

Brothers in Arms

1945 March 12-18

In the 1998 Hollywood drama *Saving Private Ryan*, Tom Hanks portrays an officer leading a squad of U.S. Army Rangers behind German lines shortly after the Normandy invasion. Their mission is to find a paratrooper, Private James Ryan played by Matt Damon, and bring him back to safety because his three brothers have been killed in action. General George C. Marshall personally ordered the mission to save the life of an Iowa family's sole surviving son. There was no Private Ryan in this situation during World War II, but the scenario is based in fact.

The danger of brothers serving together on the same ship was demonstrated on the first day of World War II for the United States. Thirty-eight sets of brothers (79 individuals) were serving on board the battleship *U.S. S. Arizona* when Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese. When a Japanese bomb penetrated the forward ammunition magazine of the *Arizona*, sixty-three brothers (23 sets) died in the massive explosion that sank the ship. Of the three sets of three brothers on the ship, only one individual of each set survived. The only set of brothers who remained intact after the attack on the *Arizona* were Kenneth Warriner, who was on temporary assignment in San Diego, and Russell Warriner, who was badly burned.¹

The devastation of Pearl Harbor would also be linked another family tragedy involving brothers. A sailor from Fredericksburg, Iowa named William Ball was one of the thousands of Americans killed in the attack. His boyhood friends, the five Sullivan brothers of Waterloo, Iowa, went to the Navy recruiting station and enlisted at the same time. They insisted that they serve together on the same ship.²



The Sullivan brothers: Joseph, Francis, Albert, Madison, George

(NavyTimes)

On the night of November 11-12, 1942, American ships sank four Japanese ships, while the Japanese sank six American ships near the island of Guadalcanal in the southwest Pacific. When the cruiser *U.S.S. Juneau* went down, all five sons of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Sullivan--George, 29; Francis, 26; Joseph, 23; Madison, 22; and Albert, 20--died.³

Almost two months later, a representative from the Navy, rather than the usual telegram, arrived in Waterloo to tell their parents that all five brothers were missing and presumed dead. It was the largest military loss of life in one family since the Civil War, when Lydia Bixby of Boston lost five sons in 1864.⁴

The five Sullivan brothers became a national symbol of sacrifice in the war. The Navy named a new destroyer, the *U.S. S. Sullivans*, after them. Tom and Aletta Sullivan made appearances at defense plants and war bond rallies. Their sister, Genevieve, joined the WAVEs. The Navy was instrumental in the production of a movie, *The Fighting Sullivans*, that premiered in 1944. Some viewed it as propaganda for the Navy rather than an honest portrayal of the family.⁵

This tragedy also spawned one of the myths of World War II. The "Sullivan Act" supposedly prohibited family members from serving on the same ship or in the same unit after the death of the Sullivan brothers. Such a law was proposed in Congress, but it was not enacted. The Navy did establish regulations during the war that prohibited brothers from serving on the same ship or station. There was also a regulation that called for non-hazardous duty and return to the continental United States for a "sole surviving son" of any family that had already lost two or more sons. Those regulations were rescinded at the conclusion of World War II.⁶

We have seen feature articles in the newspaper on multiple brothers serving in the armed forces during World War II. These have included the four Medinger brothers of La Crosse, and the four Van Riper brothers of Onalaska.

Many feature articles on one service person often mention other siblings who are in the service, including a sister.

In the March 18, 1945, edition of the *La Crosse Tribune*, there are feature articles on the four Traister brothers and the three Severson brothers.

Four Brothers In Army, Navy; One Given Medal For Heroism

The mother of four fighting sons serving overseas, Mrs. Cora Traister, 505 Badger street, learned in a recent letter from her son, T.

Sgt. Frank F. Traister, that he had been awarded the army's bronze star medal for "heroic achievement" in action against the enemy in Germany.



FRANK



JOHN

Fighting with the 3rd Army, Frank helped several wounded soldiers to safety under extremely heavy fire and was wounded by shrapnel in so doing. Frank entered the army in November, 1942, and went overseas in September, 1944.

Another serviceman son of Mrs. Traister is Petty Officer John W. Traister, a navy man who has been overseas since December, 1944. He has a wife and four children in San Diego, Calif.



HAROLD



ROBERT

Mrs. Traister's third son in service is T4 Harold E. Traister, now in the Philippines. Entering the army Feb. 10, 1943, he was sent overseas in June, 1943, and was stationed in the Hawaiian islands, Australia and New Guinea before taking part in the re-conquest of the Philippines with MacArthur's forces.

Her fourth son overseas is Pvt. Robert J. Traister, now fighting in France. Entering the army April 27, 1944, at the age of 18, he went overseas in December, 1944, after receiving his army training at Camp Roberts, Calif., Camp Van Dorn, Miss., and Fort George Meade, Md.

Trio Of Severson Brothers Now Serve In Army Overseas

Two sons of Mr. and Mrs. Ted Severson, 1932 Onalaska avenue, are serving in France and a third son is believed to have gone to England, after leaving the States early this month.



TED

are serving in France and a third son is believed to have gone to England, after leaving the States early this month. Pvt. Orval is a jeep driver in the motor pool stationed in France. He entered the army in March, 1943, and trained at Fort Jackson, S. C., Nashville, Tenn., and Camp Atterbury, Ind. He was sent overseas in May, 1944, arriving in England where he remained until August.

Pfc. Donald arrived in France this month and is driving a truck with a signal batallion. He has been in the army since July, 1943,



ORVAL

DONALD

and received training at Camp Crowder, Mo., Nashville, Tenn., Camp Chaffee, Ark., and Fort Riley, Kan.

Pvt. Ted, Jr., entered service in June, 1944, and trained at Fort Bliss, Tex., in anti-aircraft and also at Camp Maxy, Tex. He was transferred to the infantry and left for overseas duty this month.

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In a global conflict regarding a huge number of people in uniform, the majority of eligible males, and quite a few women, served in the armed forces. Inez Davis of Burlington, Iowa had seven sons in the United States Navy.⁷ Mrs. Russell McFarland of Leighton, Pennsylvania had eight sons in the armed forces. One was listed as missing in action and another was wounded, as of March 1945. Her ninth son failed to pass the selective service physical examination.⁸ Forty-five-year-old Frances Evans Dyke of Chicago had seven sons in the European Theater and four sons in the Pacific Theater. These eleven sons ranged in age from 19 to 30, and included a set of triplets and three sets of twins.⁹ The 1945 "War Mother of the Year," 63-year-old Margaret Natterman of Louisville, Kentucky, had seven sons, three daughters, one grandson, and one son-in-law in the armed forces during World War II.¹⁰ Closer to home,

Edna Doxrud of Sparta had five sons in the armed forces in 1945, and her sixth son was expected to be inducted soon.¹¹

With so many people serving all over the world, it was inevitable that tragedy would visit some families more than once. Eugene Lester, 23, and his brother, Ned Lester, 20, of Dallas, Georgia, were killed on the same day in Italy while serving in different units.¹² Mr. and Mrs. Howard J. Hollister of Robbinsdale, Minnesota lost their 18-year-old twin boys when they were killed in the 1943 sinking of an escort carrier in the Pacific Theater. Their last son was killed in early 1945, also while serving in the Navy.¹³ Mr. and Mrs. Roy Knutson of Marengo, Illinois had four sons in the service. They received two telegrams the same day—one stating that one son had been killed in Belgium and another son had been killed on Iwo Jima. Roy Knutson's brother was also killed on Guam in 1944.¹⁴ Mr. and Mrs. Martin Mrozek of Chicago had six sons in the service. One of them was killed in France in 1944. A second one was killed in early 1945 on the island of Luzon. A third son, who was stationed in Texas after completing 25 bombing missions in Europe, was flying home to be with his parents after the death of his second brother. His plane crashed in Texas killing all 25 men on board. Mr. and Mrs. Mrozek asked the Red Cross to help get their three remaining sons reassigned to noncombat duty in the United States.¹⁵

Multiple deaths like these caused the War Department to establish a "sole surviving son" policy in March 1945. "The policy . . . of retaining in or returning to the United States a remaining son engaged in hazardous duty overseas applies only in the case of a sole surviving son when two or more sons have already been killed, have died as a result of wounds, accident or disease, are missing in action or prisoners of war in the present conflict." The policy was formulated only after it was determined it would affect relatively few people.¹⁶

In the balancing act between the needs of a nation at war and the instinct to preserve one's bloodline, there was only a little room for compromise. No matter if you call it fate, luck, or something else, the most dreaded outcome of war visited some families more than others.

[This article was revised with new information on 2020 April 24.]

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Sources & Notes:

¹ "Brothers Assigned to the USS Arizona," National Park Service, 2019 July 2, <https://www.nps.gov/valr/learn/historyculture/brothersassignedarizona.htm>. A father and son, Thomas Augusta Free and William Thomas Free from Texas, were also killed on the *Arizona*.

² Ronald H. Bailey, *The Home Front: USA* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1977), 22.

³ David M. Kennedy, *The Library of Congress World War II Companion* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 2007), 525.

⁴ Bailey, *The Home Front*, 22.

⁵ Bruce Kuklick, "The deaths of these 5 sailors changed how US manned military units," *NavyTimes*, 2019 November 9, <https://www.navytimes.com/veterans/2019/11/10/the-deaths-of-these-5-sailors-changed-how-us-manned-military-units/>.

⁶ "The Sullivan Brothers: U.S. Navy Policy Regarding Family Members Serving Together at Sea," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 2017 November 7, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/disasters-and-phenomena/the-sullivan-brothers-and-the-assignment-of-family-members/sullivan-brothers-policy-family-members.html>.

⁷ "Seven Sons In Navy," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 11, page 9.

⁸ "Woman's Ninth Son 'Flunks' Induction Exam," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 6, page 2.

⁹ "Mother Proud Of Having 11 Sons In Nation's Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 9, page 7. Mrs. Dyke married when she was just 13 years old and was a widow at 29. The extraordinarily fertile Mrs. Dyke then had four more sons with her second husband, Peter Dyke. Children ran in the family; her mother had a whopping 21 children.

¹⁰ "Mrs. Margaret Natterman," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 12, page 8.

¹¹ "No Festivity Noted In Sparta V-E Day Observance Monday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 8, page 12.

¹² "Brothers In Separate Units Killed On Same Day In Italy Campaign," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 1, page 1.

¹³ "Third And Last Son Of Minneapolitans Dead," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 8, page 1.

¹⁴ "Two Sons Killed, Say Two Wires To Parents," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 1, page 1.

¹⁵ "Three Sons Killed, Parents Ask Three Others Return to U.S.," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 21, page 1.

¹⁶ "Create Policy About Service: Sole Surviving Son Information Issued," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 29, page 20.