

READ THE PREFACE – BUY THE BOOK

# *Preface*

## *A Heartfelt New WWII Novel by Carole Sarkan*

*“From the Pen of Private Jim -- Letters to Bette” is much more than a wartime love story. It is the true account of a soldier’s life in the war. Private Jim was my father, and this book reveals his honest fears and vulnerabilities as expressed through his pen as he wrote to his beloved Bette. These heartfelt letters are woven together with stories reflecting how Private James Roscoe Grabill, my father, might have felt as he looked back on his experiences during the war.*

*My mom “Bette” was Bette Lou Baker. Her name was pronounced “Betty.” She changed the spelling of her name to end in “e” when she was thirteen. My name was originally spelled “Carol”. In honor of my favorite folk singer Carole King, I also at age thirteen changed the spelling of my name by adding an “e”. I did not know mom had changed to “Bette” until 2008. That’s when we had a good laugh about our both showing our creative independence at the young age of thirteen.*

*While growing up I would often hear my dad tell stories about the war. In 1994, two years prior to his passing, I gave him a Sony tape recorder and asked him if he would document his experiences from World War II. Having shown an interest in his stories, he shared with me that he still had the letters he wrote throughout the war. They were sent to my mother Bette, to other family members, and to friends. These letters had been stored in boxes in our garages for fifty years.*

*In 2022, twenty-six years after my father’s passing, I finally decided to sort through all the letters. I found approximately 2500 letters with almost half of them to the love of his life, Bette. His letters to Bette reveal his experiences as an army private. I also listened to the tape of his war stories. Listening to his remarkable accounts on tape was fascinating and made me feel as if he were sitting right next to me.*

*At first, I couldn’t believe it. In all, there are about 1200 letters to Bette spanning from May 1942 to October 1, 1945. These letters describe the life of a soldier in WWII. They describe over three years of confusion, fear, pain, anger, friendship, humor, joy, and even some miracles. Mostly the letters were written in honor of his love for Bette, and I’m sure he never thought they would be published in a book. He wrote the letters with “the pen,” and the letters describe what life was really like in the trenches of WW II. His letters tell how the war turned boys like him into men.*

*I read about how my father changed from a skinny recruit into a tough young private, relying on his letters to and from Bette to cope. Reading them revealed the hardships he endured. The filth, illness, and death were constant. Sometimes I laughed and sometimes I cried, and I often wished I could just pull him out of the letters to a place that was safe. He depended on “the pen” to reach Bette so she could love him from across the ocean.*

*Private Jim was born in 1920 in Westerville, Ohio, and graduated from high school in 1938. Before joining the army he served as music director at Westerville High School. He attended Otterbein College, now Otterbein University in Westerville, and met and fell in love with fellow music student Bette Lou Baker.*

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*They often performed music together at Otterbein - he on his violin, she on her piano. Bette and Jim were members of the graduating class of Otterbein College in 1943, with degrees in public school music. He enlisted to the Army in the summer of 1943, and they married in October of that same year while he was on furlough.*

*While serving in the Army, my father fought in battles and campaigns in Naples, Foggia, Rome, Arno, North Apennines, and in the Po Valley. He was in the Army for twenty-five months and overseas for fourteen months fighting with the Fifth Army Division under the command of General Clark. His last few months were served in the occupation force in Germany. He was awarded the Purple Heart, the African European Theater of Operations Campaign Ribbon with two battle stars, the Combat Infantry Badge, and the Presidential Citation Unit Award.*

*After his service in the army he earned a Master's Degree at The Ohio State University and then taught music at Bowling Green High School and both Libbey and Bowsher High Schools in Toledo, all schools in Ohio. He built extraordinary bands and orchestras. Known for his artistry, wit, determination, and storytelling, he was well loved by students, teachers, and administrators.*

*In 1957 he was stricken with Multiple Sclerosis. This disease eventually confined him to an Amigo cart which was his trademark everywhere he went. He touched the lives of everyone he met through his larger-than-life personality and passed away in 1996 due to a heart condition. Bette continued to thrive and passed away in 2009.*

*In 2025, I decided it was time to work on this book. I read and re-read every letter he wrote to Bette from 1942 to 1945. The stories they told took on a life of their own, creating a chronicle of that horrific time in history. I now consider this compilation of his intimate thoughts and experiences to be "sacred ground."*

*It would be impossible to place all 1200 plus letters to Bette into this book. These seventy-nine letters contain enough information to allow me to tell his story as a fictional narrative. His thoughts that I constructed as the lead-ins to the letters are my humble attempt to recreate what my father might have been thinking while he read these letters so many years after he had written them. They are based upon our conversations, the stories I heard him tell his friends, the letters themselves, the tape he made, and my understanding of the father who raised me. These semi-fictional thoughts are in italics preceding his actual letters, which follow in regular font. Please know that except in instances where a portion of a letter or Vmail could not be read, these are the actual transcriptions of his letters and Vmails.*

*Welcome to World War II and Private Jim's "Letters to Bette". May we all learn a lesson about the real story of war and about how "the pen" kept Jim and Bette together.*

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