

The Impact of the Letters Came 73 Years Late

By Kenita Gibbins

I think it was my paternal aunt who left the letters for me. They ended up in a heavy, plastic box and were found in the highest corner of my closet. Two days ago I became more or less forced to think about a letter that changed my life. My Savage Clan wrote letters. My grandfather and Daddy played Chess via mail until the end of World War II. In the meantime, at age five, I also became a whizz at playing Chess as taught by my grandfather.

I knew my Daddy Kenneth joined the Navy with his buddies when I was four years old. Daddy became a pharmacist mate because his father and brother were friendly undertakers. At least we think that is the reason Daddy ended up on The USS Jean Lafitte, a Navy medical ship with the capacity of holding 1,600 men either dead or wounded. He had seen death.

The found letters were written from June to late November 1945. I don't know why I didn't read them. The typed carbon copies on onion skin paper made reading difficult. Now, I'm thinking that I should have asked about the content while members of our family still lived. This is a learning lesson that can't be corrected. Neither my mother, my grandparents nor his three siblings told Kenneth the furniture/funeral home store had been sold. He didn't know he wouldn't have a job when he arrived home even though he talked about the business in his letters.

The June 30, 1945 letter written about the war details the engagement of battle on May 20. The medics left "Frisco" with the ship filled with troops. The letter doesn't say how many trips they had already made. When the ship and crew had almost reached their destination near Okinawa, they stopped in the middle of many Naval ships. The bombs were dropping from the sky. Daddy doesn't think the Chaplin was the only one praying for their safety. Guns lined the ship on the way across the Pacific Ocean. The troops practiced shooting and bombing. All of a sudden they saw our ships fighting and burning from the hits. Fear struck – their ship was hit. The gunners in the prow were killed. Many of the Japanese planes weren't carrying bombs. Suicide pilots in planes without ammunition flew into ships. My Daddy said he and others took the place of the soldiers who became exhausted manning their weapons. The battle lasted about three hours, but seemed like an eternity.

My Daddy did make it home for Christmas. After Japan surrendered our military people had leave passes to visit Korea and Osaka, Japan for shopping and entertainment. This seemed very strange to me. I can see our friends, the South Koreans, wanting the United States military to spend their money. I would have thought the Japanese would not want to look at Americans. My present was a beautiful Korean doll.

The letters made me see why my father came home damaged and then beaten with the disappointment of having to start life from scratch. He and my mother succeeded in a new business. I grew up a happy only child. I feel sad the greater family stayed broken until a little before Daddy's death because of the kept secret.