

# **A Lady in Waiting One WW2 Wife's Story**

By William E. Smith

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Berni Smith was watching her husband of 64 years, Cpt. William C. Smith Jr., speak to a gathering of military and civilians about D-Day on Omaha Red. It was, as always, a great speech with no notes. He never needed them. After a universally rousing applause by the appreciative audience, a lady seated next to her asked how hard it had been to wait for him for the 4½ years he was over seas.

“Hard, very hard” was her only answer. Instantly her thought went back to that time and that worry. When she agreed to marry Bill, she realized that he might have to go to war. They both accepted that. They would both do what was necessary to support their country and each other. They had set up housekeeping a couple of times in postage stamp apartments as Bill was sent from one Army assignment to another. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, she and Bill had not been married very long. On that day, they both realized that they would not be together much longer before Bill was sent overseas. It took all the strength she could muster not to let her fear affect Bill as they prepared for his departure.

She never had spoken about the day Bill and the rest of the First Division left for the War in Europe. She thought about the fact that everything written about the World Wars focused on the men. Someone should write about the Ladies in Waiting—waiting for their husbands, sons, and fathers to return safely from the war.

There have been a few mentions in the history books about “Rosy the Riveter”. Certainly, American women proved to the world that they could do a man’s job with a skill and dedication that matched their male counterpart. But that image ignores the majority of contributions that these ladies in waiting made to the war effort. The vast majority of women who had men overseas were faithful and supportive of the war. Letters from home were the cement that held the foundation of the military’s morale together. Each one became a tangible exhibit of what the fighters had to protect. Those letters would make the men laugh and cry at the same time. But each word added strength to the resolve of those upon whose shoulders this great burden had been placed.

After Bill shipped out, she moved back to Columbus, Ohio. She really had 4 jobs. She took a job in the Entrance Board of Ohio State. There, she saw first hand the horrors of war. She enrolled the returning veterans under the GI Bill. She helped them start their lives over again in college. She would ask them where they had been and what it was like trying to glean as much information as possible. Information was always at a premium. There was no television, or e-mail, or Internet then. The winter of 1943 at Ohio State was like the Arctic. It was a snowy, icy torture chamber for the returning veterans, many of who were amputees. She helped them as much as she could all the time praying that Bill would come home safe and whole.

As critical as her job at the University was, it was the least of her responsibilities. Her most important job was to keep both sets of parent’s spirits up while Bill was in harms way. Her parents loved her husband almost as much as his did. Bill and his Dad were best friends. Bill Senior was a very positive man with the ability to tell the simplest story with a point of view and in a way that would make a stone statue burst with laughter. But Bill Jr. was his pride and joy. No matter how hard Bill Sr. tried, it was

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hard to keep spirits up. Wherever the First Division went, Bill was right up front as a forward observer.

Her third job was to prepare for his return and their future together. Bill sent nearly every dime he made home to her. He managed to survive quite nicely on the money he made playing bridge with the other soldiers. Together with what she could save from her salary, the money from overseas was beginning to build a nice nest egg for his return and their future life together. She was good at saving money and it did provide a great start when he finally got home.

Berni's final job was to support other women that were in very much the same situation. That was one of the most difficult jobs she had. Several times, her friends got that most dreaded telegram telling a loved one that their soldier was missing in action or had given the last best measure of life in defense of his country. There was not much she could say to someone that had lost a husband or son. But each time it happened, she did the best she could to provide support, caring, and a shoulder to cry on. Berni was extremely strong and very courageous. But this war, and the impact it had on her marriage, pressed that strength and courage to the very boundaries of her ability to maintain it.

Some weeks were harder than others. She felt a sense of temporary relief when she learned that he had been sent back to England from the fighting in Sicily. The relief was only temporary because she knew he was going to be part of the invasion of France, which would be the most dangerous assignment in the most dangerous attack in the history of warfare. Bill had not told her that he would be one of the first 10 men on the beach hours before the invasion was to begin. It would be just Bill and 100,000 angry Germans—not exactly fair odds. As she looked down the table at her husband, proudly dressed in his 1945 uniform, she smiled quietly to herself. Those poor Germans never knew what they were in for.

The days of Berni and all other ladies in waiting were taken up with work and supporting each other. The nights were a different matter. They were a combination of waiting to hear the latest news about the war, and the never-ending loneliness of not having a husband there to share a meal, the days events, and most of all the closeness that had been postponed for so long. While Bill was in England training for the invasion of France, there were letters. Although he wrote letters in the first few days after the invasion, the Army was just a little too busy to get them back to the States. Berni filled the days in between letters with worry. But she could not let anyone see it on her face or hear it in her voice. The parents and Bill's sister worried enough for everybody.

Another daily challenge was to deal with the rationing situation. Very few people complained about the lines and the limited quantities of food, gas, and other commodities because they knew it was necessary to support the war effort. But it was a challenge none the less. She had a car but very seldom used it. She supported the war effort by taking the High Street Bus.

Berni would go to dinner with Bill's parents as often as possible. It was her way of trying to make up for his absence the best she could. She filled the hole in the family

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with love and concern for Bills family. As much as they loved her before he left, they had never realized how strong she was until Bill was overseas. Her strength helped Bill's entire family survive his absence.

As the war in Europe wore on, another major problems arose. Bill's Dad developed cancer. The burden on the entire family more was than doubled by his illness. Berni had to help his Mother, Angie Smith, deal with the incredible weight of both burdens. In one of the hardest decisions of Berni's life, she chose not to let Bill know about his Dad's illness. She had decided that since there was nothing Bill could do about it while he was fighting the Germans, she would keep the secret and the pain to herself. The last thing Bill needed was to be distracted from the challenges of his job as a forward observer by worrying about his Dad.

Unlike so many of her friends, Berni was lucky. Bill came home. Just after he and his First Division had fought their way into Germany, he was called home. His expertise was needed to prepare for a possible invasion of Japan. Fortunately for them and every Allied family, the A-bombs were dropped and the war ended without an invasion. Bill was home and after 4 ½ years, they could start their married life. They lost Bill's Dad shortly thereafter. But the time that they got to share with Bill Senior was a blessing for them both. They would carry his memory with them and pass it on to their children.

She had thought a lot about what their lives would be like when Bill got home for good. Many wives expected that their lives would return to exactly what they had been before their husbands went to war. From Bill's letters, Berni had a better idea about how these men might be changed by what the men in war had seen and been through. Bill was a little different. Fortunately, he was strong too. But he was also a quiet person in private. He never wanted to talk about the war. He was home and that was all that mattered.

As she looked down the table at her 86 year old husband, Berni's eye caught the glint of the Bronze Star with a V for valor on his chest. It was only one of many medals and ribbons he had earned during his military life. She thought about the fact that although he had won the third highest honor that America can bestow on it's military, he had not even mentioned it for years after the war. It was only in the last few days that he had shared with Berni and the family the circumstances for his receiving the award. It was only because he was preparing this speech. He never bragged about any of his many accomplishments. That was one more reason she loved him.

With love and understanding, they got through the transition of his return from the war. It was not easy. Several times, Bill had experienced flashbacks to the events of the war. It took several months before he could be comfortable about a plane flying overhead. Airliners very seldom bomb neighborhoods. But like every other aspect of life, Berni helped Bill over come it. Together they had built the business started by Berni's Dad into the dominant company of its type in the city that supported 80 families. Together they had built a family, a much harder thing to control than a business. The

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foundation of that family was the same love and strength Berni had shared with everyone during the War.

And today, I am delighted to report, they are both doing fine. Bill is 86 and Berni is 83. They have shared a life together that deserves far more than this author's poor abilities could ever begin to express. They have lived a good life in a great way. They are perfect examples of what another author called the "Greatest Generation". As complimentary as that title is, it does not do justice to the contributions that Bill and Berni and millions of other members of this generation made to America and the world. For all of us that have grown up in freedom and prosperity, we say thank you.

I know all of this because I am lucky enough to be Berni and Bill's son.

Love from your son, Bill