

Memories of World War II (1939-1945)

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Pre-War (1931-1939)

My parents were missionaries: Donald C. Gordon, M.D. (Harvard Medical, 1922) and Helen Gary Gordon (Wellesley, 1922). I had an older sister, Hope, and two younger siblings, Alan and Alma. In 1929-1934 my parents were in Brazil, learning Portuguese, and my father was taking exams to get his medical diploma validated in Brazil.

I was 11 years old when World War II started (Germany invaded Poland), and 17 years old when it ended (Japan surrendered after atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki). I was not directly involved in the fighting. However, everybody was involved in this war. I want to share my memories, as affected by World War II.

Germany had invented the Zeppelin, and had weekly service, carrying passengers to and from Brazil, via Dakar. While we lived in Bahia, I remember seeing the Zeppelin every week from our back yard. French was still the foreign language to study, which I did in third grade. My school teacher, D. Loide, insisted that Germany was the greatest country, although I loyally stood up for my United States.

Start of World War II (September 1, 1939)

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. It was clear that Hitler's aim was to conquer Europe. England and France had warned Germany, and immediately declared war on Germany. I remember that day, because my father's friend, Sr. Nego, had picked up the news on short wave radio. As the three of us walked from the clinic to our home, he explained it to my

father. I was only 11 years old, too young to understand all the details, but I did realize this was a serious matter.

Brazil Experiences (1939-1943)

Many missionaries were taking a year's furlough in the United States after 6 years on the field. My parents were due a furlough in 1942. However by that time the German submarines were sinking ships in the Atlantic Ocean, and not being too careful which ships they chose.

So in 1942 our family took a 3-month vacation on the ocean beach in Santos. Bright lights from the coastal cities made it easier for the German subs to sink ships at night. So all autos dimmed their headlights by painting the top half with black paint. Gasoline was scarce, so many private cars ran on burning charcoal. The partially burned gas was fed into the carburetor, and made the car go - more or less. Foreign languages were forbidden in public places, so we had to speak in Portuguese.

Flight to United States (Dec 1944)

The Mission Board decided if missionaries continued to postpone their furlough year, all the missionaries would want to visit the U.S. at the same time, when ships became available. The Board decided to use a new service - the Pan American Airways.

The first day our family flew from São Paulo to Corumbá, near the western frontier. The second day we flew to La Paz, Bolivia, and then on to Lima, Peru. Our airplane had no pressurized cabin, so going over the Andes (18000 ft.) most of us got air sick. My parents had spent 3 years in Lima, so they had arranged a 2-day layover to see familiar friends and places.

From Lima we flew to Panama. The flight from Panama to Miami was over water. At that time a hydroplane, that could land on water, was considered safer. Due to mechanical problems with hydroplanes, passengers were backed up at

Panama. We had to wait a week before a plane became available. It was HOT in Panama, but it was our first experience with an air conditioned building - and that was cool!

Miami to Washington, DC, by train

We were headed for New England, but we stopped in Washington, DC, after a 24-hr train ride. During the war many military personnel were riding the trains. So the trains were crowded and part of the time we had to stand, or sit on suitcases.

My father had a sister (my Aunt Lois), in the Washington, DC area, and we needed a rest. So we stopped there, and visited in her home a few days. It was winter, and I remember she took us ice skating on a nearby pond - my first experience.

On to Hazardville, CT, and getting started in USA.

We travelled some more by train, and arrived finally at the home where my father was born and raised. My grandmother still lived there, and welcomed us after our eight years in Brazil. The rest of her children and grandchildren gathered to meet us.

My mother needed an operation, plus time to recuperate. My father asked the extended relatives to take care of his children. My older sister, Hope, went to a prep school, I went to live with my Uncle Ray and Aunt Jean, my brother Alan went to live with Uncle Carl and Aunt Helen, near Albany, NY, and my younger sister Alma stayed with Uncle Dave and Aunt Helen.

Concord, MA (spring, 1944)

So for the spring semester I lived in Concord, Massachusetts, only a few blocks from the Old North Bridge. "Here once the embattled farmers stood, and fired the shot heard round the world." That's where the U.S. Revolutionary

War (1775) started. After a battery of tests at Concord High School, I was placed in the junior class.

By this time the U.S., Britain, and others, had driven the Germans from North Africa, landed in Italy, and were advancing on Germany from the south. Early morning, on June 6, 1944, known as D-day, the allies landed on the coast of France. The news came over the radio, and students and teachers forgot about classes, as they listened to history being made.

By this time many things were in short supply, and some were rationed: such as cars, gasoline, butter, sugar, etc. To combat inflation, the government encouraged saving money. At the high school, I bought 25¢ “savings stamps.” These were pasted in a booklet, and when there was a total of \$18.75, you could turn it in for a “war bond.” After a certain number of years, the bond would mature, and was worth \$25.

Hartford, CT (Fall 1944)

By the end of the summer, my mother was well, my parents rented a home in Hartford, and gathered the family together. For me they found a prep school, which I could attend as a day-student until my parents left for Brazil, when I could become a boarder. The Loomis school suggested I start there as a junior, and attend for two years. The Loomis School was an excellent transition for me. When I graduated in 1946 and started college, I found the college was easier than prep school.

Due to the war many college students and prep school teachers volunteered or were drafted into military service. As a result of the imbalance, some college teachers found work in a prep school. My English teacher at Loomis prep school had come from Amherst College. Somehow he discovered I knew my Bible, asked me questions that I could answer, and encouraged his other student to study the Bible.

Also, migrant workers to gather potatoes in nearby farms were in short supply. So, each day the school volunteered a

quarter of the study body, and a quarter of the faculty. My science class had both juniors and seniors, and the teacher was assigned a third day. So we only had one normal class every four days. Fortunately it didn't last too many weeks. There was a machine that dug the potatoes out of the ground, and left them on the surface. So all we had to do was: pick up the potatoes, and put them in a bag.

Christmas, 1944

When my mother was a student at Wellesley College (class of 1922), she taught a Sunday School class of young boys. For many years, she kept in touch with one of them, Pastor Wyeth Willard, and contributed to the Christian camp that he started - Camp Good News. When World War II started, he joined the Marine Corps as a Chaplain. In June, 1942, the Battle of Midway ended Japan's expansion eastward. On Aug 7 the U.S. marines landed on Guadalcanal, and Chaplain Willard landed with the troops.

In 1944 he was stationed with his family of 6, at Paris Island, SC. He invited our family of 6 to join them for the Christmas holidays. When the holidays were over, we went to the nearest railroad station. My sister Hope and I boarded a train going north - to Wellesley College in MA, and to Loomis prep school in CT. My parents with their two younger children boarded a train going south - to Miami, and then by airplane to Brazil.

Summers, 1945 & 1946

It was too expensive to go to Brazil for the summer, so my sister Hope and I got jobs as counselors, at the Willard's Camp Good News on Cape Cod. In the absence of her husband, the Camp was run by Mrs. Grace Willard. Most of the campers slept in army tents, and in one tent I was in charge of eight of the older boys.

Near the camp was Edwards Air Force base, so we had many fighter planes flying overhead. A few campers were catholic, and their parents wanted them to attend Sunday mass. So on each Sunday morning I would hike 2 or 3 miles with them to the Edwards chapel.

On Aug 6, 1945, the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and on Aug 9 a second one was dropped on Nagasaki. On Aug 14 Japan accepted the Allied surrender terms. World War II was over.

Predictions, 1946

I enjoyed discussing atom bombs, rockets, and space travel, with one camper at Camp Good News, Ronald Krauss. We agreed on two predictions:

One: If the world can go 25 years without an all-out nuclear war, we'll have it made. After that the probability of a nuclear war will decrease.

Two: We will have a man on the moon in 10 years.

Conclusions, 2015

In retrospect, I think we did pretty well, 69 years ago.

One: An all-out nuclear war has not happened. The closest we came to it was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Russia and the U.S. managed to resolve their differences without using any of their atomic weapons.

Two: Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin did not step on the moon until 1969, which was 23 years later. However, from the time President Kennedy issued the challenge "We will have a man on the moon by the end of the decade" the Apollo program did take about ten years.