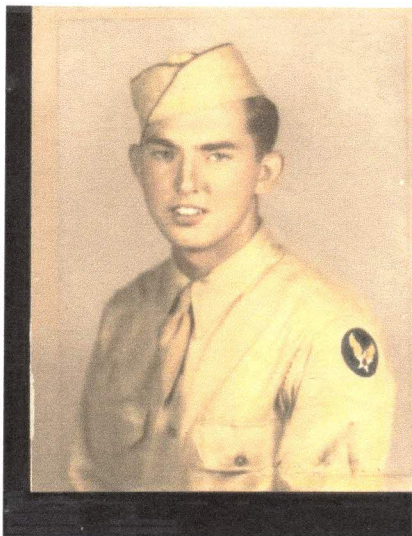


Uncle Bill

by Sharon Johnson O'Donnell
sjodonnell513@gmail.com



When I was little, I was embarrassed of my Uncle Bill -- the way he mumbled and laughed to himself, how he would say things to people that didn't make sense. He helped my father in the family sewing machine repair and sales shop that my grandfather had started; he was competent at repairing machines, but most of the time he watched television from his chair in the shop -- game shows in the morning and soap operas in the afternoons with some Andy Griffith re-runs too. And the evening news. Sadly, television was his life.

Uncle Bill was a World War II veteran and served in Italy from the end of 1944 until he came home on a hospital ship in December of 1945. My uncle didn't die during the war, but he did indeed give his life for his country: when he came back to Raleigh, North Carolina in 1945, he never lived a normal life again. Back then, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder wasn't diagnosed, but he and his family -- especially his mother -- certainly suffered its consequences. The Veterans Administration initially called it a "nervous condition" and later actually diagnosed him with

schizophrenia. But he hadn't been like that before he'd left home. When he came back, he paced back and forth and mumbled to himself and once even tried to go to Washington, D.C. to "tell the President about something." He couldn't function in society and seemed lost in another world, talking little and not making much sense when he did. He was a kind soul who loved animals and was so gentle that if he saw a bug inside the house, he would take it outside instead of killing it the way most people would. Uncle Bill was merely a spectator of other people's lives. Day in, day out.

For 66 years.

The Sewing Machine Shop

The shop was just across our back yard. A simple, two-room cinderblock building with no air conditioning, which was certainly a drawback in the humid, sweltering North Carolina summers. The back room was the repair area, while the front room with a huge picture window looking out onto Lake Wheeler Road was the retail sales area. In the summers when I was a kid, I'd run across our yard to the shop around noon to let Uncle Bill and my daddy know Mama said dinner was ready and to come in and eat. In the south, lunch was called dinner and what most people refer to as dinner -- the evening meal -- was called supper. My mother cooked for Uncle Bill and did his laundry, while my father gave him a place to go, something to do, and paid him for his services -- even though Uncle Bill never spent his money for anything except groceries. I remember my father saying that he wanted Uncle Bill to have his own money so he would have a feeling of self-worth. "When he asks your mama to go grocery shopping, I want him to have the money to give her to pay for those groceries," he explained. "I want him to feel he is contributing." For that reason, my father paid Uncle Bill and in fact, paid him so well that Uncle

