

A Family's Letters to their Young WW II Naval Officer - Francis L. Unnold

By Vic Bary

A Puzzling Gift

Ever since my appointment as Curator I have stared at a box of moldering letters in the Fridlington Room vowing to get to them after I had addressed more pressing needs for the archives. This past Spring and Summer I finally had the opportunity to read and index the over 150 legible letters and cards from family and friends addressed to young naval officer Francis L. Unnold (known to family and friends as "Roy"). Most of the family lived in Middle Village, Long Island, and I wondered how the letters got into the CHS archives. The letters offer a window into living conditions and family concerns on the home front during WW II.

Maureen Wakeman produced the 2012 accession sheet for the letters, which were given to us by local resident Michael Bodhan. Mr. Bodhan informed me they were found by a friend of his while rehabilitating a house at 66 Mohawk Trail, Westfield. Cranford City Directories listed banker Francis Unnold as residing there from 1976 through the publishing of the last City Directory in 1982. A review of those directories and the online newspaper archives at the Cranford Public Library revealed other Unnolds living in Cranford from 1961 until recently, providing a Cranford connection.

December 1942 - the Letters Begin

Beginning December 11, 1942, most of the letters are from Unnold's father (L. F.), mother (M.) and siblings who resided at 7723 66th Drive, Middle Village, Long Island. (The town no longer seems to exist). Also living at that address were sisters Norma, Florence, Dot, Joan, brother Robert, and sister Barbara, a toddler. Uncle Joe and Aunt Antoinette Unnold resided at 7744 66th Drive, and other relatives, the Truitts, lived in Brooklyn. Their son Tom was already in the Army awaiting OCS.

The first letters are addressed to Francis Unnold when he is in his final months as a Mid Shipman at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, and urge him to do well on his final examinations. The letters also cite difficult home front living conditions. Food stuffs are rationed and hard to find. During an unusually cold winter, coal is of poor quality and also difficult to obtain. Wartime employment opportunities are much better than during the Great Depression, but demanding. Father Unnold works long hours outdoors at a shipyard.

When male Unnolds do get a day off, gas rationing (1 ½ gallons per week) prevents them from visiting their favorite fishing spots. A worn out tire may cause a car to be put up on blocks for the duration of the War. Letters also voice concerns that sons and fathers will be drafted into service, or give news about those already drafted.

While the war is stripping neighborhoods of young men, it is also opening new opportunities for women. In May, 1943, Francis's sister Dot is interviewed for a pilot training position at Mitchell Field. Family members report that raises are accorded frequently in order to retain good workers.

Francis is Assigned to a Ship – USS Sands

No letters to Francis were found from the end of December, 1942 until a May 13, 1943 letter from his cousin Josiah addressed to him as *Ensign* Francis L. Unnold aboard the USS Brooks. He seems to have been almost immediately reassigned, as all mail from May 21 onward addressed to him on the USS Brooks is forwarded to the USS Sands. Unnold will serve on the Sands throughout his Pacific Theater deployment until sometime in mid-1945. Prior to his assignment to her, the USS Sands, which arrived in the Pacific Theater in January, 1943, had already seen action at Guadalcanal-Tulagi, the Russell Islands, and in the New Caledonia-New Hebrides-Solomon Islands areas.



USS Sands

The Sands is no spring chicken - she's a Clemson Class WW I design four stacker, whose keel was laid just before the end of WW I. She was commissioned as DD-243 in 1920 and was twice de-commissioned and re-commissioned before the U.S. entered into WW II. Perhaps because of her older design and light armament (four 4" guns and three 76 mm cannon), she will then be re-designated, along with other Clemson Class destroyers, as a fast transport - (APD-13). She will earn nine (six-month deployment) battle stars for her Pacific Theater service carrying supplies and troops (and landing them with supporting naval gunfire) in various major campaigns, and will finally be sold for scrap in 1946.

Shipboard 1943

Wartime censorship prevented Ensign Unnold from telling his family where he was and what his ship was doing – something they often wondered about in their letters to him - but records for the Sands allow us to fill in the blanks. At the time Unnold joined Sands, she was conducting various transport missions along the Queensland coast of Australia to the Papuan Peninsula. Beginning in September she embarked units of the Australian 9th Division to Lae, and later that month landed troops at Finschafen, New Guinea.

In May, Unnold receives letters from two friends who are now naval officers. Uncle Joe informs him that Uncle Fred (who is over age 38 and served in WW I) is now in the Army and has received a complete set of false teeth. (He will later be released due to his age.) Various immediate family members thank Francis for remembering birthdays and for his gifts. (Unnold seems to have been a very thoughtful and family-focused young man, remembering birthdays and holidays, and sending additional funds to his parents to help them out.) In June his father (who addresses letters to “Dearest Son Roy” – his family nickname - and signs them “Lovingly, Father”) informs Roy that Middle Village has an Honor Plaque with 1,400 names – and his is one of them. It takes about three weeks for letters to reach Unnold.

In June, father Unnold writes Francis asking if he has received the candy and harmonica he sent to him (he hasn't). Sister Dot informs him that every time she sees a blond in a naval uniform in Penn Station she's sure it's him. She recounts reading about fierce fighting in the Solomon Islands involving four destroyers and a cruiser, and wonders if Sands was one of them. In July sister Joan reports on the progress of the family Victory Garden. Father wonders why Francis hasn't yet received the candy and harmonica. Sister Norma writes they had porterhouse steak the other night, their first beef in weeks.

In August, Aunt Anne Truitt writes that her son Bill is stationed in England and that other neighborhood boys are serving in India and Africa. Mother writes that a friend of his made a surprise visit, he's now in the Air Corps. Another friend has died in a training crash of his aircraft. She thanks Francis for remembering Father's Day and calls him “the swellist son a Mother could have.” Father thanks him for the money he sent to the family and opines that “you American Navy boys are better than any five Japs.”

Brother Robert informs Francis that a friend of his has just made LT Jr. Grade (LT jg) and wonders when Francis will be promoted. He reports that another friend of his (Joe Castellano) is at Guadalcanal and that Cousin Joe has joined the Army after high school graduation.

From October through December Sands conducts amphibious exercises to the Hon peninsula and between Papua and offshore islands, and then inserts units of the 112th Cavalry Regiment on New Britain, and the Marines on Cape Gloucester.

In May, the Sands goes to Alameda, California for an overhaul, then returns to Pearl Harbor to embark men of the 81st Division Recon Company to the Solomon Islands. Numerous Navy friends write to congratulate Francis on his promotion and to tell him about their postings. He receives the most recent letter from Beverly Olsson June 8, 1944.

Shipboard – Second Half 1944

In August Sands rehearses for a Palau operation, and in September lands troops in Pelelieu and supports them with naval gunfire. In October she transits to Leyte Gulf for the invasion of the Philippines, landing and recovering troops and supporting them with naval gunfire. She also engages in shallow water mine-sweeping. The Battle of Leyte Gulf is the swan song for the Japanese Navy. Afterwards it will be unable to function as an offensive force. By October 21 the Sands has returned to New Guinea.

For unknown reasons there are no letters between June 7 and December 29 in our collection. Letters received then from his family thank Francis for his Christmas gifts and describe their Christmas celebrations. Father writes that brother Robert has received his induction notice. Mother, who has been laid up with a cold for weeks, writes that neighbor Ray Castalano is home on leave from Saipan where he lost 25 pounds. He doesn't talk about his experiences there or at Guadalcanal.

Shipboard – 1945 and Return Home

In early January Sands arrives at Lingayen Gulf in spite of kamikaze attacks. In late January she transits to the Western Carolinas, then joins a convoy bound for Iwo Jima. Eleanor Taylor continues her Navy-themed cards campaign. By mid-June Sands has completed three runs to the Okinawa area. It will be her last combat duty. In late June she transits to Pearl Harbor and then to San Diego July 11 where she will remain until the end of hostilities.

In April cousin Thomas Truitt, who has been with the 397th Infantry Regiment in Germany, writes "The War is over, over here." He will remain in Germany on occupation duty well until at least November. Brother Bob Unnold is a Navy Hospital corpsman stationed in Long Beach, California.

Francis seems to have been re-stationed to the New York area as all mail to him is reposted through "Com 3 New York". The last letter in the batch is from a fellow Sands shipmate dated July 12, 1945 from FPO San Francisco. He writes that there have been no transfers and he and his fellow crew members "don't know what's to become of us, but I guess it's all been decided."

Sources:

1. Letters to Francis L. Unnold December, 1942 – July, 1945, Archives, Cranford Historical Society.
2. [En.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Sands_\(DD-243\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Sands_(DD-243))
3. [Argworldwartwo.weebly.com/Uploads2/7/8/5.](http://Argworldwartwo.weebly.com/Uploads2/7/8/5/)

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