

The Telegram

“My last thought was of love for you, Bob”. This was a telegram message sent by Sergeant Robert Trout a medic with the 35th infantry Division just before deploying to England for the invasion of Europe. Bob, although wounded, survived the war and came home. However when he wanted to be assured his parents would get his most important thought, a telegram was what he chose.

During the Second World War there were several main forms of communication. Telephone calls while being the fastest were notoriously unreliable. War needs were always a priority and one could spend hours trying to get a line to come available only to end up empty handed. Mail was reliable but it could take a week or more to get a letter across country and much longer if being sent overseas. The telegram was hands down the most reliable means of conveying important information in a quick and reliable fashion. It was so reliable that it was the governments primary choice in sending notifications to soldiers and families. It was also how many returning GI's let family know they were safe or perhaps on the way home. Telegrams were delivered in envelopes with no return address on the outside. The only way to know what was in it, good or bad, was to open it. This is the story of one man and one telegram.

Francis Peter Green was a typical depression era American kid living in rural Iowa. Immediately after graduation from High School in May of 1938 he enlisted in the navy. After boot camp at Great Lakes and specialty training at Norfolk he was sent to his first duty assignment the U.S.S. Minneapolis a heavy cruiser. Reporting aboard in March 1939 he was able to start his trade as a fireman, working in the ships engine rooms. He was aboard the Minneapolis, which was just south of Pearl Harbor for gunnery practice on the morning of December, 7th 1941. Over the next eleven months the Minneapolis would take part in nine major engagements ranging from Midway to Guadalcanal.

On the night of 29 November, 1942 the ship would take part in the naval battle of Tassafaronga. While initially the battle went well for the Americans, the tide soon turned and the Minneapolis was hit by two Japanese torpedos. With her bow almost severed and severe damage to her engineering spaces the damage control party, including Francis, worked furiously to save their ship. After initially controlling flooding they were able to make their way to Tulagi. Here the ships damaged bow was removed and a temporary structure of palm tree logs and metal was built and installed to allow her to sail to Espiritu Santo, the closest allied port with any sort of real facilities. Here, more repairs were carried out and finally on March, 6th 1943 the ship and crew returned to Pearl Harbor. From Pearl the ship and crew sailed for the west coast, finally completing their harrowing journey at the end of April.

It was while on leave after returning to the states that Francis was able to marry his sweetheart Velma Rodamaker. They were married on July 1, 1943 in Charles City Iowa. After a brief time together he was off to war again, this time on the newly commissioned escort carrier U.S.S. Guadalcanal. His job was still in Damage Control and this time his enemy was the Germans as the Guadalcanal and her destroyer

escorts formed a hunter killer team going after the Third Reichs submarines. After working up and training off the U.S. west coast the Guadalcanal started her mission of hunting German U-boats on January 5, 1944. Just two weeks later the Guadalcanal drew her first blood when her aircraft sank the German U-544. On the 4th of June, 1944 Francis was witness to one of the most daring naval feats of the war, when the U-505 was captured by the Guadalcanal and her escorts. After being damaged and forced to the surface, a group of American sailors boarded the sinking German Submarine and saved her from sinking. She was taken under tow and brought to Bermuda. It would have been a heck of a story to tell Velma, his ship towing a Nazi Submarine, but the event was classified as Top Secret at the time.

During his last months on the Guadalcanal, Francis was commissioned as a warrant officer carpenter. Late in the fall of 1944 Francis was again home for a short while. While home on leave he met his son Richard for the first time. After his leave he had a brief assignment during early 1945 at Corpus Christi NAS in Texas. Following this stint he was assigned to the U.S.S. Curtiss, a seaplane tender. The Curtiss was no stranger to war, having been damaged during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Francis reported aboard April 12, 1945. Shortly thereafter she weighed anchor and headed west, headed for the battle then unfolding off Okinawa.

On May 22, 1945 the Curtiss arrived at Okinawa to serve in the role of flagship for the commander of Air Group One. Okinawa was Francis' first exposure to the Japanese kamikaze suicide attacks. With the war going poorly the Japanese had resorted to sending planes on one way missions to crash into the allied ships. After months of fierce fighting Okinawa was declared secure the morning of June 21, 1945. However this would prove to be a premature decision as later on the 21st a large group of Kamikazes attacked. American fighters guided by radar were scrambled, and immediately began to thin the numbers of approaching Japanese aircraft. As they closed in general quarters was sounded and Francis with his damage control team assembled at their battle station. From here they could hear and feel the ships five inch main gun battery open fire. Then the 40mm Bofors anti aircraft guns began to fire. Finally the smaller 20mm automatic cannons opened up of the enemy as they closed in on their attack. A single Japanese plane chose the Curtiss as its target and despite a wall of lead the kamikaze hit the Curtiss with both itself and the 550lb bomb it was carrying. The plane penetrated three decks and exploded into a ball of flame.

July 5th 1945 was a typical mid summer Thursday in Charles City, Iowa. At the local western Union office the teletype began to chatter. The operator took the small strips, cut them to length and glued them to the blank form. The telegram was then handed off to a delivery driver who headed out to deliver it. It was just a short distance from the office on Blunt street to Velma's home on North Jackson street. We can only imagine what she felt as she was handed the telegram by the driver. Inside she would find the words that for so many would prove earth shattering. "I deeply regret to inform you that your husband Carpenter Francis Peter Green has been Killed in Action in the service of his Country. Sincerest Sympathy is extended to you in your great loss." Velma had been married a few days over two years and was now a war widow, her son would never get to know his father. The telegram continued and asked her to not discuss any information that may provide aid to the enemy.

Thirty-five men died that day aboard the Curtiss, and many others died on the over half dozen ships that were struck during the raid. A memorial service was held for Francis in Charles City, on July 12, 1945. Family and friends gathered to remember a young local boy, turned man, who had known no other adult life than that of a navy man. The war ended 32 days later. After the war Francis's body was returned home and buried in Iowa. In 1947 Velma remarried and had a second son. She passed away in August, 2008 and was followed in death by their son, also a navy man, in 2020.

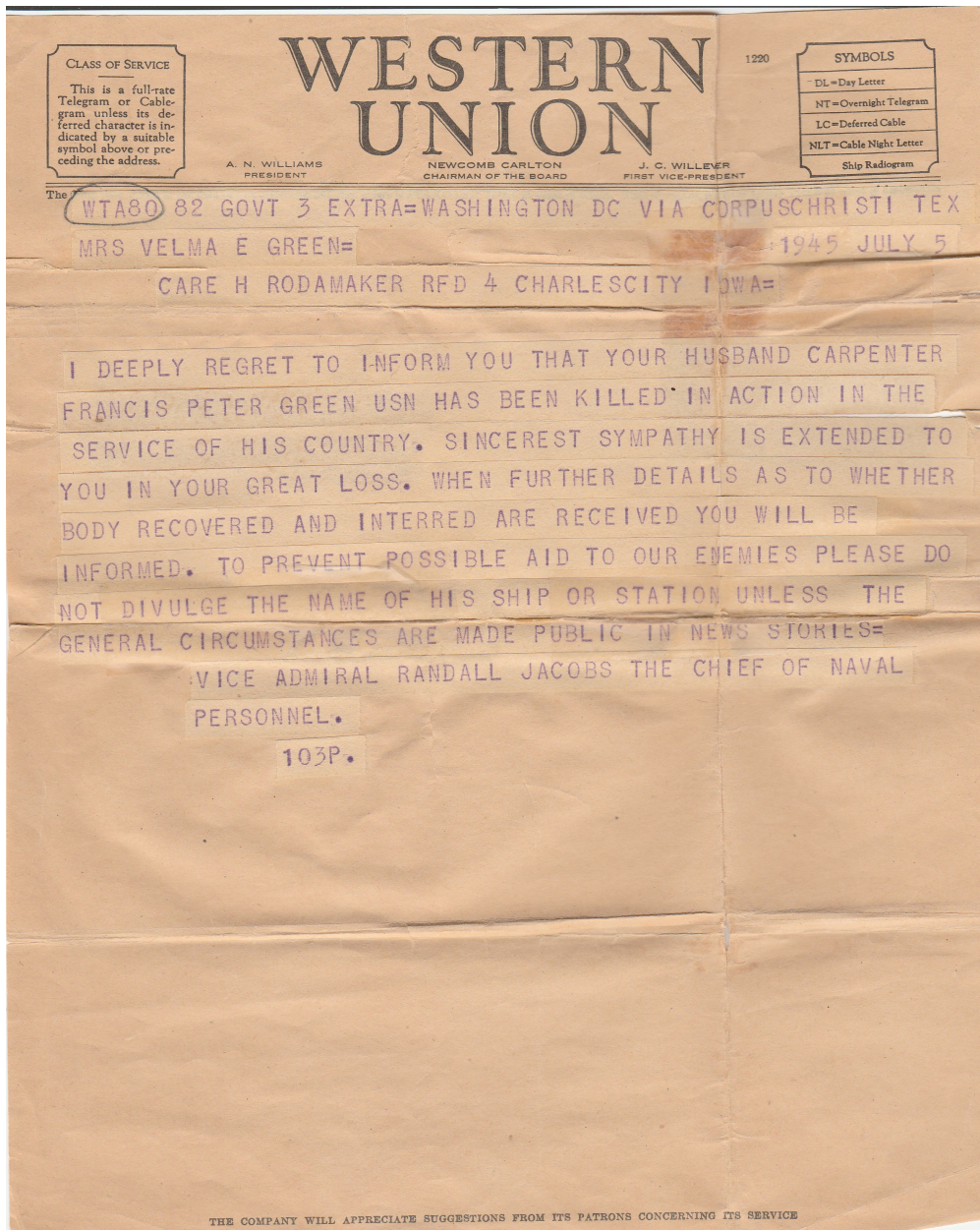
As we honor the fallen this Memorial Day it's important to not only remember the ones who have made the ultimate sacrifice, but their families as well. Regardless of the conflict, parents lose children, children lose parents, and relationships are sometimes forever shattered. This Memorial Day, please remember them all.

Tom Saluzzo

Tom Saluzzo is a military historian based in Kingman, Az. If you like military history stop by Pawn World on Northern Ave and check out some of the historical wall displays.

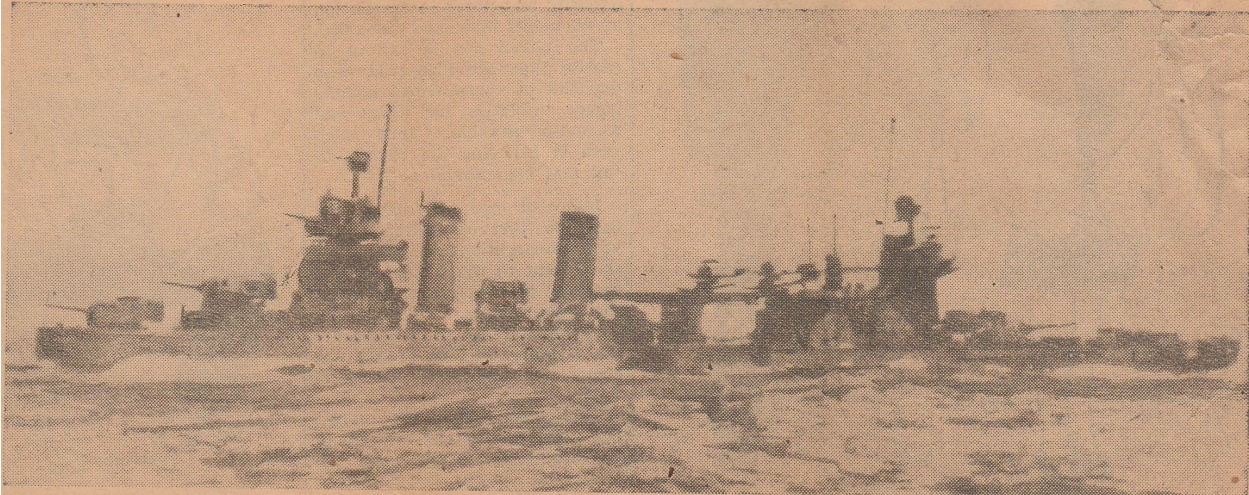


Warrant Carpenter Francis Peter Green.



The telegram. This message was sent over four hundred thousand times during the Second World War. This is the telegram that forever changed Velmas life.

Damaged ♦ NEW BOW BRINGS HER HOME



HEROINE—After 15 months, the Navy revealed the Cruisers Minneapolis and New Orleans were damaged in the battle of Tassafaronga, November 30, 1942, when the Japs were frustrated in an attempt to

reinforce their army on Guadalcanal. The Minneapolis is pictured limping home with a makeshift bow after helping to sink nine Jap ships. She is now back in service.

—Associated Press wirephoto from U. S. NAVY.

A local newspaper clipping showing the repair that Francis and his fellow sailors had made to the U.S.S. Minneapolis.