

GENERAL NEWS

Mathias remembers World War II in GI Jive

The following are reflections of Frank F. Mathias on writing a memoir.

Many old veterans hope to write a memoir someday. I am one of the relatively few that has.

I am surprised that my memoir, "GI Jive, An Army Bandman in World War II," may be the first released memoir to come out of the South Pacific Theater. Why this dearth of memoirs?

The paraphrase says words of wisdom from Pope, the apostle, many memoirs are stepped by "insurmountable opportunities."

This paradox is seldom apparent in the world's memoirists. Every thing seems to favor him at first. I remember the feeling well. I thought with great gladness that my memoir was all done before I even started. My two and one-half years in the army were simply stored in my memory, my letters, and were documents. God, what a relief!

The memoirs, expensive trips, and years of research for me. All I needed to do was sit down, let the golden words flow, and a book about the way we men and women in the sweet and exhilarating vent of thousands of letters. I had published two books previously. I felt my writing style was adequate. It was for the writing of history, but I now encountered the need for art in the use of memory's sweetest tools as well as the craft of the historian. This line of art with truth soon impaled me on the horns of Pygma's insurmountable opportunity.

I was puzzled, yet I knew that history was more of an art than a science. I had yet to see that for the competent memoirist the midway expand, that he may use art and imagination in ways denied the narrative historian. The memoirist must construct his own personality and those of men and women in his past in a way more akin to the novelist than to the historian, for he must involve himself in love affairs and marriage, divorce, birth and death, perhaps even criminal activity. Good, readable narrative history may well help, but it will

lack the imaginative, artistic breathem expected and attainable in a top-flight memoir.

The memoirist, like the historian, writes to be read by other people. If more artistic handling of material brings additional readers, what is wrong with that? Is it not desirable that Robert Butler, a figure, in much better known words than any Civil War general?

I suppose my entrance into the field of memoir writing was about average. My number saved my letters here, and I shipped the letters I refused to be in hands. I forgot all about those letters as the years turned into decades. When the day came, I moved many boxes, including the letters into my basement.

One summer day in 1973 I had a little to do that I copied one of the boxes. I was nostalgically sated to find some 300 letters, photos, and other memorabilia of my years in the big war.

I had read, my life as an 18 to 20-year-old began taking shape in my memory. There were all the judgments of youth, but with occasional insights into the war, and into life itself, which started me. "Did I really believe that?"

I was just as startled to realize that my memory had grossly distorted much of the life passing before me in the letters. Suddenly I realized I was reading the soul of a boy I no longer knew, a boy I had mostly lost and forgotten during the war and loss of nearly 40 years. When I had here was the man I used to be.

But I had the letters, a priceless aid to memory, chronology, and the truth of my experience. I gradually understood later that, without these letters, my faculty and busy memory would have produced a rather typical, belabored memoir.

I made several false starts into my story before I understood that there could be no neat separation of art and craft. I had been writing my story from the rump damp and wrinkled viewpoint of an aging and nostalgic college professor. I pon-

dered a bit here, offered a scholarly viewpoint there, and composed correct and craftsome-like sentences and paragraphs. I was trapped into what many writers call the "syntactical cage" - the attempt to explain and straighten all things instead of letting the story speak for itself.

I knew something was wrong. My first chapter was lifelike. My ten-year-old son and daughters read it. They shrieked in tacit agreement. Facing their disappointment, I think me still admitting that I was not really writing of the time-aged soldier I used to be in a very different way. The cause was slowly to change my entire approach to the memoir.

From this time on, I tried earnestly to get my story across as lived by a son who had never been a professional player and a damned frightened machine gunner. A young fellow who had never heard of jet planes, television, Korean police action, academic deans, John Kennedy, or thank God, rock 'n' roll. A young fellow, however, who thought he knew much more than he did. It is funny, my officers, and playing ad lib solos on "Star Dust" and "Body and Soul." This decision brought art into my memoir to stay.

I now had to build up this forgotten fellow's life and personality in much the same way as a novelist builds the character and fables of any major subject in his novel. Although I could record only a fraction of my involvement in nearly three years of my life, this fraction had to tell my story with balance, truth, and dramatic force. Unlike the novelist, I could not invent material to fill in or bridge gaps. Any memoirist committed to the truth is soon faced with limitations of choice. Perhaps it is the one greatest discipline of memoir writing. And it is the one which, done with a heavy, artless hand, destroys most memoirs.

There is no guide to the choice of material. It is an art, I think, one that has to know where to stop where the colors begin to fade. Examples abound. I played han-

dreds of card games and rolled the dice frequently. Most recalled none of the same. I remember several colorful events and firefight connected with these games. Should I use them? I decided against it, and used only one card game in the entire memoir. It represents the time spent on hundreds of such games. More than this would have been idle and redundant, for card games and dice are accepted by knowledgeable readers as understood backgrounds, the names as barracks, tents, company streets, and mess halls.

One of the unexpected fruits of publishing my memoir came in a stream of letters from old veterans formerly in or attached to the Blackey Division. I call them my "new core" letters and developed some 100 art in answering them. Most of them start like one from Jasper Smith of Anderson, Indiana. "How come you didn't mention

and with fires started by cigarette lighters each year. An estimated 140 of those deaths are the result of play with lighters.

Most of the victims are less than five years old. Children surviving such fires are often severely burned, resulting in disability, disfigurement or other serious problems.

Toddlers as young as two have started fatal fires while playing with cigarette lighters.

Parents and anyone in the household should keep lighters out of sight and out of reach. A child should never be encouraged to play with a lighter or to think of an toy.

Lighters should never be used as a source of amusement for a child. Once their curiosity is aroused, children may seek out a lighter and try to light it. Never leave a toddler or a young child unattended.

Because children are naturally curious and have little experience with innards four in their short lives, about 200 deaths are attrib-

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Company C, 672nd Amphibian Tractor Battalion in your book?"

It wouldn't do to tell Jasper that I had never heard of the 672nd. Instead, I developed an awful fudge - the final skill for the adult or student who would try his hand at a memoir. "Jasper, I wrote, 'I will certainly include the 672nd in my next book'."

Frank F. Mathias is a native of Carlisle.

"GI Jive, An Army Bandman in World War II," excepted in these pages in November 1987, was published by the University Press of Kentucky. This reflection on its creation evolved through a paper given at an American Historical Association meeting (San Francisco, 1983) and an essay in "The History Teacher" (1986).

Those from Carlisle attending the memorial service for Emmet Derrill, at the Lake Wissaman United Methodist Church, June 26 were Mrs. George Dale, Mr. and Mrs. Orel Day, Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Allen Derrill.

The Baptist Church P. O. F. F. Club will meet Tuesday, July 28 at Rich Barnett, 216 Columbus Drive, Lake Carnation.

The group will enjoy boat rides, fishing and different games in the afternoon before going to Cynthia for dinner at Hank's Restaurant.

MILITARY

MCDONALD
Marie Corporal Brenda L. McDonald, daughter of Mr. Dennis McDonald and Helen F. Fryman, both of Carlisle, Kentucky, has been promoted to her present rank while serving with 1st Force Service Support Group, Camp Pendleton, California.

She joined the Marine Corps in September 1982.



Frank Mathias

Health Tips

from Lee Rose

Would you allow your young child to play with fire?

A ridiculous question you say. Of course you wouldn't consciously permit him to brush dangerously near flames with the great possibility of an eye or minor burn. We all know any flame has the potential of causing an all-out fire.

With things mind it is difficult to imagine young children being permitted to play with cigarette lighters or lighters not being kept safely out of reach.

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