



TOM POTTS

Old friends shouldn't fade away

Losing touch with friends who have been important in our lives seems to hurt more as we grow older and have more time to reflect on the past.

So, the voice I heard on the phone a few weeks ago brought back memories and tears.

I hadn't heard Ron's voice for five decades, but there was a quality — maybe his Baltimore accent — that made it sound familiar.

In 1945, Ronald Mergenthaler and I had enlisted in the Navy just days after our high school graduation.

We sat together on the train to Chicago and the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, and we were assigned to the same barracks.

The first four weeks of boot camp brought new and exciting adventures.

But it all changed on a Sunday morning as I sat on my bunk and opened mail.

The letter from Dad simply said my only brother had been killed in action in Europe. He was 21. I had just turned 18.

I stumbled across the room to show the letter to Ron. I don't recall his words of comfort, but I do know he stayed with me throughout the day and evening, finally suggesting that I find a pay phone and call my folks.

Long distance was a luxury in those days, and I hadn't even thought about calling my parents.

Dad talked first and told me how Mother knew the dreaded news when she saw the Western Union messenger come to the door.

According to my father, she had rushed upstairs crying while he read the first words of the brief telegram:

"The secretary of war asks that I assure you of his deep sympathy in the loss of your son..."

I also talked with my mother, and her calm voice gave me great comfort.

With tears streaming down my face, I pushed open the phone booth door and headed back to the barracks to share the conversation with my buddy.

Ron remained my close friend during the remaining weeks of boot camp. We attended the same training schools, but our Navy careers eventually parted, and we were assigned to ships in different parts of the world.

So now, 58 years later, I talked to a friend who had stood by my side during the most difficult day of my life.

Being able to talk to and e-mail an old friend has reminded me of how much I want to reconnect with other friends from many years ago.

Several of us are helping each other track down high school and college friends. What a joy it was recently to receive a call from California from another high school friend and then, a few days later, a call from Canada and a college roommate I had lost contact with many years ago.

As we advance in years and move from city to city, friends are made, and friends are forgotten. Often, we don't find time to keep in touch — and sometimes when we try, it is too late.

But old friendships, as well as old memories, are to be nurtured and cherished, and reaching out to find those we knew and loved in the past can bring many rewards.

I know.

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