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Away from Home: The Transformation of Wisconsin Soldiers in the Worst of Times

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- Raymond J. Bailer

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a comparison between two Wisconsin soldiers who fight in different wars in the 20th Century. The first soldier is the Archie Van Gordon. He volunteered for World War II and was shipped around the world, spending most of his time in Australia, never seeing combat. The second soldier is Dennis Klimpke, who volunteered for the army at 18 and was sent out to boot camp immediately and eventually shipped out to Vietnam. These two soldiers' experiences are compared as differences and similarities are noted. Klimpke was in the middle of the war, fighting many conflicts and eventually killed in action. Van Gordon never fought in the war and returned safely to his family. The most dynamic similarity between the two is the transformation they went through from the time they left for boot camp to the time they spend in their respective wars abroad. Two separate wars, two different soldiers, yet they still change dramatically during the war while going through tremendous struggles and difficulties with their relationships back home, their war and country and their own character.

Introduction

During the twentieth century the United States became more involved in foreign affairs than any other time during its history. Multiple conflicts and wars across the century defined the United States during this period of change. World War II and the Vietnam War are two of the largest and prominent wars in U.S. history. Due to these two events, struggles were felt across the United States from coast to coast, border to border. Wisconsin was no different as many men and women became involved in these wars directly and indirectly. The cities of Neillsville and Colby felt the impact of the wars in different decades as Archie Humphrey Van Gordon and Dennis Klimpke two different men, in different situations, gave up what they knew and committed to fighting for the United States in separate periods of distress.

Both Van Gordon and Klimpke came to crossroads in their lives when their country intervened and asked them to leave their lives and dedicate them to the service of their country. Despite their differences in their backgrounds, age, family and experiences during the wars, they undergo an identical transformation as their character, attitudes, beliefs and understanding of their lives changes dramatically as they come to question what they felt was concrete in their lives before they left for military service. Both men changed during their times away from home as one returned as an altered man and one did not return at all.

World War II and Vietnam Background

World War II began in September of 1939 with Hitler's Germany invading Poland. The war would be contained in Europe till the Japanese bombed the United States Naval Base Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, which would lead the U.S. into joining the war. Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 8th, 1941 the U.S. declared war on Japan. Two days later on December 11th 1941, the United States declared war against Germany and Italy following Germany and Italy's declaration of war against the United States. The United States would send thousands of troops out to the South Pacific and Australia in order to fight the Japanese.

The Vietnam War, originally termed the Vietnam Conflict, started in 1959 between North and South Vietnam. The United States began deploying combat units in 1965 to support South Vietnam and the containment strategy. The Vietnam Conflict would escalate over the next few years as more men from the U.S. were sent over to fight peaking in 1968. During this year, the well-documented Tet Offensive occurred between January 30th and September 23rd.

Soldiers' Background

Archie Van Gordon and Dennis Klimpke both came from relatively small towns in west-central Wisconsin. Van Gordon was from Neillsville and Klimpke from Colby. Archie "Red" Van Gordon was born on April 11, 1903 in Hixton, Wisconsin. He would eventually marry and have three children, named Richard, Heron and Cyrena. During the

1920s Van Gordon ran the Feed Mill in Alma Center however, the Feed Mill would succumb to the Great Depression and went bankrupt in 1929. Van Gordon decided to purchase the Feed Mill by borrowing money from his Grandfather having him co-sign a bank note. He would then move his family to Neillsville in April of 1929. In 1940 Red joined the National Guard deciding he did not experience enough from recreational camping and wanted to experience more adventure outdoors. Soon after he enlisted, the National Guard was called into Federal Service for one year. He was placed in the Neillsville Guard, a service company with the 128th Infantry in the 32nd division, also known as the “Red Arrow” Division. On October 15, 1940, Red was sent to Camp Williams in Wisconsin and then moved with his division to Louisiana to Camp Beauregard on October 18th, eventually ending at Camp Livingston in Louisiana.¹

Dennis Lee Klimpke was born on October 17th 1946. From rural Wisconsin, Klimpke was part of a large family as he was one of thirteen children and came from a working class family. This was common from this era as the majority of Vietnam enlistees were from lower socioeconomic classes. According to Christian Apply nearly “80 percent of soldiers were working from working classes.”² He was also in a serious relationship with a woman named Janice Carol Krause. He was drafted in August of 1967 and joined the National Guard of Wisconsin at the age of twenty for a term length of six years. He would obtain a sharpshooter badge with Rifle Bar and was classified as a

¹ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, WI.

² Appy, Christian G., “America in Vietnam: A Working Class War?” *Reviews in American History* 22, 2. (June 1994): 322-327. Date Accessed Feb 27, 2008.

Specialist Four. His training took place at Fort Campbell, Kentucky and Fort Gordon, Georgia and left for Vietnam on January 15th, 1968.³

Pre-War Mentalities and Beliefs

Before Klimpke and Van Gordon were sent abroad to either fight or become stationed in a foreign country, they revealed their emotions and thoughts about the experiences they were becoming prepared to go through. These two men would differ greatly in their views as Klimpke did not shy away from his distaste for fighting in Vietnam while Van Gordon was much more optimistic and displayed no concern for his possible future events. Most of the information gathered from these two men is from correspondences to family members while stationed at their respective boot camps and training facilities.

Loneliness, insecurity and anger best describe Dennis Klimpke's emotional state as he was stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. In his letters he writes mostly to his parents he displays the difficulty he is going through while being stationed in boot camp as he was trying to process what he will have to go through once he leaves the United States. From a letter addressed on September 21st, 1967 Klimpke writes to his parents "it sure was lonesome here for the [first] couple weeks...I didn't think it would bother me but it sure did." He was struggling adjusting to the military life as he is no longer among friends and family and is forced to live a different lifestyle. During this time Klimpke

³ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, WI.

becomes aware he would be going into the airborne division. He wrote in anger about his placement asking, “Why the hell did they have to pick on me? I don’t know if I can jump out of a plane. Its hard enough riding in one, and I’m not kidding.”

In the same letter from September 21st, Klimpke exhibits his concern over being sent over to Vietnam saying, “all the sergeants have been saying that 95 [percent] of us will be going over [there]. Why can’t I be one of the five [percent] that won’t go over there?” Klimpke clearly shows he does not want to go to Vietnam but continues on stating “But I think I want to go over there though. I think it sure would be a lot different for a change. You can really make rank fast over there. I talk[ed] with some guys that were over there and they said everyone that gone over there has a good chance to come back sergeant.”⁴ Klimpke does change his opinion of going to Vietnam however as he wants to be among the few who does not have to be sent over but at the same time realizes the potential to rise in the ranks due to his service overseas. He seems to be conflicted over a want for change but does not fully support being sent over demonstrated by his statement of wanting to be one of the “five percent” who stays in the U.S.

During his time at boot camp, Klimpke’s relationship with his girlfriend, Krause, became strained, as he would begin to question her commitment to their relationship. He writes to his parents about this from a letter dated October 27th, 1967. “Janice has got some crazy idea that we should break up until I get out of the army. Boy that sure is stupid if you ask me.” It is clear Klimpke wants to continue his relationship with Krause

⁴ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, WI.

throughout his military service and is strongly affected by Krause's idea to break up. He goes on in the letter stating "I got her sweet letter yesterday and I was so damn mad and I plan staying that way until she can make up her mind what she is going to do once and for all." By being sent to Kentucky, Klimpke is struggling to understand his girlfriend's reasoning for wanting to break up and this starts to take its toll on Klimpke as he writes "She just doesn't know how much she hurts me when she writes and say some thing about breaking up or some thing like that. She isn't even writing as much as she used to."⁵

The impact of this struggle with his girlfriend drives Klimpke to become even angrier at his situation as he reveals that Krause is the only reason he wants to come back to Wisconsin after he is done after he completes his military service. "One thing is for sure if Janice and I do break-up while I'm here I will make one promise and that is I'll never come home after I get out of the army. I'd rather sign up for three more years than come home to Nothing and if I haven't got Janice I don't have anything." Understandably, especially at Klimpke's age, his relationship with his girlfriend means the most to him as he writes, to his parents, that he has nothing left at home besides Krause. He becomes more apathetic towards the end of his letter by simply stating, "...there just isn't nothing I can do any more." Despite the animosity Klimpke writes with, he does hold hope that his relationship with Krause will continue as he would seek a larger commitment from Krause as he writes "I'm still going to try and get Janice an

⁵ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Oct 27, 1967.

engagement ring...I'll wait until I get home and get it.”⁶ That way I will know what she is planning on doing.” Klimpke’s experience at boot camp left him unsecured in his relationship with the woman he had hoped to marry and this contributed to an even harsher time while away from home. This will become even more difficult for him when he leaves the United States to go fight in Vietnam.

Archie Van Gordon’s pre-war experience was vastly different from Klimpke’s, as Van Gordon seemed to have much more stability in his life at the time. He was also older, as he would have been 37 years of age, which may have lead to more secure relationships with his loved ones and a stronger direction in what he wanted to do in life. A large difference between Van Gordon and Klimpke was that Van Gordon joined the National Guard voluntarily, versus Klimpke who was drafted in service. Van Gordon did join the National Guard in 1940, before the attacks on Pearl Harbor and the United States declared for war, however by the time he volunteered war was well established in Europe. Wither Van Gordon believed the U.S. would become involved in the war is unknown, however if he was strongly against fighting in a possible war it would be assumed he would not have joined the military.

While at boot camp in Camp Livingston in Louisiana, Van Gordon’s first letter described himself as “happy and well” displaying he was enjoying boot camp, another stark difference between him and Klimpke. His letter was full of compliments towards other soldiers by writing “I sure have a nice bunch of men” and to ranking officers as well as the conditions he was in as he described how it was a “swell day” and he was able

⁶ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Oct 27, 1967.

to go for a “nice drive.” Although these seem like simple positive statements, they differ from Klimpke’s description of boot camp as a “hell of a place.” Contributing to these differences in opinion of their respective boot camps may have been that Klimpke did not have any visitors, no family members or friends came to the boot camp and spent time with him. This of course would contribute to the loneliness Klimpke was already feeling. Van Gordon was able to have his wife and two sons spend time in Louisiana at separate times.

By comparing both these soldier’s letters while away from home, but not fighting or stationed abroad, it can be seen there is already a large difference in mentalities. Although Klimpke did write he would like to experience some change by fighting in Vietnam, he seems to be going through multiple struggles, from fear of his duty to the strain on his relationship with his girlfriend. Klimpke would be sent overseas on January 15th, 1968 containing an already fragile emotional state and mentality that would haunt him in his experience abroad. Van Gordon had a more positive experience while he was at Camp Livingston and did not write about the same type of worries Klimpke had. However he was sent to Australia on April 25th, 1942 and his next set of letters sent home would reveal a different type of character Archie had not displayed while in the U.S.

War Experiences

Klimpke and Van Gordon would go through vastly different experiences while abroad in their war effort. Van Gordon would be shipped to Australia and later move to New Guinea but would never see combat. Klimpke would not have this good fortune as

he would immediately be thrown into battle and unfortunately would only last four months. He would ship off on January 15th, 1968 at the peak of the Vietnam War and went through physical and mental torture till just exactly four months later. On April 15th, 1968 he would be killed when hit by fragments from a hostile anti-tank round. Just four days before, on April 11th Klimpke sent his last letter home to his family. He informed them he was located in the Delta Area.

The four months Klimpke spent in Vietnam were full of dreaded experiences from which it can be imagined he only discussed a portion of what he went through. Along with the few experiences describes he goes through and the news clippings found on his unit, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, (nicknamed the Wolfhounds) we are able to understand why Klimpke goes through a transformation in character as some light is shed on the horrid hell like conditions he faced while fighting for our country. *The Tropic Lighting News* reported on February 19th, 1968 Klimpke's 25th Division fought a Vietcong Battalion to aid a reconnaissance patrol that was 55 kilometers northwest of Saigon. Klimpke's division "smashed through 250 meters of army barriers, machine gun nests and trenches to save the 3rd squadron, 4th cavalry platoon."⁷ In this operation sixty-eight Vietcong would lose their lives along with eight Americans leaving fifteen wounded. It was concluded to be an eight-hour battle in the northern sector of Hobo woods.

This type of combat was not uncommon for Klimpke as he describes an experience he had earlier in February from a letter sent to his parents dated February 21st,

⁷ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002,.

1968. “I shot a person and it wasn’t very pretty...when we went to too check him it was only a young kid and I broke out in tears.” Later in the letter he then would go on to describe another traumatic incident from February 14th. “I saw my squad leader get shot in the face. If you ever wanted too see something terrible, that was it.”⁸ It is clear by now, not even a month in Vietnam, Dennis Klimpke has witnessed and experienced the worst of humanity. He has taken at least one life away and has seen it taken away from someone he had spent an abundance of time with. It should be of no surprise that Klimpke changes as a result of being forced into situations of life or death. Less than year before this, Klimpke was working multiple jobs in Colby, Wisconsin, living at home with his parents in a serious relationship with his girlfriend Krause but now he is thrown into a war he doesn’t understand and is forced to kill or be killed.

In the same letter from February 21, Klimpke writes to his parents “If you hear that I got shot in the hand and lost a finger don’t worry, I probably shot it off myself to get out of this hell of a place.” This was written after Klimpke mentioned in the letter that another soldier he was with got shot in the hand and lost a finger because of it. He goes on stating “I would do just about anything to get out here.”⁹ The desperation on his situation is clearly affecting Klimpke, as he wants to find any reason to get out combat. The next letter, dated March 13th, Klimpke writes home does not offer any more hope for his family as he describes the dark reality he faces each day. “We usually do the same stuff every day. Just try too stay alive from one day to the next...they moved us into the

⁸ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Feb 21, 1968.

⁹ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Feb 21, 1968.

Hobo woods and we been getting into fights every day and it really gets harder on use every day.” Klimpke would become worn because of the strenuous physical and mental pressure he and his division would be forced to go through. As of the 13th of March, Klimpke writes that he has “been in the fields for 43 days and they say we won’t be goin in until the end of March.”¹⁰ His conditions would not improve, evident by his next and last letter he would send home less than a month later.

On April 11th 1968, Klimpke writes to his family about his current situation and recalls recent events he and his unit have faced. “We were in the field for sixty-two days without a rest and then they sent us into base camp for four days. While we never had a day off at all.” Over two months with no rest and constant concern for survival has left Klimpke questioning the U.S. military as well. He does not trust the U.S. military’s decision making anymore as he states “the way they have been treating us lately, no wonder we don’t go crazy...they really don’t even care what happens to us.” Klimpke tells more close calls he has gone through as he writes, “One night we walked into a V.C. Ambush, but we were lucky, we only got one wounded and killed seven of them.” He writes about another experience, “we really had a bad night last night. We had [an] Ambush patrol and go two people killed and four wounded. We only killed 2 V.C. That wasn’t bad enough, Charlie mortared base camp and killed 1 more guy and wounded three more so in one night we lost 10 men.” This would further affect Klimpke as one of the wounded was the only other soldier from Wisconsin in his unit. He mentions their

¹⁰ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Mar 13, 1968.

bond and states, “We always had so much fun together.” Dealing with the loss of his closest friend in his unit and the recent traumatic events, Klimpke’s unit is ordered to the Mekong Delta. Before he arrives there he describes it as “All it is, is water and mud and plenty of V.C.” If any hope at all remains for Klimpke it is a bare minimum, “it seems like ever trying is getting worse,” he anticipates this worse is to come. This would become true as four days after Klimpke writes this letter, he is killed the Mekong Delta. Sustaining wounds from a hostile anti-tank round, Klimpke is killed in action on April 15th, 1968. “Just four days before he wrote “I just wish I would have never seen this place.”¹¹

Klimpke’s struggles are evident through his experiences while fighting in the Vietnam War. Archie Van Gordon would not engage in any battle while abroad but he would go through multiple experiences that would deem to affect him. Van Gordon and the 128th infantry, 32nd division was sent from the United States to Australia in April of 1942. It does not take long for Van Gordon to start doubting the situation the United States and the rest of the world is facing. In a letter addressed from May 22nd, 1942, a little over a month after arriving in Australia, Van Gordon writes to his mother “sometimes one wonders if all this modern education, science, religion is worthwhile. It seems that the bright, smart, educated people of these times would kill and destroy all they worked so hard to obtain.”¹² This is a generalized statement from Van Gordon in which he could be discussing a number of people; however it may be possible he is

¹¹ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, April 11, 1968.

¹² Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, May 22, 1942.

including the U.S. leaders in his doubts. From a letter written on June 6, 1942 Van Gordon writes, “This army is so rotten, no one expects anything.”¹³ This is partially due to the anger Van Gordon is feeling after not being promoted before he left the United States and the long delay in getting a promotion. He does not get down though, and he confirms in a letter from May 30th, 1942 he is “fine and couldn’t be better.”¹⁴ This war has not got to him in lowering his esteem and health. It can be seen in his letters as he spends time out of the United States that Van Gordon grows an intense hatred for the enemy. It starts with his first letter written from Australia, dated May 21st, 1942, “If we can get these bullets in those Jap bellies instead of rice.”¹⁵ He writes on June 2nd, 1942 “I want to stay and see Tokyo burn.”¹⁶ Writing on the 18th on June he describes his desire to become engaged in the war stating “we would like to get up there to give them hell, so we get home.” Van Gordon wants to go fight, a large contrast from Klimpke, as he wanted to find any way to get out of fighting. This noticeably large difference between the two men may be accounted for by Van Gordon’s belief that this war was justified and Klimpke felt the exact opposite. Van Gordon believes the reason the United States in fighting in World War II is so “the Rats will not bother our people and homes.”¹⁷ He wants Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to be stopped in Europe and the Pacific so the war is not brought home to U.S. soil. This anger towards the Japanese would continue as he would write “I would be disappointed if Japan didn’t get a month of bombing.” It is

¹³ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, June 6, 1942.

¹⁴ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, May 30, 1942.

¹⁵ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, May 21, 1942.

¹⁶ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, June 2, 1942.

¹⁷ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, June 18, 1942.

interesting to notice Van Gordon is not distinguishing the bombing to be on the Japan military but on Japan in general. It is impossible to know if Van Gordon held his hatred towards all Japanese or just the military, however he does clarify that he believes innocent Japanese civilians should be spared in his desired bombings.

It is important to note, during his time abroad Van Gordon did suffer through multiple medical problems. He wrote on June 11th, 1942 he has a sore throat due to tonsillitis and lost 15 pounds. On March 26th in 1943, he would contract Malaria as he would write “my eyes don’t come right, since Malaria I am not the same...I feel each day they will be better, but of late they seem to be the opposite.”¹⁸ He would struggle with other health problems of less severity that would keep him in the hospital, as his weight would often fluctuate between 10 to 15 pounds. The health problems could have affected Van Gordon and influence his feelings and emotions towards his current situation being stationed in the Pacific.

Van Gordon and his unit would be sent to New Guinea in late September. At this time, through Van Gordon’s writings, it seems the fighting and the war is getting closer. He will describe some fears he has as he is moved to New Guinea from Australia. From his notes from September 20th, 1942, Van Gordon writes about landing in New Guinea. “We could hear the noise of the Japanese aircraft in the distance. We could also hear noise near us in the grass. We were terrified, we thought it was Japs and could get no sleep that night.” Suddenly Van Gordon has been dropped into a fear-provoking

¹⁸ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, March 26, 1943.

situation as they feel they are close the enemy and even fear for their lives. It turns out the noise the heard was just caused by small wallabies in the grass.

Van Gordon, like Klimpke would struggle with losing men he had created relationships and bonds with while in the war. From his notes dated from September 20th, 1942, Van Gordon writes about a story about a soldier he had gotten to know while abroad. “In the morning we went to the creek to wash up. When we returned to our bedrolls we found someone had put our pup tents. It was Corp. Leonard Rupperecht, a Neillsville lad.” Van Gordon would ask him how the corporal knew how to put up the tents and Rupperecht answered, “Captain, didn’t you know I was a boy scout?” Van Gordon writes, “I will never forget that little kindness.” Later in his notes, Van Gordon describes what eventually would happen to Corporal Rupperecht as he was sent to Buna. “Corporal Rupperecht and an Indian lad from Neillsville, George Green, were riding in a outrigger canoe. The Japs dropped a 500 [pound] bomb and the lads were blown to kingdom come.” This clearly affects Van Gordon, as this was a soldier he had grown to like as he from the same town as him and the kindness Corporal Rupperecht displayed. Van Gordon would write, “I shall never forget this boy scout soldier.”¹⁹ It is difficult to understand how one would feel after losing someone they developed a type of friendship. It may be possible Van Gordon felt he was a mentor to the young soldier making Rupperacht’s death even harder to take.

¹⁹ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, Sept 18, 1942.

Family and Relationship Struggles

As discussed previously, Klimpke had struggled with his relationship with girlfriend, Janice Krause, while he was away at boot camp. It became apparent through his letters; Klimpke's relationship with Janice was of the greatest importance to him, as he found no reason to come home if they were to break up. Although he does not mention their relationship often in the letters he wrote while abroad, it can be assumed Klimpke and Krause mend their relationship and work out the difficulties as he describes in a letter from February 21, 1968, how excited he is to get married when he returns home. Articles written on Klimpke's death mention he and Krause were engaged and set to be married when he came back from Vietnam. It is not known when or why Klimpke and Krause decided to get engaged, as Klimpke does not devote much writing to it with his correspondence with his parents or other immediate family members. Although he would fix problems with his relationship with his girlfriend, Klimpke would struggle with other worries with family members and have to deal with family tragedies while he was away from home.

Before Klimpke was sent to Vietnam, he wrote from boot camp containing some frustrations with his family. He asked his siblings if his father was "starting to drink more again?"²⁰ Potentially showing some concern over a problem his father may have with alcohol. It is unknown if there were previous problems with alcohol but it is interesting that Klimpke specifically asks this question of his siblings while he is gone, demonstrating it must have at least been of some concern to him. His also wrote on the

²⁰ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Oct 27, 1967.

frustrations he had with people in his family writing to him. While he was at boot camp, Klimpke was struggling with feelings of loneliness and despair and it can be seen through his letters that not having correspondence with loved ones from home was making it difficult for him to deal with the conditions at boot camp. He writes “I have only gotten two letters from mom since I left and I wish she would write more often.” He would show greater frustration with two of his siblings when he added I wrote a few times to Clem and Mary but they never answered so the hell with them.” It seems Klimpke is starting to take the absence of writing from family members as insults to him. It is possible he may be assuming they do not care about him anymore or forgotten about him. Clearly he has taken the lack of writing personally as he has already dismissed his brother and sister by saying “the hell with them.”²¹

While Klimpke was in Vietnam, his mother would struggle with difficulties of her own. She writes to him on March 15th, 1968 about the tragedy the family was forced to cope with. “You know that surprise I told you about? Well we don’t have anymore. It was a tiny baby brother, Ricky Alan was born February 25th, but he died before he was born and almost took his mother with him.”²² Klimpke’s mother was pregnant with a baby boy, apparently Klimpke had no idea about this as it was going to be a surprise but tragedy struck the family at home as Ricky Alan Klimpke would not survive birth. Ricky would be the fourth sibling Klimpke lost to a tragic family as his brother Ronald was killed in an automobile crash and two of his sisters, Carol and Beverly died during

²¹ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, Oct 27, 1967.

²² Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, March 15, 1968.

infancy. These events happen before Klimpke left, but it shows the difficulty the family had gone through with events surrounding the children. Unfortunately, a month after she wrote the letter informing Klimpke of his youngest brother's death, she would lose the fifth child from her family due to tragedy.

As his family, specifically his mother, struggled in dealing with Ricky's death, one cannot imagine the difficulty Klimpke had dealing the news abroad. Away from his family, stuck in a place and a war he had no desire to be in, Klimpke was forced to take in family tragedy, something all too familiar to him, all by himself. This only got worse for Klimpke as his mother would experience heartbreak among physical problems post childbirth. In the same letter that informed Klimpke of his brother's death, his mother describes how she is not feeling well as she writes "I think it was the shock of you getting hurt that made me feel worse."²³ Klimpke's mom is describing the added pain of hearing of Dennis getting wounded while fighting in Vietnam. His mom continues to write about how much she is worrying about his health in later letters as well. "I don't know what I'd do if you really get hurt."²⁴ This was written just a week before Klimpke would die in battle. It is not known if his mother's worries affected Klimpke but it is difficult to understand how they would not bother him in some way.

Van Gordon differs from Klimpke in many ways, including his family situation. He is much older, married for multiple years and has three children named Richard, Heron and Cyrena. However despite a family situation unlike Klimpke's, we see Van

²³ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, March 15, 1968.

²⁴ Dennis Klimpke Collection, 1965-2002, April 8, 1968.

Gordon endure struggles while he is abroad away from his family. Often he displays an understanding concern for his sons in his correspondence. There are multiple times where he writes to his wife, Hazel or his grandparents that he is depressed his boys do not write him. From a letter dated June 26th, 1942, he writes, "I wish the boys would write me. I have been away from them for 2 years now and of course they have lost interest in me. You can't blame them, but I will keep writing Hazel and them just the same, as I am made of tough stuff and there is nothing going to get me down."²⁵ The resiliency Van Gordon displayed before and after he left for the war is still there as he continues to try to remain upbeat and not let disappointments and worries let him down. However it is quite evident he is affected by the lack of writing from his sons as he is starting to doubt their interest in their father. Writing about his boys just three days later, Van Gordon expresses his desire for some type of correspondence from his sons. "I do wish they would write a line and send a picture . . . sometimes you wonder why our children can't write a line. I know I have been gone so long that they have lost interest in me, which I don't blame them . . . maybe I am to blame."²⁶ In a letter written just three days later, Van Gordon is questioning his children and continues to wonder if his children have lost interest in their father. As a family man, Van Gordon must have struggled being away from his family on the other side of the world. Adding to this difficulty must have been the lack of communication with his children. He ends this particular letter in a different manner from other correspondences he wrote previously. "Well, I hope you all are well

²⁵ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, June 26, 1942.

²⁶ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, June 29, 1942.

and enjoying the freedom of a wonderful country which knows nothing but good times.”²⁷ It is difficult to know if Van Gordon is being sincere in his well wishes or if there is a purposeful sense of sarcasm. It seems he is writing this line as if he believes the people back in the United States are unaware of the struggle he and other soldiers are going through. This has not been displayed in his letters thus far. This can be seen as a testament of his disappointment and possible frustration and anger with his sons for not writing to him, or as Van Gordon may have seen it, as having an interest in their father.

Van Gordon’s worries about his immediate family did not end with his children. He wrote about the condition of his wife, Hazel multiple times. He understands she is lonely at home and has a lot of pressure put on her with him leaving the home and the children with her. He writes in May on the 22nd in 1942 that he sees war and his leave from the family as a type of test. “It has been hard for Hazel these days, I know she gets lonesome, but this will test what she’s made of. It will teach her to handle her family and business.” He realizes Hazel has taken on a much larger burden with him gone, and knows she will struggle. However he stays positive believing she can handle it. It is unknown if Hazel was able to handle the added responsibilities she was given and if she felt the same way Van Gordon did. However, her experience was not unique to the United States or Wisconsin as other married women whose husbands left them for the War, struggled with the new burdens placed on them. Alice Aspeslet described the home front

²⁷ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, June 29, 1942.

as a difficult place to be for women, as “all those young women had nothing to do.”²⁸ It is known Van Gordon felt this war was a test for all Americans not just the soldiers abroad but the people at home as well. He wrote in the same letter, “This [war] will test and show what a good American is made out of.”²⁹ Less than a month later however, Van Gordon would write about this worry about his family. From June 5th he writes, “If only I was satisfied Hazel and the children were O.K. I am afraid she is going to get so lonesome.”³⁰

Hazel’s experience most likely mirrored Jean Lechnir’s, a Wisconsin native who went through the same type of struggle when her husband left for Europe during World War II. When asked if she felt alone after her husband left she states, “Yes. At first you feel abandoned and you feel angry because they took him when you needed him more at home.” She continues to say “After a while you have lonely times.”³¹ It is clear Van Gordon is worried about the condition of his family as seems apparent this worry is growing during his stay abroad. This, as can be imagined, was not unusual, as many men disliked being away from their families and wives. Elmer Grossklaus, another Wisconsin native who experienced World War II, was stationed in Iran and like Van Gordon, did not see any combat action. He does state the hardest part of the war was “being away from home, I got homesick. I wrote letters to my wife and the turnaround was slow.”³² Edwin Kijak was stationed in New Guinea working in a hospital. Much like Grossklaus he

²⁸ *World War II: Stories from our Veterans*, pg 25.

²⁹ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, May 22, 1942.

³⁰ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945, June 5, 1942.

³¹ Michael E. Stevens. *Women Remembering the Past 1941-1945*. Pg 85,

³² *World War II: Stories from our Veterans*, pg 33,34.

describes the most difficult part of the war was “being away from home . . . you miss the family at Christmas and Thanksgiving and that works on your mind.”³³ It is apparent many Wisconsin soldiers who were stationed overseas, particularly in the Pacific struggled away from their family. Dan Markstrum, an infantryman who served in New Guinea and Leyte, like others, stated “Being away from the home [and] missing all your friends and family,” was the hardest part of the war.³⁴ It only took less than a month for Van Gordon to declare how this war will be a good test for his wife to his worry about Hazel becoming lonely without him.

Transformation of Character

It can be seen both Klimpke’s and Van Gordon’s experiences lead to a change in each of these soldiers from Wisconsin. Different from each other in many ways from their age, family situation or attitude towards the wars they each fought in; both men went through a transformation of character. While being abroad these men were put through incredibly strenuous situations that would promote change within themselves as they progressed away from the men their loved ones knew them as. It can be seen in their correspondences over time, as they are away from home how much they differ from what they were like before they left. Changes in their tone, attitudes and opinions towards the war, country, friends and family, or the disappearance of humor as an abundance of seriousness took over Klimpke’s and Van Gordon’s letters. Instead of

³³ *World War II: Stories from our Veterans*, pg 38, 39.

³⁴ *World War II: Stories from our Veterans*, pg 41, 43.

reassurances the men wrote home about their dread, concerns and fears that had taken over their lives. These men were forced to live different lives, not given an option but *forced* to change into people their loved ones struggled to recognize.

Klimpke was a barely an adult when he was sent over to face life or death situations. Leaving behind his large family and close relationship with his girlfriend, Klimpke progressively became more frightened and continually wrote about his pure hatred for his situation. At an age where one is expected to change from adolescence to adulthood Klimpke goes through a hell like experience many young men in the 1960s and 1970s were obligated to go through. From a soldier who fought in Vietnam from Mark Baker's *Nam: the Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There*, "No eighteen-year-old kid went to Vietnam thinking 'Oh boy, now I'm going to be evil.' But most of them met their darkest sides face to face in that war."³⁵ Klimpke's experience, although tragic, was not unique. "The war was like a machine, a machine to do one thing and do it very effectively; destroy people...it didn't' just chew up flesh; it chewed up human will."³⁶ It can be seen through his writing, Klimpke was destroyed by his time spent away from home and the few months he spent in Vietnam. Before the war took his life, it already took away his spirit and character. Klimpke became transformed and lost his identity and due to his experience in the Vietnam War.

Archie Van Gordon was a family man with three young children and a wife he deeply cared about. This love he had for his family would turn to be his enemy while he

³⁵ Baker, Mark. *Nam: the Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There*, pg 189. New York: Quill, 1982.

³⁶ Beesley, *Vietnam*, pg 57. Norman: Oklahoma University, 1987.

away from home. As he spent months away from his family he became withdrawn and felt he was losing his relationships with his children, eventually even coming to the conclusion his children had forgotten about him. He left his family for war and returned a different man. His daughter Cyrena wrote about how she remembered her father when he returned to his family noticing a:

Change in personality from an idealistic, optimistic, extrovert with a healthy ego and sometimes cocky attitude to a man with self doubts that worries about this relationship with his wife and children. He sometimes wonders if their country and the people back home are really worth the sacrifice. He begins to realize that he is not a self-made man and feels the needs for prayer to give him strength in tough times. When he finally comes home he has guilt feelings because he is the first in the community to return. He worries about his men who have to go on for 'God only knows how long'.³⁷

The change in her father was obvious for Cyrena to see as Van Gordon's time abroad made a once proud American with unconditional love for his family into a skeptical man who questioned his country and his family's devotion. The personality that defined Van Gordon during his entire lifetime in Wisconsin disappeared in a matter of months due to his experiences in the Pacific.

It is unclear exactly what made Van Gordon start to question important aspects in his life, most likely it was due to a variety of factors that plagued him while he was overseas. However, it is clear the impact of being away from what was familiar to him, his lifestyle, his home, and most importantly his family, eventually broke this strong willed, "sometimes cocky" man into someone his own family didn't recognize. Van Gordon was able to return home to his family, unlike Klimpke the war did not take his life and he was able to go back to what he knew. However, the time away from home took away his identity, his distinctiveness that everyone knew before he had left. He

³⁷ Cyrena M Van Gordon Dierauer Collection, 1940-1945.

underwent a transformation of character as his experience in World War II molded his new self.

Conclusion

Much has been made in recent history about the effects of war and combat on veterans, conflicts in the last two decades such as Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq have brought back soldiers who struggle to adapt to American society while leaving some with medical and psychological disabilities and conditions. It is now known with more clarity the suffering soldiers go through due to war. However the transformation of character soldiers went through in 20th century conflicts is largely unnoticed. It is not a medical diagnosis that can be made however it is instantly noticeable for close friends and loved ones of a soldier. Dennis Klimpke and Archie Van Gordon demonstrate that soldiers change while away from their loved ones. When they come into contact with unfamiliar and unknown and at times frightening experiences, their identity is stripped away and they are left to be transformed into a person unrecognizable to people that matter in their lives. The Klimpke family experienced multiple tragedies including the painful loss of Dennis. Before he Dennis was killed in battle it can be noticed the environments and situations he was constantly facing was depriving him the chance to be the same person he was before he left to fight in Vietnam. Archie Van Gordon was lucky enough to see his family again but he would not be the same friend, father and husband he was before his experiences abroad. We learn about how World War II and the Vietnam War took many lives and destroyed many families back home. The fact that so many soldiers bravely gave up their lives to fight for their country and the ideals the

United States stood for. The credit given to all soldiers is rightly justified as they gave the ultimate sacrifice. However it is important to recognize they were not the only ones lost, but the soldiers who forgot who they were become lost as well. The soldiers who were stripped of their identity lost what truly made these soldiers who they were. This transformation of character undoubtedly occurred with most soldiers from World War II and Vietnam, if not all, in some way, large or small. By recognizing the change these soldiers were forced to go through we are able to obtain a better comprehension of how much these soldiers lost and how much they gave.

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