

# MY MEMORIAL DAY

By EVAN HILL

A *Post* author remembers  
his four years in hospitals  
as a critically wounded  
World War II infantryman.  
Here are the men who  
shared those lonely  
hours with him.

Most of us were freshly wounded, just arrived from Europe and the Pacific; but Ed Agnew had been there for two years. He had more hospital time than many of us had Army time. Agnew had been hit in the Guadalcanal jungle, where the coconut palms were splintered stumps, their tops shot away by Japanese artillery fire. He was at the head of his rifle company, leading the early-morning attack, and did not see the Japanese infantryman dug into his "spider" hole only a few yards away. The Jap's machine gun was set low. His first burst caught Agnew five times in the left leg, once in the stomach and once in the right leg.

One night when the darkness of our ward was dotted with the glow of cigarettes and we were swapping combat stories, Agnew told us of his wounding. "That first burst knocked the wind out of me," he said, "but it didn't knock me out. While I was down, he kept shooting and hit me twice more in the side, breaking my ribs, and once more in the right leg. I was pretty much of a mess." He shifted in bed, reaching down to lift his left leg, which still drained from the hole in the knee. We waited, knowing he had not finished. "Then," he said, "my men knocked him out with grenades."

It was ten hours before they got Ed Agnew back to the field hospital. There Army surgeons gave him up for dead, and the Catholic chaplain gave him the last rites. But Agnew wasn't about to die, despite the "times when I didn't care whether I lived or not; it was so hot, and they wouldn't feed me anything because of my stomach."

He arrived at our hospital—Hammond General in Modesto, California—with ten wounds, a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and some memories of Christmas of 1942 in the Fiji Islands. "Somehow the nurses got a Bing Crosby record of *White Christmas*, and there in the heat of the Fijis we played it again and again, with tears running down our cheeks. And I remember the doctor, all dressed up as Santa Claus, with sweat on his face; making ward rounds with the nurses, trying to cheer us up. And outside the natives sang their beautiful songs."

Ed Agnew spent four of his five Army years in hospitals. When he was finally discharged to return to his home in Dickinson, North Dakota, he had been operated on more than twenty times. He was all right, except for a stiff leg.

Not long ago Ed wrote me a long, reminiscing letter about our ward mates and our nurses and our horizontal years in the exclusive white world of hospitals. He suggested a reunion.

"We'll find Pearson—remember how he used to break all speed records in a wheel chair and never once bump into a bed? And Peterson is somewhere near San Diego; I wonder if his legs are still full of brass? And we'll get Solot up from Arizona, and Lawlor out of San Francisco—he lost that leg, you know; and we'll get Jenks and Jim Novak. I can still see Novak running around like mad; he was my favorite wardboy. I used to hear from him at Christmas, but haven't for years. I wish I could locate him. I owe him and Jenks so much. My hopes are that God will be good to him wherever he is."

I, too, have lost contact with Jim Novak. Wartime friendships are often cut off by Army discharge orders, and it is fifteen years since I have seen him. But I hear from Harry Lawlor that Jim works out of Portland, Oregon, erecting miles of chain-link fencing. A fence-erecting Novak is not the man I knew; I remember a chunky, conscientious wardboy serving thirty bed patients in Ward A-18. I cannot remember whether Novak was a private or a corporal or a sergeant, but it doesn't matter now and never did. Hospital medics don't wear stripes on their white jackets. What you remember is how they changesweat-soaked bedsheets, or carry bedpans, or hold basins to the lips of retching patients.

It was Jim Novak who lifted us, oh, so gently, onto the cart in the early mornings and rolled us, groggy from morphine and sleeping capsules, down to surgery. It was Jim who eased us back into bed when we returned unconscious, wrapped in wet, white plaster. It was Jim who produced the pillow to ease the ache in the stump of an amputated arm. It was Jim who brought us our rattling wheel chairs, and crutches, and arm slings, and our personal trifles from the clothing room. He pushed us to the movies, the Post Exchange and out into the hot California sun; he kept us from falling when we started to learn to walk again. He was our legs and our arms and



Jim Grimsley of Los Angeles as he is today (left), and as he was in 1945 (right) when he was one of the author's mates at Letterman General Hospital. Grimsley suffered head wounds in the South Pacific that blinded him temporarily and left him with "tubular" vision.

Left. 1945: Nurse Leota Jensen with two of the author's hospital buddies, Pete Peterson and Bob Evans. Center. 1960: Peterson at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, where he recently auditioned as a singer. Right. 1960: Bob Evans and nurse Jensen during a reunion in San Francisco.



sometimes our eyes for more than two years.

There were more than 1000 of us at Hammond, and Hammond became our home. News of V-E Day came to us while we were there. We were not particularly gleeful, for we knew the Pacific war was far from finished. On V-J Day we were still in plaster casts and slings and Stader splints, and now that the war was over someone poured three bottles of whisky into the water cooler in the ward.

Then, because the shooting was finished, and the supply of beds was greater than the number of bodies needing mending, the Government closed Hammond, and we were transferred to other hospitals.

Jim Novak somehow disappeared in the consolidation, but our nurse went with us. We had more than one nurse, of course. There was Alice Duane with her special concern for the paralyzed; and Marguerite Haynes, who shampooed our heads so vigorously that we claimed our scalps ran red; and Mary Lou Keaton, who seemed to sense a too-tight bandage; and Eleanor Siemson with her quiet smile and gentle hands.

Still, just as quiet Jim Novak stood out among the wardboys, we had a special nurse, Capt. Leota Jensen. We called her "Jenks"; we loved her. Tall, blond, efficient and brusque, Jenks was a no-nonsense nurse who commanded respect and earned devotion.

It could not have been easy to maintain discipline and morale among thirty men who knew they faced years of hospitalization. There were unhappy times when a wardmate died, and gleeful times when a wardmate walked—and these were occasions when the ward could have tottered into chaos. But it never did, for Jenks had a 1st sergeant's instinct for command.

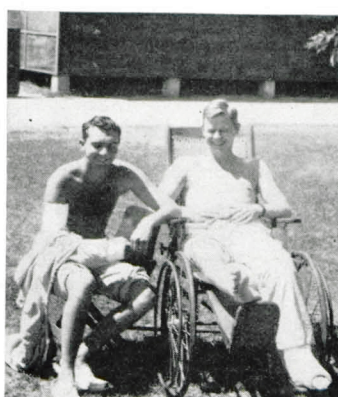
Once an irascible patient, wounded in the head and leg, pushed his dinner tray onto the floor and cursed at Jim Novak in a fit of childish anger. Jenks came to the foot of his bed and lectured him until he winced, warning him that she would wash his mouth out with soap "if you ever swear at one of these men again." That day every one of us could feel her strength.

And once three wheel-chair patients started a water fight in the ward, drenching those of us in bed and finally emptying the fire buckets, leaving huge puddles flooding the floor. We stopped the

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September, 1944. As the Allies pushed relentlessly toward Germany, countless GIs paid the price of victory.



Left: Mort Solot at his father's real-estate firm in Tucson, Arizona. He is shown at right with the author at Hammond General Hospital, Modesto, California, in 1945. Solot's forearms were shattered by artillery fire on Leyte during the invasion of the Philippines. (See box at right for the reason Evan Hill was in the wheel chair.)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan Hill went on active duty with the Alaska National Guard in 1941 and volunteered for combat shortly before D Day. He joined the 79th Infantry Division as a replacement in Normandy in July, 1944, fought through Normandy, across the Seine, into Belgium and to the Nancy and Metz area of France. In September, 1944, he was wounded by artillery fire while his company was holding a roadblock near Lunéville, France. A shell fragment shattered the femur in his left leg, severed the sciatic nerve and pierced his right leg.

While at Hammond General Hospital in Modesto, California, and Letterman Hospital in San Francisco, Hill underwent six major operations on his left leg. After four years of hospitalization he was discharged in August, 1948.



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horseplay when we heard Jenks's rapid steps in the hallway, but it is difficult to maintain an innocent air when you are soaked and your recently-filled water pitcher stands empty on your bedside table. The wardboys did not mop the floor that day; we did. Jenks got mops from the utility room and borrowed more from nearby wards. The wheel-chair brigade—Peterson and Pearson and Agnew—mopped from their chairs, and we bed patients mopped from our beds, leaning out as far as we could.

We were a handful of the nearly 700,000 Americans who were combat-wounded in World War II; we had survived, while almost a third of a million had been buried on battlefields throughout the world. Since 1914 the nation has lost, in three wars, almost half a million men killed and a million wounded. Other countries have suffered greater losses, but this is small comfort. There are no degrees of death; twelve men killed are no more dead than two.

Each Memorial Day, and on other days, too, when memories come tumbling back, we remember the dead. Too often we hear patriotic phrases composed of empty words, spoken with an empty shallowness; and these are disappointing days. To a man who has known combat, patriotism has a special meaning. It does not require public exhibition to prove its existence, or the hearty endorsement of campaigning politicians. It is a personal, enduring emotion, compounded of devotion and pride and gallantry and anger and fear, and simple, unvarnished love of country, and love of humanity.

It may be comforting to organize our patriotic feelings, setting aside certain minutes in a certain month to honor our dead. But to me—and, I believe, to the hundreds of combat-wounded men I knew during four years in Army hospitals—the parades and ceremonial rifle volleys sometimes seem to be parodies.

At these times I think of Big Ed Manifold of York, Pennsylvania, my company commander in France, who in our rare rest periods sat near his slit trench reading stacks of *The New York Times*, eating

huge chunks of quartermaster bread spread with sweet French butter, and washing them down with cognac. Big Ed was killed outside Lunéville while holding his wire sergeant's wounded head in his arms, protecting him from artillery fire. I think of Gage Chetwood, who taught me to ski and who was shot down over Italy. I think of my wardmate, Everett Dixon, who died in spite of Jenks's spending her off-duty time as his special nurse.

And I remember what he told me of his wounding in Okinawa, when he lay on the ground holding his belly together and a combat medic looked at him and said, "Well, I'll patch you up, but it won't do no good." And the medic was right; Dixon was killed there in Okinawa, but he took a long time in the dying.

And I think of the living.

J. Harold Peterson Jr. was from San Diego, a tall, happy man with sparse hair and a superb singing voice. I met him in an Army hospital somewhere in England in 1944, a few weeks after we had been wounded in Northern France. When we began to feel better, we would urge Pete to sing, and his great voice would fill the ward with operatic arias. He had been a concert singer before becoming a soldier. We would listen, and the nurses would come to hear, and we would all be most thankful that Pete had been hit only in the legs.

Pete got his Silver Star Medal while we were there, but most of us thought a Bronze Star or a brass star would have been more appropriate, because of his wounds. North of Metz, one September afternoon, Pete's tank platoon attempted to stop German armor that was decimating an infantry company. One round from a hidden Tiger tank killed three men in Pete's tank and exploded the canvas bag that held empty machine-gun cartridge cases.

These struck Pete's legs. When we first knew him, Pete had more than thirty brass cartridge cases in one leg and almost as many in the other.

We came to Hammond together, Pete and I, on a

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(Continued from Page 131) hospital ship to Charleston, South Carolina, and a hospital train across the continent to central California. There the crumpled brass was nipped out of his legs one piece at a time as it worked to the surface, and his legs were healed. It was almost two years before Pete was returned to duty, and in that time we met many wounded men.

Harry Lawlor arrived at Hammond early one morning and was plunked into the bed next to mine. Just in from the Pacific, he was still in his shipping crate, a plaster cast running from armpit to toes. After Jenks and the doctors had checked him in, a sergeant came from the cast room with knives and nicked cast cutters to cut him out of his cast. It took almost two hours, with the sergeant grunting and cursing and stopping for a smoke while he sliced horizontally through the hardened cast, cutting it so that it would be like the two halves of an oyster, with Harry lying firm in the bottom half shell.

To do its job, a cast must be tight, and a tight cast is difficult to remove, especially around the bones at hip and knee and ankle. When the sergeant knifed in these areas, Harry winced a little, but said nothing. After the sergeant had gone and the top of the cast was loose, the orthopedic surgeon came to lift it and unwrap the layers of cotton padding beneath it. When he saw the fresh blood

oozing from the sergeant's knife cuts, he turned to Harry in anger. "Did the cast man do that?" he asked.

Harry nodded.

"Why in hell didn't you stop him?"

Harry shrugged. "It's off now. But I guess he was a little careless."

We all learned something from Harry Lawlor. Although he had never seen an enemy soldier and had never fired a shot in anger, he was one of the most severely wounded men who ever lived, and he had the kind of courage that makes heroes.

He was wounded in the late spring of 1944 on the Hawaiian Island of Oahu during a training problem in jungle assault. One round of high-explosive 105-millimeter artillery fell short on his platoon. Eight men were killed, nine others wounded. Harry was hit with seven fragments of that shell, hit in both feet, his left knee, his spine, his buttocks, his right thigh, and he was almost, but not quite, emasculated. Six years later, when World War II had been over for almost five years and the Korean eruption was only two months away, Harry was discharged. But he returned afterward for the amputation of his left leg.

Sometime during the war an English playwright made the silly statement that wounded American soldiers were whiners and complainers. We read this in the newspapers and were not even indignant, for it was obvious that the man was a

better dramatist than an observer; but we rather wished he could meet Harry Lawlor, lying there with us, quietly conquering pain with astounding strength and calmness. Harry was not a particularly vigorous patient, even when he had gained back the thirty pounds he had lost, but he was alert and observing, and his Irish wit made life much more pleasant for all of us.

Not long after Harry was freed of his cast and strung into a web of white ropes in a wooden frame, a tall, close-shaved patient came limping into the ward, looking for me. His left leg flopped as he walked, and his left arm swung useless, curling partially from the obvious paralysis of a head wound. As he stood at the foot of my bed, fumbling for the bed tag to read my name, I knew I had seen him before.

Then he spoke, and I knew him. His voice took me back to France, where I had last seen him on the day my company lost thirty-seven men in a ten-minute artillery concentration. Dale Cluck had been a Pennsylvania farmboy when he entered the Army, tall and steady, unruffled and dependable. Because of his strength he was armed with a heavy Browning automatic rifle. In France we were together in the same infantry company, fighting through Normandy, past St. Lô, across the Seine, into Belgium and back toward Strasbourg.

During these months Dale Cluck became acting sergeant at least a dozen times—each time his squad leader was killed or wounded. Cluck led the men who were left until replacements came up at night, when he returned to his job as a BAR man. Somehow the Army overlooked his leadership ability. He was still a private first class on the day he was discharged, the same grade he had held the day outside Lunéville, when German mortar fragments caved in the side of his head and killed Big Ed Manifold 100 yards away.

Cluck was with us at Hammond for eighteen months, while neurosurgeons cleaned fragments of bone and steel out of his brain. Shortly before he had the tantalum plate wired into his skull, his girl Marium came to visit him from Iowa, and they were married. I was at their wedding. Novak loaded me into a wheel chair and pushed me to the chapel, up the ramp and into the wheel-chair space at the rear of the building, and we heard the post chaplain, Col. Edward Witt, perform the ceremony.

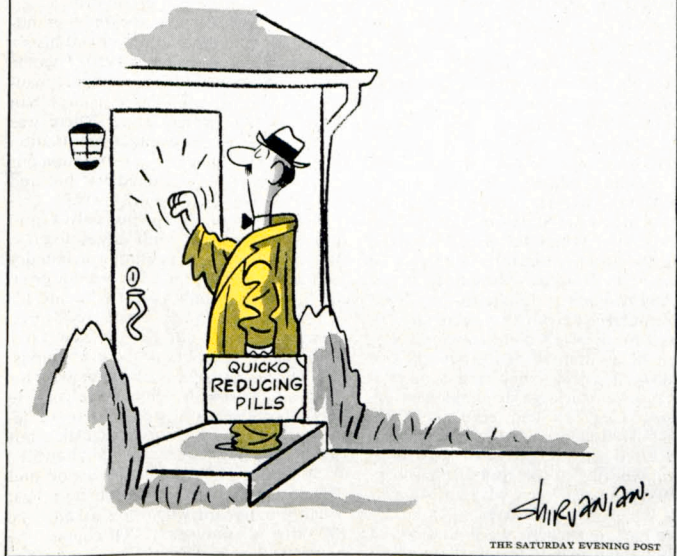
One of the men in our ward could walk—I've forgotten his name, but he was an artilleryman who had been wounded in the mouth; his jaws were wired together. One afternoon he returned from a drive in the countryside and collapsed on his bed in mock terror. "Brother!" he said between clenched teeth. "Don't ever go driving with Solot—at least not in civilian clothes. The guy's a madman. He could get you killed."

Mort Solot, a tall, thoughtful, almost taciturn soldier, was an infantryman from Tucson, Arizona, and had fought in Attu, Kwajalein and Leyte. He had been wounded in both forearms during the invasion of the Philippines, and that night the enemy repeatedly bombed and strafed the hospital tent where he lay helpless. He won his Silver Star on Kwajalein for ignoring point-blank small-arms fire to guide a tank platoon through a defile; he got his Bronze Star on Leyte, where artillery fragments cut the nerves and shattered the bones in his arms.

The day the artilleryman accused Mort of being a madman, Mort's arms were no longer in casts, and he was allowed to drive a car. To the casual observer he was



"I'll take it."



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as rugged as a north-woods logger, but inside his sleeves his arms were shriveled and scarred, and the splintered bones were not yet firmly united. A sharp rap could have shattered them. Knowing this, we could not understand the artilleryman's story.

"We're both in civilian clothes," the artilleryman said, "and Solot says let's drive to Stockton. So he has gas coupons, and what else is there to do? On the way back he stops to pick up a GI, a young kid about eighteen maybe, a big bruiser of a kid. He's been in the Army three months, he tells us, and Mort keeps asking him how he liked it and what the Army's like and is it rough, and that sort of thing. Pretty soon the kid looks at us, sitting there in civilian clothes, as if we were draft dodgers.

"Mort says, 'Gee, I envy you guys in the service, leading such a wholesome life, doing your duty for your country.' The kid looks from Mort to me and then back to Mort, and I can see he's getting angry. I said to Mort, 'Listen, this is the way to get a busted nose,' but Mort ignores me, and the kid—he's as broad as eight ax handles end to end—this kid can't understand me because of this damned jaw of mine. Now Mort is saying something about myopia and the long hours—even Saturdays and sometimes Sundays—in the war plant.

"About this time I'm feeling a little sick to my stomach—car sickness, I guess—and I'm not too eager to choke to death on my own juice with these jaws the way they are, and I get Mort to stop the car. As it happens the GI says he can make it on his own from there on, and he walks off, pretty sore. Then I'm not car sick any more, and we came back. Why, that kid could have taken us both apart even before we went overseas. Solot's a screwball; he'd play Russian roulette with a hand grenade."

Mort shrugged off the story when he returned to the ward. "I do it all the time," he said. "The trick is to see just how far you can go; to see just how mad you can get him before he wants to fight. I haven't misjudged yet." He lay on his bed and propped his brittle arms on pillows. "It does help pass the time, and it's a little more exciting than poker."

Mort Solot went with us when Hammond hospital was closed, and several hundred of us were shipped to Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco. At Letterman we met Jim Grimsley.

Jim was older than most of us, more mature, more philosophical, and probably more intelligent. He had been wounded in the head on the obscure little island of Angaur, about 500 miles south of the Philippines, on the day his wife Jeanne—7000 miles away—frosted a tiny cake for their son Tom's first birthday. He was hit shortly before midnight, and his two companions in a three-man fox-hole stuffed the wound with first-aid bandages to stem the bleeding. He was not moved until morning, for ground rules in the Pacific war said that anything that moved at night was the enemy.

When daylight came, sniper fire was so heavy that the battalion aid station refused to risk litter bearers for one man—especially a head wound. But one brave medic volunteered to deliver a litter if Grimsley's companions would help carry him back.

Two weeks later an officer from Grimsley's battalion visited the field hospital. He offered to shave Grimsley. "I kept asking him how he could shave me in the dark," Grimsley recalls. "But he didn't want to tell me I was blind, and he just passed it off by saying he was a clever barber."

When we met Jim Grimsley, brain surgeons were still cleaning the head wound, fighting the infection and preparing him for the tantalum plate for his skull. By that time he could see again, but he had tubular vision—he saw the world as if he were looking through two soda straws. When he got ambulatory enough to wander about San Francisco, Jim and Mort Solot found a huge pair of coveralls for me. They would slip them over my cast, and we would be off.

Once, when we were sitting at a lunch counter, a sweet, middle-aged lady passed behind us and saw the starfish scar on the back of Jim's head. "Oh, dear," she said. "Your mother must have had a rough time."

"Beg your pardon?" Jim said. "The scar," she said. "Forces. I know. My daughter had difficulty in childbirth too. My grandson's head is just like yours."



*It's the only one we've got doctor and it reads "Medium Rare."*

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Jim smiled pleasantly, and we said nothing.

I went with them when they played golf in the little town of Sharp Park, south of San Francisco. They would dump me under a tree with a book, Jim would tee off, and Solot would tell him where his ball went. Almost daily we visited Gage Rodman in his private room at the end of the ward, where he was recovering from repeated brain surgery. Rodman, after winning a Silver Star for knocking out a pillbox on Leyte, had been wounded in the stomach on Okinawa. Brain abscesses resulted from his infected wound. Before the war he had been a science major at Weber College in Utah, with an IQ of 148, and we wondered what the war would do to his brilliant mind.

Then there was Felix Sharp. We tried to teach him to read again, but it seemed a hopeless task. Flip Sharp had commanded a battalion of Filipino guerrillas, had actually learned to like rice in his years in a Japanese prison camp and now, as a result of brain injury, had lost the ability to read.

Today Flip is somewhere in Florida, married and the father of one child. He did learn to read again in a special Army school for aphasics, but Jim writes me, "Apparently his eyes have gone bad, for he said he had just received some new records for the blind."

Gage Rodman has not been so fortunate. He lives in Los Angeles now with his devoted mother. His genius-level IQ has been reduced to 123, and because he has partial tubular vision similar to Grimsley's and because he falls frequently, he spends most of his life in a chair. He cannot read well. He can feed himself, with some difficulty, but he cannot cut his meat.

Today, as Rodman sits limply watching television and Flip Sharp listens to his records for the blind and Pete Peterson feels the occasional twinge of a cartridge case in the calf of his leg, it is difficult to gain perspective about the meanings of war or the meanings of days set aside to commemorate the war dead. Especially when there is so little peace in the world.

"It is right that we honor the dead," Jim Grimsley writes, "but we cannot forget the Gage Rodmans who can no

war and his wounding changed him. He says quite simply that his combat experience was valuable, and he would recommend it to his six-year-old son. He has self-respect.

Ed Agnew is still single—"I just couldn't catch up with them with this stiff leg"—and devoted to his seventy-five-year-old mother. He runs the Agnew Insurance Agency in Dickinson, North Dakota. He has been mayor of his town, is active in the American Legion, and ten years ago was a Democratic candidate for Congress—"I got the hell beat out of me." He is an unabashed patriot; he has not forgotten ten machine-gun wounds on Guadalcanal or his four years in an Army hospital, but he writes, "I am sure that my combat experiences have made me a better American. I choke up at the playing of the national anthem or when I watch a military parade. I am sure that I would do it all over again should I be called tomorrow. God and America have been good to me; now serving either of them is all I can do."

Jim Grimsley, with his tubular, soda-straw vision, cannot drive an automobile, but he operates his insurance agency in North Hollywood by having his wife Jeanne drive him around. "She is as pretty as ever," he writes, "probably more attractive than she has ever been."

He sums up the value of his combat experience soberly. "For a person who has never slain a dragon, or written the great American novel, or who can't even get an idea for a better mousetrap, World War Two is the high point of my life. Since it happened, I'm glad I had a part in it. Anything done in good faith and executed with integrity is well worth while."

Our wonderful nurse Jenks contracted tuberculosis sometime during her Army career, and has been hospitalized at least three times since discharge. I visited her recently while she was in a Fresno, California, tuberculosis hospital and was delighted to be able to comment caustically about the neatness of her bedside table, as she had done about mine for several years. She is now recuperating in Astoria, Oregon, and if things go well she should be working at her profession in a few months.

Mort Solot's brittle arms are healed now, and he lives in Tucson, Arizona, with his wife and four young children. After the war he returned to the University of Arizona to complete his interrupted education, took his degree and joined his father's real-estate firm.

Harry Lawlor, now the only grandfather in our close group, finished his six years of hospitalization in 1950. Then he went back to his old job as import manager for the City of Paris, a large San Francisco department store. There was no choice about the eventual amputation of his left leg—it had to go—but surgeons reconstructed his shattered left hip and he walks today, although slowly.

Pete Peterson, with his calves and thighs still pocked with scars, lives in Bonita, California, operating a laundry and dry-cleaning plant. He has not given up his singing; only recently he and his wife Jean left their three red-haired children at home and flew to New York City for Metropolitan Opera auditions.

Like the rest of us, he remembers his hospital days with some nostalgia. He feels that the war made him more religious, "perhaps more pacifistic, but then I was never belligerent anyhow."

Still, like Grimsley and Lawlor and Cluck and Agnew and Solot, he is just slightly indignant when he's asked if he would go to war again. "Of course," he says. "Of course I would." THE END