

Bitter Experience

Wendell Tangborn

My brother Virgil started writing a journal in 1940, when he was 20 years old. In it, he expressed gloom about his future, which he knew would be affected by the war raging in Europe. In fact, his journal was probably prompted by the war. Norway and Denmark were occupied by Nazi Germany on April 10, 1940; then Belgium and the Netherlands were overrun in a matter of days. France was invaded on May 10 and surrendered 40 days later. The air war over Britain began on July 10 and London was in flames by October. The radio was our main source of information about the war. We listened to every newscast, from morning until late at night. The war news was always filled with drama. Night after night Edward R. Murrow gave vivid descriptions of the blitz that began: "This is London". In the background during the broadcast we heard bombs exploding, anti-aircraft guns and air raid sirens. For me the war was too remote and so far from our Northern Minnesota backwoods farm that I felt no fear. But for Virgil, who was seven years older, each day brought the war a little closer than it was the day before.

In his journal, Virgil also listed the scores of books he was reading during the 15-month period before March 1942, when he was drafted. Two of the novels were War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy and The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. A journal entry made a few days before he left home provides a glimpse into the agony he felt about what his role might be in a world turned dark:

March 26 (1942) - Gloomy drizzling rain last two days. Pete Ness over this afternoon. Next Tuesday I leave for Fort Snelling for physical exam. Hope I don't pass it for very justified reasons. But hardly dare hope. Reading Brothers Karamazov - rather strange, almost unintelligible. But I gather some vague ideas from it. These characters seem to suffer so intensely from doubt, religious doubt and confusion. I believe I have a clearer philosophy of life. Thanks to J. Dewey, H. G. Wells, Shaw. Perhaps it is too simple. Maybe it won't stand any bitter experience - Life can be explained for the most part in terms of natural laws. The causes of suffering, pain then become plainer. Man should strive to enrich as much as possible life - to make himself an important tool in the general progress of mankind.

Shortly after he wrote these words Virgil was drafted into the US Army, went through boot camp and training at Camp Barkley near Abilene, Texas and was shipped out for England in January, 1944. He was killed in France shortly after the invasion on June 6th. News of his death devastated us back in Minnesota, but it is only recently that I realized the connection his death had to another family member who was caught up in another European war nearly 200 years ago.

The novel, War and Peace, which Virgil was reading during the weeks before he left, has been called a "hymn to life". Tolstoy's depiction of life in Russia during Napoleon's invasion in 1812 is a strong indictment against all wars. Tolstoy felt that humans treat war as a simple game when actually it is their vilest act. Virgil must have realized as he read War and Peace that it had a link to what he was about to endure?

When Napoleon invaded Russia in June, 1812, his army numbered 422,000 men, many of them recruited or drafted from countries other than France. Likely one of his most reluctant soldiers was my great-great-grandfather, Lars Bjornsson, a Swedish serf who was probably conscripted into the French army because of a recently-formed French/Swedish alliance.

After the untimely death of Crown Prince Carl August, who ruled only a few weeks, Sweden was

without a king. In 1810, one of Napoleon's marshals, Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, was invited to meet with the Swedish Riksdag. With Napoleon's approval, Bernadotte was received into the Lutheran faith and adopted the name Charles John. He was designated Crown Prince of Sweden by a Riksdag eager to have Napoleon as an ally rather than an enemy. Within a month Napoleon demanded Sweden declare war on his avowed enemy, Britain. Britain was Sweden's most important trading partner, but the Riksdag thought it unwise to go against Napoleon's wishes. They agreed to the demand, but actual warfare between Sweden and Britain never occurred.

Meanwhile, Great-great grandfather Lars Bjornsson ended up in Napoleon's army. Exactly how remains a mystery? According to my father, who must have heard it from his mother, he was "volunteered" for Swedish military duty by a nobleman on whose land he lived. Probably Lars was forced to take the nobleman's place, a common practice at that time. In January, 1812, the French army marched into the Swedish territory of Pomerania on the European continent and made the small Swedish contingent prisoners. Lars Bjornsson could have been a member of the Swedish garrison captured on Pomerania and forced to join the French for the invasion of Russia a few months later.

Lars Bjornsson was born in Rok, Ostergotland, a small village three miles east of Lake Vattern, on December 10, 1784. He married Maja Eriksdotter on November 29, 1807, and his son, my great-grandfather, Carl Erik Larson Runn, was born in Rok on April 29, 1811. Carl Runn married Anna Sophia Hansdotter on May 23, 1862. My grandmother, Christine Josefina Runn, was born on January 27, 1867, ten years after Lars Bjornsson died.

When he joined Napoleon's Russian campaign, 28-year-old Bjornsson left behind his wife of five years and at least one child, my year-old great-grandfather. There is only one known account of a draftee in the French Army during the invasion of Russia, written by a German, Jakob Walter: *The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier* (edited by Marc Raeff). Jakob Walter was one of the few survivors of Napoleon's Russian campaign. He suffered horrific hardships, especially during the retreat. Temperatures often fell below zero degrees Fahrenheit and food was nearly nonexistent. He was forced to eat the entrails of a cow for a time, as that was the only unfrozen flesh he could find. The retreating French army also endured terrifying raids by fierce Cossacks on horseback.

The suffering that these men must have gone through is almost beyond comprehension. Napoleon made the retreat in relative comfort, riding in a covered horse-drawn carriage. However, his ride was not always smooth as the carriage was frequently jolted as it rolled over the frozen bodies of his men. He must have asked himself if the invasion of Russia was worth the terrible cost in young lives and the misery it inflicted on millions of people. As with many wars, the fundamental cause for this one is absurdly simple: Russia refused to cooperate with Napoleon in his attempt to blockade British ports. Napoleon is revered today because of his enduring social and political accomplishments, but the carnage for which he was also responsible is nearly forgotten.

Bjornsson deserted the army after it reached Moscow and made his way back to Sweden. It took him nine years to make the nearly 2000-mile journey. He could have been one of the 8000 men Napoleon ordered to remain in Moscow as a tactical maneuver when he began the retreat. Lars probably would not have survived had he stayed with Napoleon. Only 10,000 men (about 1 in 50) of the initial force remained by the time they completed the retreat to Poland. Not much is known about Lars's nine-year trek. Supposedly he stopped for a while in Kiruna in northern

Sweden to work in the iron mines. A small wooden trunk he carried throughout his journey is still in our family's possession (what an incredible story must be embedded in its worn planks). He returned home to his wife and child in 1821 and lived 36 more years. Lars Bjornsson died on June 24, 1857 and is buried at the Rok Parish in Ostergotland.

The prevailing legacy through three generations of Bjornsson's descendents was an ingrained distrust and loathing of anything connected to the military. Thus my father avoided the draft in 1915 by going to Canada with his parents and staying there until the end of World War I. However, the innate fear of warfare was not sufficiently strong to persist into a fourth generation. One hundred and thirty-two years later, a member of my family again aided France.

Virgil Tangborn, my older brother, was Lars Bjornsson's great-great grandson. A boy from a Minnesota farm, where hard work was valued over education or reflection, Virgil kept his journal, read books, and thought about his place in the world as best he could. Another journal entry, made the day before he left home forever, expresses a new-found hope for his future:

March 30, (1942) - A strange calm has come over my feelings and disposition last two days. Feel a strong will to achieve something forming and growing. It seems like I have been living a too careless and too easy a life. I have a sudden determination to never slide back into those easy leisurely ways. Maybe I am squarely facing reality at last and am beginning to mature mentally.

Virgil ended up as a French horn player in the US Army's 90th Division Band. The band members were made into medics just before the Normandy Invasion. He was killed in Normandy attempting to rescue a wounded soldier during an artillery barrage. He died, on June 14, 1944, just 87 years after Lars Bjornsson's death. Virgil's grave is in the Colville-sur-mer Cemetery at Omaha Beach. His statue, along with likenesses of three other American soldiers who died during the invasion, now stands in the town square of Periers, France, in a memorial inspired by French citizens and dedicated in June 2000. In the photograph, Virgil is on the right - a medic helping a wounded comrade.

On September 11, 2001, a fateful day that will remain forever in our memories, many citizens of Periers gathered at this memorial, weeping and praying as they set lighted candles and flowers around the statues of these four men.



Statues of four 90th Division soldiers who died during the Normandy invasion in June, 1944.



Wendell Tangborn and son Eric, at Virgil's gravesite at the Omaha Beach Cemetery, June 1983. Photo by Henri Levaufre

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