

TO THE CASKET

Herb – I'm deeply honored that I got asked to say something about you. We only really knew each other these last five years and these last few days I have found out so much more about you. Thanks for the script [HOLD UP HERB'S NOTES - ABOUT 120 PAGES] – I see you got it all sorted out for me. I hope you don't mind I made a few changes – I hope I don't :

[HERB VOICE] "goof it up!"

[ADDRESS MOURNERS]

How can you condense the life of this man into 10 minutes?

I first met Herb when Bill his son asked me to "Go help his dad with his computer". I had never heard of Herb Rommel - I was new in town. His computer was not up to his ambitions he needed a new one. I was very conscious that I might be seen as taking advantage of a pensioner and was a little reluctant to sell him up to the idea. He barked me through the pros and cons of my recommendations and told me to get him a new one. I took my leave - slightly troubled that HE had made the sale - not me.

As I was leaving I saw a picture of a WWII destroyer half showing behind a door on the wall. If you look on the back of the order of service you will see a copy of the very picture. I stopped - pondering the picture and assessing Herb's age and I didn't think I would go too far wrong when I asked if he had served on her?

[HERB VOICE] "I did – My first command – The Wilkes – We called her the lucky Wilkes."

I got my first smile of the visit.

I have a deep respect for those who served.

Before my next visit I searched for the words "Rommel" and "Wilkes" on the Internet and tripped over a fascinating story – this man appeared to have saved the day on the USS OKLAHOMA at Pearl Harbor.

[HERB VOICE] "This is a real Air raid – this is no bullshit!

When I dropped off the new computer I asked if he was the man mentioned in the stories I had been reading. Herb's gruff countenance - eyebrows hooded over his glasses, lips pursed - briefly turned a shy smile and he admitted that the stories were about him. Turning gruff again he announced

[HERB VOICE] "You know that is not what I really said on the day – but the history books can't print what I really said."

To this day I never found out what Herb REALLY said - we were due to record an oral history for National Public Radio this week and I was going to try and find out. Now it is too late.

We shared some thoughts on command at sea and my small interest in stamp covers. From that began a friendship that I hold dear.

ABOUT HERB - NAVY AND CAREER

Herbert Fox Rommel Junior was one of THE greats of Tom Brokaw's "Greatest Generation". The generation that came of age in the depression of the 1930's, who fought and won World War II, came home to fill the country with their vigor and their families and to rebuild the world ravaged by war.

He was born in Philadelphia in 1915 to Herbert Fox Rommel and Mary Cecelia Fox. With no money for college Herb joined the Naval Reserve in 1934 - hoping to make it to the Naval Academy. Mixed up orders meant he missed his chance and ended up an ordinary seaman instead. Not to be deterred - Herb took night classes and correspondence courses and earned his commission as an Ensign in 1938. In 1940 he applied for active duty and was assigned to the battleship USS OKLAHOMA. By December 7th 1941 they were anchored in Battleship Row in Pearl Harbor.

The OKLAHOMA is largely forgotten because of the massive explosion that sank the ARIZONA. But Herb's presence of mind on December 7th - urgently calling the ship to battle stations, acting to protect the men in his division and his later command of TWO launches in the harbor - pulling men from the water - are not forgotten by those who he touched that day. At this time a memorial is under construction at Pearl Harbor to honor the 429 casualties on the OKLAHOMA. The veterans responsible have recently been in correspondence with Herb about putting his name and call to action on the memorial. Herb never considered himself a "professional veteran" and though proud of his service was never one to flaunt it. In his final weeks his shipmates argued that many would not be here today if Herb had not been so forthright that day.

Herb had a long war - mostly on the USS GRIDLEY. It was during this period that he earned 12 battle stars and his Bronze Star with combat "V". If you ever asked Herb about that he used to pass it off as "awarded for being there". That is not strictly true.

Part of the citation for that award reads:

"....during operations against enemy Japanese forces in the Pacific War Area.....By his effective organization and coordination of the battle stations Lieutenant Commander Rommel contributed materially to the success of the mission. His inspiring leadership and gallant conduct throughout reflect the highest credit and Lieutenant Commander Rommel is authorized to wear the Combat "V" .

Most Bronze Stars do not have "Combat "V's". That "V" - is for showing heroism while under enemy fire. Herb was more than "just there".

In 1945 Herb found a few minutes to marry his high school sweetheart Mary Heins while on leave before rushing back to the War and his first command and second love - The destroyer USS WILKES DD441. Herb was one of only four Naval RESERVE Officers to command a destroyer in WWII – Herb used to say - "The most fun I ever had in my life".

USS WILKES

Herb told me this story about himself when recounting his years in the WILKES

During the war there was little time for formal training - you learned on the job and often - despite the best of efforts there could be holes in your knowledge. Herb once asked the Captain of the GRIDLEY if he could do some ship handling. The Captain told him:

"Herb, I would like to, but I haven't had enough experience to get us out of a hole, if you got us into one".

So in 1946 as he returned to Charlestown with the WILKES he made a showy high speed entrance and raced up to the dock. There was only ONE problem. Herb had never docked a destroyer in his life - he had always come to anchor. With the dock wall rapidly approaching he realized he was out of space and time. Ordering "All Astern Full" the ship shuddered and the screws were nearly torn out of her as she foamed to a halt - just short of the dock wall.

[HERB VOICE] "Everyone thought we were showing off - I just considered myself extremely lucky!"

Post War Herb applied for a regular commission and after line school to brush up on the bits he should have learned about being an officer - he went on to a distinguished naval career both at sea and ashore.

He spent time in Newport at the War College - first as a pupil in 1949 and later teaching. He spent time on the staff of Admiral Burke as his assistant in the Strategy Division.

Herb always recognized that if he had hitched his star to Admiral Burke's he could have been an Admiral – notwithstanding his straight talking which could get him into trouble – but he chose not to play the sloggy hard work navy game in order to pay proper attention to his family and told the Naval War College Oral History that he NEVER regretted this decision.

Herb retired to Newport with Mary and the family in 1969 and purchased Arnold Art. Herb used to laugh that being a Naval Officer was no training for how to run an art store and even with Mary's considerable artistic skills - they lost their shirts the first couple of years!

The long list of roles Herb played in the community - are published elsewhere this week. But it is true to say - that Herb never retired - he just kept making himself new careers.

FAMILY

Herb never got over the loss of his beloved Mary in 2001 after 56 years together. If you count their high school years - it was a 60 year love affair.

Their legacy is their family, gently rebellious Baby Boomers - now matured.

Beth, Vicky and Bill's fondest memories are of childhood at Naval Station Washington in the 1960's

It was a great life - Beautiful Quarters, a steward, car and driver, Captain's gig. Their yacht the SEAFOX on the dock next to the Presidential Yacht the SEQUIOA. Herb used to stop work early to make time to be with his children.

Beth particularly remembers as a young lady she had an interest in the crew manning the SEQUIOA! She used to sail around in the river in the dinghy and then deliberately capsize in front of the Presidential Yacht. She always had to be "rescued" by the sailors. She used to enjoy teasing them - knowing that she was perfectly safe with her father was in command. She says Herb was in on her plot and used to encourage her! Herb got a laugh out of the sailor's frustrations!

LONG before the Surgeon General decided smoking was a problem - Herb had "Smoking is bad for your Health" painted large and clear on a bulkhead. Vicky decided to act out on her Dad she went over to a cigarette machine, dropped in a quarter, got her smokes, lit up and blew smoke in his face. The expected explosion never happened. Herb just turned away and ignored her. Wise man that he was - a deflated Vicky never smoked again.

Bill used to love the sunset concert parties on the Potomac. They would take the Captain's gig and tow Bill's dinghy along behind and during the concert Bill would get to row around selling programs to the other anchored yachts. Herb taught Bill to count backwards by deliberately pitching tough softballs so he had count his score in negative numbers as he missed each ball.

In later years when I got to know Herb in Newport - if I dropped by to yarn at the end of the day - he would be sitting playing UPWORDS with Beth. It is like three dimensional Scrabble. He used to complain - with some justification - that Beth had memorized the dictionary and that is why she was always ahead in the score they used to keep. One day and out of the blue a package arrived for me from some eBay seller - opening it in mystification I found my own set of UPWORDS - Herb was just like that - sent you something to encourage you, because he thought you might like it, because he was so generous.

Herb sailed through his later years in the Rhodes 19 fleet every Wednesday evening with Bill as crew. Herb crowned last season, tenaciously coming from behind and lifting the championship in a nail biting last race.

Privately Herb honored Mary EVERY day. Publicly he honored her each year by continuing her Iris Parties. We all knew that this year there was a possibility it might be the last. All Herb's friends honored him by pulling together to make sure that this year we had:

[HERB VOICE] "Best D@!n Iris Party ever".

For Herb it was a last chance to greet friends. In truth - when I said good night to him Saturday and he shook my hand a little longer than normal and thanked me for helping - I had a clue of what was coming. Herb had planned his final voyage.

LIFETIME HOBBY

Throughout his life Herb had always held an interest in Naval stamps and covers. In 1933 - aged 18 - he joined the Universal Ship Cancellation Society and was assigned membership number 175. At the time of his death he was THE senior member of the society.

His normally sharp eye for investing let him down and he used to rue the fact that when ordered to Tokyo in 1945 he omitted to get ships to mail him covers. Tokyo surrender covers are very rare and now worth a lot of money.

With peacetime it was again possible to take up cover collecting seriously. Herb revitalized the post war Universal Ship Cancellation Society, editing the newsletter and holding office. Always collecting, encouraging, promoting the Navy that he loved.

On Armistice Day 1947 Herb sent the following signal to collectors:

[Hold up and read from signal - Addressee - start, end, signature and ship. Omit middle "war" for time]

NAVAL SPEEDLETTER

IN REPLY
REFER TO:

F
TO: THE COLLECTOR OF NAVAL POSTMARKS
ADDRESSED

NAVAL SPEEDLETTER Form NAVGDS-48

- Is for urgent messages not requiring telegraphic transmission.
- Is expedited upon delivery.
- Is designed for Navy-wide use without change (1 September 1945, Navy Department Bulletin).
- Does not clear through communication offices.
- Permits dispatch in informal language.
- May be sent (1) air mail and/or special delivery, (2) with enclosures, (3) to nonnaval activities, (4) in window envelope.
- Provides space for inserting "From" above "To" if activity's correspondence format so requires.
- Field activities obtain supply from their District Publications and Printing Office.
- Navy Department obtain supply from Records and Publications Section, Administrative Office, Navy Department, Washington 25, D. C.
- Available in pads of 25 sets, each set comprised of 1 white, 1 yellow, 1 pink, and 1 green. Additional pads of 100 available in white, pink, and green.

INDICATE HERE IF CLASSIFIED

— ARMISTICE DAY IS A NATIONAL HOLIDAY AND IS SO CELEBRATED BY THE UNITED STATES NAVY X HOWEVER, OUR MINDS SHOULD NOT BE ON THE END OF A WAR WHICH IS FAST BECOMING MORE HISTORY THAN MEMORY X WE MUST DEVOTE OUR ENERGIES TO THE PREVENTION OF THE NEXT WAR OR FAILING THAT THEN THE WINNING OF ANOTHER WAR X YOUR INTEREST IN THE NAVY IS APPRECIATED X FOR A MONTHLY REPORT ON THE DOINGS OF THE NAVY SUGGEST YOU SUBSCRIBE TO QUOTE ALL HANDS UNQUOTE AVAILABLE FROM THE SUPT OF DOCUMENTS GOVT PRINTING OFFICE WASHINGTON DC FOR TWO DOLLARS A YEAR

COPIES TO

SIGNATURE AND TITLE

H. F. ROMMEL, LCDR, USN

SENDER'S MAILING ADDRESS (INCLUDE OFFICE SYMBOL, IF DESIRED)

USS BURKE (APD65)
FLEET POST OFFICE
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

ATTENTION ADDRESSEE: Speedletter reply should be addressed as here shown, to insure prompt routing of reply.

Herb's own covers are now considered very collectable and command high prices. But his generosity encourages generosity - this item was withdrawn from sale on eBay and sent to us for nothing so it could be read today.

[In the heat of the moment and as time was short - this part in italics was omitted - I should have read it - sorry Herb]

After Mary's death he threw himself back into the hobby. He decided to sell his collection gathered over 70 years - a means to keep interested in the world. When he ran out of covers and discovered himself still alive - he bought 10,000's at auction, made them up into interesting packets and traded them all over the world. His auctions in the Universal Ship Cancellation Society log are still running and he was trading to the last - right up to when we went to collect him to go to the Iris Party on Saturday. Vicky - will be carrying on his collection in his memory.

Herb never stopped challenging himself and learning. Building a darkroom in his own home to practice photography, embracing technology to keep up - scanning covers, selling on eBay, running his own email auctions tabulated and calculated in Excel spreadsheets with a skill I see few business owners possess! We identified at least 303 unique people who Herb touched through email, in the USA, the UK, Switzerland, Germany, France, Australia, Italy, Belgium, Canada and his US military friends around the globe.

His sharp observations on the world of geo-politics, the state of the navy and the state of the presidency are to be found scattered across the bulletin boards and chat rooms of the Internet.

Herb wasn't above having a little fun either - he played games online - Axis and Allies against others by email - plotting his strategy. Fellow players considered him their "Senior Player with a Great Sense of Humor"

Herb Stories:

Everyone has a favorite Herb story - of the many I was told - here are but two:

When Commander of Naval Station Washington

We all know that Herb could be plain spoken - As part of presidential order to "clean up and beautify military bases" he had just planted 150 acres of trees to screen the rifle range on the banks of the Potomac. The problem was it was near Christmas and many of the trees were cute little Christmas trees and Herb was concerned that they might start to disappear. Herb - posted a sign which we found in his basement this week.

[HOLD UP SIGN]

In case you did not bring your reading glasses it reads:

"Anyone caught tampering with, or removing these trees will be shot immediately - by authority of the CO" .

There it MIGHT have ended - except a newspaper photographer published a picture which the wire services picked up and it ended up published coast to coast. Herb came under some pressure because locals were writing to the Pentagon to complain that the sign was "not in the Christmas spirit". He had to issue a press release pointing out that it had been meant as a joke and that the guards were not actually armed.

The sign came down - but as you can see - Herb framed it and kept it - along with a scrapbook of all the newspaper cuttings sent to him from across America by friends and acquaintances.

JACK LEAVITT - a past president of Newport Rotary recalls Herb's sartorial elegance - or occasional lack of. He reckoned Herb used to be dressed by Uncle Sam or Uncle Sal. Clothes made for him by Mary - were worn and worn out to the last. Herb could dress when the occasion demanded - when I asked Herb out to brunch last March for my birthday - he appeared in Blazer, bow tie, sharp khakis, Bronze Star in place. But on occasion Herb could be absent minded about his clothing - at swim therapy one day Jack Leavitt recalls everyone screaming at Herb as he arrived at the pool. For sure he had got undressed. He had just forgotten to put ANYTHING on before coming to the pool!

Tributes

I have received over 100 tributes to Herb since Sunday and they are still coming in this morning. These are representative and say more about the man than I ever can in these few minutes:

From Jack Shutty - Helmsman - USS Wilkes (Jack is deeply disappointed that his health prevents him travelling here today to say this himself) said...

SUCH a great skipper! I will severely miss him.

I had several skippers on the Wilkes and Herb was the best. Which was amazing since Herb was not given proper training to do so in the rush of the war.

I made sure he didn't make mistakes. I only told him at our WILKES reunion recently that I had taken charge a couple of times and changed course a bit.

Herb was shocked!!!!

But I waited to tell him.

Herb always treated me like a son, even though he was my boss. The crew loved him.

**From Commander Tom Halvorson - USS JOHN S MCCAIN -
currently off Japan**

I am greatly saddened to hear of Herb Rommel's passing. He was a true friend to all who knew him and my short acquaintance with him was a memorable one that I will always cherish.

His thoughts on life and advice on Command have served me well.

Please pass my sincere condolence to his daughter Beth and the rest of his family. My sons and I now play UPWORDS.

I will be in DC by the end of the year, after completion of my tour. I will be sure to visit Arlington to pay my respects.

It's wonderful that the Iris Party went so well!

From Stewart Milstein - Universal Ship Cancellation Society - one of MANY USCS members tributes - Stewart's is beautiful and representative:

We exchanged many dollars and many covers and he never once asked me for an accounting. He trusted and respected people and it was a pleasure to do business with him.

On a personal note I admired him not only for his wartime accomplishments and his service to the United States, but because he was open, and honest about his point of view. He spoke his mind and it was a pleasure to speak with someone who did not mince words.

I also admired him for his willingness and ability to adopt to the modern age. More than one Universal Ship Cancellation Society member said to me that if Herb could be computer literate at his age, there was no reason for younger people not to be computer literate.

In a sometime dark and ugly world, a beautiful candle has winked out. I am better off for having known him, and sadder because he is gone. He will live in my heart and mind forever.

CLOSE

When talking of his career, family and friends Herb used to regularly declare - "I have been lucky and I have been blessed".

[ADDRESS CASKET]

Herb that may be so - but in truth I believe it is everyone who YOU helped in the past:

- from the drowning sailors in Pearl Harbor,
- the many you trained, advised or encouraged in your career and retirement;
- your family who have wonderful memories of their upbringing;
- your pen friends from around the globe;
- the people of Newport here today;
- and your many other friends and shipmates.

Herb – WE have been "lucky" to have known YOU.

WE have been "blessed" with YOUR presence in our lives.

[COME TO ATTENTION] Herbert Fox Rommel - my friend -
[LOOK AT MOURNERS] our friend – [LOOK AT CASKET] BRAVO
ZULU!

[HERB VOICE - LOOK AT MOURNERS] Carry on!