

His Story

by Alice Hickey

This is the history of a story. Or, more specifically, it's the history of the letters that tell a story, fabulous, almost unbelievable – untold for more than 60 years.

Between the first and last letter there are over 300 others. They tell about North African tank battles, Italian stalemate and German concentration camps. These are the stories of my grandfather's World War II experience as a volunteer ambulance driver with the American Field Service, an organization of young "college men" who were disqualified from military service but wanted to be part of the "excitement." My grandfather never spoke a word about his story to anyone. These letters are my family's first glimpse into a heroic service that gave little back but the horror of transporting the dead and dying.

In 1995, my grandfather died unexpectedly in a car crash. He left behind a box that contained every letter he had written to his parents between 1942 and 1945. There were more than 150 letters, many longer than five pages. His mother saved his bi-weekly correspondence along with the clippings and souvenirs he sent home to his four younger siblings. After he died, my mother placed the letters into another old box, where they remained.

In May 2002, another box arrived on our doorstep with 150 more letters – opened, still in the original envelopes, carefully preserved. These had also been

written by my grandfather to a woman named Dickie, a childhood friend who later became his girlfriend. They grew apart after the war, but she had kept his letters. When Dickie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, her brother searched for our family so as to return them. After a year, he found my mother's cousin, who still spent part of the year in the same community my grandfather and Dickie had summered during their youth. My mother carefully placed Dickie's letters with the others and forgot about them for five more years.

**These letters
are my family's
first glimpse
into a heroic
service that gave
little back but
the horror of
transporting
the dead and
dying.**

One night, my brother and I went into the attic to look for something my mother had asked for. He suggested rummaging through the oldest-looking boxes, when we found the letters and recognized our grandfather's handwriting. We forgot what we were supposed to be doing. My brother was more interested in the medals in small velvet cases,

but I lifted out the envelopes, along with a Geneva card and my grandfather's passport, and snapshots fluttered to the floor. My grandfather had captured moments in North African villages, the bombed-out countryside in Italy, and men posed around ambulances boldly marked with insignias of the British Eighth Army and riddled with bullet holes. Buried at the bottom was an envelope on which my grandfather had written "Belsen." The photographs inside showed the last days of the camp where he had evacuated inmates for almost a month: the burning of the huts and the tearing down of barbed wire. No one in our family knew that he had been in Germany during the war.

In the summer of 2007, as we read and transcribed all the letters, I decided to write my senior honors history thesis about my grandfather's experience with the American Field Service. My mother wondered if he would be proud or horrified to get such attention. He never talked about the war. She doubted if he would have wanted his story to be told because he knew many men had been braver and given far more than he. After 60 years, I told her, it is an unusual and important story. And, after all, history is about stories.

Alice Hickey, C'08, is a diplomatic history major who lives in New Hampshire.