

WORLD WAR II *Remembered* LEADERS, BATTLES & HEROES



World War II Participants and Contemporaries

Herbert Eugene "Gene" Book, Jr.
Chapman, Kansas
U.S. Navy, Pacific Theater

World War II Remembered is a multi-year exhibition currently on display at the Eisenhower Presidential Museum. The article that follows is a special feature of this exhibition, the first in a series created to honor and educate about the generation that won World War II. Featured are the stories of real people from the "World War II Participants and Contemporaries" collection, held and preserved in the archives of the Eisenhower Presidential Library.

Dear Dad,

I've been putting this off for a long time but it just can't wait. My mind is made up Why should I be taking it easy here in school, waiting for the draft. I know its [sic] bad quitting school in the middle of the semester but this semester hasn't cost you anything. From what I hear from John McCormally, the marine corps is the place for me. When you get in there you see some action. As far as I'm concerned I just as well be at home for all the good I'm doing down here. Its[sic] getting to be accepted generally that college students are dodging the draft. I don't want to be one of those fellows.

*Your son,
Gene*

Herbert Eugene "Gene" Book, Jr., wrote hundreds of wonderfully descriptive letters to his parents—and sisters—during his service in World War II. Each began with "Dear Folks" and ended with "Love, Gene"—the envelopes addressed simply, "Herbert E. Book, Chapman, Kansas." Gene's first wartime letter, dated October 26, 1942, was postmarked Manhattan, Kansas, where he was a student at then-Kansas State College, working hard to put himself through college. Gene explained to his father the reasons for his decision to quit school and join the military, like so many before him.

Born in Chapman, Kansas, in 1923, Gene grew up at 101 S. Anderson Street, where he lived a nearly idyllic small-town life in the company of his sisters, Verna and Mary. In 1989, looking back on his boyhood years, Gene recalled, "Those were less complicated days than we live in today and it was a relatively quiet life." An enthusiastic Boy Scout, he delighted in mountain campouts in Colorado and Arkansas, aware that travel—this was the 1930s!—was a luxury to be appreciated. Gene enjoyed school and earned good grades. "High School was easy for me, and I did well." As he began his freshman year at Dickinson County Community (now Chapman) High School in 1937, Gene could not have imagined that, only a few years later, he would travel to some of the world's most remote and exotic destinations.

Gene was sworn into the United States Navy on March 11, 1943, and would not be discharged until February 14, 1946. Following boot camp at Coeur D'Alene, in northern Idaho, he was selected to attend the Navy Radio School at Northwestern University, followed by Armed Guard Radio School in Los Angeles. A navy "radioman," Gene served in the South Pacific on merchant (cargo) ships alongside merchant marines. On January 9, 1944, he wrote to his parents, "We really lead a carefree life out here. In the armed guard crew I think there are only 3 men who are older than I am. (Gene was 20 years old at the time.) The merchant marine

Oct. 13, 1944, "As we marched to the station we had to pass a sorority house. All the girls were out in front and they sang 'Anchors Aweigh' for us as we passed. At the La Salle St. Station we rounded up about 15 girls who were waiting for trains or something. A little high pressure talk from old man Book and they kissed us all goody & waved to us as we pulled out. Quite a send off don't you think."

primary responsibility was receiving and sending all-important shipboard communications as a navy radioman. Among his ships' many ports of call in the South Pacific were New Guinea, Guadalcanal, the Marshall and Marianas Islands, and Goodenough Island. Decades later, recalling these remarkable experiences—and considering the sobering responsibilities with which he was entrusted—Gene expressed more than a little awe, "How did a 20-year-old Kansas kid get into a situation like that?"

Gene's letters home are filled with the details of everyday life for a young sailor in World War II: the ubiquitous training, the routines of life at sea, the special comradery shared with fellow sailors, and the tall tales of liberty adventures on shore. In one highly entertaining letter, dated April 10, 1944, he recounted dating some WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, a division of the navy]. "Bowers [Bill Bowers, a fellow navy radioman] and I called the whole thing off with the Waves. We figured that 2 weeks was long enough. They were getting so they thought all of our time belonged to them. That won't work with us." Gene's collection contains photographs of him with the WAVE he dated in San Francisco, a young woman from Oregon.

As was the case for so many young men and women who found themselves in far-off places because of the war, Gene yearned for—and celebrated the arrival of!—letters and packages from home. As each holiday season approached, his letters reveal how deeply he longed to be home with his family for Thanksgiving and

boys are the same way. They are nearly all young kids to [sic]." On these ships, the navy was charged with manning the guns and providing communications services. Gene performed a number of duties, including shore patrol and guard duty, but his

Christmas. On December 14, 1943, Gene wrote, "Well, here it is almost Christmas again. I can't seem to get the spirit this year. A long ways from home and out here in this warm weather." Memories like those of spending time with his father, indulging in one of their favorite activities, fishing for channel cat near Bennington, Kansas, took on a special poignancy.

An endearing portrait of Gene unfolds through his letters. Clearly he was a very likeable, even ornery, young man—fun-loving and outgoing, yet, when the situation demanded it, attentive, conscientious, and responsible. Photographs of Gene reveal his winsome appearance and undeniable charisma, which undoubtedly attracted the attentions of many young ladies, particularly in a wartime climate of uncertainty and "live for today." Gene's letters have a surprisingly contemporary "feel," with an occasional word or turn of phrase evocative of his era, such as "swell," "fellow," and "green." They offer a wealth of insights about the generation that won World War II.

Following the war, Gene returned to college on the GI Bill, earning a graduate degree in chemical engineering from Kansas State in 1949. He became a self-described "pioneer" in the field of atomic energy, working for General Electric, under the auspices of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, in Richland, Washington, and at the Vallecitos plant near San Francisco. In 1961, he accepted a supervisory position with the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission—later the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission—overseeing inspections and compliance at nuclear plants in the Western United States, Hawaii, and Alaska. When the Three Mile Island accident occurred in 1979, it was Gene who was called in to assist with containment and recovery operations.

Gene and his wife, Ellen, retired to his beloved Chapman in 1984, anticipating many happy retirement years ahead. Like so many retirees, they fulfilled their desire to travel and to do all the things they had not had time for while working. Ironically, Gene found himself just as busy as he had been during his career as an "atomic cop." When not working in the yard or in the garden, he indulged his passion for fishing and hunting. One of the joys of retirement for Gene was the opportunity to write for the local newspaper. Gene Book, World War II veteran, died at age 69 in 1992.