



The Last Farewell Pacifica couple bring memoir of wartime romance to life

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Thirty years after the end of World War II, Edmund Burke O'Connell spent months typing out a memoir of the colorful and dramatic days he spent as a military combat photographer amid the lush landscape of the Tuscany region of Italy.

At the center of the story was his whirlwind courtship of a young English-speaking Florentine woman during the Allied liberation of her city and the months they spent together at her family's villa, the Villa Calamai, which also served as his temporary base of operations.



But as the war's end drew near O'Connell – like so many of his military colleagues – faced deployment and the possibility of permanent separation from his beloved.

"I just fell in love with the story," said O'Connell's stepdaughter, Pacifican Julie Whitman Jones, who ran across the draft of the manuscript among some of O'Connell's wartime belongings.

"I promised my stepfather before he died that I would find a way to get this story published one day. It was so tender and romantic."

She and partner Tom Sullivan recently fulfilled that pledge by publishing "The Last Farewell – A Journey of the Heart," the culmination of a two-year collaboration involving extensive research, editing and memorabilia and photo gathering.

“When Julie showed me the manuscript I thought ‘what an amazing story.’ I’m definitely a military history buff, but the romance really appealed to me. All great love stories deserve to be told,” said Sullivan, a history teacher and former newspaper reporter. “You could sense in the pages that this was Burke’s way of reliving his wonderful days in Italy.”

A former enlisted journalist with the U.S. Navy who served during the Persian Gulf War, Sullivan is editor of the American Legion Post 238’s newsletter. Although both he and Jones have a mutual interest in writing, putting together a published book from a basic manuscript proved challenging.

“We had just two copies of the bound manuscript that I remember my stepfather typing out on a manual typewriter,” Jones recalled. “We also had a collection of World War II photos he and others had taken, as well as medals and citations.”

The pair spent months editing and organizing the manuscript, revising the timeline and adding dialogue and other relevant historical information.

“The details about names and places Burke recalled were very precise, but we were privy to some primary and secondary source information that wasn’t available to him at the time. It was work to figure out who some of the people were and some of the references he made. I knew having worked on a copydesk I could piece it together,” said Sullivan whose research included requests for military documents from the National Archives and correspondence with the military Stars and Stripes newspaper.

“It was like searching for the needle in the haystack and would have taken twice as long if we hadn’t found a second partner,” said Sullivan whose research on the World Wide Web hooked them up with Don Wiedenmayer of Worcester, Vermont.

Now 90, Wiedenmayer was also an Army still photographer with the same unit and was partnered with O’Connell to document the final months of the Italian Campaign.

“Once we found Don, the floodgates opened. He’s a packrat and had photos, military orders – momentos of everything he had done in the service and he taught me to interpret the coding on the bottom of Army Signal Corps photos,” Sullivan said. “Since he doesn’t have a computer, we mailed information back and forth for a year.”

The completed book, says Sullivan, is filled not only with photo selections from O’Connell’s personal files, but also with Wiedenmayer’s Army Signal Corps photos, unit rosters, military orders and Stars and Stripes newspaper articles that complete his one-time photographer partner’s vivid recollections of the months spent in a foreign country during wartime.

Jones, meanwhile, contributed details about her family’s life with O’Connell in his later years after he married her mother, Jan Whitman in 1972 when she was just 15.

For a brief time the family lived in Italy, where O'Connell brought them to visit the 15th century Villa Calamai, which Jones recalls was shadowed by a giant fig tree.

"My stepfather talked about Italy and the war all the time. He was very articulate. In addition to being a great photographer, he was a gourmet cook, taught classes and painted. He really was a wonderful man and I cherish those memories," she said.

Prior to the war, O'Connell enjoyed success as a New York stage actor and was reputed to have been the production person who handed the copy announcing the attack on Pearl Harbor to a CBS radio announcer to read on air.

Readers of "The Last Farewell," say Jones and Sullivan, will get a detailed glimpse into the life of a military combat photographer and relive O'Connell and Wiedenmayer's action-packed days documenting a war that led them from the sands of North Africa to the foot of the Swiss Alps.

"It's a bittersweet collection of close calls in combat and situations of divine intervention set against the unique life of American combat photographers to capture and experience the rich cultural history of Italy during wartime," the book's press promo reads.

"I can only imagine what Burke saw through the viewfinder, taking pictures of battles while getting ready to run like hell for cover," said Sullivan, noting the book pays homage to all the military combat photographers whose stories might not yet have been told.

"This is about life in the military, but it is also very much a romance. Burke's story will appeal to both men and women alike," said Jones. "What makes this story so unique is that this man had to make a decision. All of the other photographers in his unit were getting ready to go back to the U.S. and O'Connell is thinking 'I'm leaving the woman I love; how am I going to get back to her?'" Sullivan said.

Besides a good read, Sullivan and Jones are hoping the book will encourage other military veterans, particularly those who live in Pacifica to share their personal experiences. "These need to be shared before they disappear, particularly those who served in the Italian Campaign which has been called the "Forgotten Front,"" Sullivan said.

The writing duo are already planning their next projects: A publication of the some 200 photos they have gathered, not to mention a trip to Italy to research the fate of the villa. And they're already pondering a screenplay of "The Last Farewell."

"It was through a chance lunch meeting that Burke and Tina met and their courtship turned into a real fairy tale. When his unit, the 196th Signal Photo Company was facing redeployment to the Pacific, Tina had no way of knowing whether her beloved Burke was every coming back. When I first started reading the manuscript, I didn't know how it was going to end," Sullivan said.

So how does this fairytale turn out?

Say Jones and Sullivan: “We don’t want to give anything away, but let’s just say it has a happy ending.”

© *The Last Farewell - A journey of the heart*

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