

Portrait of war is looking for a home

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Charles Herbert Clark and his wife, Ivah, had seven children. The oldest was born in 1906, the youngest in 1926. Clark owned a market in a small town in southern Missouri, but the market caught fire and Clark had no insurance. So he became a meat cutter, and the family bounced around from Missouri to Illinois to Kentucky and then back to Missouri. The family settled in Wellston in 1931. The Great Depression was in full swing.

Those days in Wellston form the earliest memories for Frank Clark. He was the child born in 1926.

Tough times or not, the family survived. Kids were expected to work after school. The family moved from Wellston into St. Louis in 1939. Frank went to Blewett High School.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, two of Frank's three older brothers enlisted in the Army. Charles Bransford Clark, who was 20, and Harvey "Pat" Clark, who was 25, went into the Army Air Corps. Pat became a tail gunner and was sent to Europe. Charles became a bombardier-navigator and was sent to the Pacific. Frank, still in high school, dreamed of joining them in the military.

He graduated in the spring of 1943 and rushed down to the Marine Corps recruiter. He failed the physical because of an enlarged testicle. He had surgery to correct the problem, and in December 1943, while he was still 17, his mother signed the appropriate papers and he joined the Marine Corps.

Why not the Army Air Corps like his revered older brothers? "Who knows? I was 17," he said.

All three brothers sent their mother photographs. Charles looks dashing in his leather bomber's jacket with his silver first lieutenant bar on the shoulder. He's looking skyward. Pat and Frank sent formal photographs. Pat looks pensive. Frank is beaming in his dress blues.

One of their sisters had married an artist, and he turned those photographs into a painting sometime in 1944. Four feet by 6 feet with Charles on the left, Frank in the middle and Pat on the right. Ivah put it in the living room. Her three sons, all in harm's way.

Charles' plane was shot out of the sky near Borneo in October 1944. Two months later, 10 days before Christmas, Pat's plane went down. A plane in the same formation but at a higher altitude dropped a bomb that struck Pat's plane, which then exploded. Officially, the brothers were listed as missing in action. In reality, there was never much hope.

In February 1945, the Marines stormed ashore at Iwo Jima. Frank was among them. He was a radio operator. He was at the foot of Mount Suribachi when the flag was raised, but he didn't see it. He survived the battle, but cut his foot — probably on some coral in the water — and his foot became infected. He was sent back to Hawaii for treatment. His war was over.

After the war, he returned to St. Louis. His mother insisted he meet Phyllis "Nadine" LeGrand, whose father was the minister of the Methodist church in Wellston. He did. They celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary last month.

The painting of Frank and his two brothers hangs in their bedroom. They got it years ago when Ivah moved to California to live with one of her daughters. She has since died.

Frank is now 82. He looks at the painting and wonders, "What will become of it?"

Pat was married but had no children. Charles was engaged. No children, either. Frank and Nadine had a daughter, but something went terribly wrong after she graduated from college in 1970. Some toxic combination of medicines is what Frank believes. She has been institutionalized since 1972.

With all of his siblings gone, everybody who would remember Pat and Charles, who would want the painting? Perhaps the children of the artist?

"No, that sister and her husband had a son, but he's dead now, too. He had a son, but he's not interested in his grandfather's painting," Frank said.

Nor are any of the great-nieces or great-nephews. And so it hangs in the bedroom of a small apartment in Valley Park, a painting of three brothers who went to war so long ago. Frank talks wistfully of selling it to a history buff, but he knows the chances of that are slim.

"I just don't want to leave it here when I die."