

THE DIRECTOR'S VIEW

MORE ON REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

In the fall 2005 issue of *Families That Work*, in a column called "Remembering to Forget," I wrote about the way in which the paths of remembering and forgetting can crisscross. The column began with a story about Charlie, a World War II veteran with a penchant for recounting vivid war stories involving ordinary people placed in the extraordinary circumstances of war. The punchline of that story was that many of these stories—mostly upbeat and amusing—were as much acts of forgetting the grim realities of war as they were memories.

Charlie is my father-in-law, Charles Sass. When I sent him the newsletter, he responded characteristically, sitting down and writing me a letter. I thought it might be nice to print that letter here.



Charles Sass

Thank you for the MARIAL newsletter. It is far more than that. Your article on selective forgetfulness touched some nerves. I'm an expert. The front-line spear carrier (rifleman) does his duty, bonds with his buddies, and survives if he can. He also collects close-up pictures, a few of which stay top-of-mind for a while. The most troubling are retired to the back shelf, always there but dusty. A few may leave a permanent scar. I have several.

Some must be forcibly "forgotten" again and again. Most of us can handle such incursions; many cannot.

Sadly, some of us remember happenings that never were. At our waning reunions, we hear endless, often-told stories about the good-old wild times, surprisingly accurate about who, what, when, and where. But, spotted here and there are the tellers of "real war stories": pain and gore, grossly exaggerated, loud and wholly fabricated. I've seen men break into tears as they performed their humbug. We pity those people with their amazing memories; their images and pains grow heavier, more real with each performance.

It's likely that fewer than 10 percent of those engaged in war ever get within range of the enemy. And of those, only one in ten will ever see combat and its detritus firsthand. Those are the ones who must choose what to remember and what to forget. When I wish to draw the curtain on still-troubling incidents, I do so. There are tricks that work: diversion is one; sweat is another; alcohol and pills are deadly. My images will never go away, not even after sixty years, but they are concealed until next time.

"Someday (I'm eighty two), I will make a list of the images I choose to forget and will be reminded each day to forget them. Of course, time will solve that for me and my aging friends, but I feel deeply for the current crop of those who must learn to forget and won't."



Charles Sass

My father, who served in France in WWI, spoke only once of how he lost his best friend, then he went to his room and cried. He never again mentioned the war. Perhaps if he'd written his "story," he could have brought the memory out of the dark and accepted the reality. Or that might have sent him deeper into rejection.

My friend Jack Erwin commanded a landing craft at Okinawa. He talks about the immensity of it all and leaves out "the hard parts." They never happened. Selective "forgetting" is a gift that keeps us in balance.

Someday (I'm eighty-two), I will make a list of the images I choose to forget and will be reminded each day to forget them. Of course, time will solve that for me and my aging friends, but I feel deeply for the current crop of those who must learn to forget and won't. I'd like to think that writing and talking help. There must be a level at which they work. So I'm told.

We at MARIAL are very interested in the way that stories work (or don't work) for families, including military families. In that context, we are happy to welcome to the MARIAL Center our newest graduate fellow, Erin Finley from Emory's anthropology department, who will be studying families of soldiers with post-traumatic stress syndrome. Her specific interest is how soldiers' ability to tell their story affects their adjustment and that of their family to postwar life. ■

Bradd Shore