

“Dear Mom, Pop & Brats”
A World War II Beverly Warrior Writes Home

Richard (Dick) Ulmer was Beverly, New Jersey all the way, from Miss Tees’s 1930 Kindergarten class, to graduation in ’39 out of Mrs. Kathryn G. Lewis’s eighth grade. Learned to swim in the Delaware, got the hiding of his life from Mom for walking across it on ice flows during a cold winter, and performed the rite of passage for every Beverly boy, swimming to the Pennsy side and back. He went by Dick, inherited from maternal Grandfather, Dick Swanson, who supported his brood of ten by droving a team from the Coal Wharf at the river foot of Cooper St. to deliver coal to Beverly homes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dick the younger was an alter boy at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church under the tutelage of Rev Walter T. Doyle, served papers six days a week from Duffy Carr’s Cooper St. news stand, turning the princely sum of a dollar a week over to the Depression depleted family coffers. He did the same with his earnings from a second job at Wes Dumhardt’s A&P grocery store beside the Movie Theatre on Warren St. The Ulmer family backyard joined that of the Mitchell’s, home of Dick’s childhood, and lifelong sweetheart, Virginia, a beautiful girl (pictured right-other photo is of Dick at the time of his confirmation at St. Joseph’s parish) and heartthrob of many Beverly suitors. From a combat zone in the Western Pacific, Dick would later write of her to his family, “You might also give my love to Miss Mitchell, as I am about to hit the sack, too tired to write anymore.”

Dick skated on Nelly’s Pond that fateful 7 December Sunday in 1941, the onset of the terrible war that changed his life forever. Fourteen months later, cutting short senior year at Burlington High School, he enlisted in the US Navy, following in the footsteps of his Word War I veteran father.

Fortunately, all Dick’s letters to his family, some one hundred of them, are preserved. They tell how love of family, community, and friends sustained him through the hard years that lay ahead. As Will Rogers ‘never met a man he didn’t like,’ neither did anyone who ever met Dick not like him.

In addition to family and close friends, correspondents included schoolteachers, a Nun from the Order of St. Francis, and many wartime accumulated acquaintances that passed briefly through his life. The initial letters tell of a homesick boy at the Naval Training Station, Bainbridge, Maryland, only eighty, but many miles further than he had ever traveled from Beverly. Each one began with the salutation, “Dear Mom, Pop & Brats,” the latter alluding to his younger brother and sister.

The first letter from Bainbridge is dated February 26, 1943, when Dick was not quite 18. “Yesterday we received our first needles. We had two inoculations and a vaccination. Then we were lined up at attention while a Chief Petty Officer lectured on Navy Customs and Traditions. Every minute, you would hear a thump as somebody fainted. There were a lot of sick boys here last night. The needles didn’t bother Hank or me. I guess that’s what coming from the country does for you.” Then getting to the heart of the matter, “I haven’t received any mail at this



writing, but look forward to getting some.” He closed each of his letters with love to a litany of ten family members and friends

Recruit training ended four weeks early. He was promoted to Seaman Second Class and passed his Recruit leave in Beverly where he picked up a case of scarlet fever. This he took to his next assignment, Quartermaster School, at the Naval Training Station, Newport, Rhode Island, where he was promptly turned in to the Naval Hospital. “I didn’t write yesterday because I didn’t feel so good. I had a temperature of 103.” And later, “. And I will be delayed here two more weeks. That will be two more weeks before I get on a ship, and two more weeks before we win the war.” About the nurses, Dick said, “They put in long hours, and always look fresh and smiling. From now on, when I see a nurse in gold braid, I’m going to salute her.” A man from the Seaman’s Church Institute of Newport delivered stationery to the hospitalized sailors said to Dick on learning he was from Beverly, “Oh yeah, Palmyra, Riverside, Delanco, Edgewater, Burlington, Rancocas, Moorestown, Mt. Holly, I guess the boys will be swimming in the Delaware soon.” This touch of home drifted into Dick’s hospital ward like a spring breeze off the river. Released from the hospital, he began Quartermaster School and befriended Jerome Pruchniewski, a first generation Polish-American from Baltimore. Last names were the customary form of address. Jerome’s, being difficult to pronounce, he was called ‘Pancho.’ Pancho and Dick grew very close over the months ahead, and Dick would write of him often. Promoted to Seaman First Class upon graduation from Quartermaster School, Dick followed a series of assignments in Amphibious Warfare training, first at Solomons Island Base, Maryland, temporary assignment aboard a New York based LCI, Landing Craft Infantry, and to Portland, Oregon in December for permanent assignment aboard USS LCI (G) 725. Pancho was assigned to sister ship number 726. The (G) designator meant the ship was configured for firing rockets close in to the beach, but not to land troops.

Dick wrote of Portland, Oregon, “I got here yesterday morning and they gave us week end liberty. This is really a nice place. Lots of pretty scenery and met a lot of different kinds of people, all of whom treat us well.” Of home, he said, “So all the women are asking about me? Tell them not commit suicide, cause I’ll be home with bells on one of these days. I sure do miss the old town.” He was given a special assignment. “All the single men on our ship under 25 got issued camouflaged trousers, jackets, packs, shovels, sub-machine guns and GI shoes, so it looks like I’ll be part of a beach party. Guess that means I’m in for some tough training when we reach San Diego, dammit.” And he wanted to hear more from home. “What’s the matter? Why don’t you write more often? In case you don’t know it, I’m in the Navy now, and away from home, or are you giving me a dose of my own medicine?” Easy going Dick was not above getting irked when he didn’t hear enough from home.



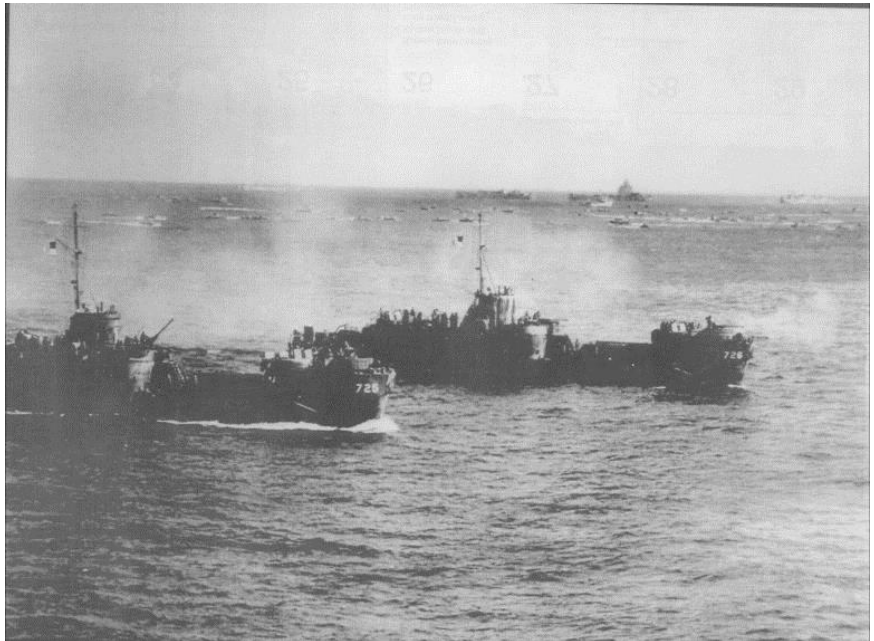
Scarcely a year after enlisting, Dick made his way into the combat zones of the Western Pacific, and the envelopes of his letters home bore a certification stamp, which read, “PASSED BY NAVAL CENSOR.” Dick once wrote a complimentary remark about an officer on his ship, “His name is Ensign Hall, but he answers to Chuck. He’s a good Joe.” In a different hand, in parentheses adjacent to Dick’s comment, the censor wrote (I bet he knew I was censoring tonight). It was signed, ‘Chuck.’ Later in the same letter, Dick said, “The officer I told you about told me to take it easy, as he censors tonight, so I guess I’ll only write one letter.” Chuck

added, again in parens, (See, I told you.). Life was informal on small US Warships in the Pacific War.

By then Dick had turned 19, and was promoted to Quartermaster third class along with his friend Pancho on the '726' boat. Dick related after the war how on the eve of the Saipan Invasion, June 25, 1944, he had urged Pancho to steer the '26 from the open bridge, for he would not be able to see anything from the protected conning station below.

As the 25 and 26 boats steamed in to lay down their rocket barrages, Pancho waved to Dick from the 26 open bridge. A short time later, 26 was raked with machine-gun fire from the beach, and when the smoke cleared, Pancho lay dead on the deck. Dick imposed a great deal of guilt upon himself, and said often, "If only Pancho had not listened to me, he'd be alive today." On August 4, 1944, Dick wrote, "I am glad you are having a mass said for Pancho. He was buried at sea, Mom, and I did say a prayer for his folks. In fact we held our own services the Sunday after the invasion and dedicated it to the intentions of those wounded and killed in that engagement."

The stack of letters includes several from Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Pruchniewski, Pancho's parents, incident to their visiting Dick's parents in Beverly. Jerome's father's lack of grammatical acuity was more than offset by his vast compassion. The letter to Dick's parents is transcribed exactly as Mr. Pruchniewski, a Polish immigrant, wrote it. "I no how you feel Mrs Ulmer about Dick.



LCI(G)-725 and LCI(G)-726 give fire support for landing craft forming up for assault waves on Saipan, 15 June 1944. Two crew members of LCI(G)-726 were killed and several wounded by enemy fire in this action. Photo was taken only moments before 'Pancho' died..

While those invasions were going on me & my wife was the same way. When Jerome was in those invasions we would sit by the radio & listen to the news & could just picture him every move he made out there. I always Dreamd that we were going to have bad news, so I no just how you feel now that you say you are nervice. That's just the way we felt. As long as the boy was on this side, Every thing was good but as soon as he went out to the Pacific, we could just not sleep or eat like we have been because we had a feeling something is going to happen to him. May God spare Dick."

Between the lines of Dick's reassuring letters were snatches of the combat he experienced. "It was the first one (invasion, probably Pelelieu) where every man on the bridge had to lie down on the deck (including the skipper). We stuck our nose in too close, and the Nips

opened up on us with rifles.” About the Marine Corps, he said, “. When they were passing us to hit the beach, they clapped their hands above their heads to let us know we did a good job. They were going into a hell a lot worse than we’d ever see.” Though Dick never mentioned his role in the beach party spoken of in an earlier letter, he told his younger brother, “I’ll send that Nip uniform, first chance I get.” The 725 was involved in the invasion of Tinian, but he made no mention other than the addition of a third battle star to his area campaign ribbon. When Dick returned home at the War’s end, it was evident that the horror he found in the Pacific had left an indelible mark. The terror of combat contradicted all he had come to know while growing up in the peaceful and gentle town beside the Delaware.

The story's end is not a happy one. Dick returned home, but not the same boy who left in the winter of '43. An ominous change had overcome him, and his family was ill prepared to cope with this. The effects of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome were unknown then, hence counseling techniques to see him through attendant emotional problems were not forthcoming. A bright spot was his marriage to childhood sweetheart, Virginia Mitchell, and the birth of three children. Despite this, he reached an early grave at age forty-four, driven there in the continued belief that he was responsible for the death of his friend, Jerome Pruchniewski.

Dick, classic example of a mid-twentieth century Beverly boy, was in the final analysis a hero. His great sacrifice for his country was the fine young man he so much enjoyed being.



Dick & younger brother Don, circa 1932 and 1949. Dick was always his little brother’s hero as reflected in the admiring glances given him in both photos.

Don visits retired LCI (L) 713 in Portland, Oregon November 28, 2009, indeed a sentimental journey.

