

MEMOIRS OF A WWII
P.O.W WIFE

EDNA E. AMES

This final compilation was inspired by and is dedicated to Vic and Edna Ames, whose story began in 1943 and continues to be written three generations later.

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CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	vii
Prologue	i
Part I	
BEFORE SEPARATION	
Chapter 1	5
Part II	
LETTERS AND JOURNAL ENTRIES	
2. Letters from a Newlywed	13
<i>About the Author</i>	19

FOREWORD

This memoir is written and told by my 95 year old grandmother, Edna Earl Ames, and describes her very short courtship, and subsequent struggles as a young POW wife, to her husband, my grandfather, Vaud Victor Ames. The two newlyweds made, and kept, a promise to write each other every day they were apart, beginning the moment they said goodbye from two different trains pushing out of a station in California. The promise only broken because a barrage of bullets from a German plane struck my grandfather's P-38 bomber escort over the fields of France.

In November 1943, she and some friends went to a skating ring in San Rafael California, and sometime during the evening, a young, handsome Army pilot introduced himself to her by unceremoniously tumbling into a fall right in front of her. She told me that he often said that he fell for her the very first time he saw her. Both of them freely admit that they were immediately smitten, and two months after that first "date", she and my grandfather were married. When asked why they just didn't remain engaged until the war was over, a mischievous smile crossed her lips and she answered, "Because we were in love. And love blinded us to any other possibility other than the immediate need to be together." They spent only one month together as husband

FOREWORD

and wife before he received orders in January 1944 to join the European theater and begin his combat service. And it is at that moment that the reader is introduced to the star of the book: their love story.

As you may know, it was not unusual for couples to quickly marry before the service member shipped out; but what is unusual is that my grandmother saved all of their correspondence as a memorial to their promises. Those letters, plus her accounts of her daily events, create a very personal and accurate historical record and priceless treasure for her children. In my grandmother's own words, "I wrote to Vic every day, and he to me as well, until he became a casualty of the war. All of my letters to him were lost except a few I had written to him that were returned marked "Missing-in- Action" when his personal items were shipped to me after he fell into the MIA status."

She told me after she wrote her memoirs that she was not interested in any formal publication; rather, it was written for my sister and I to better know her and my grandfather, the beginning of their love, and beginning of their life together. Her hope was that we would learn the fullness of their lives, and understand their impossible challenges. Her story tells how they met, their unbelievable whirlwind marriage, and her determination to love him and remain faithful to him, even while unsure of his health and status after being shot down and imprisoned by Nazi Germany.

Growing up, I only ever knew her as MaMa, a kind and very intelligent woman who showed generosity to everyone around her. When I read her book, however, I met 18 year old Edna: a strong willed, fiercely independent young woman who, in early 1943, traveled from Texas to California by train in order to better position herself in the quickly changing society and workforce. She was offered a job as a welder, where she helped build Merchant Marine Ships that transported cargo to overseas Allied countries and war sites. Indeed, she became one of the women inspiring the Rosie the Riveter campaign.

It was surreal for me to see her as a young woman in love and I recognized the same lovesickness, the silliness, the dramatic emotions

FOREWORD

similar to those I went through as a young woman. Her life and experiences made her multi-dimensional and I became more uniquely bonded to her as her book shared an entire lifetime of experiences that occurred before I was even born!

I know it seems that the world has been inundated with America's version of WWII, but her story dissects the large picture and focuses in two people swept apart in the world's agonizing events of that era. This book can be read not only as an American history lesson, but as an American woman's history lesson. Part of my motivation seeing this project to completion is that I am challenged to continue to fight for equality and recognition as a citizen - to continue the path laid by those who came before me. But the greatest portion of my motivation is because I love her and am endlessly proud of who she is, and for the immeasurable influence she has had in my life, and in the lives of countless others.

My name is Cheri Ames and I invite you to bear witness of her serendipitous love story, born in the middle the world's second war.

PROLOGUE

The package arrived unexpectedly in October 1997. It was addressed to 2d Lt. V.V. Ames at our home in Big Spring, Texas. Inside was a four-inch piece of metal from a P-38 aircraft, SN (Serial Number) 42-67222. It had been mailed from Luce, France, by Jean Pierre, President of the Forced Landing Association.

My husband was Vaud Victor Ames, and these were his words upon receipt of that package: “Memories came flooding back to that fateful day when I last saw this aircraft to which the piece of metal belonged. It was May 25, 1944! I escaped this burning airplane that had been hit by ground fire (flak) and a subsequent burst of fire from a German FW-190 aircraft. As a result of the ground fire, I had a two-foot hole in my wing, and while I was bent over in the cockpit adjusting the trim tab, tracer bullets hit my left engine and it burst into fire. When 850 gallons of fuel left in my plane, it was time to eject from this burning aircraft! My plane crashed in a location near Rambouillet, France, south of Paris. I landed via parachute in a tree and was apprehended by German soldiers immediately upon extracting myself and was brought into Rambouillet for interrogation.”

In that serendipitous instant, 66 years after being shot down over

EDNA E. AMES

France, Vic recalled with great clarity the day he became a prisoner of war. And in that same instance, sitting right beside him, I, too, recalled that same day, 66 years ago, when my life began as the wife of a prisoner of war.

This is our story.

I

BEFORE SEPARATION

December 7, 1941 – It was a peaceful Sunday morning in Colorado City, Texas as I, Edna Earle Hazlewood, sixth and last child of Fannie Pearl Garrett and Leonard Hazlewood, returned from church completely unaware that every single life in America had been irrevocably altered. I entered the front door to see my parents sitting close to the radio to hear, “We’re at war with Japan!” The announcer proclaimed that Pearl Harbor, Hawaii had been bombed, resulting in the destruction of most of the country’s naval might, along with most of the aircraft stationed at the airbases on the island. The declaration of war was soon announced against Japan, Germany, Italy, and their satellites. In what seemed like an instant, our country plummeted into World War II. It was indeed “a day that will live in infamy,” as then U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt sadly declared.

My life was not immediately affected in the early days of the war as I was a senior in high school concentrating on graduation. Soon enough, the evidence of the war became noticeably close as my graduating class began to empty of males enlisting to join the war effort. Shortly after graduating from high school in Colorado Springs, Texas, in 1942, my parents moved to a farm south of Westbrook, Texas. I knew attending college was not an option as we could not

afford tuition, and I also knew I would have to leave our small farm and community in order to support myself. Simultaneously, the U.S. was transitioning from the worst depression known in our country and, unfortunately, it was because of the war that people were beginning to find work. So, in July 1942, after turning 17 years old, I moved to Odessa, Texas, and was hired to keep the cash account and staff the pickup desk at my paternal uncle's Odessa Steam Laundry. I earned the grand sum of \$9.00 a week plus room and board. Nine cents were taken out of my weekly salary for Social Security, a national program recently enacted into law.

Military bases sprung up quickly around West Texas, and my uncle won the laundry contracts for both the Pyote Army Air Field, and the Midland Army Air Field. Air training fields were numerous in the area due in part to the excellent flying weather most days of the year. In essence, I entered defense work as we handled laundry for thousands of troops from both bases. I enjoyed working with my family during those few months, but the lure of more lucrative and exciting defense jobs, such as putting together airplanes and ships, beckoned me to seek work on the West Coast.

I returned home to bid my parents goodbye and joined a first cousin, Christine Garrett, to board a train in Colorado City to travel to San Francisco in March 1943. I spent three days and nights on a westbound train sitting on bench-type seats, sleeping or leaning on anything that would hold my head. The train was loaded with troops heading to military camps and bases on the West Coast. Sleeping cars were provided for the troops, although some bore the same hardships of travel that I did. Christine debarked in Los Angeles, and I continued on to San Francisco alone.

Mass migration caused a severe shortage of housing, so I was lucky to reside with a brother, 'Cheesy,' and his family, whose home sat atop a hill in San Anselmo, California. Early in the war years, many items, including some food products that one thought one could not live without, were unobtainable. Rationed items that *were* obtainable had to be purchased with 'ration stamps.' Ration books were issued to

every family and/or adult early in the outset of the war and had to be purchased periodically.

Among the items that were severely rationed were gasoline and tires, so the transportation choices were public transportation, carpooling, or walking. I was able to find a congenial carpool group with five other people and formed long-lasting friendships with each of them. Sadly, the years take their toll in more ways than one, and eventually, I lost touch with these dear people with whom I shared so much on those daily rides to and from work six days a week. I acquired many 'foot miles' climbing and descending that one-mile long hill each day going to and from Cheesy's house to the carpool meeting spot. To this day, I have never wanted to live near a hill again.

Upon arrival in California, I was first told I would be unable to enter a union defense job because I was under 18. But in March 1943, only three months shy of reaching that age, I fibbed about my age and secured a job on the day shift as an apprentice journeyman welder in the Sausalito Shipyard in Sausalito, California, a few towns away in the same (Marin) county. The shipyard built 'Liberty ships' for the Merchant Marines to transport war-related cargo to overseas Allied countries and battle sites.

EDNA E. AMES



In those early days of America's involvement in the war in 1943, it

was necessary to take three steps to become a journeyman welder. Initially, I only had to be able to 'strike an arc.' To pass the second step, I had to be able to 'weld a bead' without any air holes visible in the bead. It could take up to a year to become a journeyman welder, but before my year was up, I resigned my shipyard job after I met and married a handsome Army Air Corp pilot.

During the almost one year that I worked as a welder for the shipyard, I was assigned to work with 'Flangers.' The flangers were responsible for ensuring the steel plates of the ship were tightly drawn together. They had me weld removable pieces of steel on either side of the larger steel plates, and then with jacks, cable wires, and wenches, drew the two steel plates tightly together for the final weld seams. The temporary weld pieces were then removed and smoothed over. This procedure was repeated until an entire ship's hull was completed.

Sometimes, the work entailed working in very tight spaces and even to the lowest reaches of the ship's hull, where welding and air lines had to be pulled manually from dockside to the lower depths of the ship's hull. This type of work proved to be hard, but youthful strength prevailed. It was a great experience, and I felt I was 'doing my part' for the war effort as so many women of that era were.

The 'war wounds' I received on that job were the many burns suffered from weld sparks. One huge spark, in particular, came down through the collar of my shirt and landed on the front left side of my stomach while I was wedged between a steel bulkhead and some type of turbine. I was unable to move to loosen my clothing to relieve the burning sensation. I still carry that scar to this day.

The pay was exceptionally good for someone so young during that period. My last paystub read "50.50 hrs – \$64.20 gross" per week. Thirteen years later, in an office environment, I was making \$350 a month – not much progress in pay for a woman!

II

LETTERS AND JOURNAL
ENTRIES

LETTERS FROM A NEWLYWED

February 2, 1944. South Pacific R.R., somewhere in Arizona (the first letter received, dated one day after our *second* separation):

My Dearest Edna,

I told you I would go U.P. (Union Pacific) when I left, but about an hour later, we were shoved off onto the S.P. (Southern Pacific). I am hoping you have a layover in El Paso and us too. We can talk to each other then. You will be home when you get this letter, and at least you will have known I was following you all the way to El Paso by a couple of hours. I hope you are faring this trip o.k. We have Pullmans, and they are leaving the berths down all the time. Already I am tired, so I can imagine how you are doing. We are just pulling out of Fairbank, Arizona. I just tried to find my glasses, but I put them in my jacket and that is inside of my B-4 bag, so I will do without them. Too much trouble to get at.

I'm hoping and praying that I can get to see you at El Paso. Gee, darling, I miss you so much now, and knowing that you are so close to me makes it even worse. This is really a lonesome trip. All one can see is old desert for miles upon miles. Certainly is different from S. Calif. and Illinois. All we do

EDNA E. AMES

is eat, sleep, read, and write letters. I guess by the time I finish my train ride, I will have written to everyone I owe and then some.

Here is something new for a change. A mountain with snow on it. Rather surprising to me. It looks to me as if they have had rainfall here recently and it seems rather odd to have snow in Arizona. I'm tired of riding – reading – in fact, I'm just tired period. We are a little late. One of the cars had a hot box last night, and we had to stop and let it cool a couple of times.

The tree cactus is getting greener now. Must be cooler and moister here. In the distance, I can see a formation of three trainers. They look like AT-6s. The train seems to be going rather slow, and if we keep up this rate, we will be late. Can't do nothing to us though. I can see some sort of mines to the left. Must be copper.

Well my sweet, I hope you have stood the trip o.k. Remember I love you more and more all the time.

All my love and kisses. Vic.

FEBRUARY 3, 1944. Rock Island R.R., somewhere in Texas:

My Darling Edna,

It is quite a job to write a letter on the train and make it look decent. We just left Dalhart, spent about 15 minutes there, got water and we got some air. It was quite snappy, but it sure felt good. They keep the train really too warm. Just about 75 degrees. We go through Liberal, but I don't think we'll stop long if at all. I'd like to see my Aunt and Uncle, but won't get to, I'm afraid. This is an all military train so we don't make the stops as regularly as the civilian trains do.

Honey, I got to El Paso about 9:45 pm, and I asked of the T.P. [Texas and Pacific] to Colorado City. It was due to pull out at 10:15 pm, so I guess you were already on it. We had 15 minutes to get back on the train. I was so sorry I couldn't see you again. If I had known what car you were on, I'd have tried anyway. Maybe it was for the best. I haven't seen him up since

MEMOIRS OF A WWII P.O.W WIFE

Tucson. There are a few patches of snow here yet. Can tell they have had plenty. The only place it can be seen is in the low places and ditches.

I rested pretty good last night. Went to bed after we pulled out of El Paso. We sure did a lot of bumping around early this morning. I guess we must have been at Tucumcari, N.M. It really is too warm to sleep really good, but we can stretch out and rest. We have been making pretty good time, but we still will be late. If we have an hour or so in Chicago, I'm going to telephone home again.

We are out of the desert now, and boy am I glad. We have seen so much of it, it makes us sick. After we leave Illinois, it will all be new territory for me. Lived in Illinois all my life and haven't been east of its borders yet. How do you like that? I am looking forward with much anxiety, but what I am really looking forward to is to come back to my darling wife and make her happy.

Honey, this is surely an interesting trip so far. I guess because I've made it about three times before. I'll gladly make it again so I can see you, my dear. This looks as bad as my Aunt's writing, and I don't have a broken wrist either. I did have my right wrist broken when I was about ten years old.

Tell Mom and Dad hello for me and not to worry too much. It would be impossible to ask them not to worry because I know they will. I surely would have liked to meet them before I shipped.

Cheesy is a lot of fun. Darling, you surely would like all my family. We are easy to get along with. Honey, in that month we were together, I feel I have learned a lot about you. Things that won't happen again. Darling, I love you so much, I'd never want to hurt you ever.

When I write to you tomorrow, I'll probably be in Illinois. I'll be so close to home and can't get there; seems awful, but again, I guess it is for the best. Be sweet, my dear, and remember I am thinking of you always. I wish I could give you an A.P.O. but can't. It would give away our shipment. I must close for now, dear.

All my love to you. Your Husband, Vic."

FEBRUARY 3, 1944, Westbrook, Texas:

Dear Diary,

Today, I finally made it home! Aunt Maude and Uncle John brought me on out to Westbrook and to the house from Colorado City. Mom and Dad were really surprised and glad to see me.

Today, also, is my wedding anniversary. I have been married exactly one month. Gosh, it surely makes me miss Vic all the more. Mom and I went over to Westbrook and sent my sister, Nell, a telegram to come home. Then we went on over to Iatan to see Gene, my other sister. She didn't seem very surprised to see me, but she gave me a picture of her and her husband, Les.

FEBRUARY 4, 1944, Rock Island R.R.:

Dearest Edna,

As I write, I am going through northern Illinois. We are just about 100 miles from Chicago and within 100 miles of Havana. It seems good to be in the old state again, but it makes me sick to think that I am so close to home and can't get there. It is all a part of these things one has to do in the Army that I don't want to. We are behind on the Golden State Limited now, and we really are making good time.

It is cold here, but there is no snow. There is, however, ice where it is low; it is just about noon, and the sun is thawing the frozen ground. One can see a variety of things now. At present, the terrain is a little hilly with timber. Back a few miles, one could see cattle, hogs, horses, and all in the cornfields getting fat. This is the first time I've ever made this trip through northern Illinois in the daytime. I'm seeing more of my state that I hadn't before.

We came through Ames, Iowa, early this morning. I was asleep though, and I doubt if we even stopped. We just passed LaSalle. In another 1 1/2 hours, we'll be in Chicago. I'm going to telephone the folks then.

MEMOIRS OF A WWII P.O.W WIFE

Darling, how are you making it? Honey, I'm so glad you got to go home. It will do you good to see your mother and father. They can be of so much comfort to you.

This has been a rather quiet trip except for last night. The boys were rather dry – nothing to drink all through Kansas – so when they got to K. C., they all got liquored up. Some got in a bad way. One man got a mean streak, and we had to quiet him. Had to carry a couple on the train. Some were o.k.

Honey, I'm out of words this time, I'll write again tomorrow. Be sweet my love, and have a good time.

Love, Your husband, Vic."

FEBRUARY 5, 1944:

Dear Diary,

Nell came in today. I didn't expect her to come right away. She had started walking to the farm, but some friends drove her the rest of the way. I went with Mom and Dad to town to finally get my baggage. I received two letters from Vic. He said he followed me all the way to El Paso.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Edna Hazelwood Ames was born in Tyler, Texas, in 1925 and graduated from high school in a small west Texas town at the beginning of World War II. In early 1943 she was one of many caught up in the country's mass migration who were attempting to relocate for better job security, particularly with U.S. Defense jobs.

While staying with her brother in San Anselmo, California, she acquired a union defense job as a journeyman welder, helping build "Liberty Ships." After several months and several welding burns and

scars later, she and some friends went skating, and it was there that her future husband, Vic Ames, took a tumble that landed him at her feet. After only dating for two months, they were married. And after only one month as husband and wife, he was shipped out to join the fight in the European Theater.

Still classified as newlyweds, Edna received a telegram from the Department of Defense on June 6, 1944, D-Day, that her husband had been classified as MIA (Missing in Action). She kept a vigil by daily correspondence to him until his reunification on May 26, 1945 – 16 months after their separation, and one year after he was first interned in 3 German POW camps.

Since their reunion in May 1945, they resided in Arizona, Ohio, and several cities in Texas, including Houston, where their only child, Steven Victor Ames, was born in 1953. Finally, they settled in Big Spring, Texas, and lived there for 45 years until Vic's death in 2002. She now resides in Houston with her son, who cares for her in her twilight years.