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1. A Guy Named Bill

May 25th, 1975 brought a beautiful, sunny Sunday morning to my home town of Aurora, Illinois. I was nearing the completion of 7th grade and I enjoyed being able to get to church on my own, occasionally by walking about a mile to Claim Street Baptist Church. On this particular day, I remember going into the church auditorium and finding a seat on the east side of the main floor. Those already present were involved in conversations as the organist played through the prelude. As the volume of the organ music crescendoed into the last powerful chords, people flooded into the church to find their seats. The auditorium had a high A-frame ceiling with arching wooden beams and the music filled the building with the sense that something big was about to happen. The church was filled to a capacity of 400 to 500 people, and the voices of the congregation joined in powerful refrains of familiar hymns. Pastor Adamson eventually came to the pulpit and announced that in observance of Memorial Day, the church wished to remember the fallen and recognize those in attendance who had served our country in the various branches of the service. He asked those who were serving, or had served, to stand when their respective branch was called so they could be recognized.



Private William
Wesley Bennett,
U.S.M.C., 1942
(Cochran-Larson
Family Photo)

He called out “Army!” and quite a few veterans stood up. “Navy!” and about a half dozen stood. “Air Force!” and three or four stood. When he called out, “Marines!” a very loud bellow of “YO!” rang out across the auditorium. Heads turned toward the lone figure of a man who had sprung to his feet. There was a slight burble of laughter that washed across the room, a reflex from the exuberance that this man had just shown for the United States Marine Corps. From my seat, I could clearly see him. He was in his late 50s with graying sideburns, glasses and a strong-looking physique for his age. He had a stern

look on his face as he looked straight ahead. No one else in the room could see what he saw within his gaze. No one else could hear the echo of distant battlefields or smell the stench of war. We were comfortable in our pews and probably concerned about the lunch menu. Although I would not fully understand it for many years to come, I recognized that there was something special about this man. From what I had read about the United States Marines, he fit the picture. The first thing I ever knew about Bill Bennett was that he was without question, a proud Marine. (For “Quick Read” Feature, go directly to Chapter 16.)

2. True Pioneers

Stephen Bennett was born in 1811, in Dutchess County, New York. A rural upbringing during those early years of America allowed very little time for activities that were not directly related to survival or food production. He learned how to grow crops and build buildings. Stephen’s dream was to one day own his own farm, and he grew up hearing the stories of hearty and adventurous pioneers moving westward across Pennsylvania, Ohio and the Indiana Territory. As a young man, Stephen courted the attention of Betsy Knickerbocker, who shared his deep Christian faith and his excitement for venturing out into the frontier. The two were married in 1836 and they carefully made plans to head west to the Illinois Territory which had recently become the 21st state. The Pottawattamie Indians had recently made a deal relinquishing their possession of the wilderness just to the west of Lake Michigan, and explorers had reported some of the most fertile ground known to mankind. This opportunity, although dangerous and uncertain, provided the best chance for the newlyweds to own a sizable homestead on which to raise a family and prosper. Within a few months, Betsy announced that the Bennett family would be expanding, and the couple made the decision to move west before travel would become impossible for Betsy and the baby.

Stephen and Betsy said goodbye to friends and family and set out overland for Buffalo, New York. At Buffalo, they bought passage aboard a Great Lakes steamship and sailed west on Lake Erie for Detroit. Upon arrival at Detroit, they changed ships for the second half of the trip to Chicago. The Bennett’s ship took them north through Lake St. Claire, then onto the St. Claire river which opened up onto Lake Huron. The vastness of the Great Lakes was beyond belief for the pair who had spent their entire lives near the banks of the Hudson River. There was so much territory to be had, and they prayed they would soon own a piece of it. Passing Mackinac Island, Huron gave way to Lake Michigan and soon the western shores of Lake Michigan came into view. The crew pointed out areas of the Wisconsin Territory as the ship headed south, including a small settlement north of Chicago called Kilbourntown, which would one day become Milwaukee.

The arrival at the Port of Chicago was filled with excitement as ships were loading and unloading supplies. There were raw materials moving back to the East Coast for sale and farming supplies moving out into the frontier. The population of Chicago was about 8,000, with 400 being Pottawattamie working

with traders, suppliers and shippers. New construction was visible in every direction and the now empty Fort Dearborn told the story of wars fought here just a few short years before. The Bennetts bought a wagon and a pair of oxen to carry their belongings and new supplies in search of their future. Stephen gathered all the information he could regarding the immediate opportunities and heard about a man named George Ela who was settling an area just a few days travel to the northwest. A new publication by S. Augustus Mitchell entitled *Illinois in 1837* provided ample information about every type of challenge the pair might encounter in the new territory. Within a few short days, Stephen and Betsy headed north away from Chicago to find George Ela.

The Bennetts located George Ela twelve miles west of the western shore of Lake Michigan, just east of modern day Lake Zurich, Illinois. The word that had been brought back to New York did not exaggerate the beauty and fertility of the land. A homestead of 160 acres was claimed and a house was built. Frances "Betsy" Bennett was born on October 20th, 1837. The family prospered, and by 1850, the Bennett family boasted seven children: Frances, Louisa, Samuel, Sylvia, George, Robert and baby Owen. On April 2nd, 1850, Ela Township had the first official meeting at the new town hall and Stephen Bennett was elected the first Township Supervisor. Stephen and Betsy had built a beautiful farm, owned a General Store and had become prominent citizens of Ela Township. On October 17th, 1853, their youngest son, Owen, died tragically at the age of four. The entire community was devastated by little Owen's death as they gathered to bury him at the new Diamond Lake Cemetery. Not long after Owen's death, Stephen and Betsy decided to sell their land and move the family farther west. The Bennetts loaded everything they owned into two wagons and left Ela Township. This time they set their sights on Osage, Iowa, and the current frontier.

As Stephen was leading his family very near to their destination in Iowa, he died suddenly. Betsy and the children buried Stephen very near what is now Floyd, Iowa. Stephen Bennett was 42. The area was unsettled and still considered dangerous. Many settlers were warned that this area of Iowa remained dangerous due to Indian raiding parties and wilderness conditions. Betsy believed the Lord would take care of her and her family and she wanted to honor Stephen's desire to move the family to this area. After burying Stephen, Betsy loaded the children, took the reins of the ox team and moved ahead. William Howard was the first settler in this area and he marveled at the sight of this small woman with six children in tow driving the huge covered wagon into the Floyd County area. William and his brother Sanders, held land rights to a vast area of prairie and Betsy looked it over with her children. Within hours, she came to a stretch of prairie that she recognized as a terrific spot for a farm. Betsy dug into the soil and recognized a similar texture of fertile soil to that which she and Stephen had found in Illinois. She told the children that this was their new home, and then she led them in prayer as they asked for God's blessing upon this new place. She arranged to purchase 216 acres from the Howard Brothers. Betsy and her oldest children picked out a prime location for a cabin, barn and shed. Betsy and 18-year-old Frances, 16-year-old Louisa, 15-year-old Samuel, 13-year-old Sylvia, 11-year-old George,

and nine-year-old Robert, worked tirelessly to build their new homestead. The Howard, Bennett, Neville, Newton, Walling, Harris, Schermerhorn, and Wright families all worked together to build up their homes and farms, and the closely-knit community of Howardville, Iowa, was established. It would be a long hard road for the Bennett family, but they would stick together and take care of each other.

Betsy became known in their part of Iowa as “Mother Bennett” and she earned a reputation for being a tireless follower of Christ. She read the family Bible and taught her children the teachings of Jesus. She lived out her faith in plain view for all to see on a daily basis. She not only took care of her own family, but she also tended to the sick in the area, including many who were dying. She fed the hungry and aided the frontier pastors as they arrived in the area. The Bennetts and the other families were friendly to the Sioux Indians that migrated annually through their homesteads on the way to and from the Mississippi River. The families traded with these Indians and even built shelters that the Sioux could use as they passed through. At times of Indian attacks on the frontier to the west, settlers would flee their homes and many found refuge with the Howardville families. Betsy was instrumental in organizing and building the first United Wesleyan Methodist Church in this region of Iowa, the Howardville Methodist Church.

George Bennett served with the 6th Iowa Cavalry from 1862 to 1865, fighting in the Sioux War in the Dakotas. Betsy organized the Howardville women to hand sew a large American flag in 1864, along with church banners that became part of the area’s historic treasures.

3. A Change of Direction

Betsy’s youngest son Robert eventually built a store in Osage, Iowa and Samuel took over the farm as she moved to town with Robert. Robert married Margaret Neville in 1872 and their first son, Charles, was born in 1875. Their first daughter, Missy, was born two years later. On October 16th, 1879, Robert and Margaret’s second son, Stephen Robert Bennett, was born into their house on Pleasant Street. Two years later, Maggie was born. The family grew as Grandmother Betsy watched the frontier fade away into civilization.

Robert and Margaret Bennett made a very difficult decision to sell the family store and relocate in 1891. Betsy decided that she wanted to stay in Iowa and moved in with her daughter Louisa and eventually went back to the farm to live with Samuel and his wife Sarah. Robert and Margaret were attracted to the growing city of Aurora, located in Northern Illinois along the Fox River. Aurora had been one of the first cities in America to use electric streetlights, warranting the nickname, “The City of Lights,” and it had one of the best public education programs in the state. The city of nearly 20,000 had a bustling downtown district that was split right down the middle by the river. The city’s east and west sides were expanding across flat plains that were perfect for developing residential neighborhoods. The elevation dropped down into the river valley by 60 feet, creating clear views of the downtown area from the streets above. In the heart of the downtown area, the river forked around Stolp Island, which was the centerpiece of the city. The main east and west

streets dropped down the hill to the river, across two bridges, over the island, and then back up the hill to the neighborhood on the other side of the city. Across the river, and up into the neighborhood of the east side, Robert and his family found a new church family at First Methodist Church.

The Bennetts bought the house at 185 Spruce Street, on Aurora's near west side, and Stephen Robert Bennett enrolled into the West Aurora schools. On March 18th, 1892 Margaret gave birth to George Oswald Bennett and their family was complete. Steve adapted quickly to the new city life, so very different than what he was used to back on the prairie at Osage. Steve grew into an impressive young man of 5' 10," with a lean frame, black hair and steel gray eyes. Aurora had everything a young man could want in a city and the most important was opportunity. Steve was drawn to another new aspect of city life, that being stylish men's wear. The clothing stores in Aurora featured the latest fashions that one would expect to find in Chicago or New York. Steve was fascinated by the immaculate tailors that could measure a man in a few minutes and produce a custom-made suit in a matter of hours.



Betsy Knickerbocker-Bennett, 1870
(Osage County, Iowa,
Historical Society)

After graduating from West Aurora High School in June of 1898, Steve set about the task of building a career in the men's clothing industry. He was hired by Fernberg's Clothing Company as a clerk and went to work full time right in the heart of the city's business district at 8-10 S. Broadway. His years of hard work in the family store had taught him a work ethic that was easily spotted by Mr. Fernberg as Steve was given increasing responsibilities. His favorite part of the business became tailoring itself and he applied himself towards learning every detail of the craft. Steve used some of his first paychecks to buy himself a "proper suit." Looking good in public was now a must as his appearance was one of the best forms of advertisement. His 5' 10" frame in a

tailored suit with shined shoes and straw hat would become a daily sight in downtown Aurora for many years to come.

A telegram arrived at the Bennett home in Aurora on October 15th, 1902, informing the family that Grandmother Betsy had passed away in Floyd, Iowa. She was a true pioneer woman who lived to be 90 years old.

4. A New Bennett Family

In 1903, Steve began the courtship of Miss Jessie Jean Pfrangle, a 1901 graduate of East Aurora High School. Jessie was now an elementary school teacher at the east side's D. W. Young School on the corner of Fifth Street and Center Avenue. Steve had known Jessie for many years through church activities and was impressed by her sense of direction and kind personality. Jessie was the grand-daughter of German immigrants and she lived with her parents, William and Sarah, on Aurora's near east side at 279 S. LaSalle Street. William was a postal clerk at the sizable Aurora post office and Sarah maintained an immaculate home. Steve went to call on Jessie at the Pfrangle home and the two began to get to know each other beyond their previous casual conversations. Jessie expressed a closeness to the Lord that was at the very core of all she aspired to in life. Prayer, for Jessie, was a part of her everyday life, not just something she saved for Sundays. She brought decisions and plans to the Lord in prayer and believed that He answered prayer and guided lives according to His will. She was the most loving person that Steve had ever met and this spilled over into her work as a teacher as well. Jessie loved her students at Young Elementary and they loved her back. Perhaps Jessie reminded Steve a little of his Grandmother Betsy. Steve took it all in and came to believe that Jessie had the ingredients to be a very, very good mother one day.

The city offered an almost unlimited opportunity for activities for Steve and Jessie during their courtship, with church, social and family gatherings. The two fell in love and Steve proposed marriage. They were married at the Fourth Street Methodist Church on August 30th, 1905 and a new Bennett family was formed. They rented a spacious two-story home at 228 Avon Street on Aurora's east side, close enough to D. W. Young School for Jessie to walk to work. Steve was already in the habit of catching the electric trolley for his ride downtown to Fernberg's. The new couple had their work cut out for them with the Bennett and Pfrangle families to interact with, and each family was excited about their new addition. When Christmas time arrived, Jessie shared the wonderful news that another Bennett would soon be living in Aurora, as she was expecting their first child. Jessie taught the remainder of the school year of 1906, but when she closed up her classroom in June, that would be her last day as a school teacher. Stephen Robert Bennett, Jr. was born on August 16th, 1906 at Aurora's City Hospital on the east side. Steve and Jessie decided to call the new arrival "Bobby" to avoid any confusion with Steve. The families were so excited about the new baby, and Grandpa Robert Bennett was honored by the name choice. Knowing that he and his father Stephen's name would live on into the future meant a lot to Robert. The honor proved a timely choice as Robert passed away nine months later on June 4th, 1907.



Jessie Jean Phrangle-Bennett on her Wedding Day, August 30th, 1905.
(Bennett Family Photo)

With Jessie staying home to care for Bobby, the Bennetts decided to rent out the extra two bedrooms to occasional boarders. As kindergarten was approaching for little Bobby, Jessie, again, had happy news for Steve and the family as they were expecting their second baby. Albert Eugene Bennett was born on January 11th, 1912 and there would be no more room for boarders at the Bennett house. Steve worked long hours at Fernberg's and he had been promoted to management, so his income had been able to increase along with their bills. Jean Phrangle Bennett was born on February 11th, 1914 and Steve and Jessie began to look for a bigger house. They found a large two-story, four bedroom house for rent nearby at 430 Maple Avenue, and the Bennetts moved from Avon Street, right up Fourth Street about seven blocks to the new neighborhood. Jessie was thrilled with the bigger house and the fact that they would only be a short walk from church. Marian Virginia Bennett was born on January 2nd, 1917. Three-year-old Jean was over the moon with excitement upon the arrival of her little sister. Al had already proven to be a very dependable young lad at the age of four, and ten-year-old Bob was busy getting used to the new neighborhood. The new house on Maple Avenue brought new friends to the children and a better area for playing. Bob and Al changed elementary schools as they started at the Marion Avenue School just a few blocks away. Another huge change in the Bennett's lives arrived when Steve bought a used Ford Model T and Jessie and he learned to drive it.

Steve and Jessie's lives were extremely busy with the children and all that went along with having a large family. Besides the children and housework, Jessie was active with the Parent-Teacher Association as she had experience on both sides of the equation. She was also very active with the Sunday school organization at Fourth Street Methodist Church. In spite of the busy schedule that came with motherhood, Jessie continued to find time for prayer and de-

votional reading of her Bible on a daily basis. She prayed for each one of the Bennett children and her husband daily. She wanted her children to come to know and love God more than anything else.



A very well-dressed
Stephen Robert
Bennett, circa 1910.

Over the following months, the United States would learn that Germany had been trying to convince Mexico to attack the U.S. on Germany's behalf. On April 2nd, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany and on June 5th, the military draft was begun. By the middle of August, 1918, Jessie told Steve that there would soon be a boy's bedroom, a girl's bedroom and a nursery at the Bennett home as the doctor had confirmed that child number five was on the way. Steve's age bracket was called to register for the draft and he went and filled out his card as was his duty as an American. No one knew how long this war would last or if family men like Steve would actually be called to serve. For Jessie, the thought of having a loved one in harm's way would be more than she could bear, but on November 11th, 1918, Germany surrendered, ending the "War to End All Wars."

5. Arrival

A lot of people say that they "wouldn't want to bring a child into a world like this." The truth is, there has never been a time in recorded history when it seemed like a good time to bring a child into the world. The world seems to find a way to provide all kinds of evil and danger, so someone has to watch out for the vulnerable. The year 1919 had more than its share of turmoil, both in the U.S. and around the world. Americans were trying to put the war in Europe behind them while race tensions came to a boiling

point. Communism was raising its ugly head all around the world, and anarchists were bombing innocent Americans. In the middle of all of this, life with the Bennetts kept moving forward. Mr. Fernberg had promoted Steve to Vice President of the company, which meant he could fairly well run the business by himself, if necessary.

Jessie's friends were especially excited about this new baby as there had been other new arrivals in the neighborhood. Two friends from church had new babies that had actually been born on the same day last June 18th. Gertie Meyers had little Rodney and Florence Morey had Jack. John and Gertie Myers lived directly across the street from the Bennett's, so Jessie saw her and the baby often when the weather was nice. It had been mentioned, more than once, how nice it would be if the next Bennett baby just happened to be a boy so that Rodney would have a playmate. Wilbur and Florence Morey lived just a few blocks away on Jackson Street. Jessie's next-door neighbor, Margaret Keck, was a high spirited Scottish gal that had no children of her own, so she paid great attention to Jean and little Marian and could lend a hand if Jessie needed one. The Bennett children were a great help to their mother and they looked forward to the baby's arrival.



Jessie Bennett and Billy during the spring of 1920.
(Bennett Family Photo)

Another friend of Jessie's from church, Maude Troll, lived a half block west on the corner of Fourth Street and Maple Avenue. Maude had been born into the Riley family in Aurora in 1877 and had married Ernest Troll, an immigrant from Germany. Their son Robert was about the same age as Bob Bennett and the two were buddies. Two months after Jessie had told Maude about the new baby on the way, Maude had walked down for a morning visit after the kids

were off to school. The great news was that Maude was pregnant and her due date would be sometime in June. Another nice thing about the neighborhood was that the hospital was only a few blocks away, close enough to walk if one went into labor.

As March gives way to April, the new life of spring is an exciting time for Midwesterners who have just been through a tough winter. Looking forward to having the baby made the spring all the more welcome. With Easter Sunday just a few weeks away, Jessie was planning out what needed to be done for Sunday school and what she and the girls would wear for Easter. When it came to the boy's suits, she had to consult Steve, of course. Perhaps the baby would wait until after Easter when all these decisions had been taken care of and Jessie's schedule had been cleared. On Monday, April 14th, 1919, Jessie Bennett gave birth to William Wesley Bennett and the word traveled quickly through the city. Jessie held this baby in her arms and thanked the Lord for His blessing. Flowers were delivered from friends and family and Steve was congratulated at Fernberg's. The Bennetts had quite a family.



The Bennett home at 430 Maple Avenue, where they lived in 1919 when Baby William was born. (Bennett Family Photo)

6. The Early Years

Siblings Bob, Al, Jean and Marian welcomed baby Billy into the family routine and the neighborhood was excited with the news of the latest Bennett arrival. Jean was old enough to be a real help to Jessie, and Marian couldn't wait until Billy was old enough to play. Jessie and Steve tried to make sure that the other Bennett children didn't feel overlooked as Billy required most of the attention for a while. Bob and Al knew the ropes by now. Of course, Gertie Myers was elated about Billy's arrival, and within a few months Wilbur and Florence Morey moved into the house right next door to the Myers.

On June 11th, Maude Troll went into labor. Ernest called Jessie that evening to tell her that the Troll's had a new baby boy named George. The Maple Avenue neighborhood was going to be a busy place for Jack, Rodney, Billy and now George. These four boys were together playing on the floor long before any of them could walk. Jessie enjoyed having the ladies over for tea and coffee during the day, and she was often over at the other's homes with Billy and Marian during the school days. Getting together over tea and baked goods became a standard way to break

cise grounds and the sergeant told them that there would be religious services available. He told all of the Catholics to step forward, turn right, and march off to mass. All the others should face left and march off to the Protestant services. Any recruit that did not select a service to attend could spend the morning cleaning the latrines. After church, each recruit was allowed to send one post card home and Bill wrote his to Jessie with a brief description of camp life and his new haircut. 96 hours ago, he was Bill Bennett from Aurora, Illinois. Now he was Private Bennett, 352573, Training Platoon 55, Marine Recruit Depot, San Diego, CA. Bill was a Marine; one of many.

29. Semper Fidelis

Platoon 55 moved 14 miles north to Camp San Luis Obispo (SLO) and the sergeants wanted everything done to perfection. The camp was an Army camp that the Marines were borrowing and the sergeants did not want any reason for the Army to disrespect the Corps. In fact, the sergeants wanted the Marines to be so impressive that the Army soldiers would wish that they had joined the Corps. The new quarters consisted of three-man tents with rough wooden floors. Bill managed to bunk up with Bob Weir again, but Al Swanson was assigned to another tent. A cowboy from Wyoming named Al Schlager was assigned the other cot and Bill started to learn a lot about life in the west. Al Schlager said that just about everybody in Wyoming is a cowboy. The daily schedule was set up with a 0430 wake up, then dress for breakfast and organize the tent; in line for breakfast by 0500. After breakfast, 15 minutes to shave, then scrub the tent floor with a bucket and a scrub brush, leaving it perfect or you will scrub it again. Next came the morning exercises and three hours of marching drills before dinner (lunch) at noon. After noon there would be one hour for hand-washing clothes for the next day and then marches and runs of increasing mileage. Supper would be at 1700, followed by three hours of study, rifle cleaning and reassembly. At 2100 there were 30 minutes for showering and getting ready for bed, followed by 30 minutes to write letters or postcards. Lights were turned off at precisely 2200. Sleep became a commodity of survival with only six and a half hours available each night. Anyone goofing off or making noise after 2200 would not be tolerated by the recruits or the sergeants, who liked their sleep as well.

There was absolutely no talk of war or the Japanese enemy during this time. The focus was almost entirely on Marine Corps discipline, protocol and procedure. Unlike the other platoons, 55 was led by a corporal. He was tough and stern, but he needed to make Marines out of this cornucopia of civilians. Not long after arrival at SLO, the corporal had gotten close to Bill's face while yelling criticism of his marching ability and Bill thought that he could smell alcohol on the corporal's breath. Probably just something left over from last night, but more than likely forbidden for recruit or officer.

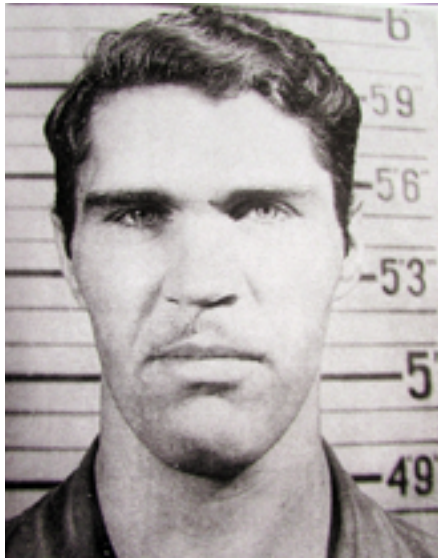
At long last, Bill was able to get some real letters going home. Bill wrote a post card to little Bobby and told him that he was lucky he was still so young, as he would miss the war. He also asked Bobby to eat some extra candy for his Uncle Bill as the recruits could not have any for 30 days. He also asked

Bobby to give Grandma Jessie an extra kiss goodnight for Uncle Bill while he was away. He wrote to Jessie and filled her in on the daily schedule and told her that Al was right about Bill being nuts to join the Marines. He also told Al to tell the guys in Aurora not to join the Marines because it was hell. After 10 or 12 days, letters from home began to arrive. Little Bobby was sick with the flu, but all else was going well. Al had driven out to Sandwich to bring Helen over for supper a couple of times already. Bill wrote back to Jessie to tell her that he wanted Bobby to have his Lionel train set and that he hoped he was feeling better. He had not heard from Al yet and he wanted Jessie to tell him to get with it. Although the recruits could not have any candy during basic training, they could have cookies from home. Bill loved cookies and he made it abundantly clear that he could use some in San Diego, right away.

The following Monday morning, it was time for U.S.M.C. inoculations, which was a nice way to say that they were about to receive five or six shots at the same time. The shirtless Marines were herded through the medical building with doctors on the left and the right, with several assistants standing behind them readying syringes as fast as they could. The doctors jabbed the needles into the recruit's arms faster than anyone imagined possible. After the second shot, Bill lost count, but there were at least four, maybe six injections. There were a lot of unhappy campers at this point. Over the next few days there were a number of recruits in sick bay for a variety of reasons. On the second day after the injections, Bill felt as though he were coming down with something and a trip to sick bay showed that he had a fever of 101. Possibly a reaction to one of the inoculations, but Bill would be spending the night in the infirmary. Once back to the barracks, the drills, physical training and studies continued. Recruits were taught how to salute, who to salute and when to salute. In a nutshell, anyone that wasn't a private needed a salute and "Sir" when being addressed. The proper salute was a 45-degree slant with the index finger contacting the forehead halfway to the eye. A Marine's head should be covered unless told by an officer to remove the cover.

The pistol range was 3.5 miles from SLO and Platoon 55 would walk over with their Springfield M1903s on their shoulder. At the range, the 1903s were racked and each recruit issued a 1911 .45 caliber pistol. The range instructors and the platoon corporal went over safety issues and procedures and the general operation of the .45. Next, there was a demonstration of the various shooting positions from which they would eventually have to qualify with the 1911. The basic standing position would have the Marine's shoulders pointing a line to the target while firing the 1911 with the right hand. The left hand would be placed on the left hip to stabilize the shoulders. Bill loaded three .45 rounds into the magazine and held it in his left hand. When his group stepped to the firing line, they were ordered to unholster the weapon while keeping the muzzle down range toward the target. Anyone seen pointing a muzzle in the direction of another Marine would be removed from the range for punishment, whether it was intentional or inadvertent. The order came to load the weapon and Bill jammed the magazine into the pistol grip and it clicked into position. In order to "charge" the weapon, the left hand gripped the slide and pulled it abruptly backwards and let it snap forward. "READY!" Bill held the

.45 toward the target. "Aim!" he lined the front sight into the gap on the rear sight. "Fire!" he pulled the trigger and the .45 jolted in his hand. He pulled the trigger again and again and the slide stayed open after the third shot, showing that the .45 was empty. The target showed that Bill needed work. Firing the .45 accurately was harder than it looked.



Pvt. William W.
Bennett
(U.S.M.C. Photo)

On the way back from the range, Platoon 55 ran the 3.5 miles with the M1903 rifles in their hands. All of the running a person could do would not prepare them for running with an 8.5 pound rifle at the ready. The "boondockers" were not too bad for running. Bill had worn several pairs of football cleats that were worse over the years. The M1 helmet was a bit heavy but fit well. It consisted of a fiber liner that fit inside the steel pot and a strap that buckled under the chin. Bill set up the helmet strap like he had his football helmet and wore the strap over his chin, just below his lower lip. Bill found that this kept the M1 helmet from tipping forward under normal use. If he suddenly needed to run or secure the helmet, he just pushed the strap under his chin and he was good to go. The liner was a web construction that supported a leather head band that mixed with sweat and gave off the familiar smell of the old football helmets. The weight was a bit hard on the neck at first, but Bill was soon comfortable with his ever-present companion. He had no idea at the time, but his helmet would be a very useful tool for a variety of reasons, including bathing, cooking, bailing, a rain awning and the only privacy that he would have at times. The pack and belt were similar to football pads and getting them adjusted was the key. Carrying the rifle was unlike anything Bill had done previously. Holding the rifle while running began blisters in the grips of his hands. It would be a process of toughening up. The range experiences began to break up the endless drills and marches and the recruits started to get a sense that their job would be at least, in part, to shoot at things. The next trip to the range resulted in the issuance of bolt action, .22 caliber rifles. Bill was shown four positions for the

rifle: standing, prone, sitting and kneeling. Standing would be the most difficult, prone the easiest. The rifle was comfortable to Bill and he was on target from the start. Bill told Bob and Al, in the tent, about Helen's championship rifle team from Ripon College and they asked Bill if she had taught him anything about shooting; unfortunately not, as no one had foreseen the need. A week of working with the .22 rifles would be preparation for the Marines finally getting to load and fire the Springfield M1903 rifles that they had been carrying around for weeks. About this time, the platoon was assigned a new sergeant as the corporal had been found drunk the previous night and had been relieved of duty. The sergeant told the platoon what had happened, as it was a strong lesson about U.S.M.C. discipline and the seriousness of breaking the rules. Sergeant Frank Drasil took over the platoon and turned out to be a fine leader who was well respected.

The .30 caliber rifle range was about three miles farther away than the pistol range and there was a train that would carry them back and forth. This train ride afforded the recruits a bit more time for letter writing. The Springfield M1903 .30-06 rifle is a five shot, bolt action, high power rifle, capable of hitting a target up to 1,000 yards away. Bill had carried this rifle for almost a month, studied and cleaned it every day. Now it was time to fire it. When the first recruits went to the firing line, the rest were a bit in awe of the dirt flying up behind the targets and cannon-like sound of the .30-06. Bill's group was called to the line. Five .30-06 rounds were loaded into a steel "stripper clip" and these clips would be carried in the pockets of the ammunition belt. With the rifle bolt pulled back as far as it would go, the five-round clip was pushed down into the receiver. Bill then had to force the rounds down into the magazine with his thumb and remove the steel clip. The bolt was then shoved forward placing the top .30-06 round into the chamber. The first target was at 100 yards and the sergeant stood to the side of Bill with binoculars. When told to fire, Bill shouldered his rifle, brought the front sight into the center of the hole in the rear site, flipped the safety to "fire," slowly exhaled and pulled the trigger. The recoil of the M1903 surprised Bill as it felt as though he had fired a dozen .22s at the same time. The first shot was a little low to the right, but it was on the paper. Bill worked the bolt and the spent casing flung backwards and he brought the next round into the chamber. He sighted the rifle and fired off another round, then another, then another. The fourth shot trimmed the black edge of the bull's eye and the sergeant was pleased with what he saw.

As the M1903 rifle training progressed, a new and sobering subject was introduced to the recruits; the use of the bayonet. Bill was issued an M1905 bayonet with a 17" blade and scabbard. He was taught to carry the bayonet in his pack on the left side with the handle pointing to the sky. The sergeant showed them how the bayonet could be grasped and drawn by reaching back over the left shoulder and then snapped into position on the muzzle of the rifle. Drawing the bayonet and "fixing" it onto the rifle barrel was repeated until the recruits thought that they might lose their sanity. The next step in this training was a demonstration by the drill sergeants showing the proper way to "thrust and parry" the rifle and bayonet as though using a spear. The rifle butt could be alternated as a bludgeon, as could the bolt side of the rifle be thrust into the

enemy's face. A dummy was set up and the recruits were taught to select the center of the ribcage to locate the heart, the neck or even the mouth, if possible. This drill brought Bill to a reality that he had not considered before: the face-to-face stabbing of another human being. The platoon was shown that once the bayonet had been plunged into the enemy, it needed to be rotated and twisted to inflict more damage and to loosen it for removal. It was best to have a round in the chamber during battle that could be fired if the bayonet would not come out of the body. Bill took his turn with the dummy and received encouraging remarks from his sergeant. His size, strength and agility allowed him to make some decisive jabs into the sponge stuffed enemy. The sobering part of this training was that each recruit came to the point of realization that there were Japanese soldiers somewhere over the Pacific that were practicing to plunge and twist a bayonet into their hearts too.

The Company was led to an obstacle course that was 100-yards long and had multiple lanes with what appeared to be crudely formed "scarecrows" placed at regular intervals. This course would give the recruits the chance to develop bayonet skills while running full speed, jumping over ditches and facing two and three enemies at the same time. The sergeants demonstrated the course and had several recruits run the course to be criticized, and then lined up the Company for a full speed run through. The recruits were taught to scream like crazy men as they ran through the course, as this was thought to intimidate the enemy. The first group of eight recruits tore out from the line at the chirp of the whistle and this reminded Bill of the sprints from football practice back at East High. At the next chirp of the whistle, Bill sprinted full-speed toward the awaiting scarecrow and plunged the bayonet into its midsection, twisted the blade to the left and pulled it free. He moved on, jumping a pit filled with brown water and jabbed two more mannequins with slanted eyes drawn on with a grease pencil. As Bill's heart rate soared, he was aware of the loss of some dexterity, as it was more difficult to land the bayonet where he was aiming. He completely missed one lunge and the sergeant screamed that Bill would be "a dead Marine" if that happened in real combat. As Platoon 55 chattered about their training in the showers and in the chow lines, no one seemed to be too anxious to use their bayonets in battle; it seemed that using the rifle from a distance would be much preferred.

As Bill regularly sent letters home, many letters began to arrive at the camp. He received letters from his parents, Al and Marian and even Marian's boyfriend, Perry McIntosh. He received cards from Bobby, Helen, Bob Nix and Bob Stoner in the Navy, and Grandma Pfrangle let him know that she would be expecting a visit in L.A. as soon as they would let him out of camp. His sister Jean sent him a tin of her unbeatable chocolate chip cookies that she baked at the farm and his tent mates shared the joy. One of Bill's friends from Fourth Street Methodist, Fran McElroy, sent a letter asking Bill to visit her brother in Los Angeles if he could find the time. She had told her brother all about Bill and she said that they would be happy to show him the sights of L.A. Bill found some very nice U.S.M.C. lapel pins at a little shop on base and sent one home to Helen for Valentine's Day. A few days later, he bought a similar one and sent it to Jessie. He told Jessie that she was still his girl too,

and didn't want her to feel bad. He told Jessie that if prayer worked, nothing bad would ever happen to her as he had been praying for her so much.

There had been many tough nights when Bill longed for his family and was truly homesick. He knew that everyone around him was feeling the same things and it helped that they were able to talk about it. Most of the guys had a girl back home and quite a few of them were married. Some of the guys told Bill that leaving a girl back home without a wedding ring on her finger was a mistake. This caused Bill to wonder if he had done the right thing by not asking Helen to get married before he left. He had talked to his dad about this after he enlisted, but Steve and Al both thought that it would be better to wait until the war was over, although no one had any idea how long it would last. Bill knew that his only choice would be to trust the Lord to lead him in the right direction and he prayed each morning when he woke up and before he fell asleep at night. He tried to pray as he went through the day as well, which didn't always work due to all of the excitement around the camp. Bill was confident that God knew that he wanted a family someday, and if Helen were the right girl, then she would be there whenever he returned. Being away from home and away from his comfort zone was a huge trial for him. There was a lot of foul language and crude talk where he was and Bill knew that things that deteriorate morals are very contagious. He had to make a conscious decision to pursue a closer relationship with the Lord and he prayed for strength and protection daily. One bright spot for Bill was the Protestant Service every Sunday morning. These services, although simple, helped to remind the Marines of the importance of maintaining their relationship with Christ. The Chaplain emphasized that no matter where these Marines went and no matter the circumstances, the Lord would be faithful to them as He had promised.

One morning the platoon was scheduled to be at the range at 0530 hours. When Bill woke up at 0430, the rain was pouring down. He figured that they would have to do something else for the day's training, but Sergeant Drasil told them they were going to the range, rain or shine. He told them that they would not be able to put off a fight with the Japanese until the sun was shining. The platoon was at the range all day until dark and rain ponchos or not, everyone and everything was soaked. The range had its own Mess Hall, but the food there was far worse than their regular food, which wasn't very good either. Cleaning the rifles was all the worse that night and Sergeant Drasil inspected every M1903 to make sure that it was cleaned and oiled. The rain and mud they experienced reminded the recruits that there is always a worse form of misery. Bill had become proficient with the M1903 and could load and fire the weapon rapidly. They practiced holding a fresh five-round clip in their left hand while firing so that it could quickly be loaded to continue firing. The range went from the original 100-yards, out to 1000-yards and then to 300-yards for qualification. Bill qualified with his rifle and received his Marksman medal with a score that was somewhere in the middle of the platoon. He qualified with the .45 but by his own estimation, he was no Wild Bill Hickok. The recruits' marching had grown from a disorganized mess the first week into an impressive display of teamwork. Bill became so accustomed to Sergeant Drasil's bellowing of the marching orders that it had actually become

soothing. Every recruit in Platoon 55 seemed to know that they needed to acquire skills that would help them get through the war alive. They encouraged each other and wanted the entire platoon to do well. In the final days of basic training, the platoon marched with full packs up to 20 miles. They learned how to dress blisters and take care of their feet. Sergeant Drasil told them that the Navy gets to ride on boats, but Marines have to walk. That's the way it would work.

30. The 2nd Pioneers

February 20th, 1942. After almost five weeks in the Marine Corps, Platoon 55 graduated from Basic Training and everyone received orders for assignment to other units for Advanced Infantry Training. Bill was handed orders that placed him with an experimental new unit called the 2nd Pioneer Battalion. The Pioneers would specialize in "Shore Party" responsibilities, but no one knew exactly what a Shore Party did. The 2nd Pioneer Battalion was part of the larger 2nd Marine Division, so Bill's training would remain at San Diego, for now. Bill was very sad to learn that Bob Weir and Al Schlager had been assigned elsewhere, and they may not be able to see each other again. Bill packed up his "sea bag" and moved into a pretty nice two-story barracks back at the Marine Corps Base. The other guys were all nuts to get into town on a pass, but Bill decided to stay at the new barracks and write a few letters. He wasn't looking to get drunk and he certainly wasn't looking for a girl. His mind was occupied with the life that he left behind in Illinois. It seemed that just about every night, Bill was asked to go into town carousing with a group of Marines. Going out on the town was a temptation, of course, but Bill didn't want to get caught up in living that type of life. He wrote home to Jessie and Steve and told them that they didn't have to worry about their boy. He told them that they raised him right and he was determined to make them proud and never do anything to embarrass them. He had developed a daily sense that the Lord was with him at all times, and he privately didn't want to do anything to shame Him either.

Bill was assigned to the "2nd Pioneer Holding Battalion," with a group of 33 other Marines; they would all start their careers with a 30-day trip to the kitchen. 2nd Lieutenant Clarence B. Allen was in charge of KP duty and he seemed to be a pretty good guy. Three meals per day, seven days per week; that was the work schedule. Bill was assigned as a dishwasher and he worked 0600-0930, 1100-1530, and then 1600 until 2000 hours. As much as Bill liked to work in the kitchen, he grew to hate the dish job quickly. He knew that things could be a lot worse so he decided to smile all day, act as if he loved the job and whistle a lot. His forced demeanor paid off as some of the other guys developed better attitudes and the work environment improved. One good thing about this KP assignment was the abundance of food. There were lots of leftovers. Bill found the empty Mess Hall a great place to write letters in between the meal services and Helen sent him a very nice pad of U.S.M.C. stationery. He sat at a table with a cup of coffee and two leftover doughnuts from breakfast and started to write home. He apologized for not having the Marine photo taken and explained that he did not even have one hour to himself on a weekly basis, for the time being,

but he would have a photo taken as soon as he could. The Marine Corps did not take the photos for the Marines, so they would have to find a photographer to get the job done. As Bill described how much he missed the family back home, two tears dropped onto the letter he was writing. It was impossible to hide his emotions, but he did not want anyone at home to know that he was homesick.

The good side of the new assignment was that the second-story balcony of the barracks overlooked the fenced-in area where movies and U.S.O. shows took place. Anytime that there was a show or movie, Bill could sit on the balcony and watch it for free. As Bill got to know the other guys at the barracks and KP duty, they joked around and tried to make the best of things. At times when Lieutenant Allen wasn't around the mess hall, they engaged in some hellacious water fights with sprayers, pans and even buckets. Of course, the trick was to get it all cleaned up before they were discovered. On Bill's first Sunday at MCB (Marine Corps Base), San Diego, he went to the Protestant Service on the base and met Reverend Allen and Mrs. Allen. The Allen's quickly became fond of Bill and they invited him to visit their house which was only a few blocks away from the MCB gate. The Allen's regularly attended First Presbyterian Church of San Diego. Bill put in a request for an evening off and visited with the Allens. They were about the same age as his parents and Mrs. Allen reminded him of his mother. Since they lived so close, Bill had it in mind to get over there as often as he could without being a bother. On any Sunday that Bill could get off base, he would take a Marine buddy, Herb Dale along, and visit First Presbyterian Church with the Allens and listen to the sermons of the Rev. Thomas Law Coyle.

Bill wrote his brother Al and told him that he appreciated the letters that he had sent and would take his advice to try and get into a non-combat job, if such a thing existed in the Marine Corps. Bill reminded Al what a swell bunch of friends they had back home and told Al that he wouldn't really understand until he had to leave them. He also told Al that he had been praying for him every night. Included in letters coming in for Bill was a very nice letter from Reverend Paul Dibble, who congratulated Bill on getting through basic training as well as his firearms qualifications. Reverend Dibble also quizzed Bill on what he thought about the Chaplain's role in the Marines, as he seemed tempted with the thought of volunteering. Herman Dimond, the Fourth Street Methodist Sunday School Superintendent sent Bill a very nice letter thanking him for his service along with blessings of a safe return. These letters helped Bill feel as though he was still a part of what was going on at the church.

After ten days of dish washing, the officers in charge told Bill that he would be their new "bread and butter man." Bill was in charge of getting all of the bread, butter, salads, olives, pickles and canned milk ready for the meals. Bill was thrilled to get the new assignment as his hands had been shriveled for the past ten days. Bill took the time to write Reverend Dibble a letter to let him know that he was doing well and appreciated his advice and insight before he left home. While he was in the middle of writing Jessie and Al, a few fellows from the 2nd Pioneers came through the mess hall and Bill engaged in a conversation with one of them. Bill asked the fellow if he had any idea what the Battalion's job would be. This fellow looked at Bill with a bit of

disbelief that he had no idea about the Pioneers. The new Pioneer Battalion would follow the first waves of Marines ashore during an amphibious assault. As the front lines moved forward, the Pioneers would keep them supplied with whatever they needed. The Shore Party would be organizing the ammunition and supplies on the beach as the Pioneers moved it into combat. The Battalion would have to know how to use every weapon there was, including tanks and bulldozers. The 2nd Pioneer Battalion would conduct what some believed to be some of the hardest work of the war. The Marine told Bill that the 2nd Pioneers would begin an intensive 15-week training course as soon as Bill finished up his KP duties. Bill was shocked to hear that he had been assigned to such a unit and it seemed that Al's idea of finding a safe, out of the way job would not pan out.



Pvt. William Bennett
in front of First
Presbyterian Church,
San Diego, 1942.
(Bennett Family
Photo)

Bill received news that he would be stuck in the mess hall job until the first of April as the 2nd Pioneer Battalion training had been delayed. Bill had been in line to be the lead man in the mess hall, but was passed over for that job since he would be leaving in a month. At least now that Bill was working in the mess hall, he would be easy to find. As Bill was writing one afternoon, Lieutenant Bill Flentye, from Aurora, found him sitting alone at his table. Flentye said that he heard from his folks in Aurora that Bill was trying to find him, so he thought he would stop by and say hello. They talked about the "Wonder City" and how their folks were doing. The Flentye's were an affluent family that lived in a huge home on the city's west side. Bill Flentye, Sr. was a successful stock and bond trader and he had been a customer at Bennett's Men's Store for years. On another day, Al Bennett's old friend from Aurora,



Bill's close friend,
Pvt. Herb Dale of
Ryegate, Montana.
First Presbyterian
Church, San Diego,
1942.

(Bennett Family
Photo)

Bob Robinson stopped by for a chat. Bob was in basic training at the MCB, so he could actually stop by the mess hall on occasion. Bob told Bill that he really liked the Marines so far. Since Bill could not get home, or even a few miles up to Los Angeles to visit Grandma Pfrangle, meeting these guys from Aurora was the next best thing. Bill pulled out his stationery and wrote to Al. He had not had a letter from Al in a while and wondered why. As he wrote Al, the base radio station played on the overhead speakers in the mess hall. About halfway through the letter, the strains of “Miss You” by Dinah Shore began. Emotion came over Bill and he set the pencil on the table.

I miss you, since you went away dear.

I miss you more than I can say dear.

Daytime and night time, nothing I do can make me forget that I still love you.

Kiss you, in my dreams I kissed you.

Whispering, ‘Darling, how I miss you.’

Tell me, do you ever miss me as I miss you?

Tell me, do you ever miss me as I miss you?

Bill wiped tears from his eyes again as he picked up the pencil to continue his letter to Al. The song had made Bill think of home more than any other. It made him think of Helen, of Jessie and of his family in general. It was just too tough to get through the song without a tear or two.

On Sunday, April 12th, Bill was able to leave the MCB to attend church at the First Methodist Church on the corner of Ninth and C Streets in San Diego. Bill loved the service as it was nice to see happy people that were not wearing green. Reverend George A. Warner’s sermon was about people with endless “lists” of things that they want from God. People need to be content with what they have and have the patience to allow God to give us what He wants us to have. This really made Bill think about the life that he had left behind. He had thus far considered the war and his leaving home to be some-

what of a tragedy, but the thought occurred to him that God was working in his life without it being obvious. The church hosted "The Fellowship Lounge" for servicemen and Bill was handed a card on the way out. He looked forward to attending the lounge as well as the youth meetings on Sunday night.

Back at home, Helen had just been hired by TWA as a ticketing agent and started her training at the Midway facility in Chicago. This meant a long commute for her on the train each day and Bill became concerned about her working so hard. This was the type of career that Helen had wanted and she was not afraid of hard work or even hardship for that matter. Bill thought that it would make sense for Helen to move in with the Bennetts so that her commute would be shortened. He wrote both Helen and Jessie about this and they discussed it. Helen assured everyone that the train time was not a bother and she used the time for letter writing and reading books. After she tried the commute for a couple of weeks, she decided that if she spent two or three nights a week at the Bennett's it would help quite a bit. She brought some things to keep at the Bennett's and used Marian's room since she was away at Millikin College. Helen missed Bill terribly, but being a practical thinker, she knew that there was nothing she could do but get busy, be industrious and wait out the war. Steve and Jessie invited Carrie and Wally Cochran over for Sunday dinner and they got to know each other quite well. Steve was very interested in Wally's role as mayor as well as his business experience with Sanitary Cleaners. Wally enjoyed hearing of Steve's experiences with the Aurora area business associations as well as his vast knowledge of the men's clothing business. The Fairway Skating Palace had been reopened and Al had taken Helen skating a few times. Al was dating a girl named Eunice, who he had met at a Jack Benny show in Winnetka, Illinois. Eunice was there in support of her friend, who was selling cigarettes and cigars. Al had the good fortune of striking up a conversation and Eunice ended up volunteering to drive Al home after the show in her 1938 coupe. Eunice ended up making occasional trips to Aurora to visit Al and the two of them made sure that Helen felt welcome to go out with them whenever she wanted to.

Bill thought that it might be a good idea to propose to Helen on his upcoming birthday of April 14th. He went over the plan with Steve, Jessie and Al by mail and he wanted Al to convey the message personally to Helen. He imagined the Cochrans coming over to the Bennetts for supper and then he would place a call and talk to them all, ending up with the proposal for Helen. But, Bill decided to go ahead and ask Helen about it by letter instead of surprising her and he was on pins and needles to hear back from her.

Bob Robinson finished boot camp and one of Bill's buddies and football team mates, Ray Jones, stopped by the mess hall and told Bill that he would be finishing up boot camp in a week. Ray had grown up at 320 Seminary Avenue, just a few blocks from the Bennetts, and he had played on the Tomcat football team those last two years of high school. It was great to see Ray, and it really brought a feeling of home. Bill decided that it was time to go into San Diego with Bob Robinson and they went to see a floor show at a small club for servicemen and went bowling at the largest bowling alley in the city. Bill went to buy a Hershey Bar at the candy counter and the young lady working