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Bill's Letters by KATHLEEN QUIRK

I am slowly getting to know a young man I never met.

His family has been sharing the letters he wrote as a soldier in World War II to the young woman he eventually married. In the latest letter, written in 1945 from somewhere along the French border in the area of the Pyrenees, he mentioned that he had just celebrated his 27th birthday.

That struck me because he was younger than my children are now, some of whom resemble him and all of whom inherited his red hair. (With a little help from other Irish and German gingers on the family tree).

Bill, the young man who wrote the letters during his final days serving in Europe, was/is my father-in-law. He died when my husband was 13, years before I became part of his family, so I never knew him.

The letters, which my mother-in-law tucked away somewhere after his death, were re-discovered a few years ago and are being shared – one-at-a-time – by my husband's brother, who is transcribing the cramped script into Word documents that are more readable.

We never think of our parents and grandparents as being young, having adventures and falling in love. Bill's letters, sharing his experiences traveling with the army across Europe in the waning days of World War II, open a window into his world and his plans for the future.

One of the most recently transcribed letters describes his challenges in learning the names of trees in the area. (He doesn't explain in his letter why the Army wanted him to know this.) He is eagerly awaiting letters from Mary, he tells her in the letter, but is patient because he knows mail delivery isn't speedy for soldiers on the move. He shares his frustration that he is one day short of some bureaucratic criteria that will release him sooner from the service.

And, he writes, he longs for the time when they can finally meet in person. (Spoiler alert: they did finally meet, got married and raised a family together. He became a school principal and started his own real estate business, before he died far too

young.) I married his second son, so bits of Bill's DNA are now mingled in my children and grandchildren. To them, he is a black and white photo of a young man with a jaunty smile, someone we never met.

Reading his letters is a powerful reminder of the ability of the written word to introduce us to people we've never met and share the experiences they lived through.

My own father was a prolific letter writer. As the first child to move away from home, I received regular letters from him, and eventually so did my siblings who weren't in our hometown. When I called to chat with the family and Dad picked up, we'd talk for a minute or two and then he'd say, "Well, I'll let you talk to mother."

But, oh the letters he wrote. His letters arrived regularly for decades, all through college, my first job, my marriage and the birth of my children. Every letter included the major family news, a weather report, information on how the garden was doing, updates and commentary on the local sports teams and a summary of the work he was doing on his and other family cars. (We all went to Dad first when our cars misbehaved).

Nowadays, I'm sure he'd be a blogger or all over Facebook, but social media didn't exist back then, so I just have those letters, carefully written out in his beautiful cursive.

Since I am either a historian or a hoarder, I saved most of them.

Dad usually wrote in the early morning when the house full of children was quiet, before he went to work. In addition to the news, sports and weather reports, he would often reminisce about growing up on the family farm in Ohio and about his years in the Army in World War II.

One of his favorite stories was about serving as an altar boy for a Mass at Lourdes, a highlight of his life. He gave the date of July 16, 1945

Bill's most recently transcribed letter, dated Oct. 12, 1945, describes going to Lourdes and buying some mementoes for Mary. The path of this Irish Chicago boy didn't quite cross that of a German farm boy from Ohio, but today, more than 70 years later, they share four grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.