

Laurence Stallings, From A Daughter's Memoir

By: Sally Stallings (Born 1941-Daughter of Laurence Stallings and Louise Vance),
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In 1912, my father, Laurence Stallings, placed a banner on the ceiling above his bed at Wake Forest that read, "A champion would get up". He was eighteen. And, these are the words that governed his life every day through every decade, through two World Wars until the day he died February 28, 1968. I was twenty -six, too young to have lost him.

"A champion would get up", was the unrelenting reminder guiding him on his path. His dictum was about morale, self -respect, and integrity. He lost a leg as a result of crippling injuries while saving his platoon during an offensive at Belleau Wood in June, 1918. And during World War 11, dad was on loan from the Marine Corps to the Army Air Force under General Spaatz 8th Air Force stationed in England. Experiencing the devastation of cultures and horrors from two World Wars, he never lost his indomitable courage, passion for truth, sense of humor, and the driving creative force within. "Since there will always be limits in terms of health and life struggles," he would tell me, "one must be able to live in the room of one's mind." The hammering of black keys in spite of periodic bouts of painful sciatica, and battlefield memories, his typewriter was never idle. He was a champion who played the game of life with his head held high.

Most of his writings beginning with "Plumes" and "What Price Glory", " both published in 1924", "The First World War: A Pictorial History (1932) focused upon and brought into public consciousness for the first time, in literature, the senseless sacrifice of war. This was his dominant thread running through and binding all of his major literary works, both early and late, into his whole life's endeavors ...the tragedy, the destruction and, above all, the human price, the soldier. A seasoned veteran, he understood it all too well.

As a young boy after school, dad would hike through dense forest near his Macon, Georgia home to sit on a neighbor's back porch steps with her permission to read a book from her home library. Books in private collections were treasures as most families owned few in the early nineteen hundreds. "First wash your hands and scrub them clean", she would tell him. "And, make sure you return it to its proper place before you leave at dusk".

His hunger for truth was unquenchable. He consumed stories of every kind. He read labels on medicine bottles, household jars and containers. In love with the printed word, he was a young writer in the making.

All throughout my childhood, girlhood, and young adult years, he would say to me, "Prissy (my nickname), you just remember what ever your life presents "keep your head up, your butt down and proceed straight ahead." That was who he was, this is what he did. He always remained the Marine who had transcended loss with courage and with his natural joy of life. His philosophy left an indelible impression upon me.

Throughout my young life, I don't recall a day passing without hearing the clattering of keys of the familiar black Smith Corona typewriter. As a child I would study my father's profile, etched by shrapnel and the traumas of war, observing his power of concentration as he wrote his manuscripts and puffed his favorite pipe. Pausing briefly to pull his tobacco pouch from his shirt pocket; to stuff a fresh chunk of Prince Albert tobacco into the dwindling embers of his pipe barrel; and with his red bandana swipe perspiration from his broad forehead. A puff or two later, the racquet would resume.

He wrote even when he was not at his typewriter. His thoughts could be felt while relaxing in his favorite chair, traveling in a car, or watching shoppers in a grocery store or mall. One could sense the well-oiled gears of his mind sorting material from his enormous mental filing cabinet for his next chapter, his next scene, or the next round of movie dialogue. His thoughts were revealed by the humor in his expression and the inner smile in his blue eyes along with the stroking of his chin sometimes left unshaven on Saturdays.

So often I recall dad and mom (Louise) driving my brother, Larry, and me to Huntington Beach (an hour from our house) on summer afternoons to play in the surf while he, with his khaki hat covering his shock of silver hair, and his mahogany walking cane hooked over his forearm would be leaning against a red canopied hot dog stand discussing and chuckling about daily events or the big football game with the hot dog man.

While we were plunging in waves and shoveling for sand crabs, dad had acquired his story and had mentally written a script about the man behind the grill, "a hell of a nice fella". People from every walk of life, occupation, and

trade fascinated him. Each had their story to tell and he had to know just what made them tick. His writer's instinct never let down.

Since boyhood, he was fascinated with sports, ball games, competition, and adventure; playing ball with his pals was a common scene on Forseyth Street in Macon. In his teens, football became one of his passions playing for Gresham High School in Macon and later on for Wake Forest College around 1913-14. He carried throughout his life the love of football.

In the late 1940's and 1950's T.V. football was a big event in our modest home in Whittier, California. Our three -bedroom house was a simple one situated on a lot with five orange trees, tropical ferns planted by mom, and a large concrete patio roofed with green strips of canvas, which became my father's writing studio in warm weather.

New Years Day events were inflated to festival proportions. Our world stopped for the famous Rose Bowl football game and the preceding parade both televised on the consul T.V upon which our tropical fish tank stood. My mother and I prepared hot hors d'oeuvres on heated metal trays with rows of little fussy cheese types of goodies and chips for dad, my brother, and neighbor friends washed down with cokes and beer. It was a day of camaraderie, raucous laughter and good -natured swearing against the ill-favored team. The louder the banter, the louder the television. The louder the television, the faster the fish above circled their aquarium. I loved those times. Dad was a man of great charm wearing his green beret, herring bone blazer, and seated in his tweed chair with his Idaho Willow limb straight legged in front of him. His gaiety could be heard throughout along with the occasional knocking of pipe ashes into his yellow ashtray.

During the late 1940's and 1950's, his movie career was in full swing. Dad was credited with eighteen films between 1925 and 1953. His first, a silent movie, "The Big Parade", directed by King Vidor established him as a sought after screen -writer.

The story follows three Doughboys from peacetime into training and finally overseas to France and into hell on the battlefield. Other of his more known films include: "The Sun Shines Bright", "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" (John Wayne) and "Too Hot To Handle" (Clark Gable). In addition to being a screenwriter, he was a great friend and served as a consultant to producers and directors such as King Vidor, Marion C. Cooper, and John Ford. On one

occasion, dad asked me to accompany him for dinner at John Ford's house in Hollywood. My mother was away in New York. They were going to talk business about Ford's upcoming film, "The Long Grey Line". I was around fourteen.

Wearing the long-sleeved white shirt I had ironed and driving the Hollywood freeway in our green Studebaker, his wooden foot, the accelerator foot; I was given a stern reminder regarding correct manners for a girl my age. Emphasized in my upbringing was the attention to good manners and proper appearances. The Marine in him would say, "You can always tell a lady by her shoes". Dad reminded me, "when you meet Mr. Ford, don't forget to give a slight curtsy, extend your hand and look him straight in the eye. And, you are to eat everything on your plate without exception. Everything. If you don't like it....tough! " I listened knowing I would be in big trouble if I didn't do as I was told.

Entering the Ford living and dining room, I felt over powered by the dim interior furnished with massive furniture and smelling of leather, polished wood, and musty books. I recall John Ford as being a very large and authoritarian figure with tufts of thinning grey hair stuck under a beret, a black patch over one eye and a gruff demeanor.

He and Dad were talking movie talk when the dark haired maid entered the dining room placing a silver tray supporting iced crystal goblets containing grey raw shrimp quivering in some kind of soupy slop on the waxed mahogany table. My stomach turned. My face paled. My father shot a look at me as if to say, "Remember what I told you." Without saying a word, I speared the slimy little things with my fork and one by one placed them in the back of my mouth chewing the rubbery mess squishing stringy stuff between my molars.

When I was a teaching major at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California, I received numerous letters from my father... sometimes two a week. The sum total filled a three- inch binder. Extending between September 1961 through May 1963, they are literary gems illustrating the broad scope of his versatile writing genres. These personal documents were written at the same time he was writing, "The Doughboys, The Story of the AEF, 1917-1918...published in 1963. Frequently, they were a sort of progress journal shared with me.

Here are a couple of examples:

"Things go well here, but the first nine chapters of my eighteen chapter book have been extremely difficult to polish. Two editors have so cut, transported, and stapled, that the mechanics of polishing become something of a jigsaw puzzle.

Things go on as usual, and I work at the desk until I am dizzy, and then walk back through the house to the kitchen booth to correct pages and clear my head. Today, I am cooking 2 cheap stewing chickens to get the protein for Poodies diet"... (our dog).

I've still about twenty letters to write; and then the galley proofs to read. Harper's returned their key map done by their cartographer from your brother's tracings for me to check. I have had to mutilate my West Point Atlas by sending them a full page of symbols universally employed by military topographers."

The following father to daughter letters contain his tongue in cheek sarcasm, vast knowledge and observations of history, newsy notes from home in Whittier and strong lessons and advice. Here are some excerpts all touched with his brand of humor and affection:

News from home.....

"We've been on a crash diet for a week. Both of us look like fugitives from a tuberculosis sanitarium. The diet is simple. No bread, no butter, no booze, and **not** potatoes. Sometimes we meet in the kitchen at midnight to drink a glass of Tang, which is about as appetizing as a mug of shaving water.

Hope the candy heart reached you. I know you admired my packing although a purple-bottomed

mandrill could have done a neater job. Devotedly,
Pops"

After a visit to me and my Cal Poly roommates...

"Dearest Prissy and all the other semi-literates in the Flea Bag: We thank you for the round robin of notes which so extravagantly thanked us for that greasy chicken, the two vile bottles of Castoria, and the 12 little Burgies. The best thanks that I can receive is to know that you girls can reduce the size of the meat balls by 1/4 inch and make them from lean ground chuck. The butcher will sell those extra two ounces of tallow per girl to the nearest soap factory.

I feel much better about your surroundings. The wall paper in the hallway is enough to scare off the boldest prowler. I hope it doesn't give you jaundice."

A comment on history...

"I wonder what they'll teach you about California history. It was a culture of Catholic avarice and Spanish cruelty.

The padres used the lash and the Indians had a taste of it morning, noon, and night. The whips never stopped. Most of the Indians perished. Every adobe block in every mission has the mark of the lash somewhere within it. Boy, I'd set the course back twenty years in one lecture. Old "one invitation Stallings, that's me. One big bang and then the faculty club says, "Don't call us. We'll call you".

Father's words when I wanted to take a part time job my college senior year...

"Ours is a conflict and always has been of philosophy. Of a philosophic approach to life. I am not interested in the shoddy merchandise of J.C. Penny nor in your learning book keeping for the maintenance of some lunatics. I am interested only in your mind. It takes courage to be set apart from the crowd. Do not get a job."... (I got one anyway)

His letters are packed full of life revealing his spirit, guts, humor, optimism and compassion. Dad was a poet, a romanticist, a historian, a humorist, a conversationalist, and a journalist. The sum total of his life's work embraces all of these capacities as well as his letters. He did not belong to any one genre but, rather, to them all.

Forty-five years after The Great War, published five years before his death, he wrote the expansive, panoramic, human history entitled "The Doughboys, The Story of the AEF, 1917-1918" published in 1963 by Harper and Row. After a lifetime of writing with Civil War, World War I and II as his central theme, this was his final work of which, I knew, Dad was most proud. Written with such color, passion, and feeling, it was his finest hour. The sum total of his life and works, inseparable, had come full circle.

Here is what Mark L. Watson of the Saturday Review summarized about "The Doughboys":

"Here is a grand mingling of men and deeds and qualities that make history as they do drama---the tragic and the comic, the drab and the picturesque, the frolicsome and the rough.

Tension suddenly relieved by lighthearted interruption---with all action moving irresistibly toward the final curtain. The Doughboys is a tale so moving that one can hardly lay it aside until it is finished."

In Dad's own words, here is the opening paragraph from his "Doughboy" prologue:

"Why write of them at this hour? Why open the door of a room sealed off in my mind for many

years? I chose to walk among these buddies of the past so that they may be remembered."

And, in his one line dedication centered on an ivory page he writes so simply, so eloquently:

"Greet them ever with grateful hearts."

Respectfully submitted,
Sally Stallings