

A Sister's Promise

*A Minnesota WWII Veteran's Story
A memory of Harriette Peterson Koopman
as told by daughter, Connie Pettersen*

I was nearly 18 when bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. American patriotism flared after every radio news broadcast. My older brothers, Orv and Bob, enlisted in the Army. I became the eldest of seven kids at home.



My closest sibling and best friend was Don, two years younger. We had common interests—singing, laughing, teasing, and shared many secrets; keeping confidences no matter what.

When the older boys' left for the service, Don and I teamed up on chores. We added music and laughter, jitterbugging around the kitchen; slapping each other with a wet dishtowel and drumming wooden spoons against a kettle while doing dishes.

Our teenage voices echoed through the house. We harmonized with the radio's popular war songs: "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree With Anyone Else But Me" and "I'll Be Seeing You." Don's favorite, "Put My Little Shoes Away," was a song about heaven, dying and being ready to meet God.

Like the homemade fudge we'd make, Don's and my relationship was warm, sweet, and comforting.

In 1942, Orv and Bob were fighting overseas. After every letter home, Don wanted to enlist. One night in the kitchen, he begged Pa to let him join the Navy.

"I wanna go, Pa . . . my country needs me."

Pa's face turned ashen. "You're not old enough!"

"When I'm 17, you could sign—"

"No! This war already has two of my boys." Pa left the room.

I was devastated at the thought of Don leaving home but he persisted for months, wearing at my parents' patience. He convinced Ma the money he'd send home would help out, so she supported enlistment. Still, Pa refused. Finally after threatening to lie about his age, Pa agreed. Don joined the Navy on his 17th birthday, Nov. 3, 1942.

That night he and I sat by the fire. I couldn't bear another brother— especially Don—so far away and in such danger.

"Don, please. Don't go."

"I have to, Sis. If our guys don't enlist, we'll never win. God's hand is in this war. It'll all work out."

He seemed so sure. So grown up. His confidence and trust in God gave me courage to let him go "On A Wing And A Prayer" like the popular war song.

Short and wiry in build, Don became an Aerial Gunner with VB 112, a Navy Squadron flying PB4Y'S. I missed our late night chats and singing over dishes. I missed his laugh and gentle spirit. Every night I'd ask God to send an angel to protect him.

Months passed. Seasons changed. Don's letters asked about family, friends, my new defense job; always closing with, "Sis . . . I'm in God's hands."

In June 1943, Don returned to St. Paul before more training and deployment overseas. Several days into his leave, our folks went dancing. Don and I baby-sat. As I frolicked with the kids on the braided living-room rug, Don played and sang "Put My Little Shoes Away" on the record player he'd sent home as a gift to the family.

The song was sad and his thoughts seemed far away, so I confronted him. "Don...are you okay? Don't you like the Navy?"

"I like the Navy. It's not that . . ."

After the kids were asleep we sat on the couch. "All right, if it's not the Navy, what's wrong? Why aren't you with your friends?"

Don hesitated. "Sis . . . you gotta promise . . . you can't tell Ma and Pa . . . It has to be a secret . . ."

A secret. Just like old times. I nodded, wide eyed.

"Sis, this is my last leave . . . I won't be coming home again . . . I'll be . . . giving my life for my country."

Tears filled my eyes. "But . . . how can you know that?"

"It's a feeling . . . a premonition. The Lord's given me peace."

I sat stunned, searching his face for clues of his thoughts. Although his eyes glistened with unshed tears, he sat with shoulders squared in military determination.

His expression showed pride, fierce loyalty to our country, yet with calm acceptance etched into his face.

"Sis, we are at war with a grave enemy. We . . . don't know the outcome . . but we must trust God . . . and put everything into His hands."

I nodded. Don would do his duty despite any personal cost. After a prolonged silence, and swallowing the lump in my throat, I said, "If that's what you believe . . . stay close to the Lord. Don't let go!"

"I will," he promised. "That's why I wanna take in as much of home as I can. Don't tell the folks, Sis . . . it'd kill Pa knowing he signed me in early."

I gave my word. We closed our eyes and prayed. My throat swelled and I couldn't speak, nor could Don, so we didn't use words to offer petitions. We rested our foreheads together, embracing, tears mingling as we sought God's comfort.

Days later, we gathered around Don at the train station, tearfully hugging him goodbye. When my turn came, a favorite hymn we'd sung together came to mind. With a quivering voice, I began:

"God be with you till we meet again;
When life's perils thick confound you;
Put His arms unfailing round you;
God be with you till we meet again."
Don grabbed my hand, squeezed it tight and joined on the chorus.

"Booooo-rd. All A-boooooord." The conductor yelled the last call.

With tears streaming down his face, Don turned and ran for the train, never looking back. It was the hardest thing I'd ever done, letting him go, knowing what I knew, and not being able to tell a soul because I'd promised.

Don shipped overseas on the USS Humboldt on his 18th birthday, November 3, 1943 to be based out of Port Lyautey, French Morocco in North West Africa. As an Ordnance Man and Gunner with Crew #9, he began practicing familiarization flights in their B-24 Liberator.

On November 30, 1943, Don's plane crashed in the Mediterranean Sea while returning from their first mission. There were six survivors of the 11-man crew, but Don never made it out of the plane that night. He never came back, and as I'd promised, I couldn't tell Pa and Ma Don knew he'd die for his country.

Scripture assures us that our real residence is not on earth, but in heaven. I know God enabled Don to prepare himself, and me, for his call home. God's will isn't the easy path, but it's the one that brings peace.

Sixty years later, I know Don won't mind if I share his secret. He was a brave American, a wonderful brother and faithful Christian. He taught me to trust the Lord in everything, no matter what. I look forward to heaven with the same assurance I saw in my brother's face on his last leave home. I picture the day Don and I will sing together again:

'Till we meet . . . at Jesus' feet . . .

God be with you . . . 'till we meet again.

Author's note: After my Uncle Don's last leave home, but before deployment to Africa, my grandparents moved from St. Paul to Vanport City, Oregon where my grandfather welded battleships. My mom, "frozen" to her defense job at International Harvester, remained in Minnesota. After Don's death, a family-hardship release allowed Mom to leave her defense job.

Don's confidence in trusting God in everything gave Mom courage to go where she felt God leading. She moved to Vanport City, found a job, met a parish worker named Helen Michelke, and began helping in that church.

In August, 1945, Mom accepted an invitation to accompany Helen on a visit to their family farm in South Dakota where my parents met. Their marriage lasted 48 years.

My grandparents received three military letters with conflicting information after Don's death. Because of wartime restrictions, the letters said that Don's plane crashed "somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea." His commanding officer wrote, "Don had been the flight's radio operator . . ." which was confusing, because he'd trained in weapons ordinance.

In November, 2002, nearing the 59th anniversary of Don's accident, I located a US Navy Website with details of Don's plane crash and names of the deceased crew and survivors. Via the Internet, I contacted Mr. Lyle Van Hook, a superior officer in Don's plane, who gave explicit details of their crash and mission.

Mr. Van Hook said, "On that fateful night of November 30, 1943, four Navy planes attempted to return to base from a successful Atlantic patrol mission guarding US convoys to Italy. In dense night fog, two planes returned. Two others became lost and disoriented. Our crew repeatedly—unsuccessfully—tried to radio their base. Critically low on fuel, our plane crashed within sight of the southern coast of Portugal. The impact broke the plane apart. Six survivors were pulled from the sea into a small boat guided by two Portuguese fishermen.

Don was our gunner and weapons expert. Our radioman also perished in the crash, possibly the reason for the misinformed wartime letters. Divers found the wreckage of our plane, which still rests off the shores of Faro, Portugal."

Knowing accurate details and the location brought comfort to my mom and siblings, and Mr. Van Hook has become a family friend.

Somehow, I think Uncle Don approves.

"A Sister's Promise" was previously published in: Finding and Following God's Will, Jane Kise, Bethany Books, Alice Grey's Stories from a Soldier's Heart, Multnomah Press, and in the NewsHopper.

For more real-life tales of valor, as well as exciting novels set in World War II, visit www.TriciaGoyer.com!