

Agony in advent: Lessons from a father's war journal

by [John R. Wimmer](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

Those who watched the *The War*, a documentary about World War II by Ken Burns which aired on PBS this fall, could feel the horror of battle with a foot soldier from Mobile, Alabama; understand the pressure on a newspaper editor in Luverne, Minnesota, who worked as if victory depended on him; and feel the anxiety of a mother coping with the government's rationing program.

Above all, viewers sensed how, for soldier and civilian alike, the war involved a lot of *waiting*—longing for a letter from a beloved young man in harm's way, gazing each day at a picture of a faraway sweetheart, yearning for that great homecoming when the war would finally be over.

Those wartime experiences are in my mind as I come to Advent this year and prepare again for the coming of the Christ child. In his version of Romans 8, Eugene Peterson conveys a fresh sense of Paul's words on Advent waiting (from *The Message*):

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. . . . That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see that it is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become and the more joyful our expectancy.

Watching *The War* reminded me of my Dad and a time when he was "enlarged in the waiting." John H. Wimmer was a young man on an Indiana farm when he was drafted in 1940; he remained in the army until 1946 and spent most of those six years in the South Pacific.

When Dad died we discovered among his belongings a journal he had kept during the war. In it, he described dozens of experiences about which he'd never spoken during his lifetime. He was not a foot soldier and rarely carried a rifle. Instead, he played the trumpet in one of the army's best stage bands in the Pacific theater, sometimes even entertaining soldiers along with movie stars like Bob Hope and Errol Flynn. (Dad was delighted to report that "Errol is just one of the guys" and "eager to share any danger or deprivation with us.")

I had thought that Dad didn't like to talk about the war because he was embarrassed at having had what seemed like such cushy duty. Playing backup to Dinah Shore, after all, was hardly like storming the beach at Tarawa. But his journal revealed that he had not been as sheltered from danger as I'd imagined.

On dozens of five-by-eight inch writing tablets, Dad wrote of unrelenting terror and a longing for home. When he was not playing in the band, he was in or near combat, tending to the wounded as a stretcher bearer, or enduring nauseating hours in the lower decks of a cramped and noisy transport ship. No matter where he happened to be—even in jungle clearings where they entertained troops—carnage, destruction and fear were constants. He never got over the jarring disparity between war and home.

He also wrote about the promiscuities and profanities of army life, an atmosphere that offended his morality. I once met one of his army musician buddies and asked if he remembered my father. "Of course! So how is good old 'Fap' Wimmer?" Fap? I called my Dad to ask what this meant. He explained that there was a popular cartoon character who used the word as a mild expletive. Dad adopted the name as his own "nonprofane profanity," and apparently his nickname. I knew that I had never heard my father utter a profane word; I didn't realize that his army friends never heard him swear either.

Above all, Dad wrote about the agony of waiting, the experience of soldiers in all wars that led Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. to say: "War is an organized bore." Dad complained of endless wasted hours. In one instance, the line for breakfast on a transport ship wrapped around the deck several times. He wrote with annoyance that as he was still standing in line for breakfast, he crossed men moving in the other direction who not only had already eaten breakfast, but had managed to get ahead of him in the queue for lunch. He waited two years, along with 1,000 other soldiers, to enter a lottery for the one wristwatch the PX had available for sale. (This

was a story he *did* tell later in life: he won the lottery and bought an Omega watch that he prized all his life.)

My father never liked change, and his journal reflected his anxiety on hearing scuttlebutt that the outfit would soon be pulled out. There were often weeks or months of waiting after such news, of not knowing where or when or into what kind of danger he was headed. Often the rumor turned out to be in error. It was the absurdity of *Waiting for Godot*—army style.

One terrifying experience lasted no more than a few minutes but haunted him the rest of his life. Dad was lying in his bunk on a deck well below the water line. When the noise of anti-aircraft guns started blazing overhead, he watched as 500 men suddenly became a frightened mob that shouted, pushed and clamored its way toward the only exit hatch on their deck. Dad realized that if his ship were struck by the Kamikaze pilot who had appeared above them, he would have no chance to escape through the mass of crazed men to the hatch on the other side of the deck. He quietly prepared himself to die. Then, at the last instant, the Kamikaze pilot decided to strike the ship next to my Dad's. More than 400 men died, many of them drowning in the lower decks.

What surprised me most about reading Dad's journal was the way he expressed his waiting in terms of eschatological hope. He never would have said it in such theological terms, but that's what it was.

He was not simply waiting to go home. In living among and witnessing the suffering of native people in Bougainville, New Guinea, and the Philippines, he longed for them to live in peace again. He ached for his own chance to be free from constant discomfort and the fear of death. Appalled by the violence and waste of the war, he hoped for the intervention of an atomic bomb even as he feared its consequences. He yearned to be "back home again in Indiana" (as the song goes) on the farm with his family and in worship in his Methodist church in Milroy.

Those journal pages helped me to understand some things about my Dad that I never grasped while he was alive. I learned that his utter lack of profane language was formed in the military environment of abundant and nonstop profanity. His faithfulness to God and the church were forged in the furnace of the war experience. (He and Mom sang in the church choir for 50 years.) I can now see that he became, in the words of our text, "enlarged in the waiting"—more kind, humble and truthful;

more faithful and devoted.

Again, as Peterson puts it: "We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see that it is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become and the more joyful our expectancy." I now believe that many of my dad's virtues were born and grew larger in the waiting of those war years.

Learning to live a Christian way of life means learning to wait in hope when the world around us does not share our values. We wait, and hope that our faith is enlarged into the largeness of God's great love even as God comes to meet us. We wait, and hope to become enlarged enough to bear sorrows and injustices that cannot be made right in this world. We wait, and dare to hope that even in the darkest of times we will glimpse a more just and merciful world in the coming of the Christ child.