"Johnny Came to College to get an Education – He Found Romance Anyway": The Unconventional Wartime Story of John and Marie Teigue Renza

Julien Dumont and Katie Gorham

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Professor Judy Barrett Liotff

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Introduction

Among the long list of economic, social, and political changes that American society experienced during the World War II era was a trend towards whirlwind romances, courtships, and marriages. The pressures of war, namely the conscription of most able-bodied American men, placed many young couples in precarious positions as they faced a long-term separation, namely a "courtship by mail," or a hasty marriage. Marriage was a very popular option; between 1940 and 1943 there were one million more marriages than would have been expected at prewar rates.[1] The trend was so ubiquitous that the popular and scholarly press alike took note, and articles in publications from *Good Housekeeping* to the *American Sociology Journal* examined its causes and consequences.[2]

In their journey as a couple as well as many other aspects of their lives, John Renza and Marie Teigue bucked the trends of their age. Unlike other couples in similar circumstances, John and Marie did not opt for a hasty marriage or even a long-term courtship by mail. In fact, for a significant portion of the war, John and Marie were not in contact at all, and it was only due to a happy coincidence that they began their wartime correspondence again, after several months of no communication.

For this reason, as well as many others, the wartime story of John Renza and Marie Teigue is that of the exception to the rules. Overall, the war was simply a backdrop to this story, rather than an overpowering force affecting it.

Part I: Time Together

When John Renza enrolled at Bryant College in early 1940, he expected the next few years of his life to proceed in much the same way that the previous eighteen had. The war that was raging in Europe was far from his mind as he took his first steps towards earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Commercial Education. And although he enjoyed the social life typical of young men his age, romance was not particularly on John's mind that winter, either.

Over the next five years, John's experiences would shape the course of his life and alter his perceptions of the world tremendously. These transformations began on the fateful day when he first entered South Hall on the East Side of Providence and continued through his years at Bryant, as well as during the course of his service in the European Theater of Operation during the war. Through it all, his decision to attend Bryant proved to be the critical factor in the outcome of much of what happened to him.

John Renza and Marie Teigue had both been born and raised in Rhode Island. After graduating from Saint Mary's Academy of the Visitation, Marie enrolled at Bryant College in the fall of 1939. She would go a whole semester at Bryant before meeting her future husband; John entered Bryant University during the second semester of the year, after graduating a semester early from high school.

To say that John and Marie were part of a small collegial class would be an understatement; their Bachelor of Arts in Commercial Education class was comprised of a total of ten students.[3] Obviously, John and Marie quickly came to know each other very well, and their friendship eventually blossomed into a long-term romantic relationship. During her time at Bryant, Marie struggled in math, but John was all too happy to help her with any difficulties she

had in the subject. This is one of many circumstances in which John and Marie enjoyed one-on-one attention from each other.

As time went on the two grew closer, until eventually fate intervened to help put romance on the forefront. Because of their last names, Renza and Teigue, John and Marie were always last on the alphabetized class lists used at Bryant College. This meant that when the school chose six students to perform their supervised teaching practicum, John and Marie were left behind to form their very own class. Under these circumstances, there was ample time for romance to grow between Marie and John. Indeed, it seemed that a romance between the two was almost inevitable. When asked about falling in love with his wife, John Renza often jokingly asks, "What choice did I have?" making light of the fact that for over a semester the only peer that John saw during his teacher education classes was his future wife.[4]

During their time at Bryant, both John and Marie found time to participate in a number of campus clubs. Marie took part in as many school organizations as she could, including her sorority Sigma Iota Chi. John was also very involved on campus and participated in dances and other social events on a regular basis.

World War II had an important impact on Bryant College, in both a physical, demographic sense and also in terms of students' attitudes and actions. Bryant College had never been a large school, but during the war it saw its numbers decline drastically as more and more men volunteered or were drafted into the army. Marie recalls how Bryant College was affected by the war in this aspect, explaining, "There weren't any men around…to speak of. Most of them were gone. But of course I was very lucky that John was there the whole time."[5] Marie also remembers how the school "had dances for the service men and we had a wonderful time" and how members of the Bryant faculty and student body put forth great efforts to try and

help with wartime efforts on the home front.[6] Both Marie and John remember that the atmosphere of the Bryant campus was different after the U.S. became involved in the war. Marie recollects:

> The whole atmosphere of the College at the time changed. Instead of being, you know, such a happy group and everything, we were always worried about – were we going to hear something about someone that we loved or some student we knew had, you know, been killed.[7]

Student activities changed accordingly. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 and the subsequent entrance of the U.S. into the war, John and Marie became two of the first members of the Bryant Service Club. The club aimed to provide Bryant alumni serving in the armed forces with letters and care-packages in an attempt to help keep morale high. John, a co-founder, helped the club get off the ground under the guidance of Public Relations director Clara Blaney. John still fondly remembers Miss Blaney:

> [She was] a person that you would never forget having known her…she was very concerned, very helpful. And then after you graduated, she continued this association…she was a great organizer and she represented the college very well.[8]

John, who organized and sent countless care-packages during his time as a Bryant student, was later able to see for himself the positive impact that the Bryant Service Club was making when he received packages and letters from the club during his own service in the ETO. After receiving one package from the club he helped found, John wrote to the Bryant Service Club, "Thank you very much for your thoughtful gift; you can rest assured that I appreciate it wholeheartedly and from the bottom of my heart too."[9]

Marie, like John, was a member of the Bryant Service Club. Her main job for the club, along with her sorority Sigma Iota Chi, was to knit articles of clothing that would later be sent off in care-packages to Bryant Alumni serving in the military. Marie remembers struggling to knit these clothes, and throughout her involvement with the club she was only able to knit the simplest scarves because of her poor knitting skills. Luckily, her knitting abilities increased with practice, and by the end of her time at Bryant she was able to create a reasonably hole-less scarf in no time.

Though he participated in efforts to help with the war on the home-front during his college career, John found it increasingly difficult to stay in school while so many men his age left the country in order to fight overseas. When the Selective Training and Service Act was signed by President Roosevelt in September of 1940, John was granted a Class 2A deferment thanks to his status as a student and was allowed to remain at Bryant for the next three years. Although the United States government awarded the deferment to him deservingly, John felt guilty that he was going to school while millions of young Americans risked their lives fighting for their country. John remembers. "It was difficult being a male student when men of my age were already serving their country at the time."[10] But eventually, in early 1943, John's deferment expired and he was drafted shortly thereafter. In spite of this, John was able to graduate in absentia because he had unknowingly taken extra credits during his senior year practicum. As he continued along the path of training, deployment, and actual service in Europe, John made use of the skills he had learned at Bryant. Indeed, these skills would prove to be the deciding factor for his supervisors' plans for him, and thereby indirectly served to decide his fate.

Part II: John

John Renza was sent to Camp Maxey, Texas in May 1943 to start his training as a member of the U.S Army. In a June 1943 letter to Clara Blaney, John described his work as a stenographer at Camp Maxey:

> At the present time I am working in the Battalion Headquarters office doing all sorts of clerical work, but I'm supposed to be a stenographer. I can type stencil in my in my sleep so many I type during the day. Everything in the Army is done in a stencil. Thanks to Mr. Mercier [one of John's professors at Bryant] for teaching me.[11]

It is obvious that John Renza was very busy at Camp Maxey and that his Bryant education helped him tremendously both there and later in his military career. Having learned how to type stencil at Bryant, John was well suited to work at Battalion Headquarters and become a stenographer. Though this skill meant that he was part of the Army's support services, and he never had a rank above corporal, it did allow him to work at headquarters and receive some amount of special treatment. John was trained as a stenographer for the 158th Combat Engineers' Battalion, whose main focus once they joined the war overseas would be to fix and/or reconstruct bridges for military purposes. But as an administrator, John was rarely at the front of the battlefield and was therefore relatively safe. This is a fact that resonates with him to this day. Indeed, like many of the World War II generation, John is often self-effacing in his remarks about his efforts during the war:

> I was the battalion stenographer. And that sounds like a good assignment – well, maybe it was, because that's why I'm here today…. My outfit really had it rough. I didn't, because I was always in a protected area because of my assignment.[12]

In addition to working at Battalion Headquarters during the day, in the evenings at Camp Maxey John taught illiterate soldiers how to read. John drew great joy from this job and was amazed at just how many soldiers were in fact unable to read. In his June 10 letter to Mrs. Blaney, John said of his teaching assignment, "It really is fun and very interesting. The clever things these 'grownups' say- you'll be surprised. I am glad I have been assigned to this because it will help me in time as a teacher."[13]

After his graduation in 1943, though John was busy with his military service and training, Bryant College and the Bryant Service Club were never very far from his heart. Shortly after arriving at Camp Maxey, John wrote a letter to the Bryant Service Club co-founder Clara Blaney and explained his thoughts:

> You really don't know how much you miss home and your friends until you are so far away from them all…. How is the Service Club functioning? I hope it is going on as good as usual. Under your management, Miss Blaney, I know it will always keep on, because you really put everything you got into it, and then the students will like working with you. I know I enjoyed every bit of it, especially when you are doing it for your country and for those whom you know.[14]

After the Combat Engineers of the 158th Battalion completed their training at Camp Maxey in November of 1943, they were sent to Shreveport, Louisiana, where they were to continue with their military preparation. John, however, did not follow the rest of his Battalion to Louisiana. Instead he was sent to Mississippi Southern College in Hattiesburg, Mississippi to

take courses in Army administration. Because of this, John was exempted from a lot of the physical training that his Battalion endured in Shreveport, and this is another example of the doors his degree from Bryant opened for him. Though he was split up from his Battalion, John enjoyed his time in Mississippi, as he was able to use some of the skills that he learned at Bryant and was able to learn new skills that would help him as a stenographer.

After a few months in Mississippi, John rejoined his outfit, and in April 1944, the 158th headed to England. During the buildup to the D-Day invasion of June 1944, John and his Battalion were stationed in Stroud, just outside of London. Due to his position and skills as a stenographer, John spent the majority of his time at headquarters. However, even though he was almost always in the presence of high-ranking officers, he never realized that his Battalion was to be part of the massive D-Day operation. "We never knew what was happening, and I being in headquarters you would think that I would know," he recalled, "If my outfit had information, believe me it was really confined to those officers in high position….We just took each day as it came."[15]

It was while he was stationed in England that in a strange series of events John met up with his brother, Italo, who at the time was also stationed in England with the U.S Army. John was out with some soldiers from his unit running an errand when they got lost. They saw some U.S soldiers "thumbing" for a ride and picked them up, asking for directions back to their own unit. While driving these soldiers back to their headquarters, John overheard one of them talking about Italo. John quickly turned to speak to the soldiers and after a short conversation realized that his brother was stationed less than 25 miles away. The soldiers John and his outfit had picked up were able to take John to his brother, which was a great thrill for both of them. John had not seen either of his brothers, who were both in the military, in some time. In a *Providence*

Journal article about the chance encounter, John described what seeing his brother meant to him. "When we saw each other – wow! I just can't explain it in writing."[16] The incident served to significantly boost John's morale.

Similarly, hearing from family and friends through letters lifted John's spirits and brought back good memories of his prewar days at home. Hearing from the Bryant Service Club especially served to brighten his mood because of the good memories it brought back. In an April 27, 1944 letter to Clara Blaney, John wrote:

> Somehow or other, my memories of Bryant cannot creep out of my mind. It seems to me as though my time spent there has been years of happiness and success. Maybe it is the time of the year, the season, and the wonderful picturesque environment of England that recalls to my mind such memories. Wherever I turn here, I'm surrounded by large patches of beautiful green grass, similar to your campus.[17]

This letter in particular clearly demonstrates John's affection for his friends at Bryant, as well as the campus itself. The interaction of the Service Club with Bryant Alumni served to create lasting and meaningful relationships with Bryant graduates overseas, and John Renza's relationship with Bryant proved to be very long-lasting indeed.

Early on the morning of June 6, 1944, the long-anticipated Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied France began. The invasion was a complicated one and involved foot soldiers, the Navy, and Air strikes. The "launching point" for the attack was Normandy, France. Though the scheme and plan of the attack was said to be brilliant and the preparation for the attack was enormous, in the end the success of D-Day came down to the courage of young soldiers and their willingness to attack the enemy with full force. In analyzing the success of D-Day, historian

Stephen Ambrose has said, "It all came down to a bunch of eighteen-to-twenty-eight-year-olds. They were magnificently trained and equipped and supported, but only a few of them had ever been in combat. Only a few had ever killed or seen a buddy killed."[18]

Around six days after D-Day , John and the rest of his Battalion arrived at Normandy and progressed quickly through France, Belgium, and Germany. In December, the 158th Combat Engineers Battalion was caught up in the Ardennes Offensive, more commonly known as the Battle of the Bulge. The Battle of the Bulge was a German offensive designed to stop, or at least slow down, the Allied forces' advances towards Germany. In the rush of battle and the subsequent movements, John was forced to abandon all of his personal belongings, with the exception of one notable item. In a January 9, 1945 letter to the Bryant Service Club John recalled the Battle of the Bulge:

> I want to acknowledge receipt of your Christmas package containing the sweater. The sweater is really coming in handy; it is so full of warth and comfort, and I just could not have asked for a better fit. May I thank you very much for your thoughtfulness in sending me such an excellent gift.
>
> The package was received on 18 December – quite some time ago, but this has been the first time I've had to myself to take care of some personal correspondence.
>
> The reason is that a couple days after, we were forced to face the enemy; and since then, we were on the go right along. Rather a nice way to have spent the holidays, isn't it? As a result of all the commotion I lost all of my personal belongings plus my Christmas packages which I had received a few days before.

> The only gift which was saved was your sweater, and only because I was wearing it. I'm so glad now that I had it on my person, otherwise I would have lost it too.[19]

While John was in Germany he was also lucky enough to run into his other brother, Mario**.** John's brother was part of the 5th Infantry Division and like the 158th Combat Engineers was advancing through Germany. Mario's infantry division was moving to the front of the lines when he spotted a sign indicating that the 158th Combat Engineers were located there. He naturally stopped and tried to find John. He went to the Battalion Headquarters but was unable to locate John; he did, however, find John in his tent where John was taking a nap.

Though John and Marie had a strong relationship, it did go through its ups and downs while John was fighting oversees. A few months after John left, Marie began feeling the pressure from her friends to go out. Marie recalls:

> I had promised John that I would be his girlfriend and that I would be his steady and that I wouldn't go out with anybody else. Well, to make a long story short I stayed home for a couple months and it got kind of boring, my friends out having a wonderful time at all these dances and everything. So I sat down one night, I regret it to this day by the way, I sat down [and I] wrote John a "Dear John Letter'"telling him that I didn't want to go steady and I didn't really tell him that I wanted to go out but that's what it was. So I went out.[20]

Part III: Marie

Sociologist Max Lerner once famously wrote, "When the classic work on the history of women comes to be written, the biggest force for change in their lives will turn out to have been war."[21] According to leading scholars of women's history during World War II, some of the changes women faced as a result of the war included a new status as working Americans, their resulting financial independence, and an overall growing sense of empowerment, among others. During World War II, conscription and the associated decline in the size of the male work force caused a labor shortage – a nationwide problem that was eagerly met with a surge of female workers. This huge change, encouraged by government advertisements that promoted the idea of "Rosie the Riveter," characterized a very significant portion of women during the war. Indeed, the percentage of women in the work force increased from 25 percent at the beginning of the war to 36 percent at the war's end.[22]

However, although there are countless examples of women in World War II who were empowered by the prospect of working for the first time, Marie's case does not reflect a change in her attitude as a result of the war. Marie entered Bryant College with the hope of obtaining a Bachelor of Arts in Commercial Education, two years before the U.S. entered the war. Her decision to join the workforce as a teacher therefore reflects her prewar mentality, rather than a change of mentality as a result of the war.

After John was drafted and began his training and service in the military, Marie's life began to change as she graduated college and entered the work force. Upon graduation from Bryant in 1943, Marie planned to work in East Providence as a teacher, but unfortunately she lost the job before it even started to another candidate. After being notified that her position had

been given to someone else, Marie was obviously distraught and went back to Bryant in search of help finding another position. With the help of her alma mater and the ever-supportive Miss Blaney, Marie was able to find work at the Union Central Life Insurance Company.

After saying goodbye to John, Marie's life continued along the same general path. She worked for Union Central, and then in 1944 got another job working for the state of Rhode Island. She lived at home with her Aunt and Uncle who had raised her. She helped care for her younger cousins, dealt with wartime rationing, and after writing the infamous "Dear John letter", enjoyed going out with friends and dates.

Then, similarly to the conditions surrounding their dating during their time at Bryant, fate stepped into Marie's relationship with John for a second time. As a Rhode Island State employee during the election year of 1944, Marie was charged with the duty of counting and processing absentee ballots of soldiers from Rhode Island who were stationed abroad. As luck would have it, during this process Marie came across the ballot of one John S. Renza. Marie recalls:

> Our group was in charge of taking in the soldier voting applications that had come in from Europe. So I had maybe 10 or 15 at a time and you processed those. Who's name do I come across but John Sebastian Renza. Oh, I say, so I wrote John a letter and John wrote me back.[23]

Part IV: End of the War and Its Aftermath

When John and Marie resumed their correspondence in late 1944, victory in both Europe and the Pacific was still months away. The couple remained in contact as sweethearts until the end of the war, and when John arrived home in November of 1945, Marie was the one who picked him up.

John and Marie Renza were married two years later, in November of 1947. Marie quit her job at Union General and was a dutiful housewife and mother for the next twenty years. John and Marie had three children, Jack, Jane, and Gerald, two of whom also graduated from Bryant College. When Marie was forty years old, after her children were old enough to care for themselves, she became certified to teach elementary school and taught in Johnston, RI for the next twenty years. When John returned from Europe, he was granted a teaching position at Bryant. He remained in teaching for the rest of his career.

The Renzas have three grandchildren , one of whom received an MBA from Bryant, and one great-grandchild. Until John's death on December 12, 2009, they remained active members of the Bryant University and Rhode Island communities..

Conclusion

World War II is often considered the source of much change in Americans as individuals and American society as a whole, and in many cases this generalization is true, but there are always exceptions to this rule. John and Marie Renza are a good example of a couple that resisted changing the course of their lives because of the war. They did not succumb to the exigencies of war and rush into a hasty marriage before John was sent overseas. Because of John's training in secretarial skills at Bryant College, he was able to be enlisted in the Army support services and was not as directly subjected to the horrors of war as some other soldiers were. Marie displayed a sense of empowerment not associated with World War II; she had planned to work for a living well before the United States became involved in the war.

Overall, the Renzas were a couple that fell in love, grew apart, grew up, and found each other again on their own terms, against the backdrop of World War II, and not because of it.

Notes

[1] Judy Barrett Litoff, David C. Smith, Barbara Wooddall Taylor, and Charles E. Taylor, *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor* (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 1990), 11-12.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Commencement Exercises Program, August 6, 1943" (1943). *Bryant University Commencements.* Paper 27.

[4] John and Marie Renza, interview by authors, February 20, 2009.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] John Renza, letter to Clara Blaney, June 12, 1943

[10] John Renza, interview, 2009.

[11] John Renza, letter to Clara Blaney, June 10, 1943

[12] John Renza, interview, 2009.

[13] John Renza, letter to Clara Blaney, June 10, 1943

[14] John Renza, letter to Clara Blaney, May 23, 1943

[15] John Renza, interview, 2009.

[16] *Providence Journal*, undated newspaper article, circa April 1944.

[17] John Renza, letter to Clara Blaney, April 27, 1944

[18] Stephen E. Ambrose. *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 25

[19] John Renza, letter to Bryant Service Club members, January 9, 1945

[20] Marie Renza, interview, 2009.

[21] Max Lerner, *Public Journal: Marginal Notes on Wartime America* (New York: Viking Press, 1945) quoted in Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, "U.S. Women on the Home Front in World War II," *Historian* 57, no. 2 (1995): 349.

[22] Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, *American Women in a World at War: Contemporary Accounts from World War II* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997), 167.

[23] Marie Renza, interview, 2009

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Renza, John, letters to Clara Blaney and Bryant Service Club, May 23, June 10, June 12, 1943, April 27, 1944, and June 9, 1945.