



The common thread to all lives that end too soon? Their ability to overwhelm us with sadness. But when we're faced with a relative whose game ended long before time ran out, it's the memory that remains in each of us. And it's our job to ensure that the life—short as it may have been—doesn't end but continues to live on.



Too Soon

BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

MY UNCLE'S 82ND BIRTHDAY would have been September 12.

I love this picture of him. It's been part of my parents' home all my life, and it's had a place in my home, too, ever since I named my oldest son, Connor Robert, after him.

Robert Gabriel Berenson, my Uncle Bob, was not just an impossibly handsome Navy pilot. He was a gifted student, graduating high school at 16 and junior college at 18. He contemplated a career as a surgeon. He was the rascally big brother who teased his sister wickedly but threatened all heck to anyone else who did. He enlisted in the service on his 18th birthday and wrote devotedly and with uncommon maturity to a doting 11-year-old brother back home.

"I'll be flying F4F Wildcats. Remember when we used to talk about those planes?" reads a letter dated 7 July 1944. "Who ever thought one of us would actually fly one? Maybe when peace comes and you grow up a little, we'll both go up together. Everything is so pretty and peaceful up there. The houses and roads look like miniatures, like our electric train set at home."

Bob's decision to fly a fighter rather than a bomber was selfless: he didn't want to be responsible for another life in the plane or to be at the mercy of someone else in a larger plane. He ultimately found himself strafing the beaches of Okinawa in preparation for the legendary fight that began 1 April 1945, and his efforts earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation read in part:

"For heroism and extraordinary achievement in action against enemy forces. Despite intense return fire from the enemy during a furious fighter sweep, he successfully strafed hostile anti-aircraft emplacements. By his brilliant airmanship and cool courage, he contributed materially to the success of these hazardous missions and his unswerving devotion to duty during intense operations was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

The officers and men of Fighting Squadron 30 extend to you, Mrs. Berenson, our heartfelt sympathy in your great loss. May some measure of comfort come to you in the realization that your son did not die of something, but for something.

FROM LETTER DATED 5 APRIL 1945, DOUGLAS A. CLARK, COMMANDING OFFICER

Bob was all and did all these things before he was even a legal adult. He died in that fighter sweep over Okinawa on 25 March 1945. He was 20 years old.

We were roommates, graduated from Pensacola and flew together everyday. One day we returned to our room and found flies, and we were both unhappy about the situation. The next liberty we had we ventured into downtown Pensacola, remembered the “fly nuisance” and purchased a roll of fly paper for the paltry sum of five or ten cents.

We got back to the barracks and hung it to the light pull in the center of our room. The next day we had had a room inspection and got at least ten demerits and an hour of rifle drill because of un-military object in the room!! We were so peeved, having spent the sum of five cents and going to the trouble of using it, and were thus rewarded. Not only that but there was not one FLY IMPALED ON THE PAPER.

So we knocked the screen out of the window and waited until some flies entered and then with our hands guided them into the flypaper, doing so until we thought we had gotten our money’s worth for the demerits and the extra duty! We had some very wonderful times together and to find out he was missing was a very agonizing moment.

LEW CASASSA, WRITING TO AUTHOR IN 2004 ABOUT UNCLE BOB

Bob wasn’t old enough to vote or to drink. He never married and left no direct descendants. No offspring would search databases and Internet links beyond number, hoping for a tidbit about Great-grandpa Bob, naval aviator and. . . What more might have been written here? We’ll never know.

Sustaining the Memory

This story of a family’s loss, a promising life over much too soon, is replicated in statistically unforgiving meter across the human condition as war, disease, and accidents exact their toll. The common thread in all such stories is their power to overwhelm us with their sadness. But Bob’s story has a different ending—no ending. Bob’s is the story of a family who has kept him alive through successive generations, saying “no” to the passage of time and “no” to letting a long-dead loved one pass from memory into mere history.

When relatives leave us too soon, a special responsibility passes to us as family historians. In the absence of direct descendants, we as survivors must pick up the torch, tell the story, and bear witness to a life that mattered perhaps even more because of its brevity.

My uncle was one of over 400,000 Americans who perished in World War II—one of 62 million military and civilian casualties worldwide. I saw Navy letters and citations for the first time as a young adult, nearly 30 years after my uncle’s death. In all that time, I had rarely heard my grandmother mention her firstborn child. I was a little stunned that such important, impressive documents had been hibernating in a closet for decades. Only now as my own son approaches 20 do I even begin to truly understand the



depth of my grandmother's loss—a loss that she was never able to, or chose not to, articulate.

In the time since, two more generations have arrived on the planet and six namesakes now ages 11 to 59 carry on my uncle's memory. One is my 18-year-old son, Connor Robert, dubbed "Connor Bob" at birth, by my brother.

Connor Robert has always known whose name he carries. He did it justice during the course of a school-wide eighth grade social studies project called "Peopling the Nation." Each student created a visual display and oral presentation about an ancestor. More than 200 displays were on exhibit the evening we walked into the library to view our son's work and that of his classmates. We navigated a sea of "Grandpa Jim—War Hero," "Great-Grandmother Annie—Red Cross Nurse," "Granddad Bill—Jazz Musician," and "Grandma Ella and the One-Room School." Connor's display alone celebrated a collateral relative. It didn't go unnoticed. During the oral presentation, Connor's very stalwart and hard-driving teacher sat in the back of the classroom with tears in his eyes.

Storytellers

Today, a new generation of big brothers in battle gear writes home. Some of them return in flag-draped caskets and, like Bob, impossibly young. They belong to all of us. Their sacrifice on our behalf is profound and permanent. We are the custodians of their individual legacies. How will we accept the task?

Genealogist Jana Sloan Broglin notes that families share the legacies of relatives who died young in any number of ways, but one of the prevailing means is by doing exactly as my family did—passing forward a given name time and time again.

"It's a way of remembering someone whose life ended too soon," says Jana. She offers examples that include war casualties, young children, and even a boy from her hometown who was killed in a bicycle accident. Future generations move

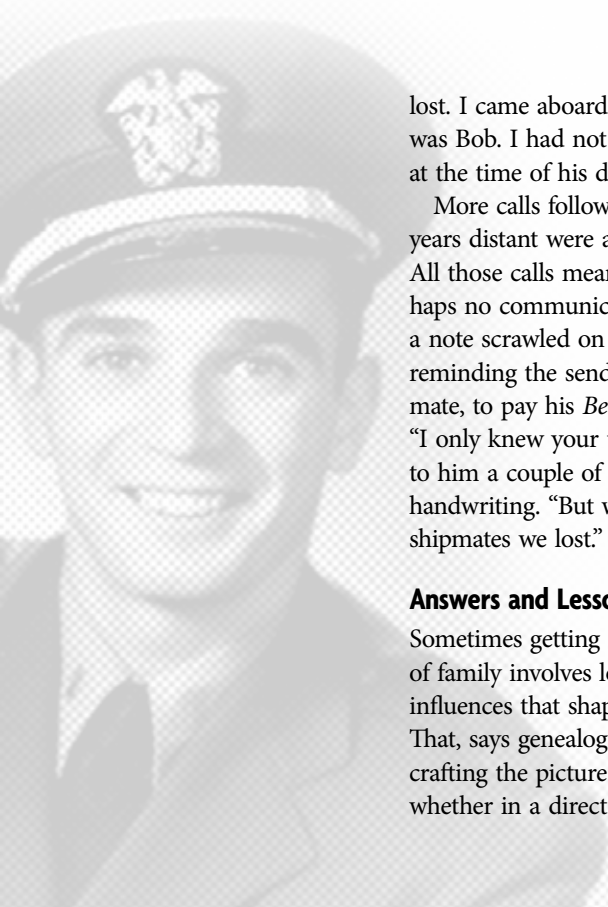
forward the lives of these people by naming children in memory. "Often it's the remembrance of a young life or a child. The brother of the boy killed on a bicycle named one of his own children for his brother," says Jana.

My own family is no exception—Bob's siblings, best friend, and cousin each named their firstborns for him.

Years before I even had a son to name after Bob, I became determined to tell my uncle's story. In the years long before Internet research, finding anyone who might have known my uncle was a laborious process carried out through the U.S. mail and, when I was lucky, phone calls. An ad placed in the *Navy Times* brought me astonishing results. The first call came from a fellow aviator who trained with Bob. He remembered quite clearly the call from the carrier *Belleau Wood* on March 26: "They needed some new planes and some new pilots. Of course we were wanting to know why we were needed, and of course we already knew: we were needed because somebody else had been

Connor, your middle name, Robert, means "winner above all," and you are named for your great-uncle Robert Berenson. Uncle Bob died at age 20 in defense of this country and its principles. We hope that by carrying his name, you will carry his memory as a reminder of the privileges and advantages of freedom he thought were important enough to fight for. As a person, Bob was a devoted and courageous son, brother, student, and naval officer. He felt a special unique responsibility to each role. We wish these qualities for you also, that you may live to have them serve you as well as they surely would have served your namesake had his own life not been over too soon.

FROM THE BABY-NAMING CEREMONY FOR CONNOR ROBERT NOTBOHM, JANUARY 1988



lost. I came aboard on March 26 and learned it was Bob. I had not realized [he] was only age 20 at the time of his death.”

More calls followed, men whose memories 40 years distant were absolutely clear and present. All those calls meant the world to me, but perhaps no communication touched me more than a note scrawled on the back of a scrap of paper reminding the sender, a former chief gunner’s mate, to pay his *Belleau Wood* Association dues. “I only knew your uncle to see and only spoke to him a couple of times,” it read in neat, tiny handwriting. “But we have never forgotten the shipmates we lost.”

Answers and Lessons

Sometimes getting a better understanding of family involves looking deeper into the influences that shaped each family member. That, says genealogist Jana Sloan Broglin, means crafting the picture of the entire family—whether in a direct line or sideways.

“If you want to know about your family, you need to know about all of them. You need to know about other family members because they influenced your ancestor,” says Jana. “You find there was a repetition of a name—on the surface, it may seem like nothing. Or you may find that a number of young children in the same family died within days of each other.” My own great-great grandparents lost six children in six weeks to a Cincinnati diphtheria epidemic in the 1850s. The seventh child survived because of a brand-new surgical technique: a tracheotomy. The story unfolded when one of her grandchildren noticed a white scar on her throat and, in true little-kid fashion, asked what it was.

In such cases, says Jana, you may learn valuable and previously unrealized details. Probe deeper and your research may explain why an ancestor developed certain personality traits, good or bad, the origin of family traditions, or even why certain subjects are considered taboo.



Remembering Why

Bob's cousin Shirley was the last person in the family to see him alive. They spent a day together in San Diego before Bob shipped out on an aircraft carrier where the life expectancy was 90 days. Forty-two years later, Shirley told me how Bob had confided to her that he "really should have been back in Chicago skating, going to school, studying to be a doctor. Instead here he was, ready to do his duty for his country. He realized then that he was so young and he could have waited," she says. But he didn't wait, "caught up in the patriotic spirit as so many young men were."

Every Memorial Day my family attends a service in the chapel of the cemetery where my father, a World War II veteran, rests in peace. Although her husband of 48 years is buried there, it is Uncle Bob, her brother, that my mother thinks of on that day: "He never got a chance." What he might have been—"whatever it was, it would have been great," says Mom—was

sacrificed to all that we have become today.

"May some measure of comfort come to you in the realization that your son did not die of something, but for something," Bob's commanding officer wrote to my grandmother. "He gave his life so that those of us who remain and those of us who came after him might enjoy the full fruits of our democratic form of government."

Today, we embrace our role as family historians, wherein we hold the memory of abbreviated lives, like Bob's, dear and pay them forward.

While Uncle Bob would have turned 82 on September 12, history has ensured that he will be forever 20.

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Sideways Glancing

"SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO GO AROUND the corner to get to the straight line," says genealogist Jana Sloan Broglin, giving a nod to a research technique known as "sideways." To successfully research sideways, you rely on collateral relatives—great-aunts, cousins, siblings, and uncles, for example—to prove something about a person in your direct line.

What can you learn by going sideways? Plenty, says Jana, including the following:

- ▶ An unusual middle name may be a mother's or grandmother's maiden name.
- ▶ Catherine Mary on a 1910 census record and Mary Catherine on a 1920 census record may not be the same child. Check birth years carefully since it was common for a subsequent child to be named similarly to a sibling who died very young.
- ▶ Middle names may offer clues to political preference or military service. "Find a son named William Tecumseh," says Jana, "and you can be pretty sure the family supported the Union army in the Civil War."
- ▶ Names traveled through families—take a look at the whole picture and you'll find that children may have been named for the parents' siblings, aunts, and uncles.

