elsie and my cousin Bobby—lived downstairs in our house. Uncle Sid was a Goliath of a man with bushy eyebrows, a puffy nose, smiling eyes, and a laugh that filled the room. He was always laughing and joking and teasing.

There was no kindergarten in Yalesville, and until I got into first grade, I'd ride my red tricycle up Newplace Street to wait for the school bell that meant Bobby and the other kids would be coming home. Bobby was my best friend even though he was three years older. We'd ride our bikes and play marbles and card games like Everlasting, a game I've never heard of since. It was a game that never ended like, it seemed, the war my Dad was in. We had a Victory Garden up on the hill where his parents had some land, though Bobby did most of the work while I climbed a nearby tree. The things both Bobby and I loved the most were baseball and the Boston Red Sox.

I had other friends in the neighborhood—David lived next door, Judy across the street, Joyce on the street in back, Buddy and Barbara and Terry, nearby. They liked baseball, too, but argued all summer long about which of the five teams in the adjacent states of New York and Massachusetts were the best. It got even worse in the early fall with the American and National League pennant races and the World Series. There were three New York teams; the Yankees, Giants, Dodgers, and two Boston teams; the Red Sox and Braves. Bobby and I liked the Red Sox, though most people in our part of Connecticut, which was nearer New York, were Yankee fans, probably because they had won more pennants. (We hated the Yankees.) Some of my friends said DiMaggio was the best player in baseball, but I liked Ted Williams. I loved Ted Williams.

In my new life, I sometimes forgot about my Dad, overseas. We got mail from him, first in large envelopes that unfolded into letters, then small ones that had gone through the censors and been microfilmed until the writing was so small it was hard to read. Some were for my Mom, some for both of us, and some just for me. He wanted to know how school was going, what Bobby and I were doing, and I'd answer with Mom's help. He never talked about himself or the terrible war he was in.

In my sheltered world, that War meant a lot of everyday things. When we went to the market, we had to turn in coupons for meat—meat was rationed then—and Grandma often would ask me to go to the store for ground beef or a package of oleomargarine, a white substance in a plastic bag with an orange button in the center that you squeezed and squeezed until the package turned yellow. Then you spread it on bread and pretended it was the butter you could no longer buy.

Finally, in January 1946, seven months after the Allied victory in Europe and four months after the Japanese surrender in the Pacific, Dad came home. Ted Williams was discharged the same month. Dad went back to work at Travelers, taking the train from Yalesville to Hartford; Ted Williams returned to the Red Sox. Other soldier-players were returning, too. Bob Feller was discharged from the US Navy on August 22, 1945, and was in the Cleveland Indians lineup two days later.

Dad came back a battle-weary veteran. He wouldn't talk about his fighting days in France. We could only guess at the horrors he'd faced. I'd hear him in the middle of the night, screaming with nightmare images of the bodies of fellow soldiers, the never-ending gunfire, and the danger that lurked behind every hill, every building. We'd never heard of post-traumatic stress, but he was certainly experiencing it.

Over the years he was gone, I'd become different, too. I had settled into my new life with my mother, grandmother, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends. I loved my school and trips to the Corner Store where Harry Acton would sometimes sit me on a stool at the counter and give me an ice cream soda.

I'd known my Dad only through letters for three years. We were pretty much strangers, but he was a stranger who wanted his little daughter back. He tried hard to reestablish our relationship. He'd sing me songs about the chicken in the Army, tell me about K-rations and the Eiffel Tower and the Arc du Triomphe that he'd seen in Paris after the war was over.

I listened but quietly wondered if Ted Williams knew the song or had seen those places.

The Red Sox opened their season on April 16, playing the Washington Sen-

ators. The replacement players were mostly gone, and the Red Sox not only had Williams back but Dom DiMaggio, Johnny Pesky, and Bobby Doerr.

The team started out in first place—and on my birthday, June 16, the Red Sox were still atop the American League standings. Of fifty-five games, they had won forty-two and lost only thirteen. I was so happy. Real baseball was back; the Red Sox were back, better than ever.

My Dad worked every weekday, then took the long train ride home. Saturdays he'd help my Mom and Grandmother with chores around the house. Sunday mornings we'd go to the Methodist church with the beautiful stained-glass windows and sit in the same pew every week. In the afternoon we'd visit with Aunt Susie, who lived about a half-mile down Newplace Street in a house with a front parlor no one ever used. Aunt Susie was married to Uncle Will, but he never came in the house when we were there. He just tended to his multi-colored flower garden that took up the entire back yard. He certainly was no baseball fan. Sometimes kids would play baseball on the field that backed up to Uncle Will's garden, and a ball would land on one of his majestic gladiolus or a precious red rose. There would be hell to pay. He'd scream at them and threaten to call their parents. The kids at school hated him, and I was ashamed he was my uncle, the uncle who'd never even said "hello" to me.

The Red Sox kept winning, and Bobby and I got more and more excited. I started reading every baseball book I could find in the library, checking the standings in the newspaper and memorizing the earned run and batting averages of all the players, not just my favorite Red Sox.

I started to see a change in my Dad, too. I knew he'd been interested in sports but he'd been quiet and withdrawn much of the time since he'd come home. Now, instead of the chicken in the Army song, he'd talk to me about the games.

We started listening on the radio, especially when there was a Sunday doubleheader, forgoing the visit to Aunt Susie. Dad was getting excited, too. We talked about the players and the games and the teams all the time. The chicken in the Army was forgotten.

By the end of the month, June 30, the Red Sox were up eight and a half games over the Yankees, with a 50-19 record. Dad and I listened to the doubleheader that day. The Red Sox were playing the Washington Senators. They won the first game 15-8. Bobby Doerr and Rudy York hit a home run each, Hal Wagner hit two, and just about everyone else got at least one hit.

They weren't as fortunate in the second game. The Senators won 9-2. Ted didn't get a hit in four at-bats—but he still was hitting .355, not bad for a guy just back from the war. Other returning players also were doing well. With the

Cleveland Indians, Bob Feller had a record of 13-5, even though the season wasn't yet half over.

As for my Dad and me, I was finally getting to know him again, and he was getting to know me. We had something in common. We loved baseball and the Boston Red Sox. For my Dad, I think there was something more. He saw that the baseball players coming back hadn't lost a step, despite losing productive years to the war. Dad's face was brighter. He laughed more. The memories of the war still lingered, but he'd found a bit more happiness.

The Red Sox went on to win the American League pennant, with a record of 104-50, a full twelve games ahead of the second-place team, the Detroit Tigers. They played the St. Louis Cardinals, whose big star Stan Musial, also served in the Navy during the War.

Unfortunately, the Red Sox lost to the Cardinals 4-3 in the last of seven games. They would wait until 2004 for another World Series win.

But win or lose, my Dad and I had our relationship back, thanks to baseball and the Boston Red Sox.

RUTH HANFORD MORHARD is the author of *Mrs. Morhard and the Boys: A mother's vision. The first boys' baseball league. A nation inspired* (Citadel Press, 2019).