

My Mom married a spy (and never told me)

R. Joseph Knudsen

Date of birth 6/2/1951

12 Alan Ave.

Danbury, CT 06811

203-470-5129

jk@hiqsgroup.com

My Mom married a spy (and never told me) page 1 of 2

“You need to see this now” my brother said, as he pushed a picture in front of me. “It appears to be a picture of mom in a wedding dress next to someone who is clearly not dad.” I looked up at him. “She looks really happy, very pretty and really young”.

Later in the living room as we presented our mysterious evidence to our mom she responded “Didn’t you know?” I don’t know whose eyes were wider but we both told her “no we didn’t”. “Oh” was all she said.

For me, already in my 20’s, it opened a door of relationship with my mother, because this too happened in her early 20’s. My mom, born in 1920, turned 21 in 1941, about the same time that our country entered into the European theatre of World War II. She soon volunteered to serve with the Red Cross in England. On the cross Atlantic troop transport women slept in quarters near the troops, but in berths that were high above the men. She did say, with a twinkle in her eyes, that many of the women were approached by men who said that they might never come home alive and couldn’t they spend just one night with them?

When she served in the Red Cross in England it was in a rehabilitation facility for American pilots injured in the line of duty. She said she played a lot of ping pong and regularly won her matches against the men. I was afraid to ask if her opponents always had all of their limbs. Growing up it was no secret to me that she had spent time in Europe and I often had wondered if she had dated anyone there, but the idea of a husband had never occurred to me. “Didn’t I know?”

In the aftermath of the war the occupation was “messy” and the Red Cross (and my mother) were right in the midst of the turmoil. That is when she fell in love with Charles and married him. Just like in the 1950’s World War II movies, like Casablanca, Charles was a real life spy. He had a diplomatic cover story and sometimes they moved from country to country in Europe with my mom’s Red Cross credentials as part of the plot. She won a surplus army jeep in a lottery that she was sure had been rigged so that the two of them had good transportation for his “diplomatic” work. My mother was NOT a spy and only his wife and companion. The best spy recruits at that time, and probably even now, were those who could not be blackmailed, especially those with no family ties. Charles family had a secret which only was clear in his mind as he got older and which caused him to volunteer for the army as soon as he was old enough, with no intention of ever returning to his home. He never met his biological father, being raised by his mother and his uncle (his mom’s brother). The problem was that his mother and her brother lived as husband and wife and told the world they were married.

Late in her life Mom told me only a couple of stories. I can’t imagine how stressful it was for her to have a husband involved in espionage. They were married a few years and always lived in Europe. One time he asked her to drop him off in front of a café and told her drive around a nearby park for a few hours and return for him. What if he never came out? Another time they drove to the border of the Russian occupation zone and he told her to wait in the jeep as he crossed into Russian territory.

My Mom married a spy (and never told me) page 2 of 2

Mom said she couldn't just sit there and got out and paced around, the guards nervously fingering their firearms just in case she tried something. After a few years of marriage a tragedy struck the couple one night at a dinner party. Charles looked his wife (my mother) seated next to him and said "Pretend to eat your food and dump it in the napkin in your lap. It's too late for me." After he died my mom was told that his poisoning needed to be kept a military secret. For almost 50 years my mother told everyone he had died of a virulent stomach cancer. She was loyal to our government and I supposed it was also a transferred loyalty to him as well.

My father, who married her a couple of years later, NEVER mentioned that mom had been previously married and even said he was her first love. I never talked to him about it and only after he died did she tell me the stories and show me her scrapbooks with pictures taken all over the continent and a very busy passport booklet.

How my mother met my father is a story for another time. They were happily married for over 50 years. I truly miss them both.