

Time enough to love

▼ LOVE FROM PAGE D1

first snuffles, the first steps and the getting up five times in the middle of the night for a glass of water — Ben had known his son only through the letters and V-mail. He'd had 45 days of leave to make up for those 26 months.

He'd arrived in the middle of the night, and as hard as it was to be patient they had let Bud sleep. The next morning, the boy had shuffled down the stairs, chin tucked against his chest, thumb in his mouth, black hair ruffled. He stopped at the bottom of the steps, uncertain until Ben squatted, bear in his hands, and said, "Hello, son." Bud had spent hours rocking in his little red chair with that bear.

Then one day Ben had sat beside Mary while he played piano. Bud tried to push him away — that was his place. A tantrum followed. Ben for once held his ground, and eventually Bud, clutching his teddy, crawled into Ben's lap. That incident had turned out well, but there was still an awkward uncertainty, a gray area between diffidence and assertiveness that was so unlike the "yessir-nosir" of the military.

Ben knew he had to trust to time and love. There would come a time when he wouldn't have to leave and he could be a proper father. Until then, love would sustain them, just as love of country had sustained the war

effort, just as love sustained the major and his wife beside the tracks.

They were touching so delicately now, speaking so softly. The world and the war did not exist, only this moment, this blessing, this instant of clarity.

The question echoed inside Ben's head: What do you say in five minutes? What do you say in five seconds, in a lifetime? Just one thing — I love you. And Ben could tell that every man on the train felt the power of that simple truth. You could say it in a hundred ways, you could say it without words, and it would cut through all the sacrifices and all the death ...

"For God so loved the world ..." muttered Jennings. He looked at Ben with a blank expression, then slowly

the edges of his mouth curled into a smile. Ben had thought Jennings didn't have a smile in him, but now the warmth of his expression was like a glowing hearth. "It's Christmas Day, don't forget."

Ben had forgotten. They had opened presents and sung hymns and eaten pie two days ago because he would be gone.

He looked back at the tracks and felt a twinge. The things you do for love — love of family, love of freedom, love of country, love of love.

The train whistled — a gentle prod from the engineer. Still, the suddenness of the sound made several men duck. Whitby hugged his daughter, then put her down and kissed his wife passionately. As he started to turn, she thrust the bundle into his arms. Tears were streaming down her face, but she didn't cry.

The men who had been standing in the aisle bolted for their seats. An uneasy quiet settled over the car as Whitby came through the door. He stooped to look through the window at his wife, who was waving. Just as he started to wave back, the train jolted into motion and Whitby reached to steady himself. Then she was gone.

He made for his seat and gracefully eased down. His weathered face was red from the chill, but there was no hint of emotion — no moist eyes, no quivering hands, no heavy sighs. He was calm — more than that, at peace.

With a quick smile around, he opened the package.

"Let's see what we have here," he said. "It won't do not to share these on Christmas Day. Here's some swell coffee for you, Jennings, some grape preserves for you, young man," he said to Jerry. He reached back into the bundle, pulled out a little brown parcel and sniffed it.

"Hmmm. This is for you," he said, tossing it to Ben. "She must've forgotten. I don't care for fruitcake."



MARTIN RHODES/TIMES-DISPATCH

This story is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Pfc. Eugene E. Graves, who was killed in action near Brittany, France, on Aug. 17, 1944.

A native of Peru, Neb., Graves served with the 359th Infantry, 90th Division. He participated in the landing at Utah Beach on D-Day and distinguished himself in the ensuing combat.

On July 3, 1944, he volunteered for a frontal assault on an enemy stronghold. He advanced through concentrated fire and threw three hand grenades that forced the enemy to surrender.

On Aug. 17, 1944, his unit was outnumbered in a heavy counterattack, but he stayed at his position and fought despite intense artillery, mortar, tank and grenade fire. "Though he received a wound in an exchange of hand grenades which later proved fatal, he declined medical treatment and continued to offer all the resistance possible until he died shortly thereafter," his citation reads.

He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster and the Bronze Star for gallantry in action.

Lee Graves is an assistant editor on The Times-Dispatch's Metro Desk and writes a weekly column about beer for the Weekend section.