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“I’ll Be Home For Christmas”

BY JAMES THOMAS

In late June 1945, as the biggest, most destructive war in human history was winding down to its last few weeks, Juarene Brown received a letter from her fiancée Jack Bennett. The two were meant for each other, in love before either of them even knew what love was. As neighbors in the small central Texas town of Crawford, Jack and Juarene had known each other nearly their entire lives. They each had big plans for their future. As soon as Jack returned from the Pacific, that future would begin. By the time Juarene read his latest letter, however, Jack was already dead. Within weeks, the war was over and soldiers, sailors and Marines would start coming home. Jack was one of millions of young men who never came home, who died for their countries during World War II, and Juarene one of the countless millions of friends, family members and loved ones who suffered loss in that war. For each young man lost, for everyone grieving their loss, there is a personal story of pain and despair. This is one of those stories.

Horace Dan Bennett, nicknamed “Jack,” was born 12 February 1921 in the little town of Speegleville, near the Bosque River to the west of Waco, Texas. His family had to leave Speegleville—along with almost all of the families living there—in 1929, when the Army Corps of Engineers damned the river and created Lake Waco. Today there are just a handful of homes scattered around that side of the lake, but no town remains. Eight year old Jack and his family left the soon to be nonexistent town of Speegleville and moved to Crawford.

Mary Juarene Brown was born in The Grove, Texas, 3 August 1925. Unlike Speegleville, The Grove still stands, but it is listed in the United States registry of ghost towns because few people live there anymore. In the 1920s, though, it was a prosperous little agricultural community of several hundred people. Olivia Humphreys Brown, called “Livvy,” chose the name Juarene for her baby girl because she had heard the name somewhere and thought it sounded beautiful, just like her daughter. Juarene herself grew up not liking her name, and was especially unhappy because no one could ever seem to spell it or pronounce it.

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Juarene was the first child Olivia and Homer Tilman Brown had together, although each had a child from previous marriages. The Spanish Flu Epidemic which swept through the United States at the end of the Great War had claimed both of their spouses. Olivia had a son named Isaac Lytton Leach and Homer had a daughter named Jeffie Day Brown. Homer and Olivia had both grown up in large farming families and would make their own family bigger by adding two more children a few years after Juarene's birth. Sammie and John would be the two little brothers who plagued older sister Juarene's childhood, but would also provide love and support for the rest of their lives. Although Isaac and Jeff, as most called Jeffie Day, would move out on their own while the other children were still small, the family was close and warm and secure.

Homer was the banker in The Grove, making annual agricultural loans for farmers in McClennon County, as well as helping residents buy houses and even the occasional new automobile. Unfortunately, the almost idyllic life of the Browns came crashing down, as it did for so many Americans, in those years that the U.S. economy began its downward spiral into depression. The effects of the Great Depression hit The Grove in about 1930. Quickly the drying up of currency supply and economic collapse forced the closing of Homer Brown's bank and soon the town of The Grove itself died. Residents moved away, each family finding ways to cope with the Depression. Luckily for the Browns, Homer found work as the accountant for Travis Chevrolet a few miles north in the town of Crawford; the Travis's were cousins, and families during the 1930s helped each other out whenever they could. This extending of help was not only for families of course. Often in evenings, Olivia would walk down to the tracks that ran through the center of Crawford and retrieve hungry, unemployed men who had been riding the rails and take them in for supper, despite the family's own limited resources.

Settling in a new home went smoothly, as both Homer and Olivia had friends and family all around, from Waco to Valley Mills to McGregor and on farms in between. For little Juarene, the first Christmas in Crawford was difficult, but then holidays without much in the way of presents became the norm, and Christmas meant singing songs around beautifully decorated trees, not gifts.

A block to the north was the Bennett home. Jack's father, Horace Dunne, was the manager of the general store, and his mother Anne Edith Trautvetter Bennett—usually called Annie when she was young, but a fearful "Mrs. Bennett" when older—became the music teacher at Crawford

High School. Jack was their only child. It was music, in fact, that first brought Jack and Juarene together. From early childhood, Juarene would walk or ride her bicycle over to the Bennett house to take piano and voice lessons from Mrs. Bennett. Combining a natural gift with hard work and parental pressure, Juarene became Mrs. Bennett's star student years before she reached high school and Crawford High's music classes. Once in high school, however, she really blossomed, playing recitals, in musical productions and was the featured performer at her own graduation. She was such an excellent student in every other area as well, so much so that she skipped a couple of grades in elementary school and finished high school in 1942 when she was still only sixteen years old.

Jack was four years older and had also graduated early, when he was seventeen in 1938. He was a fine student, but made his mark in Crawford High athletics. Football, baseball and swimming were his top sports. He also loved horseback riding and hunting—Juarene loved to ride horses as well, and both had plenty of opportunities to ride with all the farming and ranching relatives they each had. After high school, Jack went to Baylor College (later University). Like so many incoming college students he had a plan but ultimately did not stick with it. He enrolled in the Bachelor of Business Arts program with an Accounting major, but after three years decided to drop out and go to work.

Most of the time Jack had been matriculating at Baylor and Juarene at Crawford High, the Second World War was raging. Adolf Hitler's Germany had invaded Poland the year after Jack graduated high school, and by the following summer, 1940, most of Europe was under Nazi control. Only Britain still held out, despite the constant pounding from the Luftwaffe's bombers. During the summer of 1941, Hitler expanded the war ten-fold with his massive invasion of the Soviet Union.

As bad as things were going in Europe, it was worse in Asia. The Japanese had invaded Manchuria in 1931, gained control of it—calling it Manchukuo—by 1932, and then spent the next decade decimating China. The Japanese Empire aggressively expanded throughout the rest of southeast Asia and the Pacific rim, killing countless thousands of people and taking control of more and more of China, Korea, Vietnam and then eastward across the Pacific and to the west toward Burma and eventually even India. Now in alliance with Germany, the only stop to the Japanese advance was the British, French and Dutch Empires and territories of the United States. Clearly, Japan had their sights set on those lands as well.

All of these events unfolded for the American people in newsreels and

newspapers and Jack and Juarene, like every other American, knew that the United States would not stay out of this war forever. In 1939 Congress passed the Selective Service Act, and Jack dutifully registered for the nation's first peacetime draft. Selective Service was one element of President Franklin Roosevelt's "Preparedness" program; wartime industrial development was another. Factories around the country began a massive buildup of war material, both for sale to the British and Soviets as well as to prepare the U.S. for its own potential entry into the war. Jack decided to take advantage of the newfound prosperity this brought the country. He dropped out of Baylor and took a job as an inspector at an aircraft production plant in California.

From the summer of 1941, the same time Germany invaded the U.S.S.R., until March 1942, Jack worked in San Diego at Consolidated Aircraft Corporation. Interestingly, while there, perhaps because of a problem with payroll or even Social Security, Jack had to get his father to file a birth certificate for him. As was often the case with home births in small rural towns, none had been filed before then and now he needed one. So Mr. Bennett filled out the proper paperwork, got the doctor's signature and in front of a notary got Jack a real birth certificate. The notary who witnessed the signatures back in Crawford was none other than Juarene's dad, Homer Brown.

The Consolidated plant made the big and bulky B24 "Liberator" bomber. While not as elegant or indestructible as the B17 "Flying Fortress," the B24 had remarkable range and bomb carrying capacity and would become a solid workhorse during the war, especially in the extreme distances necessary for bomb and reconnaissance missions in the Pacific. It is unclear if Jack even liked airplanes before taking this job, but it certainly seems to have helped drive him toward a love of aircraft from then on. His job at the factory was to make sure wings and landing gear were properly put together. Back home in Crawford, Juarene was quickly growing up, and they exchanged letters continually as Jack found himself for the first time so far from home. Having been friends throughout childhood, the familiarity and connection they shared as he ventured out into the world was turning their relationship into something more than just friendship. They exchanged photos also, perhaps as a way for Juarene to assure him that she was no longer the little girl down the street.

It was while Jack was in California that Japanese carrier-based aircraft attacked the United States Naval and Army facilities at Pearl Harbor and abruptly ended U.S. isolation. Japanese Admiral Yamamoto purportedly

said that the December 7th attack merely “awakened a sleeping giant,” and it certainly seemed to be the case in that giant’s little town of Crawford, Texas.

December 7 was Juarene’s little brother John’s birthday, and a party had been planned for that afternoon. After church, the Browns were all busily cleaning the house in preparation for John’s friends to come fill the house with the noise of children, when the music on the radio was interrupted by a news report. As Homer, Olivia and the kids listened, they heard about the attack so far away. Mrs. Brown stopped what she was doing and walked over to the nearest shelf in the front room of the house. She quietly and systematically began to pick up every item on each and every shelf and mantel. One by one she turned each object over, looked where it was made, and anything that was labelled “Made in Japan” dropped from her hands onto the hardwood floor. After she had worked her way around the house, there was a little trail of broken pieces of glass, china and metal, which she then dutifully swept up, tossed into the garbage before sitting back down to listen to the radio. That quiet resolve and determination to strike back in any way possible was typical of the American response to Pearl Harbor.

Jack continued to work for Consolidated Aircraft for a few more months before coming back home to Texas. That May he got a job near Crawford, in the town of MacGregor as an electrician. For the next seven months he ran wire, installed switches and sockets and all the jobs that come with building houses. Two months into his job at Bluebonnet Construction Company his number was called and he got his draft notice. In July 1942 he reported to his draft board in Waco. In August he had his induction physical, and after being declared 1-A, in excellent health, he was named an E-1 Reservist with the Air Corps. He then returned to his regular civilian life and job, waiting until Uncle Sam needed him.

Although she was only 16 years old, Juarene was far from being a child during that same summer of 1942. On her own she moved to Waco, got a job and considered herself a “grown up.” Independence and self-reliance qualifies one for that term more than chronological age, and she had certainly proven she was possessed of those qualities. In a picture she sent to Jack, she still looks quite young, but there is a confidence that radiates from her that belies her age.



Juarene in 1942

In October, Jack left his job in MacGregor and getting a job with Layne-Texas Company, Water Developers, moved to Houston. Layne-Texas drilled water wells for the multitude of Army camps that were being built all around as the generally warm year-round weather made Texas ideal for military training in the rapidly expanding armed forces of the United States.

Hoping to get into flight school and fly for the Air Corps once called up to the Army, Jack took civilian flight training, learning to fly in a little 60 horsepower Taylorcraft private airplane. Before he qualified as a pilot, he had racked up an impressive 100 hours flight time. The Army Air Corps called Jack to active duty in March 1943.

In order to increase his chance of acceptance into Army pilot training, he passed another physical, took his hours of civilian flight time, and secured three impressive letters of recommendation. The Postmaster of Crawford, who had "known him all his life," and the Superintendent of the Crawford Independent School District both wrote glowing recommendations. The most impressive, however, was the letter written by the President of Baylor and former Governor of Texas, Pat Neff. Neff was an icon in Texas. Prior to taking the position of President of Baylor, Neff had been a very powerful, very popular governor of Texas and was from a remarkable Texas family. In his letter, Neff wrote, "While here [Baylor] he made a good record, bore a good name . . . a young man of sterling worth and

moral character.” All were excellent reasons to allow him into flight school.

Based on his recommendations and qualifications, the Army accepted Jack into pilot training. What followed was a long series of schools to teach Jack not simply to be able to fly, but to be a combat fighter pilot. Since the beginning of air warfare, fighter pilots have been the elite, with the most dangerous, most sought after and most romanticized jobs in aviation. That March, Jack spent nine weeks in Primary Flight Training at Thunderbird II airfield, Scottsdale, Arizona. That summer he had racked up enough hours to solo in the Stearman, P17 biplane. He sent Juarene a picture of himself, taken right after he touched down, grinning from ear-to-ear with pride standing against the beautiful airplane that was the beginning aircraft of so many of America’s flyers.



Jack right after first solo flight

He flew a multitude of great aircraft in his training, learning to fly several single-engine planes including the Stearman and the other principal training aircraft the AT6, called, appropriately enough for Jack, the “Texan.”

From Arizona, Jack then went to Basic Flight Training for another nine weeks in Chico, California. Following outstanding performance there, he moved to Advanced Flight Training in Santa Rosa, California. It was there that he truly found his element as he began training in the twin-engine P38, the single-engine P39 "Airacobra" and the P63 "Kingcobra." Qualifying in all of them, the Air Corps determined that his primary airplane would be the sleek, fast and powerful P38. The P38, called the "Lightening" was as innovative as it was beautiful. With its distinctive twin booms and twin engines, it was fast, powerful and nearly infinitely maneuverable. Heavily armed, it could out-fly and out-shoot most of what the Germans and Japanese had in the air—and Jack did not yet know which foe he was destined to face.



Pilots loved the P38 and Jack was no exception; seen here at Ie Shima

Jack next transferred into a regular squadron and trained more in the P39, which he did not love quite so much as the P38. It was a bit bulky and slower and not as pretty a plane, but the Army wanted him skilled in more than one aircraft, even if flying the P38 was to be his primary job. In the middle of all the flight training, 2nd Lieutenant Bennett also trained in what the army called Fixed Gunnery. Presumably to make sure pilots could fight their way on the ground as well as in the air, Jack was taught to fire the M1 carbine and the standard U.S pistol, the 1911 Colt .45 ACP. Not surprisingly, as he grew up hunting in central Texas, he qualified

as "Expert" in the tools of the infantryman as well. In May 1944, after months of training, Jack finally went home on leave. For nearly a month, until the first week of June, Jack was back home in Texas to visit with his family and of course, Juarene.

As soon as Jack had gone out to California for flight training, Juarene had moved to San Antonio, Texas, advancing her own pay grade. It seems likely that his letters describing his adventures in moving place to place and learning more and more influenced her desire to see more of the world as well. Living with her older half-sister Jeffie Day and Jeffie's husband George Northen, Juarene got a job at Camp Stanley, an Army base outside of San Antonio, near Camp Bullis, a huge infantry training facility. Again well in advance of her chronological age of 18, Juarene worked as office administrator, responsible for accounting, supply and distribution of the war materiel shipped into and out of Camp Stanley. In her case, this was primarily shotgun shells which machine gunners—especially aviators—used for practice on moving targets. Cheaper than .50 rounds and with a pattern of shot rather than a single bullet, it was a much more efficient way to teach and learn. For the massive war industry of the U.S. it was just one of the countless processes involved; for Juarene it was a lucrative job that taught her a great variety of skills. The Army officers who did her regular performance ratings cited her admirable qualities and exceptional work ethic.

That Spring of 1944, these two skilled and conscientious cogs in America's war machine had a chance to be together again. By most accounts, Jack spent little of his leave with his parents, but a great deal of it with Juarene. They went dancing and dining. They went skating and to the movies and spent every moment they could together. Most of all, they laughed together. Jack's friends always spoke of his wonderful sense of humor, and Juarene would say that after an evening spent with Jack, her sides would hurt from laughing. If they had not realized how much in love they were before this, they most certainly did now.

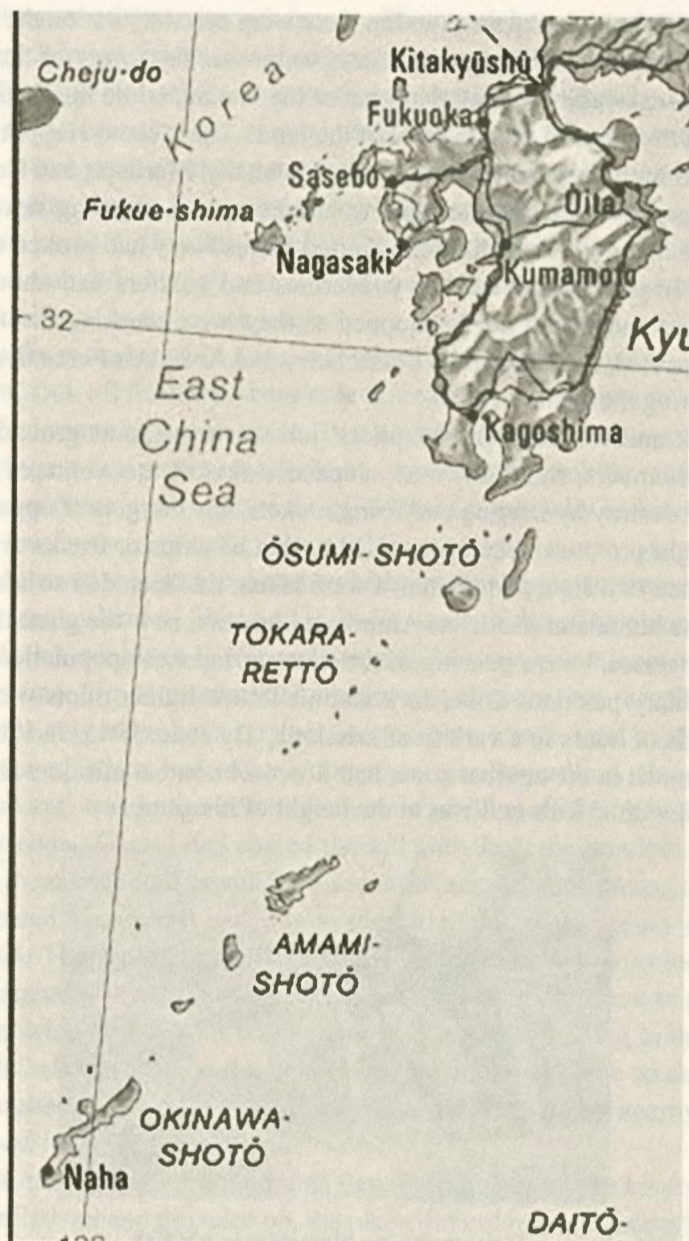
Although they could not have known it was their last time together, they were fully aware of the dangers of the war, especially for a fighter pilot. Like most wartime couples, however, they lived for the "here and now" and not the "what ifs." They must also have believed that the war would not last forever. Shortly before his return to duty, the greatest invasion in history began as the men and machines of the five Allied Nations poured ashore at Normandy, France on June 6, 1944. Clearly, the good guys were turning it around and everyone began to feel that it was only a

matter of time before all the boys came home for good. The popular song *I'll Be Home For Christmas* became their theme. If not the Christmas of 1944, then certainly the one after he would come home and everything would once again be right with the world. Perhaps it was hopeful optimism for the future, or fear of that same future, but they solidified their plans to be together forever when he came back for good. When he had first come home his face was bandaged from the effects of a rough landing, when his head had banged around the cockpit. Perhaps his injuries, though relatively minor, were frightening enough to evoke the promises they made to each other that June, 1944.

When Jack reported for duty on 9 June, he was no longer a student, but a skilled pilot and was made an instructor to train other pilots in the P39. He spent nearly three months in Moses Lake, Wisconsin in this position. In late August he was finally posted to prepare for combat, assigned to the 73rd Fighter Squadron of the 318th Fighter Group, his squadron was formed in California and spent the next months in combat training with the P38. He now had hundreds of hours behind the stick and he and his squadron mates were profoundly qualified to face the enemies of the United States. The 318th Fighter Group was then posted to the Pacific Theatre of Operations (PTO) to take on the Japanese Empire. In September his squadron was ferried with their aircraft to Hawaii and in November to the actual combat zone, operating out of Ie Shima, Ryukyu Islands.



Lower circle Ie Shima



Upper circle, Shimo-Koshiki,

By this point in the war, the Japanese were certainly not on the run, but had been steadily losing ground—and water—as the forces of the United States were steadily forcing them out of the Pacific, while the British were pushing them out of their control of the land. The “Island Hopping” campaign through the Solomons, Gilberts, Marshalls, Marianas and Carolines, as savage and brutal as the fighting had been, was showing results. By the time Jack joined the fight the United States Navy had broken the once mighty Imperial Japanese Navy, Marines and soldiers had shown their toughness and would not be stopped as they were crushing the Japanese on the ground, and the United States Navy and Army Air Force flyers were dominating the sky.

Jack and the other fighter pilots’ job was to support ground troops, protect bombers, shoot down any Japanese aircraft that ventured into the sky and destroy by strafing and firing rockets, any “targets of opportunity” that might present themselves, whether that be ships or trucks or personnel. Once Iwo Jima and Okinawa were taken, this included striking at the Japanese homeland itself. As American bombers, now the giant B29 “Super Fortresses,” were pouring destruction on Japanese population centers and military positions alike, Jack and his fellow fighter pilots were flying hundreds of hours in a variety of missions. By June, 1945, Jack had been nine months in the combat zone, had flown 21 combat missions, had been credited with .5 kills and was at the height of his game.



Jack strapping himself into his P38

On June 19th Jack received word that he had been promoted. He was now 1st Lieutenant Horace D. Bennett and entitled—at long last—to wear the silver bar on his collar instead of the gold. In further recognition of his skills, he had been awarded the Bronze Star, the Flying Cross and upon the

second award of the latter, oak leaves. That week he wrote a letter home to Juarene. Along with the usual endearments and tidbits of allowable news from the front, he noted with some disappointment that they had given him a P47 as his new aircraft. A good solid fighter, the "Thunderbolt" lacked the lines and sleek characteristics of the P38 he was accustomed to flying. Because the plane's body was so thick and graceless, he said he was not going to name it after Juarene . . . she was more like the beautiful P38. Still, he would do his job and could not wait to be back home to her; and that should not be too much longer.

On the morning of 21 June, a group of P47s, including new 1st Lt. Bennett, took off from their base at Ie Shima to fly up to Japan to see if they could find something to shoot at. Two aircraft crashed on take-off. In fact, over the past few weeks, the P47s had been having a wide range of mechanical problems and most of the pilots had occasionally had some sort of power loss in their aircraft. None of the reports give many details about what happened this time, but as they had just cleared the northeastern tip of the Japanese island of Shimo-koshiki-jima one of the other planes—piloted by Jack's wingman Lieutenant Gerald Heagney, went down. Whether from enemy fire or mechanical problems is unclear, but the plane went down. It may have been another inopportune power loss, as those others in the squadron had recently experienced. Regardless, Heagney had splashed and was in the water. Jack and Gerald were flying buddies and good friends. Gerald had shared the kill with Jack the previous January, giving them each half credit for a Japanese aircraft shot down. Heagney had cleared his aircraft and was in the little yellow emergency raft each pilot had. There were a couple of naval vessels nearby and they had picked up the signal of a man down. USS *Burke* moved to the scene to pick him up. Knowing how hard it was to spot one little raft floating in the ocean, Jack circled overhead so the ship could see him and come to the proper place to scoop Gerald up. The other pilots were also flying nearby, and all witnessed what happened next.

Jack made two passes and then flew in low, right above his friend, but as he pulled out and throttled up, the plane did not respond properly. Stalling, or losing lift so close to the water proved catastrophic. His wingtip hit the water, flipping the aircraft nose-in and Jack was gone. It is possible that he was expecting the characteristic response of the more nimble P38 he was more accustomed too, but whatever happened or did not happen in that second killed him. The aircraft slammed into the water, probably killing him on impact or at the very least rendering him unconscious, and

then sank without making much more than a great splash. The ship and other planes picked up Heagney and circled around the spot hoping Jack would clear his airplane and come up to the surface, but he never did. After searching and waiting, the other planes returned to base without him.

As customary in the United States in wartime, soon after the flight returned without him, a telegram was sent to Annie Bennett back in Crawford. The brief message simply said that her son was missing at sea and presumed dead. Within a few weeks, letters confirming his loss from the War Department, Jack's commanding officer and the squadron began to arrive in Crawford. These letters all spoke of the impossible hope of lessening a mother's grief but also of the great loss they were feeling as well. Lt. Bennett was a very popular officer. They noted that at his memorial service, not only did all the other pilots and officers attend, but a great many enlisted men did as well. Considering the often huge gulf between officers and men in the military hierarchy, this alone is great testament to Jack's personality, his humor, kindness and compassion.

Juarene of course, since she was not family, only heard of his loss second hand, but was devastated. Still living in San Antonio, she had left her job at Camp Stanley as war production was winding down, and was working downtown in the Majestic Building with a new friend, Mary Helen Crane. One day while Juarene was at lunch, Mary Helen got mad at their boss and quit, storming off in anger. Mary Helen was not someone to be trifled with. She had only recently returned to civilian life after serving the past years as a WASP. The Women's Air Service Pilots was a group of women trained to fly every aircraft made in the United States for use in the war. The WASPs ferried the aircraft from factories to airbases around the nation and for delivery to combat zones. Mary Helen had flown everything from the AT6 to the B17 and was as "tough-as-nails" and "no-nonsense" as any man pilot, and qualified in more aircraft than most men.

When Mary Helen was infuriated at the boss, she simply told him to "shove it," and walked out. She ran into Juarene about to get onto the same elevator she was stepping off of, told her she had just quit, so Juarene, no longer motivated to do much of anything at the moment, said, "I guess I'll quit too." She went to her desk, got her things and also walked out. The two of them got other work, but decided that maybe the thing to do would be to go back to school. They applied to and were then accepted by Southwest Texas State Teachers College (SWT) in San Marcos, Texas. Juarene, trying to bury her loss, would return to her music and make that her career.

Their first semester, fall term 1945, the two young women were room-

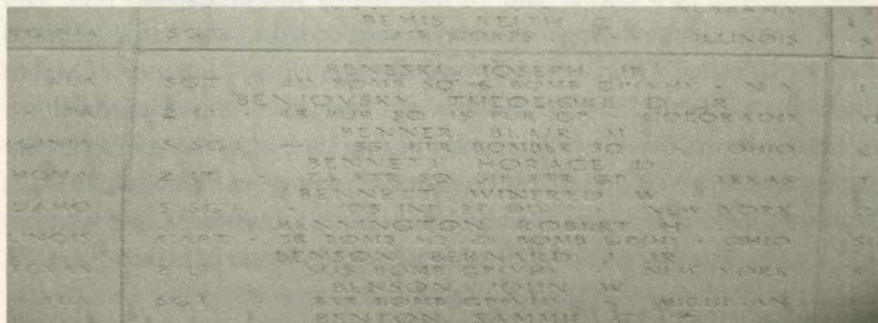
mates in Harris Hall dormitory. That Christmas, Mary Helen's little brother Tilman Robert Thomas, Jr, called "Robert" by his mother's side of the family, came to San Marcos to visit his sister. Robert, or "Bob" as Juarene would take to calling him, was a Marine who had also fought in the Pacific. He was in Marine air wing and had flown hundreds of hours as a bombardier and photographer for VMD 154, the Marine reconnaissance unit stationed at Edson Field, Espiritu Santo, today's Vanuatu.

Bob was funny and charming, and he and Juarene hit it off. He decided to enroll at SWT also, not having any other real plan set out for what to do with his life. He was accepted conditionally because he did not have a high school diploma. Back in 1941, his mother had lied to keep him out of jail after an incident at Brackenridge High School in San Antonio. She told the Marine Corps he was 17—he was only 16—and he became a Marine six months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. He grew up in the Corps and was now responsible and respectful and Juarene liked him. His first semester, her second, they took the same math class, which she helped him pass, they went on a couple of dates and decided to get married that February. The war had caused life to move fast and post-war couples did not wait around for things to happen; they had both seen such sudden death and wanted what they wanted immediately. They had a baby girl, Cheryl, the following October, Juarene dropped out of school and went to work, Bob studied to be a teacher, and the little family was on its way.

Through the next years, two boys were added to the family, Tilman Robert III, called "Tommy" and James Brown, called "Jimmy." Careers came and went, the Thomas family went through all the ebbs and flows of life for World War Two generation raising their baby-boomers, but the family was successful, generally content and prosperous. Throughout it all, however, Juarene carried a sadness just beneath the surface. Her younger son, James, was the one who, for whatever combination of reasons, she felt comfortable talking with, in very small pieces over the years, about Jack. It may have simply been that she needed someone to talk to about him. James, "Jimmy," was consumed, growing up, with an almost obsessive curiosity about family stories and history, and asked way too many questions. Once when he was about ten or eleven, she gave him a silver-plated .50 round, telling him it had been given to her by a pilot friend during the war. He was taken aback that her eyes were filled with tears as she gave it to him. Once when he built a model of a P38, she seemed to know more about that particular airplane that one might expect a mom would know about aircraft, especially since she had adamantly refused to have anything

to do with her husband's private airplanes. Once when watching the Ed Sullivan show, the Supremes were singing their hit, *Someday We'll Be Together*, and Diana Ross said, "This is for the boys over in Vietnam," and Juarene began to cry. One of the things that always confused Jimmy more than anything else was singing Christmas carols. The Thomas' were a musical family, and especially at Christmas all would crowd around the piano while Juarene or Cheryl would play and everyone would sing. Whenever the song choice was *I'll Be Home For Christmas*, Juarene would always get wistful, and if anyone looked at her long enough to notice, there were tears in her eyes.

As he grew up and pieced together the story and then eventually grew up and pursued a career as an historian, he began to ask her more directly and more specifically about Jack. When she was in her 80s, and the world of the internet was available, he found photographs of him posted on Air Corps sites and veterans' organization pages. Looking at the photos James printed out for her, she put her hand on his images from so long ago and began to cry. Each time he and his family went to Hawaii as a regular travel destination—thanks to a very kind mother-in-law—he or they would visit the Punch Bowl, the National Cemetery on Oahu, and visit Jack's name engraved on the Tablets of the Missing, and sign for him in the memorial book.



Jack's name on the Tablets of the Missing, the Punch Bowl

When Juarene died, sixty-five years after Jack did, her son took some of her ashes to the Punch Bowl and scattered them around Jack's place on the Tablets. A little bit of her had always been with Jack, and now a little bit of what was left of her would be where a little bit of him will always be remembered. There is also a memorial with his name and picture in Craw-

ford Cemetery, not too far from Juarene's family's graves. Although he is not there, his name is surrounded by everyone who knew him.

It has now been 70 years since 1st Lt Horace "Jack" Bennett's plane sank into the cold Pacific near Japan. There are thousands and thousands of other sailors, soldiers, airmen and Marines who share the same watery grave, and many thousands of others whose remains are scattered in marked and unmarked graves from Japan to Germany and all points in between because of that horrible war. Some lessons have been learned, many others clearly not, and the memory of the millions of individuals lost are fading into history. What must never be forgotten, even if the specific details are, is that each one of those men and women and the friends and families they left behind were once a complete story unto themselves. Perhaps remembering *that* at least will somehow, in some way keep a little bit of their memory alive.

Juarene Brown Thomas was my mother. It is ironic, perhaps will be seen as odd by many, that I feel such a need to tell Jack's story. The only reason I exist is because he died and Juarene was able to marry Tilman Thomas, my father. Had he survived the war and they married and lived happily ever after, I would not be here to tell any stories about anyone, and so none of my children or their children, would ever be. Still, knowing the enormity of pain his loss gave my mother, the depth of that loss and how it still hurt her a literal lifetime after it happened is worth remembering and describing and honoring. Jack was a fine man in his twenties and would have been, I am sure, a fine man in his fifties or sixties or nineties. As with so many other young men, no one would ever know, as his life ended and he was frozen in time at only 24, and was swallowed up in the march of time as much as he and his aircraft were swallowed up by the sea

¹ Juarene is pronounced "Wareen."

² The Grove is a fascinating place to visit today. The town itself is basically a museum, where visitors can wander around and look at the buildings that once made up the community. Homer Brown's bank is really just a section of the general store, but the safe, counter and transaction window are all still there.

³ The United States Army had had control over aviation since World War I when aviation first began to play a role in warfare. Soon the Army Air Corps began its evolution to Army Air Force until finally, after World War II it was split off from the Army completely to become its own branch of the armed forces as the United States Air Force.

⁴ Both the Stearman and AT6 were standard training aircraft for virtually all pilots in the United States regardless of other aircraft they would ultimately specialize in.

⁵ The Airacobra was a workhorse for the Air Corps but was difficult to fly and had some mechanical and design issues. The Kingcobra was supposed to be an improvement on the P39 but had its own set of problems, and most ended up in the Soviet Air Force, and not used by the United States.

⁶ The Army generally had three levels of qualifying with rifle and pistol, from minimum scoring "Marksman" to "Sharpshooter" and the highest level "Expert."

⁷ There is a very good webpage devoted to the 318th with many excellent photos, including several with Jack <http://www.home.earthlink.net/~atdouble/~318thFighterGroupIndex.html> Ie Shima is a small island off the coast of Okinawa, the largest of the Ryukyus and site of the last great island battle of the war.

⁸ Shooting down an enemy aircraft was considered a 'kill.' If a pilot shared a kill with another pilot, as in Jack's case earlier in the year, they each got half credit for the downed enemy.

⁹ The Bronze Star and Air Medal are both awards for bravery and accomplishment in action. When a serviceman was awarded the same medal twice, in the Army an oak leaf cluster would be added to the ribbon.

¹⁰ He had not named his P38 after her either, despite his comparison. He called it "Gremlin's Paradise."

¹¹ Shimo-koshiki is the southernmost of three islands that make up the Koshikijima Islands off Kyushu, Japan.

¹² Sadly, perhaps even ironically, Heagney was shot down and killed in action later, during the Korean War in 1951.

¹³ While it was obvious to all who were there that he had gone down with his aircraft, it was not until January 1949 that the Army finished all investigation, and through a final board examining the incident, declared beyond all doubt that he in fact was deceased and his remains unrecoverable.

¹⁴ Many years later, when she was well into her 70s, she was still an outstanding pilot, mock- strafing crowds at an airshow and hand 'propping' her brother's airplane. . . and to the author was a fairly frightening driver on city streets.