

An Ingrown Web of the Living and the Dead

Rollin W. Workman

November 23, 2015

My name is John Frank Bradley. I was born on September 4, 1975, the 30th anniversary of VJ Day, the day Japan surrendered, thus ending World War II. I was named after my grandfathers, John Bradley and Frank Purvis. My father's name is Eric Bradley, but I will refer to him simply as "my father". It is around those three men that I will spin the web of my tale.

The geographical setting is Urbana, Illinois, home of the University of Illinois. Urbana is about 125 miles south of Chicago and 30 some miles west of Danville on the Illinois-Indiana border. The old road from Urbana to Danville passed by the edge of an area of abandoned strip mines. Coal seams formerly lay so near the surface of the ground that coal was mined by stripping away the top layers of rock and sand, and then blasting loose the coal and lifting it out. When the coal ran out, the pits were abandoned. They filled with water, often 4-0 to 50 feet deep. Somewhere back in the 1930's, the Boy scout Council which included Urbana established a camp not far from one of the pits. The camp was, perhaps still is, on a bluff overlooking the Salt Fork River, which flows on two sides of the bluff. Across the Salt Fork, the Council obtained swimming rights to an old strip mine pit. Campers who were beginners at swimming went down to the river where the water was not over their heads, though the muddy bottom came over their ankles. More advanced swimmers continued across the river to the strip mine. So much for geography and on to sociology.

John Bradley was born in 1923, and Frank Purvis in 1926. At the time, Urbana was just coming out of its status as a small town farming center. The University was catalyzing the change. The city was pretty much divided into two parts. The south half was University oriented. It was where the campus itself, student housing, and faculty residences were located. The north side of the city was populated by artisans such as plumbers, electricians, carpenters, etc., along with day laborers and small businesses. There were two grade schools in the city, one serving the north side and the other the south side. Everybody walked to school, and almost everybody went home for lunch. Hence, children from the two sides had little to do with each other until they met in the common junior high school (7th and 8th grades) and senior high school. There the separation of students ceased to be geographical and became age group differences. During high school, teen agers grow so fast physically, emotionally, and, one

hopes, mentally that a senior and a freshman know hardly more of each other than that the other exists.

That gap between John and Frank closed however in the summer of 1939 when they attended Scout camp at the same time. Frank was a 13 year old camper, starting to work seriously on accumulating merit badges so as to advance through the achievement levels, or ranks, of scouting. In 1939, he had attained Star rank and was particularly eager to see if he could earn the Swimming merit badge and even start on the Life saving badge. John was an old veteran Scout of 16, and was a Camp Counselor, whose special job was water activities. He was on the verge of the highest rank of Eagle, and of course already had the Swimming and Life Saving merit badges.

One morning, all of the boys, who were eligible to use the strip mine, were busily pursuing their activities. Some were working on merit badges; most were just “horsing around”, as the saying went, enjoying the fun of swimming, diving, and playing in the water. John was conducting a swimming class, when he felt that he should call for a buddy check. The swimmers were always divided into pairs. A buddy check consisted of whoever was in charge blowing a whistle, whereupon each member of a pair was supposed to get to his buddy, and the two hold up their hand clasped arms together. John blew his whistle. All of the boys held up their arms except for Fran’s buddy who couldn’t find him. John immediately started swimming underwater in search of Frank. A missing person created a dangerous situation because of the extreme depth of the water. Partly because the boys never strayed far from one another, and partly through sheer luck, in about 2 minutes John found Frank floating unconscious not far beneath the surface.

John pulled Frank to the side of the mine, sent four boys across the river and up the hill to the camp office, and immediately started artificial respiration. In those days, the process consisted of straddling the body of the victim and applying regular on and off pressure with both hands at the bottom of the rib cage. That squeezed the lungs, forcing air out of them. The pressure was then released; the lungs expanded drawing in air. John’s efforts worked. After an eternity, which was actually no more than a few minutes, Frank began to take intermittent, and then increasingly regular, breaths on his own, along with considerable coughing.

Swimming was obviously over for the day. Two of John’s messengers returned running with word that the camp’s only stretcher was on the way. As they waited by the strip mine, Frank gradually recovered his senses. He was confused at first about where he was and what had happened. But the confusion gradually cleared up, and Frank began to talk. He had had a bad cramp in his left leg; he couldn’t move; and that was the last he remembered.

Presently the stretcher arrived, onto which Frank was loaded despite his protests that he could walk. Back they all went to the center of the camp, picking up the novice, river swimmers on the way. The Camp Director called Frank’s parents; and he along with John drove Frank to the hospital in Urbana. Frank’s parents were there already. The doctors checked Frank over, declared that he was physically and mentally all right; and, for certainty, put him in a hospital bed overnight.

Two days later, Frank was back at Scout camp for the remaining week of the session. Though his parents had qualms about it, Frank immediately returned to the regular swims in the strip mine. He completed both his Swimming merit badge and got started on the Life saving badge. He was intensely motivated in his pursuit of the badges and never wasted any time with mere fun in the water. The camp staff, especially John, gave him special attention and encouragement for both merit badges. At dinner on the day Frank completed the swimming requirements, dinner included a huge cake with double portions for everyone.

Frank's family was extremely grateful to John for saving their son's life. As soon as summer camp was over, the family invited John for dinner, the first of many such get-togethers. Frank's father owned a small, neighborhood grocery store, which provided what could be called a lower middle class income. Frank's mother, who often helped out in the store, dreamed of taking a trip to some exotic place such as Yellowstone Park or Hollywood, but she knew she never would. Besides Frank's parents, there was an older sister, named Dorothy, age 17, four years older than Frank. Dorothy was proudly and talkatively "going steady" with a member of the high school basketball team. The parents hoped that the relationship would fizzle out after graduation, but they secretly feared that "going steady" would turn into "going sexual", with its everpresent danger of pregnancy.

John and Frank themselves developed an almost brotherly relation despite their difference in age. They were both kids. Hence world events were interesting but irrelevant to their lives. The start of World War II, the fall of France, the almost miraculous rescue of the British army from Dunkirk, the isolation of Britain by German submarines, were all adult stuff. So was the Japanese conquest of Korea and China and their increasingly obvious drive toward the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies, with its resultant gathering of the U.S. battleship fleet at Pearl Harbor. What mattered them was how well the Urbana football and basketball teams did, and whether the deposit on Coca Cola bottles might go up again.

That world of you and dances in the gym crashed unexpectedly and suddenly in what was early Sunday afternoon, December 7th in Urbana. It was the day and moment when battleships went extinct and aircraft carriers became the new Lords of the Seas

Immediately, all American males between the ages of 18 and 35 were subject to the military draft. A man could, in a sense, escape the draft by enlisting in one of the military branches. Lots of men did that, including John. He joined the navy, That branch of the military services tended to attract mid-westerners, for whom the ocean was a kind of vaguely romantic part of the world which they had never seen.

John went to boot camp at Great Lakes, or more formally, the Great Lakes Navy Training Station. It was north of Chicago and south of Milwaukee. Those unfamiliar with boot camp may not know why it had that name. The initial training period was 3 months. During that time, a recruit was required to wear what might best be called spats, though that probably does not mean anything to most people either. These so-called “boots” consisted of a canvas, wrap which covered the trousers from ankle to half-way up the shin, and were tied by a cord that went through holes the length of the wrap. These so-called boots were of no earthly use except to designate that the wearer as a lowly rating of “seaman apprentice”, or, more simply “seaman recruit. At the end of three months, the boots were thrown away, and the former wearer received the rating of Seaman Second Class. Some men, with prior skills, were then sent to what the navy mysteriously regarded as a related specialized training schools. I say “mysteriously” because, for example, men who were excellent mechanics from tinkering with cars might be routed to Yeoman’s school, where they learned typing and writing formalized navy messages. The great majority of boot camp graduates, however, got on trains which took them to San Diego or San Francisco, where they were assigned to active ships, or to troop ships that took them to Hawaii, where again they were similarly distributed as crewmen of the ships of the rapidly expanding Pacific 7th fleet.

John’s boot camp group went to San Diego. There they were offered the opportunity to volunteer for submarine duty. John was one of the few who volunteered. He became part of the original crew of a newly commissioned submarine, officially numbered S139. Eventually, the crew named it the Sea Stalker. The sub’s shakedown cruise was to Pearl Harbor, which became its home base. By that time, it was the summer of 1942. The sub prowled the Pacific, sometimes alone, sometimes with one or two other submarines. At first, they stayed fairly near Hawaii as a kind of shield around the islands in case of another Japanese attack. In the fall of 1942, the U.S. effectively gained control of the Pacific, and, as it turned out, effectively won the war in the Battle of Midway. From then on, U.S. submarines ranged far and wide in and over the waters between Hawaii and Japan.

Routinely, a sub spent a time on what; years later during the Vietnam War were called “Search and Destroy” missions. After several weeks, the sub then returned to Pearl Harbor to get re-supplied with fuel, food, toilet paper, and sometimes torpedoes. The harbor visits also provided time for maintenance, collecting and sending accumulated mail, and giving the crew recreational shore leave.

In later years, as was and is so common among veterans, John never talked much except in a general way of his days at sea between late 1942 and the early part of 1945. His letters home were about routine, his companions, fun on shore leave, and his gradual acceptance

of coffee as a drink, resulting from the awful stuff that the navy called mk. That concoction came as a powder which had to be mixed with water to get something white resembling the chemically treated product of a cow. Incidentally that powdered milk was manufacture in Salina, Ohio, in a factory owned by the father of the late Club member Herbert Curry, whose bequest funds the Club's annual Spring Outing.

Germany surrendered in July of 1945, and all American military attention immediately shifted to the Pacific and the campaign against Japan. In early August, John's submarine made its normal return to Pearl Harbor both for the usual purposes and for the installation of the latest sonar equipment.

While the latter was going on, the crew got a greater amount of shore leave than usual. Like most sailors under those circumstances, John spent the greater part of his free time at movies, dance halls, brothels, and bars. It wasn't long before the steady sameness of those activities began to make him bored and irritable. One fateful evening a few days before his submarine was scheduled to return to its patrolling, John got into a bar fight with a group of soldiers. John doesn't remember what started the fight or whether it was about something or just a result of everybody being drunk. When the navy Shore Patrol and the army Military Police quelled the disturbance, John had a broken bone in his left leg. The hospital patched up the leg with a cast that ran from his knee to his foot. He was also reduced to moving about in a wheel chair until the bone healed enough to make crutches possible.

On top of all that, he was docked a month's pay.

Meanwhile, his submarine on schedule "stood out to sea", as navy lingo put it. A temporary substitute for John was hurriedly added to the crew from the rapidly growing pool of men being gathered for an anticipated invasion of Japan.

Several weeks later as August neared its end, John was hobbling about Waikiki Beach with a cane. He fell into conversation with a Yeoman who worked at the headquarters of the Navy Pacific Command. The conversation drifted around to duty assignments, and the Yeoman happened to ask John what his assignment was. John replied that he was waiting for his ship to come back from patrol and he would be recovered enough to rejoin the crew.

The Yeoman thought for a moment and then said that he vaguely remembered a report on John's case. John was from the S139, wasn't he? Without waiting for an answer from John, the yeoman added, "That ship ain't a comin' back. She hit a mine and sank in three minutes. No survivors."

John was stunned. How did the Yeoman know, he asked. The information came via the sister submarine with which the Sea Stalker was patrolling. Nobody anticipated there being any mines in the area the two subs were watching over. The Sea Stalker had submerged for a test of its air system and was resurfacing. It rose straight into a mine and never even reached the surface before plunging down to its grave. What about the new sonar, John asked. Didn't it detect the mine. The yeoman couldn't or wouldn't answer that question.

John never joined another ship. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the U.S. dropped its atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and, after the internal struggles between the Emperor and the Military of which we heard a few weeks ago, Japan surrendered. The huge American military machine turned to dismantling itself. The first task of the navy was to convey the vast numbers of men from the Pacific theater back to the U.S. mainland for discharge. The guiding formula became, the longer a man had served, the quicker he went back to the States. John was among the earliest of the Pacific force to get home and discharged.

I will leave John for a while and turn to Frank. Franks' 18th birthday was on May 23, 1944. By that time, a man could volunteer for some military branch only until his 18th birthday. Once that date was attained, he had no choice. He went where the draft sent him, which was almost always the army infantry. Early on, Frank decided to follow John's lead into the navy. Shortly before his crucial day, he went to the recruiting station and signed up. Oddly, he was not ordered to report to Great Lakes until near the end of August. Hence, he had all of the time between his June Urbana High graduation and his departure. He spent the days heeling out in the store, and the evenings and sometimes the nights out enjoying his first complete freedom from parental oversight since entering first grade..

As it had to, August and boot camp arrived on schedule. The three months of recruit training passed; and, after the customary 10 days leave, he and his company took the train to San Diego and an expected troop ship. Contrary to what they had guessed would be their destination, the ship disembarked its passengers on Guam. There they found a number of worse for the wear beach landing ships which had been built for the invasion of Okinawa, and had participated in subsequent island battles. They were being assembled to be taken back to San Diego for restoration for use in the great armada landing on Japan. The ships could travel under their own power, but their fresh water condensers and their guns usually didn't work. Frank was assigned to the crews of four different ships conveyed successively to San Diego. Each time, he was returned to Guam on a troop ship. Finally, after the fourth round trip, near the end of summer, he was delivered to Pearl Harbor instead of Guam, there to wait for a more permanent assignment. His family got letters and phone calls from San Diego, in which Frank described his activities. A week after arriving in Hawaii, Frank wrote that he had a new, permanent ship and

was about to go out to sea. It was a long while before the family received another communication. And that message was not from Frank, but from the Secretary of the Navy; and it was not a letter, but a telegram. In the usual formal language, the Secretary regretted to inform them that Frank was lost at sea and presumed dead due to hostile action.

That was the news which John learned when he got back to Urbana after his discharge. He contacted Frank's family not long after getting home to ask about Frank, having heard nothing for several months. The war's end was not the happy time which John had anticipated for 3 years.

But there was more to Frank's story than John would ever have imagined. I mentioned earlier that, before the war, Frank's family was worried for fear that his older sister, who was "going steady" might go too far and become pregnant. That never happened. The romance petered out after high school graduation without any consequence. Instead, it was Frank, of all people, who ended up with a child. After the telegram from the Navy announcing Frank's death, the family received a short note from him, written at the time he went into the navy and left with a friend to be given to the family in case Frank never came back. In it Frank told the family that he had been having a sexual affair with a girl of 18 whom he met while still in high school. Her name was Melinda Baxter, and she lived in Fithian, a small town some 15 miles from Urbana. Frank's note said simply that she might be pregnant; and, if she was, he was the cause.

Melinda was in fact pregnant. She contacted the family and said she wanted their acquiescence in an abortion. It was hardly a problem that the family wanted to deal with while still despondent over Frank's death. After a lot of commotion, involving lawyers and the court, Melinda consented to let the baby be born, provided that she immediately relinquish all claims of motherhood and let Frank's parents become legal guardians of the child. That was formally approved by the court; and Melinda left the state for some place unknown. Frank's sister, Dorothy, took over the care of the baby.

The baby became my father. He was given the name William, Frank's middle name. So, since William was my father, Frank was my grandfather.

But John was also my grandfather, my other grandfather. It took 25 years and two marriages to make that occur. And, when it did, the web referred to in the title of this paper began to be spun. I will now tell of those years and marriages.

After his navy discharge, John enrolled at the University of Illinois using the benefits of the GI Bill to pay his way. At first, he suffered from a mental malady common to long time service men upon return to civilian life. He had lost the habit of thinking. He could only half understand anything he read in the newspaper. It took several weeks of Frank's first semester before his mind was fully active again. But, after those weeks, he found his way and proceeded well academically.

Besides his studies, John spent increasing amounts of time with Frank's family. At first, he visited the whole family; but, gradually his visits became concentrated on Frank's sister, Dorothy. By his junior year, the two y were dating regularly, which became "going steady", and which ended shortly after John got his Master's Degree with what on the surface was a formal proposal by John, but what was really a mutual recognition that they loved one another and wanted to be married. The wedding took place in July of 1949. It was held at Dorothy and Frank's parents' house with a half dozen guests present. At the following picnic super, my father, who was four, remarked to Dorothy that he liked the man who held his (my father's) hand during the ceremony. That remark opened up words from both John and Dorothy, which they had intended never to mention, even to each other. Both had seen the man, and he was Frank. Cautious inquiry revealed that Frank and Dorothy's parents had also seen Frank, but that apparently nobody else at the wedding had. The nice man soon faded from my father's consciousness for many following years.

John's college major was Botany. He did so well that he secured a job on the faculty of the College of Agriculture, teaching and doing research in the College's hybrid corn development program. He and Dorothy had three children, a girl, followed by a boy, and then another girl. The first daughter was given the name Louise. She is the only one of the three who plays a major role in my story, so I won't bother with the names of the others. John and Dorothy formally adopted my father, making a family of six, counting the parents.

When my father turned twelve, he joined a Scout troop, and the next summer went off to scout camp for three weeks. For the first week, he swam in the river, but then graduated to the strip mine. He noticed that, whenever he went swimming, the man who held his hand at the wedding stood nearby and watched the swimmers. My father began to wonder about it, since he never saw the man around the camp. When he asked a counselor about the man, the counselor professed not to have seen any such stranger near ether of the swimming locations. My father

went back to scout camp for three summers in all; and The same man always appeared at swim time, always watching when my father was in the water; always gone when my father was on dry land.

It was not until the stranger appeared at my father's high school graduation ceremony that John and Dorothy decided it was time to reveal their conviction that it was Frank, my father's biological father, or rather Frank's ghost. my father's biological father. My father was bewildered for several days, while he tried to comprehend the information. But he was 18 and full of the excitement of life. Bewilderment turned to a fascinated interest in ghostly phenomena and ways one might communicate with them.

In that latter endeavor, he was joined by Louise, John and Dorothy's daughter, my father's cousin by genetics and sister by adoption. The two researched ways of causing or enticing ghosts to appear. They tried them all, but Frank never appeared as a result of their efforts. He did come, however, as an indirect result of their work. That work drew Louise and my father together. After my father got a Degree in Accounting from the University in 1968, he and Louise were married. Frank was at the wedding, hoped for but unexpected. He stood a little to the side of the minister who officiated. All of the family members saw him, but the minister and none of the guests did. When Louise and my father performed the traditional ceremonial kiss, Frank put his arms around both of them. They felt a warmth of joy, but then Frank was gone.

At the time of the marriage, my father was 24, and Louise was 19. Though marriages where one side is 19 usually do not last very long, theirs is still going strong after 47 years. It was through that marriage that John joined Frank as one of my grandfathers.

Besides drawing my parents together, their joint ghost research had another, darker result. In one project, they wrote to the U.S. Navy Department requesting information on the details of Frank's death. The Navy was compiling its own comprehensive record of naval activities during the war, and was able to reply fairly readily. It reported that shortly after Frank arrived in Hawaii after his months of shuttling landing craft from Guam to the States, he was assigned as a last minute crew replacement on a ship leaving Pearl Harbor immediately. Further records made it all too clear that the ship in question was John's submarine. Frank was John's replacement on that last, fatal patrol.

My parents thought for over a month before they could decide whether to tell John what they had learned. Then, with apprehension, they took the navy's letter to John and Dorothy's house, gave it to him, and left him alone to read it. Some days later, John phoned. He thanked them for the letter. He then said, "The ways of God are hard." That was all. He never uttered another word on the subject, even to Dorothy. Dorothy said that she believes that she sometimes almost caught him crying when alone in later years. . He brushed away her attempts to help. All she could do was hug him and say, "I loved him too."

The web of my tale is reaching its outer loops. In 1989, at age 65, Dorothy developed breast cancer which spread to other organs of her body. By the first week of October of that year, it was obvious that her death was near. The family took turns sitting with her day and night at the hospital. Late on the third evening of the vigil, my father and Grandfather John were sitting in the room. The lights were low, and both were dozing. They were jolted into full wakefulness by Dorothy's voice, saying, "I'm leaving now. Frankie has come to help me. He knows the way. I love you both." In the dim light, they saw Dorothy and Frank moving together toward the door. They faded out just as they seemed to be about to leave the room. My father jumped up to turn the lights up. John took Dorothy's arm and tested for a pulse. There was none. They summoned the nurse on duty, who summoned the physician on duty, who declared that Dorothy was dead. In due time, she was buried next to her parents.

John moved into my father's house, or I should say, our house. He could not bear being alone in the house he had shared with Dorothy. During the second winter, he expressed a desire to visit before he died the areas of the Pacific where his submarine had patrolled so many decades before. My father revealed that he had long wanted to do the same thing. A travel agency found a tour by ship that seemed designed for people like John and my father. Its ships departed from Honolulu, went from island to island that figured in the war, and ended up in Nagasaki, Japan. The passengers then flew home from the Tokyo airport. The ship picked up Japanese passengers and gave them the same tour in reverse.

John, my father, and my mother bought places on a tour which started in mid-July with a flight from Chicago to Honolulu. They occupied two cabins on the ship, my parents in one and John in an adjoining one, with an interior door between the two spaces. The island battlegrounds fascinated the three of them. The weather was excellent, with warm days and nights on the quiet Pacific. There is a kind of magical atmosphere around one, when a person sits on deck watching

the sun go down over the endless westward expanse of water. John particularly enjoyed sitting alone as night came on, thinking about his past. My parents did not feel the magic and usually went inside to watch the evening movie, or sit at a table in the bar listening to the ship's band, conversing with other passengers, and occasionally becoming one of the three or four couples on the small dance floor. Sometimes, John was joined by another passenger, a younger man, who was also entranced by the transition of day into night over the water. The two sat in adjacent deck chairs, sometimes talking, sometimes not. It is usually better just to sit in wonder, awe, and contentment when immersed in that magic peace

On the last night of the voyage, when the tour ship was some hundred miles out from Nagasaki, John took up his usual evening contemplation. He stayed out later than usual. The next morning, my parents gave their usual knock on the inner door between the cabins to see if John were about to go with them to breakfast. John did not answer the knock. My parents opened the door. He was not there. His bed had not been slept in. He was not on the deck or in the dining room or in the ship's hospital room. Alarmed, my parents contacted the Captain's office. . A search was made of the whole ship. John was not aboard. It was not until then that anybody thought of looking through the items on the small desk in John's cabin. There was the note. It read, "Tonight we will be near the resting place of my submarine. Frank has sometimes at with me as the sun went down. I asked him to come for me when we got near to our submarine. He promised he would. He will help me put my body in the water and then will guide me, as he did Dorothy. I, too, love you both; I always will. Frank says he will watch over you and come to guide you when, far in the future, time lets you go."

One more thread to weave around the web and I am done. Not long before my grandmother Dorothy died, she received a letter from a Margaret Snyder. The letter writer asserted that she was the granddaughter of Melinda Baxter, my father's biological mother. Elizabeth asked permission to visit the family and perhaps even meet her biological uncle, my father. There was much family discussion of whether to respond to the letter, and, if so, how. In the end, Elizabeth was given the permission she sought; and she appeared three weeks later.

She and I now have two children: a boy who is a senior in high school, and a daughter who is a freshman there. Neither cares much for swimming or playing in the water. It's soccer, soccer, soccer day in and day out. Perhaps both of my grandfathers would like that. Perhaps they actually do.