Tori Tollison - English 102 - Living History Interview

My great grandma, Bettie Lou Teague Shawe, has the most stunning crystal blue eyes that are always outlined with just the right touch of eyeliner and mascara. Her permed gray hair flawlessly pinned into place with a silver hair comb accented with small sapphires, the last anniversary present she received. She takes great pride in how she looks. She always wears that familiar smile that I have grown to love and admire. Bettie has always been a vision of true beauty, inside and out. Bettie was born on October 7th, 1924 in California. She has always enjoyed sports and even played semi-professional volleyball in the 1950’s. Bettie is a retired school teacher and an active volunteer for numerous charities and organizations. In her younger days, she was a volunteer for the Air Force Family Services and Desert Community United Way. That is how they met and lived a life so full of love, beauty and passion.

Bettie describes the first time she saw *him* with a gleam in her eye and a smile on her face. I watched as she closed her eyes, smiled and said, “He appeared in the threshold, just like an angel dressed in blue. His eyes were full of confidence; his smile was nothing but grace. That smile could brighten the darkest room and bring comfort even to the saddest of hearts. . .” I see the passion and faithfulness in her eyes and her love for him beams like the sun glistening off fresh fallen snow. Until that moment, I had never seen what pure love had looked like.

Hamilton Bruce Shawe Jr, or Bruce as he liked to be called, was an Air Force Pilot stationed at George Air Force Base. He is Bettie’s first and only love; he is my great grandfather. He had graduated from Douglas High School in 1941, was appointed to the United State Military Academy (West Point) by the late Senator Pat McCarran in 1943. He graduated with the class of 1946 due to the acceleration of the four year program as a result of WWII. In late 1947, he began his Air Force Pilot career and his first assignment he was sent to serve in occupied Japan. He was one of the first pilots to fly over Korea. They had met while both volunteering for Air Force Family Services.

November 19th, 1948, Bruce and Bettie were married in a small quaint church just off post. Bettie recalls their first house being “. . . musty, dusty and full of flies. It was a rundown little thing of a house. All it really needed was a good scrubbing and a fresh coat of paint!” They spent their first few holidays refurbishing their new home and by the time the renovations were done, she decided that once the school year was over, she wanted to focus on being a military wife and mother. From then on, Bettie had focused much of her time as a military wife organizing programs to help families of lost or fallen soldiers. That program today has been blended into the more popularly known program as the F.R.G. (Family Readiness Group). Their newlywed happiness was short lived because in 1950, Bruce was assigned to deploy to Korea.

In May of 1950, Bruce was sent to Korea as a combat pilot and in June, there was an outbreak of war in Korea. By this time, my great grandpa was now an Air Force Lieutenant. In December, he was flying his 88th combat mission when his plane was shot down in North Korea. Miraculously, he survived the crash but was captured behind enemy lines. December 15th was a tragic, day for my great grandma. She recalls that day saying “As I pulled into the driveway and saw those men standing there, I knew that something wasn’t right. They told me that his plane had crashed but they could not tell me if he was still alive. I just stared at them for a few moments and sat down on the front steps. I did not understand what was going on inside me but I could feel him in my heart… I could feel that he was still alive, I could feel his presence but I knew that chances of him coming home were not in my favor.” Slowly as months passed, she had begun to give up hope, then one chilly early spring morning the mailman came.

A small package wrapped in brown paper with a tiny piece of twine tied around it. She sees a very familiar handwriting, the written words “To My Beautiful Bettie Lou.” My great grandma said “my heart stopped, I could not breathe… I burst into tears wondering who could play such a mean and awful joke. It took me a couple minutes to regain my composure but once I did, I opened the box. Inside of it was a tiny wooden chess piece, hand carved from what looked like a piece off a tree. I knew then and there that one day he would come home to me.” Bettie has tears running down her cheeks as she is telling me this part of the story. I told her that she didn’t have to continue if she did not want to but she thinks it is important that I know how strong and dedicated that my great grandpa was. She continues on “The bottom of the piece said open. I had to get tweezers to get out the small piece of paper from the bottom. I unrolled the very small piece of paper that was wedged inside the chess piece. It was a note, from your grandfather. It said that he was alive and that there were others. The writing was so small that I had to find a magnifying glass to read the rest. He told me that a Korean woman took pity on him in the POW camp and offered to smuggle this letter for him. So she could know he was alive and to not give up hope!” Tears start to run down my face and she tells me not to cry, because I did not even get to hear the best part of his story yet.

More pieces had arrived in the mail off and on over the next few years. Every piece had a note inside. Every piece had names of soldiers who were in the POW camp, names of soldiers who were still alive; names of ones who had passed. Bruce was offering closure and hope to the families of the men back home. Every note had one word printed across the bottom, the word was HOPE. After thirty-three months in the North Korean POW camp, in September 1953, he was released along with several other men across the freedom bridge in Panmunjon. My great grandma told me that after Bruce had passed away, she was contacted by a museum wanting to display some of the chess pieces in honor of his heroic deeds. She could not remember which one, but she sent them her two favorite pieces he had carved. She sent the museum the king and queen pieces along with the tiny scrolls of paper that were still inside.

After my great grandparents were reunited, they focused on their family and their careers. Bruce went on to teach at the Naval War College. After several years he decided that he couldn’t stay away from the Air Force and went back and re-joined the team as an Engineer with Rockwell on the B-1 program and B-2 program. They spent their years teaching and having their kids and establishing their lives. When he retired from the Air Force he was the recipient of the Silver Star and two Distinguished Flying Crosses for his heroic deeds. He was also awarded the Prisoner of War Medal. Bettie said that my great grandpa was not a proud man and he did not boast about his medals, but he did take pride in being able and fortunate enough to tell of the soldiers who did not get to come home. He was proud that even though their bodies could not make it home, their memories did.

On November 19th, 2002, they celebrated their 54th wedding anniversary and Bruce had gone all out for her. My great grandpa had convinced the owner of the country club that they were apart of to allow them to have a private dinner out on the 18th hole of the golf course. He had a violinist serenading their dinner. Dessert came and she recalls being handed a small silver tray with a red velvet box sitting on it. She opened the box to find a silver hair comb encrusted with gorgeous blue sapphires; the same hair comb that she still wears every day to this day. Unknowingly to her, that was the last anniversary that they would ever spend together. That following Christmas, my great grandpa passed away in his sleep at the age of 79.

I know the assignment was to ask a couple of questions about the interviewee’s life, but today, I heard the most wonderfully tragic love story I could have ever imagined. A love so great, that it survived against all odds; a bond that was truly never broken. In all of my 28 years of existence, I had never asked my great grandma how she met my great grandpa; now I am eternally grateful that I have. The love and devotion that they had towards one another is inspiring and hopeful. So now I am going to pass on their story of love in hopes that it will inspire people to have faith, patience and to never lose hope.