

Children finally learn Dad's WW II story through letters he had mailed home

Veterans Day may be the perfect time for you to ask the military veteran in your family about their experiences, before those stories are lost forever.

Many Jefferson County residents knew the late Carl W. "Bill" Swanson as a Marrowstone Island resident or a public hospital commissioner, or by his other activities. He rarely talked about his service during World War II, but during the war he kept a diary and wrote more than 400 letters home to his family in Blaine, Wash.

Most of his letters were meant to be reassuring – when wounded by shrapnel he didn't reveal it – but they provide a telling glimpse into his military service. He never told those details to his three children – Carl W. Jr. of Port Townsend, Violet of Oregon, and Karen of Marrowstone Island – whom he raised with wife Dorothy after the war.

In his own words

Bill Swanson died in October 2004. While sorting through the house, his children uncovered a box of letters and photos.

"My brother just gave me a box of letters and said, 'Do something with them,'" daughter Karen recalled. "Dad never told us any of this. But he was so thorough in his writings. Reading it, you felt like you were in that foxhole."

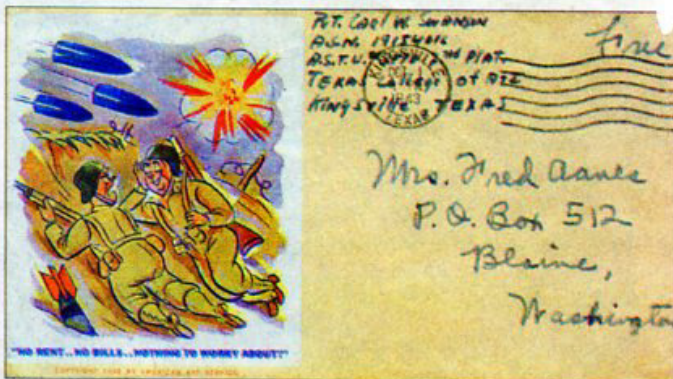
Swanson's World War II letters and diaries were compiled in two volumes by Karen and are available through the Jefferson County Library in Port Hadlock as "A Book in the Attic."

Bill had never been farther from home than Seattle, when, along with 300 other University of Washington ROTC students, he volunteered for the U.S. Army. He received orders on March 30, 1943, to report for transportation to Fort Lewis.

He eventually became part of the 384th Forward Artillery Battalion attached to the 103rd Infantry Division, known as the Cactus Division, which became part of the Seventh Army in Europe. He fought in France, Germany and Austria.

These letters, in Carl's own words, take the reader from basic

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This is a postcard Swanson sent home while training in Texas. Life in the combat infantry: "No rent. No Bills. Nothing to worry about."



Carl "Bill" Swanson is pictured before he shipped overseas with the U.S. Army. Swanson grew up in Blaine but lived in Jefferson County from 1978 until his death in 2004. Photos courtesy of the Swanson family

"Many [veterans] were like my Dad and said nothing while they were alive. We need to ask them what they did and have them tell us their stories before they are gone."

Karen Swanson-Woolf



Although American soldiers were told not to fraternize with European women, it seems Bill Swanson found plenty of reason to mix with the locals. This photo is from the Austrian Alps.

Swanson: Combat

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training through war's end:

April 1943

First impression is pretty good. Supper at camp consisted of wieners and sauerkraut, baked potatoes and salad, coffee but no milk. We'll be spending a couple of weeks at Lewis taking plenty of tests. ...

Left Fort Lewis for Camp Wallace, TX. Got as far as Oregon. First time I've ever been in another State.

I've been made gun commander of a 90 millimeter anti-aircraft gun. Please don't mention this type of gun. It would be best to burn this letter after reading it.

[After additional training, in September 1944 Carl finally boarded a train for New York to begin processing for overseas.]

October 1944

Left NY this morning on board the U.S.S. HENRY GIBBONS. Stormy weather.

Arrived at France, walked 20 miles with packs to rendezvous area. We will be living in pup tents ... the shelter sheds most of the water.

My first letter on foreign soil. The people of France are very friendly. Some call out "Hello Joe" or "Bonsoir Monsieur" pronounced "Bawn Swar Muss-Yuh" and which means good evening sir.

Unless we are being bombarded by enemy artillery we try to sleep inside a building or in a hay loft. Don't worry about me over here. I have plenty to eat and lots of warm clothes and if God's will I will come out o.k. and will be home soon.

November 1944

Had a pass to Marseilles.

Walked around town and enjoyed seeing a French city. Tasted cognac, wine and French beer, which is much flatter than American.

Snowed yesterday. About 4 inches deep at new position. Digging a dugout. Returned to sleep in a hayloft. Occupy new position tomorrow. Will live underground greater part of the time now I guess.

Moved to a new position. Snow all day. Will sleep in foxhole.

Seeing fires toward east for days as whole night sky is lit up by towns being burned by Germans.

We are sleeping in a farmhouse lately as there are "S" mines, teller mines and booby traps galore in this position. The sergeant in "A" Battery was killed by a mine tonight and 7 men were injured. French lady across the street was also killed by a mine. Rain today.

The big offensive is really on. We are part of the Seventh Army now. By the time this letter arrives the Seventh Army should be pretty well-known for what it has accomplished of late.

As we approach Germany the people are not so friendly. I wonder what they will act like when we begin on the big cities over across the Rhine.

December 1944

Clear, cold, sunny. Mud is still about 6-10 inches deep. Slept in a school house with everything from swastikas to Hitler's picture for bedding.

Drew some counter-battery fire today. Knocked out some enemy batteries.

Strafed twice in chow line by ME-109s. Division is moving up to Strasbourg. Rumor is we will get 3 days rest.

My first opportunity to write a letter on a table since I left the

states. Reading about pumpkin pie in your letter surely made me homesick. I've dreamed of sitting by that old kitchen stove warming my feet up - that's my prime ambition when I get home.

Strafed again. Heavy concentrations of artillery from same position.

It's a beautiful Sunday morning but not peaceful. We hear the steady roar of the big guns, the steady chatter of machine guns and of a rifle being fired. Far in the distance can be heard the steady whine of American planes and the rat-a-tat of their machine guns as they strafe German positions. Once in a great while the whine of a German shell can be heard and then it is good to be near a foxhole.

When I first came up to the front I couldn't sleep because of all the noise from artillery fire at night as well as the flash from the guns. Now it doesn't bother me a bit - in fact I would probably wake up if they stopped firing because it would be so quiet that I couldn't sleep.

It is Christmas Eve, somewhere in France. It does not seem much like Christmas however. Just a regular day in combat. We fired a few rounds, dug a foxhole, and dug in some ammo.

We are living in a French house again. I even have a bunk to sleep in for the first time since I got off the boat. It is really wonderful!

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January 1945

I've never spent so much time out-of-doors in the wintertime. A fellow sure appreciates getting indoors by a nice warm fire after working out in the cold.

The other day we were given some champagne. This was the first time I've tasted champagne in my life. It was quite good!

You've probably read about the Jerry's counter-offensive. It's a big thing because it's so close to us. I guess the people back home will begin to realize pretty soon that this war in Europe is no pushover.

Now that our battery's radio is working, we will be able to listen to it about once every two weeks or so. Last time it was our turn, I stayed up until 2:00 a.m. listening. ...

Kraut attack 0300 this morning. Beaucoup artillery, small arms fire. Kraut tank attack repulsed.

It's been over 80 days now that we've been on the line.

February 1945

The winter weather has gone but now we have good old French mud. The gooiest mud you can imagine. The other day a little French girl got stuck up to her knees in the mud. We had to lift her out of the mud because she was so firmly stuck she couldn't move. On top of that she lost both her little wooden shoes in

the mud so we had to fish around in the mud for them.

At first it was new and interesting, but now it's getting old. There's always something going on - air raids, our planes going over to bomb, continual noise of artillery fire, an occasional burst of machine gun fire, an occasional Jerry plane coming over to strafe, and at night flares and searchlights. But even then it all gets to be old stuff, and if I were to go home I'd probably be lost because of the lack of noise.

March 1945

I just had a most wonderful experience. I just returned from taking a good old fashioned hot water shower. It's the first time I've had a chance to take a shower since the first of December. It took nearly an hour to get the first layer (last year's) dirt off.

We have been saving ammo for several days, waiting for attack which starts at 0430 tomorrow morning.

Doughboys attacked without artillery support to achieve surprise. Our barrage begun at 0635. We are the forwardmost artillery in this sector.

Jerries are on the run for the Siegfried Line now. Slept on top of ground.

Tonight I'm sleeping in a bed. 14th Armored reported in Weissenburg and our own 411th Regt one mile or more into the Siegfried Line. Happy Day!

On German soil for first time. German planes attempted to strafe our convoy but were driven away. Took position in deserted German town of Schweigen. Many wine cellars. We support 36th Division when they attempt to crack Siegfried for the fourth time.

Many fires on front. Quiet here. Siegfried Line must have been busted wide open. Drank champagne!

Lots of Jerries are being captured. Thousands of slave laborers have been liberated. We're about 6 miles from the Rhine.

We've been in actual combat, or as we say "on the line" for five months without a break. Of course that is no record but it's well over the number for many an outfit.



The military provided V-mail stationery to soldiers to write home. Bill Swanson wrote home often, and his mother saved everything. But Bill never showed the letters to his own children or talked in much detail about his military service.

to say to the Russians when we meet them.

Sweated out an expected German tank attack which never came off. Continued on to city of Schorndorf. No firing. Tenth Army is way ahead of our line.

Up to the front lines. Waiting to move up across the Danube River.

Late march across Danube. Went into position near town of Strasse. Way ahead of our infantry as we took the town ourselves. About 50 prisoners taken.

Rainy again. Four ME-109's out strafing again. One last desperate attempt to stop us from reaching the Bavarian Alp redoubt of Hitler's.

I'm writing this from Innsbruck. Just a few minutes ago an American plane dropped us the Stars and Stripes telling us the War is Over. God bless you.

Your loving son,
Bill

Attached is a story
about my Dad in WWII

Karen Swanson-Woolf

CARL "BILL" SWANSON
384th FABN

May 1945

Still snowing. Division objective is Innsbruck, Austria, and Corps objective is Brenner Pass some 50 miles farther. Innsbruck has been given an ultimatum to surrender.

Entered Innsbruck. 1½ hours behind a spearhead of the 411th Infantry which is driving toward Brenner Pass.

You ought to see the thousands of refugees that have been freed by our armies. They come walking toward the rear in single file on both sides of the road. I will never forget for as long as I live. They are soldiers and civilians from every country in Europe.

The people I feel most sorry for are the Polish and Russian Jews who have been in concentration camps for as long as 8 years. Their clothes are so worn they are falling off, many have no shoes or outer clothes for this cold weather. Scores have died by the side of the road. ...

Our guns are in position but there is no more firing to do now. Today the 19th German Army signed their surrender at the city hall in Innsbruck.

Post-war

In mid-June 1945, Bill Swanson was transferred and told he would be returning to the United States to be redeployed to the Pacific Theater. He sailed from Le Havre, France, on July 8, but the war in the Pacific ended in early September, before he received his reassignment. He was discharged as a sergeant in February 1946, and he returned to the University of Washington to receive a bachelor of science degree in forestry.

After a long career in the U.S. Forest Service in Washington, Idaho, Utah and Alaska, including a two-year assignment with the U.S. State Department in South Vietnam, he retired to the Port Townsend area in 1978, moving to Marrowstone Island in 1985. He died in 2004.

America's so-called "Greatest Generation," those who lived – and fought – during World War II (1941-45) are rapidly dwindling. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, as many as 1,100 World War II vets die every day.

The Swanson family wants this story to be a "thank you" to all the men and women who served at home and overseas during any war: World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan.

"Many of them were like my Dad and said nothing while they were alive," Karen Swanson-Woolf said. "We need to ask them what they did and have them tell us their stories before they are gone."

April 1945

We are doing a real job in the hills and mountains of southern Germany. I'm as proud as can be of our outfit, as it was us who with other units of the Seventh Army cracked the Siegfried Line wide open. And they said it couldn't be passed by any army in the world!

Last night the battery caught 7 Nazis who buried an American fighter pilot alive. Go on guard again at noon. The people are really beginning to like us but we aren't supposed to fraternize.

We've been given little printed cards called "Foxhole Russian" with a list of sentences

W A



Serving with a forward artillery unit, Bill Swanson (far right) spent a lot of time living in foxholes and dugouts near the front lines. Photos courtesy of the Swanson family

Dearest Mom and Dad,
 I'm writing this from Innsbruck, Austria deep in the heart of the Austrian Alps. The War was officially over a few hours ago for us and just a few minutes ago an American plane dropped us the Stars & Stripes telling us the War is over. God Bless You
 Your loving son,
 Bill Swanson

Pfc Bill Swanson #159016
 Btry. C 384 F.A.B. Co.
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 N.Y.C. N.Y.

Mr. and Mrs. Fred Ames
 P.O. Box 512
 Blaine, Washington
 48854 S
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