

## The War Hero

*By Alta Follis*

He was a veteran of WW II. He had served his country well when he came to settle in the small California town of Walnut Creek. While the town wasn't so small that everyone knew everyone else, many people knew him, even if they hadn't been formally introduced. His was the face that never seemed to turn and look at you directly. He always seemed to be so intent on his destination, that he never noticed the people who said Hi or saluted him as he passed on his way.

While no one seemed know where he had been born or lived before the war, his history of being a soldier was known by many and he was afforded the proper respect for his service. It was known that he had nearly been killed behind enemy lines somewhere in Germany, but had not let the bullets fired over, around and at him deter him in his mission to get an important message to his fellow soldiers.

He seemed to constantly be in motion; always going somewhere or coming back from somewhere else. He wandered the town from one end to the other. What he was thinking or what he was searching for, no one ever really knew. My mother said that he was just another restless soldier who couldn't seem to settle down to civilian life.

He came to live with my family for a while in 1952. I was six years old. I don't know how it happened. One day, he was just there, willing to eat whatever was offered to him. He didn't take up much space in our crowded home. I was told his name by my mother and told to not be a bother to him. I was happy to leave him alone at first. He didn't strike me as being overly friendly. He seemed to spend a lot of time brooding about the past and avoiding contact with others.

As the youngest, and meekest of a large family of noisy and often violent people, I knew about brooding and avoiding others. I did a lot of it

myself and recognized what he was doing. After a while, this is what drew me nearer to him. He calmly accepted me and my small attentions.

His name was Pots. I always wanted to put a Mister in front of that, as I didn't know what his military rank had been. He couldn't very well tell me had I asked him. For he wasn't a man in the true sense of the word, but a strong, stoic man all the same. He was a black Belgian Shepherd.

There were always a lot of children of various ages around our house. We were told never to run in his presence, as he would feel it his job to stop and drag down anyone who appeared to be fleeing. Much to my mothers' delight, we were also kept from yelling at each other or fighting. Pots would not tolerate that behavior. For this reason alone, I felt protected from my siblings while he was around. He was my first personal hero, keeping me safe from the harm that was inflicted by the big bullies with whom I lived. All children should have a personal protector to stand between them and the dangers of the world.

Pots saw it as part of his duty to walk me to school in the afternoons as I went off to kindergarten and then first grade. Most days, I did this alone as my mother was at her job when I got up after my siblings left for school. Knowing he would be there for me brought me comfort, even if he couldn't master the art of buttoning dresses and combing hair. If we chanced to meet anyone on the way, he was greeted. I may or may not be, for I learned that he knew many more people than I. I took on a great deal of pride and feeling special when this happened; for I was seen to belong to Pots. It was clear to all and sundry people that he belonged to no one.

After the school day ended, he would be curled up in the school yard, waiting to see me home again. As I came into his vision, he would stand and wait for me to join him. There was never any bouncing, barking or show of emotion on his part. He was doing his duty as he saw it and I saw his quiet acceptance of the job and responded accordingly. His dignity was clue

enough for me. But as a lonely child, having just spent another lonely day in a crowd of my peers, I hugged his presence to my heart.

Some days, I would find myself home from school not having been aware that it had been a solitary walk. When that happened, I knew it was once again, Pot's time to go wandering in search of finding what he was seeking in his travels. He would be gone for a while and I would miss him and wonder just what it was that called him away from our house and life. My mother said that we were not his only family, for there were others in town that claimed to "own" him.

I got a clue of what he seemed to look for when a military convoy would pass by our house. There were all the Army trucks and jeeps, sometimes as many as 40 of them, driving at the ordered 35 miles an hour. Pots would be sitting, his nose in the air, while he howled and whined. It was the most mournful sound I have ever heard, even after a life of hearing some pretty mournful things. While he often gave the impression of grieving, it seemed to put him even deeper into his normal funk. I knew then, that dogs can and do mourn.

We moved away from Walnut Creek and on into the rest of our lives. I never knew if we had left Pots or he had left us. Just as he quietly came into my life, he silently was gone from it, a very sad and lonely soldier, wanting to be with "the boys" and go back to a life he had remembered. But he left behind some valuable lessons. I learned that others can come into our lives and make a difference. Even though there is parting and sadness, there is also the love and comfort of having had someone there. When we least expect it, there can be someone to care and just silently be on our side. He taught me compassion and showed me that while I may not know about another's past, I can still learn the essence of their being. And, if I can't understand a person very well, knowing a bit of their history helps.