



“Homecoming” (Photo: U.S. Air Force, Public Domain¹)

Homecoming

I remember Uncle Louis. He really wasn't my uncle, but everyone in our family called him that. He had the same first name as my father, lived down the block from us, and what started as a joke between the two men apparently “caught on” and became something of an inside joke between the two families. No matter. It always brought a smile to everyone's face, and as they say, no harm, no foul.

We lived in Brooklyn at the start of World War II. My dad ran an old Jewish delicatessen on the corner of our block; it had been started by *his* father when he came to this country in 1890, and the old man, a widower, still lived with us above the deli. To say things were crowded is an understatement, given that in addition to my grandfather, father, and me, my mother and younger brother also lived above the store.

Uncle Louis was in much the same situation, though in his case, he sold and fixed radios. He also was the local rep for FADA radios produced by the Frank Angelo D'Andrea Company of Long Island, New York. He and his wife, Mae, also had two boys, though they were a good six years older than my brother and me, respectively.

¹ 1940's -- A Consolidated B-24 Liberator from Maxwell Field, Alabama, four engine pilot school, glistens in the sun as it makes a turn at high altitude in the clouds.

I guess selling and fixing radios paid a lot better than dishing out hot pastrami and other traditional Jewish foods because Uncle Louis' boys each had the one thing my brother and I both coveted: two-wheel bicycles. His elder son, James, was lucky enough to own one of Schwinn's Motorbike Deluxe models, a beautiful, streamlined black and white bike with an electric light and concealed horn, large carrier, and a braced handlebar. Now, *this* was one handsome bike, the one I stared at every night in the 1939 Schwinn catalog before saying my prayers and going to sleep. To be honest, never in my wildest dreams could I ever imagine owning one.

And then, the United States entered World War II. Any dreams I had of even owning a bike—*any bike*—were dashed forever. Like other manufacturers, Schwinn turned its attention to the war effort, and instead of bikes, it produced top-secret electrical devices, shells, ammunition, plane parts, and other war-related items.

James, Uncle Louis' eldest son—everyone called him Jimmy—immediately enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force just after Pearl Harbor Day. “He didn't want to get drafted,” said Uncle Louis, as we gathered at the train station to say goodbye to Jimmy and wish him well at boot camp.

As he stepped aboard a waiting passenger car, his and my eyes locked, and, waving to me, he shouted, “Pauly, take good care of my Schwinn. Ride it every day. I'm counting on you having it ready for me when I get back.”

“I will!” I shouted enthusiastically. “You can count on me, Jimmy!”

With that, he disappeared into the car and went off to war.

Well, sir, that's quite an order he gave me. And believe you me, I treated Jimmy's bike like it was made of pure gold. I rode it as he directed, but always put away clean and dry. Frankly, on any given day, you would have thought it had come right off the showroom floor that very morning.

Meanwhile, Uncle Louis would occasionally tell us bits and pieces of news about Jimmy. He said something about the censors and how Jimmy's letters always arrived with holes in them where someone had taken a razor and cut out what musta been sensitive information that would've given away important secrets to the enemy. All we knew, basically, was that Jimmy was being trained to be a pilot and when his training was completed, he would be sent overseas, either to Europe or North Africa.

Uncle Louis said he wasn't sure what type of airplane Jimmy would be flying, but based on his reading between the lines—I had no knowledge as to what *that* meant at the time—and something one of his customers told him, he had a feeling Jimmy was being trained to fly Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers.

We saw Jimmy occasionally over the next 18 months or so when he came home on leave. Boy, he sure looked good in his pilot's uniform. He never talked about what he was doing; never said *one word*. He simply enjoyed being with his family and spending time with his girlfriend, Sally. But he always wanted to know how his bike was holding up, and I was proud to show him how well it looked and ran.

We didn't know Jimmy had been sent overseas until one day, Uncle Louis told my dad he had received a Victory-Mail, or V-Mail, letter from him. Uncle Louis said that it was his understanding the letter was printed from a microfilm that contained an image of Jimmy's letter. “The censors blacked out a few passages,” he said. “It looked like the missing words may somehow have been related to where Jimmy now was stationed, but other than that, he and his crew were settling in well.”

What surprised Uncle Lewis was the fact Jimmy's letter appeared to have been written only a day or two earlier. Mae already had sent back a response using the same V-Mail system. “Sure looks like our country's doing everything it could to support our troops and the home front,” my dad remarked.

It wasn't long before the letters from Jimmy became few and far between. Dad surmised he was much too busy flying bomber runs to spend time writing, and even if he wasn't in the cockpit, he probably was trying to catch up on his sleep. Uncle Louis told my dad his wife was extremely upset by the lack of mail from Jimmy but, this didn't deter me from writing to him *every day* using V-Mail. She even got his younger brother, Arthur, to write him from time to time, more I think to keep Mae's spirits up than anyone else's. I even offered to write, if

for no other reason than to reassure Jimmy that his bike was in great condition and would be waiting for him when he finally came home.

August 2, 1943. It's a day I'll never forget. We were at the breakfast table when the phone rang. My father took the handset off the hook, said "Hello," and almost immediately, I saw the color drain from his face.

"Oh, Louis, I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say. Is Mae okay? Is there anything we can do?"

There was a moment of silence as he obviously listened to what Uncle Louis was saying, and then, my dad said, "Okay, we'll be right over."

After handing up, he turned to my mother. "Edith, we need to go over to Uncle Louis's. Leave the dishes for Eddie and Arthur. Hurry. My brother will have to open the deli this morning."

They were gone in seconds.

It was only later that I learned Uncle Louis and Mae had received an early morning Western Union Telegram, notifying them that Jimmy was missing in action. Nothing was said about his plane or its crew, only that their son was missing.

But dad and Uncle Louis had no trouble piecing the story together. Despite censorship, the headline of *The New York Times* that day read: **BIG RUMANIAN OIL FIELD BOMBED BY 175 U.S. PLANES IN LONG FLIGHT; BADOGLIO PACIFIES NORTH ITALY**

Only later would it become evident that the so-called Ploesti Raid, named after the concentration of refineries in the Romanian city of Ploesti, which occurred on August 1, 1943, and which officially was known as Operation Tidal Wave, had become known as Black Sunday because it was marked by the second highest loss suffered by the United States Army Air Force in a single operation.²

Mom said Jimmy's mom was inconsolable. Whenever I saw her in the weeks that followed, she was dressed in black, had a blank expression on her face, and said little. It wasn't long before a flag appeared in their front window. It contained a gold star on a white bed surrounded by a red border, indicating someone in that family had lost their life while serving in the armed forces of the United States. Uncle Louis said it wasn't so much the loss of Jimmy that bothered his mother as it was the fact they never had the opportunity to bury him in the family plot on Long Island.

As I look back now, it was sometime in the fall of 1949—I was in college at the time and things are a little hazy—I got a letter from my mother, telling me the government had found Jimmy's remains. "Actually," she wrote, "it was a Greek farmer who came across his dog tags and partial remains." Her letter went on:

Uncle Louis called your dad last night. He said a man from the government came by at lunchtime with a small urn containing Jimmy's cremains. He also gave him Jimmy's dog tags. Mae wasn't home, this being her day for mahjong. Uncle Louis asked dad if he would drive him and Mae to the cemetery in a few days—he needed time to have a grave opened—so that Jimmy could be laid to rest. Of course your dad agreed.

I told your dad I would gladly go along to be with Mae, but Uncle Louis didn't want to make too much of it. He wanted it to be a surprise for his wife. Before leaving, he is going to tell her they are going to pay their respects to other members of their family buried there. He will tell her he asked your dad to drive because he was tired.

² <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/instant-articles/black-sunday-ploesti-raid.html?firefox=1>

Mom wrote me again a few days later:

Mae suspected nothing. But when they got to the cemetery and Uncle Louis told her why they were there, she broke down and cried like a baby. It wasn't so much because the visit dredged up memories of the death of her eldest son, I think, but because her Jimmy finally was home.

I was comforted by that thought. Then, throwing on a light fall jacket, I grabbed my book bag, left my apartment, and rode Jimmy's Schwinn bike to my Thursday afternoon graduate class in theoretical mechanics.