

Brother Don

I grew up in the 1930s and 40s with three brothers in Waverly, IA. I was third of the four. The eldest, Don, was born in 1923. As I was seven years younger, I have few memories of much association between Don and me as we were growing up. He was just “my big brother.” The one exception was the time in the fall of 1940 when he needed a string bass player for a family trio he was putting together and he recruited me for the job. I have written elsewhere about that episode (<http://www.ocomm.net/memories/tenth.pdf>) – see the chapter titled “Music, Music, Music”. It provides a good place to begin a series of personal recollections of “Brother Don”. As it turned out, this experience also introduced me to a tendency that burdened Don throughout his lifetime; his inability to follow through with any career goal he undertook.

For me, playing in that trio—Don on the vibraphone, brother Ted (age 14) on the trumpet and I on the base fiddle (perched on a footstool to reach the neck of the instrument)—was a pretty heady experience for a ten-year-old. Don had acquired the vibraphone and the bass sometime in the past few months (I don’t remember how), after his graduation that year from high school at age 16. At the time, Ted was playing the trumpet in the high school band. However, my career as a bass fiddle player was cut short suddenly in January 1941 when Don decided to join the Navy. That was almost a year before the Second World War began, but Don announced that he wanted to play in the Navy Band. Apparently, he had been promised by the Navy recruiter that he could enlist to go to the U.S. Naval School of Music. That school was a requirement for assignment to the Navy Band, but he could not be assigned to the school until after he turned 18.

So, my few other associations with big brother Don ended when I was ten. From then on, he was an occasional visitor to the family home, and most of what I learned about him came from the family grapevine. I will relate here what I remember from the grapevine and from occasional opportunities over the years to spend some personal time with him as we connected from time to time.

It was no small deal having a big brother in the Navy at that time. The war hadn’t yet started and, although the U.S. was just beginning to mobilize, we were still a pretty unique family in town with a son in the service. Here is the earliest photo I could find from my mom’s album showing him in boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station outside Chicago. After boot camp, he was assigned sea duty on the heavy cruiser U.S.S. Augusta in the Atlantic fleet. His job on that ship was as the navigator’s yeoman. Yeoman is another name for a clerk...or a secretary. I suspect that the primary reason a 17-year-old sailor fresh out of boot camp got such an assignment was that he could type. In those days, typing was considered work for females and not many guys could do it.

As it happened, the Augusta was considered at that time to be the flagship of the President of the U.S. So, when President Roosevelt scheduled a meeting at sea that August with Winston Churchill, prime minister of England, Don was given the opportunity to witness some significant modern history. He was probably not on the Augusta for very long after



that, because his 18th birthday was in June and I assume the school of music was on a regular academic schedule and started classes in the fall of the year. I do know that he was transferred to the school in Washington, DC, sometime later in 1941 and was he there when the war started for the U.S. in December.

I have little recollection of hearing any news for the next year concerning Don's activities at the School of Music. The first news I can recall hearing was that he had been transferred out of the school because he had gotten married. Apparently, no married students were allowed in the school. It wasn't until recent years that I gained some insight into the activities leading up to that marriage. When our mother died in 2000, I acquired all of the letters she had received from three of us while we were in the service, Don and Ted in WWII and I in the Korean War. As I perused the letters from Don (now in the possession of his daughter Dee Ann Cutler), I found two of particular interest, written in July 1942 from Washington. The first, written in the first week of the month, announced that he had a new girlfriend and that he was going to be spending July 4th with her family at their vacation home on Chesapeake Bay. The second was written a couple of weeks later and requested permission from our parents to get married...but not to the new girlfriend. He and Vera Mackey of Kingston, NY, were married on July 24.

Of course, as a 12-year-old brother, I was unaware of all of this and was simply advised that Don had gotten married and he and his new wife would be visiting us in the near future. In fact, I do recall their coming to visit that summer, because they displaced Ted, Tom and me from our bedroom. However, a year or so before that, we had converted our garage (we had no car) into a family room/bedroom in which the three of us could sleep in the summertime, so we probably weren't inconvenienced all that much by their visit. Here is a photo of the newlyweds from mom's album that was taken while they were there.

When Don returned from his leave, he was reassigned to sea duty aboard the U.S.S. Arkansas and was in the ship's band. I don't recall hearing much about that assignment till he sent home some pictures from North



Africa (Morocco, I think) where he went ashore after the invasion. At the time I had visions of his having been involved in the invasion, but I don't think he was. In any event, as he was in the band, I don't know how big (or small) a part he might have played .

Meanwhile, in April 1943, his first child, Donna, was born in Kingston, NY, where Vera had apparently returned to live with her parents while Don was at sea. I don't recall when I first heard it, but my father always insisted that Donna was not Don's child. In later years, other evidence surfaced that seemed to have confirmed Dad's suspicions, but Donna was always accepted by our family for what she was presented to be. The photo on the left shows Don with her when he returned from sea duty. Certainly, in my brief encounters over the years, I never



saw that he treated her any differently than the other kids.

Sometime after he returned to The States, he was assigned to the band at the Naval Training Station in Dearborn, MI, and he was living there in September 1944 when his second child, Donald, Jr., was born. I don't recall much interaction between Don and our family while he was in Michigan. He was always a good musician, so I'm sure he was well regarded by his superiors, and he continued to receive promotions. As I recall, he achieved the rank of Musician First Class (pay grade E6) while he was there. However, his wanderlust finally got the best of him and, the next thing we knew, he had been accepted as a cadet in Naval flight training. He was transferred into primary flight training at the Naval Air Station in Memphis, TN, where he began preparing to become a pilot in the Naval air services.

He was in primary training when the war ended in August 1945. As I recall, he had completed enough training by that time to have soloed in the primary trainer (a Stearman biplane) and was working toward his wings. Of course, the need for pilots plummeted when the war ended and Don, having almost five years of service by then, could get out of the Navy any time he wanted. That's what he chose to do—although I don't know exactly when. I also don't know what he did after he got out—that is, until he showed up in Waverly with his family sometime in 1947 (or possibly early 1948). Meanwhile, his third child, David, was born in November 1945 in Kingston, NY. Either Don was still in the Navy in Memphis at that time or he was with his family living in Kingston.

In any event, by two years after the end of the war, he was in need of work and our dad offered him a job working in the greenhouse. I'm sure that the Old Man was not particularly enthused about that situation—as he was not by any means Don's biggest booster—but, as they say, blood is thicker than water, and he wasn't going to let that family starve. I can recall Dad once telling me, "The only way your brother is going to make it in this world is if they divide up the profits every Saturday night."

Vera was pregnant at the time with their fourth child. They had found housing in some inexpensive units Waverly had built for veterans in the far-west end of town. I was 17 at the time and I can still vaguely remember visiting them in that unit. On the right is a photo of Ted and Don standing in front of the flower shop at that time. Ted had come home from the Army in 1946 and had been working full time in the business.

Don and Vera's third son, Douglas, was born in Waverly in April of 1948. Regrettably, he succumbed to crib death that spring. It was no doubt good that they were surrounded by family at that time, but I don't recall anything about how the family—particularly Don and Vera—dealt with it. I simply remember it as a family tragedy. The child is buried in a section called "Babyland" in the Waverly cemetery.



I don't remember how long Don worked in the greenhouse, but it wasn't long. His bluster wore on all of us pretty quickly, but the Old Man's tolerance was paper thin to begin with, so Don's early departure was almost inevitable. However, he and his family continued to live in Waverly for another year or so and, during that time, he held at least three jobs that I can recall, each of which gave me an opportunity to become personally involved. As he was a professional

musician, he first got a job playing the tuba in a polka band out of Austin, MN. I don't remember the name of the band, but it was a fairly popular group in the area at the time and I think they even played regularly on regional radio stations. My personal involvement with that activity came when Don invited me to go along with him to a Czech community northeast of Waverly, where the band was scheduled to play for a wedding dance. He seated me on the stage beside the band, where I had a birds-eye view of the activities on the dance floor. For me, it was entertainment at its best. Polkas and schottisches were unknown dance movements to me, and the folks out on that dance floor got into them in a very big way.

His next job was selling candy and sundries out of a truck on a route in northeast Iowa. My only recollection of that job was the time he invited me to accompany him on his route. As I was licensed to drive a truck at the time (being a necessity for some of the vehicles at the greenhouse), I even drove for part of the route that day. I have no idea how long he had that job, but sometime not long after that, he became the advance man for a small circus. The advance man is the guy who goes into any small towns that might be interested in hosting the circus and arranging the details of the visit. My only recollection of involvement with that activity was driving his car (a 1927 Packard) to a town north of Waverly to pick him up at the circus site there. I do recall that it was a fun car to drive...it was old but very fast.

I don't remember exactly when Don left Waverly for his next endeavor, but it was sometime in 1949 that he left and joined the Army. Their fifth child, Daniel, was born in November 1949 in Great Lakes, IL. By then he had been assigned to the Fifth Army Band, stationed at Fifth Army Headquarters at Ft. Sheridan in Chicago. Before that assignment, he had gone to basic training at Ft. Riley, KS. I know that because, a year and a half later, I was in the same basic training company. One of the sergeants there remembered him. Here is a brief extract from a letter I wrote home from Ft. Riley on January 28, 1951:

I have a new address now. It's a familiar address and you have received mail from it before. In fact I'm the second member of the family to take basic training in the company. It's Co B - 87th Inf. Regt. I'll be here for the remainder of my basic training. About 3 or 4 weeks.

Up until this cycle this was a company for training ex-swabbies. This is undoubtedly the reason Don took his training here.

Don's rank in the Army was Staff Sergeant and, while he was at Ft. Sheridan he did more than just play an instrument (presumably tuba) in the band. Every Saturday, our family would gather around the radio in Waverly and listen to a Chicago radio station at noon where they featured a live concert by the Fifth Army Band. In the credits after the concert, the band's staff arranger was identified as Staff Sergeant Donald Ecker. As I said, he was a good musician.

Except for those concerts, I don't recall anything about Don's service at Ft. Sheridan or the whereabouts of his family at that time. In August of 1950, I assume he was being shipped overseas, because Ted and I were asked to use the greenhouse pickup truck to tow their house trailer (which had been sitting idle by our second greenhouse north of town) to Kingston, NY, Vera's home town. Presumably, his family was going to live there while he was in Japan. A few months later (April 1951), I had finished basic training myself (in the Infantry) and was awaiting orders at Ft. Riley when I received a letter from him. He was in the 293rd Band at General Headquarters of the Far East Command in Tokyo. It was apparently a response to an earlier letter from me in which I suggested that, in the Infantry, "we feed bandmen to the mules." At the time,

he was awaiting a direct commission as a 2nd lieutenant in Special Services. Special Services is the branch in charge of entertainment and recreation. That was his current branch as an enlisted man.

That is the only letter from him that I still have. The next time I can recall hearing from him, he was a Special Services officer stationed at Ft. Devins, MA. At the time (early 1952), I was back at Ft. Riley, now as executive officer of a basic training company. He had written (or called) me that he was going to be one of the officers overseeing a troop train moving men from Ft. Devins to a post in California. The train would be traveling through Ft. Riley and would be making a lengthy stop there on a Saturday. He asked if we could spend some time together during their stop. I hadn't seen him in years so I agreed enthusiastically.

When he showed up in our orderly room that Saturday, he found me busily signing passes. The captain was gone that weekend and left me in charge. As it happened, this was the first weekend in our company's basic training cycle in which the trainees were allowed to go on pass—that is, to go off the post and visit one of the nearby towns. But, to leave the post, they each needed a “pass”—a wallet-sized document signed by an officer, typically the company commander. However, the CO was gone and I was stuck with signing over 200 passes. So, when Don appeared, I set him to work signing passes, so we could get off to spend some time together before his train pulled out.

His sixth child, Dee Ann, was born in Shirley, MA, in November 1952, while he was stationed at Ft. Devins. After that assignment, he spent some time as a Special Service officer in Alaska. As I recall, Tom (the fourth brother) spent one of his summers while in college (possibly 1954) working on a tugboat in Alaska while Don was living there. Whatever I might have heard about their time together that summer, I can't remember, nor can I recall anything about the remainder of his Army career. I think he left the Army in late 1955 or early 1956. His seventh child, Dirk, was born in Columbus, OH, in June 1956. By then, Don was on the road doing sales for a company that sold recreation equipment to the Army through their Special Services officers.

And, by that time, I was out of the Army myself and enrolled in college, which provided my next opportunity to spend a little time with my big brother. I had stayed in the active Army reserves after I was released from active duty and was in a reserve unit in Ames while I attended Iowa State College (now University). One of my Army reserve activities was competing on a rifle team. In the summer of 1956 I was selected to a team that was to compete at the National Rifle Matches to be held at Camp Perry, on Lake Erie in Ohio. On my way to the match, I scheduled a visit with Don at his home in Columbus. However, when I arrived, he was gone—on a sales trip to northern Ohio.

I can't remember much about what it was like being welcomed there by Vera and six kids, the youngest of whom was just two months old. I was invited to stay (most likely on a sofa) and left the next morning for Camp Perry, where I arranged to connect with Don in a town near the camp later in the week. We did meet one evening for dinner. I hadn't seen my brother since our pass-signing session at Ft. Riley more than four years earlier. He was now 33 years old, but hadn't really changed much. The old familiar bluster was still most evident and it did not appear to me that he would ever change. I think it was only shortly after that when Don moved his family from Columbus to Las Vegas, NV. The word I heard from the family was that he had moved to escape his creditors. He had taken a job playing in a band at the Golden Nugget Casino in Las Vegas.

Their eighth child (Dale) was born in Las Vegas in January 1962. Sometime in the next decade, I vaguely recall that I traveled with my family to Waverly to visit my parents, and Don and his family were traveling through at the same time, presumably on their way to visit Vera's family in New York. I do recall Dale being with them at that time, because she and our daughter Karen are the same age. However, it was not until the celebration of our parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary in Waverly in 1972 that our families had a chance to spend some significant time together. Happily, that get-together was documented by a professional photographer.

That photo collection does not have a picture of Don and Vera together, but here are photos of Don talking to Mom's brother Pete (given name Valmah) and Vera talking to an unidentified lady guest.



On the right is a photo of all those family members that were present at the celebration. Included from Dons family were four children (David, Dee Anne, Dirk and Dale) and one grandchild (Dee's son Kenneth).



I think the next time I heard from Don was a telephone call one evening a few years later advising that Vera had cancer and asking me some questions about her situation. Earlier in my career I had worked in cancer research (although just basic stuff; nothing clinical) and had even once given a lecture at the institute in Buffalo, NY, where Vera would be going for therapy.

However, I was not qualified to provide any advice, so I just listened, commiserated and requested that he keep me informed about her progress. Interestingly, that diagnosis provided the opportunity for the last few visits we had with them before they both died.

I don't know how the system worked in her case, but she apparently qualified in her home state of New York to be considered for (experimental?) therapy there without cost. Of course, this required traveling across the country to get from Las Vegas to Buffalo. (There may have been other sites, but Buffalo was the main one). So, during the years when they made those trips, they would show up at our place for a couple of days while they engaged in their current enterprise—a roving flea market business.

In fact, they didn't come to our place to visit. It happens that our house at the time was just up Interstate 55 in suburban Chicago from Montana Charlie's Flea Market, where they would set up a booth over a weekend and peddle cheap jewelry on which my multi-talented brother would do engraving. We went out to the flea market site a couple of times while they were here to watch him at work. Not surprisingly, engraving was not the only talent he demonstrated there. His gift of gab attracted an abundance of customers and kept them captive while he worked.

They traveled in a van that accommodated them and their dog for sleeping, so they always declined our offer of a spare bedroom while they were in town and simply parked their van in our driveway. Their dog traveled with them wherever they went. I don't recall the breed, but I remember that it was a friendly little critter and that it loved MacDonald's hamburgers. Their next stop on their way east after our place was always Shipshewana, Indiana, where another well-known flea market was located.

I don't know how many years Vera was treated in Buffalo before she passed away there in October of 1983. By then she was sixty years old. My parents may have received information about her funeral and interment, but we were not in the information loop and I have no memory of any particulars.

About a year or so later, that van showed up in our driveway one last time. This time, Don was accompanied by his son David...and, of course, the same dog. I think he was still on the flea market circuit, but I'm not sure—and they still declined our offer of accommodations in the house. My brother was obviously still grieving the loss of his wife but I'm sure that having David as a traveling companion was helpful to him.

Then, in January 1988, I received a call from Las Vegas. Don's daughter-in-law (Don Jr's second wife) told me that he had died—apparently of a heart attack. He was 64 years old. I think, at the time, he was living in a trailer home parked on the property of that son. As it happened, that call came just as we were preparing to travel back to Waverly for the funeral of Ted's elder daughter, Lynn, who had died five days earlier. When we got to Waverly—and Don's family had assembled in Las Vegas—I talked to one of Don's other sons (David, I think) and volunteered to fly to Las Vegas so that the extended family could be represented at his services. My offer was declined unceremoniously.

Over the years since that day, our contact with Don's family has remained limited—although brother Tom tells me that he remains in touch with a couple of his kids on social media. I have tried to maintain an Ecker family tree, but his branch of that tree remains fairly incomplete in my records. And, as I look back over the years in which my brother and I had infrequent opportunities to share time and space, I can honestly say that those opportunities continue to provide memories that I look back on affectionately.