




Twins reflect on 90 years of faith, service

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Identical twin brothers celebrated their 90th birthday in September, marking a shared life of religion, family and patriotism.

Ralph Henderson was born Sept. 6, 1918, in Arimo, Idaho, preceded by his twin brother, Boyd, who came an hour and a half earlier.

"The doctor thought I was a tumor," Ralph said. "But the tumor had legs and arms."

The brothers are identical not only in appearance, but also in work ethic — a trait forged while tending a subsistence garden and their father's feed store, which opened a year after they moved to Pocatello, Idaho, in 1933.

After the twins graduated from Pocatello High School and attended a year of college, they registered to serve one year in the Army. Boyd said Ralph's draft number was pulled out of a giant fish bowl in Washington, D.C., around the time they were going to talk to their bishop about serving a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"The whole family was surprised because it happened so soon," Boyd said. "I voluntarily joined him because I wanted us to be together."

The twins began training in February 1941 at Fort Warren in Cheyenne, Wyo. Toward the end of the year, Boyd took a three-day leave to marry Ethel Chilton in the Salt Lake Temple. With only a few months left to complete his service, Ralph planned to begin a married life with his high school sweetheart, Lena Rawlins. But the bombing of Pearl Harbor changed everything.

"I knew I couldn't get out of the Army," Ralph said. "I didn't know where I was going."

Ralph joined a convoy headed to defend the West Coast in anticipation of further attacks. Along the way, the convoy stopped to refuel in Pocatello, where Ralph exchanged wedding vows with Lena.

"I only had time to kiss her twice and got back on the truck," Ralph said. "I cried myself to sleep."

The war catapulted the small-town twins into the large, enraged world of North Africa and Europe.

"These were terrible times," Ralph wrote in a leather-bound journal he kept during his service in the U.S. 5th Army. "We were afraid of getting killed all the time."

The campaign in Italy was one of those times.

"When our battalion landed on Anzio, we were told it would take seven days to capture Rome," Boyd said. "That was a great blunder. We grossly underestimated the Germans. It took 4 1/2 months to capture Rome. "

Wrote Ralph: "I was nothing but a pack of nerves most of the night."

The twins turned to prayer to steady the nerves, buoy the heart and direct the mind. Ralph wrote about an instance when the spirit told him not to take the rifle and pistol belonging to a dead German soldier because it could have been a trap.

On another occasion, a German 88 shell hit Boyd's tank destroyer underneath the turret without exploding. The armor plating burst, shattering into the tank and hitting Boyd in the back. He was awarded the Purple Heart among other medals.

"I have been down on my knees as a miracle has happened," Ralph wrote.

The inseparable duo felt the angst of separation many times overseas, having been assigned to different companies within the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

"I wish Boyd was here so I could talk to him," Ralph wrote.

Boyd once read his brother's name in the morning report on a list of the confirmed dead. "I kept on saying, 'It can't be, it can't be,'" Boyd said. A month later, he discovered that the casualty was not his brother but another young man who had the same name.

"I was so relieved and thanked Heavenly Father he was preserved," Boyd said. "The war brings you down on your knees many times."

Their companies were the first to enter Rome. Boyd captured the Nazi flag among a cheering crowd, waving American flags amid Italian ones. Flowers were thrown to the soldiers while wine bottles were smashed against the rolling tanks.

Boyd and Ralph attended church as circumstances allowed, whether it be at a Red Cross building or under a large embankment.

After the twins transferred to the Air Corps, Ralph helped build a 10-by-8-foot LDS chapel on the Island of Sardinia, the first in the Mediterranean. He was the bricklayer, using materials bartered with cigarettes that the U.S. government included in the soldiers' rations.

"It was a great feeling of having a place to go that was your own." Ralph said. "The testimonies and the church songs we sang accompanied by a tiny organ built us up."

After the victory in Europe in May 1945, Boyd said they were given a six-month assignment in allied-occupied Austria to explore Hitler's enormous underground factory that manufactured fighter planes.

The stakes remained high, however. On one occasion, Boyd was held captive by Russian soldiers in a locked room of an old, dilapidated building, where he was fed hard, black biscuit and water. For nearly five days, he was interrogated about being a spy. Boyd never broke from his plea of innocence, and his prayers were deep and frequent. He clung with white knuckles onto his father's blessing that was given to him before he went off to war — "Keep the Word of Wisdom and you will be blessed spiritually and physically," it said.

"I had faith in the Word of Wisdom, and I was finally released," Boyd said.

Boyd received an order sending him back to the United States shortly thereafter, and Ralph followed suit a few months later.

"They've done so many things together like school, business, combat and even got promoted in the military at the same time," said Ann Atkinson, their older sister.

Atkinson said her brothers have remained active in the church and raised strong families, having an unabated love for country. She said they are still very close, keeping in touch daily.

Boyd still lives in Pocatello with his wife, Ethel. They have nine children and 42 grandchildren, though one son was killed in a car accident driving home from the Idaho Falls Temple shortly after returning from a proselyting mission at Hamburg, Germany. Boyd served as a mission president in Melbourne, Australia.

Ralph and Lena, who passed away in 2001, have five children and 29 grandchildren. The couple lost a son to Lou Gehrig's disease, and Ralph took care of Lena for the remaining 14 years of her life after she was partially paralyzed by a stroke. He remarried in 2002 to a friend he initially met 18 years ago, LeNore Thompson Smedley, calling her "his torch." They live in Utah, summering in Bountiful and living in St. George for the winter.

Boyd describes his 90 years of life with his twin in one word — "blessed."

"It's like the old saying," Boyd said. "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away."