



Max Earle Follmer

December 5, 1923 - April 20, 2020

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Monday morning, April 20, 2020 in Amissville Virginia, one of the world's purest, gentlest, bravest hearts stopped beating as Max Earl Follmer rose to meet his beloved Elaine on the other side of the veil. Her name was the last word to leave his lips as he passed peacefully, surrounded by loved ones in his own home, at the age of 96. How grateful we are for such a father, brother, uncle, grandfather, great grandfather, and friend. Max fought esophageal cancer for this last year, but maintained a good quality of life until the last few days.

His wife Elaine Luella Kreisler Follmer preceded him in death by five years. Max is survived by his brother Don, his three children Jack (Mary), Jill (Dan), and Jan (Gordon), and their families. He leaves behind 13 grandchildren and their spouses, and 26 great grandchildren, as well as beloved nieces and nephews and countless friends who appreciate his unflappable positivity, his soft heart, his strong will, his talent and love of music, his knowledge of sports and current events, and his example of faith and charity. Max was a proud World War II veteran who served in the US Army Signal Corps in France. His subsequent government career was with the US Army Corps of Engineers, where he eventually became the Chief of Land Acquisition throughout the world.

(Tribute donations in his honor can go to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. Link and details below.)*

Max was born December 5, 1923 in Berwick, Pennsylvania, as the first of two sons to Joseph Roland Follmer and Edna Dodson Follmer. His childhood and youth were spent there, where he enjoyed camping every summer with his family on his uncle's farm, and where he excelled in academics and music in school. During high school he played in the school marching band and in dance bands. He learned to play several instruments—piano, oboe, tenor saxophone, baritone saxophone, and clarinet. As it turns out, these skills were to serve him well during his enlisted years during the second World War. Max enlisted in the Army in May of 1943. He scored so high on his AGCT test, (IQ equivalent 141) that he was placed into the signal company after basic training in Camp Shelby Mississippi. Only two out of 700 soldiers qualified for that duty. He received

specialized education at Clemson College, SC, then was called into service to Ft. Monmouth NC where he took cryptography classes and got security clearance. All the while he played in dance bands for troop entertainment. His subsequent two week trip across the Pacific gave him more opportunity to make a name for himself as a musician, as he continued to play on board in a band to entertain the soldiers on the long cramped voyage. In his words, "We played daily on the poop deck" under the charge of the battalion major. (3188 Signal Service Battalion) The troopship SS Argentina, which was designed for 600 passengers, held 5000 soldiers. Their bed bunks were stacked like shelves. The music was a welcome distraction and relief for all.

After arriving in England, he had a short stay in Liverpool and a visit to partly bombed out London (where he attended a symphony orchestra concert). After more drilling and training in Blackburn, the battalion traveled by train to the south where they eventually boarded onto two ships to cross the English Channel to get to France. They spend two nights and a day on the cramped ships. Max was on the first ship. The second ship was torpedoed. They landed in Le Havre, France in December of 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge. They waded ashore in frigid waters--there were no piers as they all had recently been bombed. They climbed a hill and walked past eerily empty bunkers. They marched for 10 miles, wet and cold, into a French village where a farmer let them stay and eat the potatoes in his field. Max says those hot potatoes, cooked over an open fire, were one of the most delicious things he ever ate in his life.

They took a ten day train trip to Dijon, where he spent a few months deciphering codes from the troops on the front lines, and then a few more similar months in Nancy. The device they used was called the Sigaba, which was patterned after the German Enigma. It was a keyboard type instrument with five adjustable discs, used for both encoding and decoding Allied Army messages. The encrypted messages arrived by radio or telegraph in groups of five letters. Each instrument rested on a thermal pad with a fuse. If their operation was attacked by the enemy, the instructions were to light the fuses and destroy every Sigaba device.

In June of 1945 Max was called to Marseilles by that same major who had led his battalion on the transatlantic voyage. The major remembered his dance band musicians and called them back together again to entertain officers and troops who would come into town on respite from the front lines. Max still did some decoding, but also played a valuable role in boosting soldier morale with his music. This is where he spent the remainder of his service, until his emergency leave discharge in March 1946. His father had experienced a heart attack, the war had ended, and Max was coming home.

Max's father, weakened by his heart attack, died in early 1947. Meanwhile, Max had started dating the lovely and popular Elaine Kreisler. He had always admired her from afar in high school, and could not believe his good fortune in securing her affections. The two would date until their marriage in August of 1950.

Max attended two years at Gettysburg College, and three years at Dickinson School of Law, where he received his Bachelor of Law Degree which was later converted to a LL.B. Juris Doctor Degree. After his marriage to Elaine and a brief stint as a private lawyer in Berwick, Max got a job with the United States government, in the real estate and land acquisition division of the US Army Corps of Engineers. Thus began his long distinguished career which led him to the top of his division. He became Chief of Land Acquisition for the entire USACE. At his retirement in May 1986 he received the Commander's Award for Civilian Service.

Max and Elaine are parents to three children, Jack, Jill and Jan. Their residences included Zanesville Ohio, Pittsburg Pennsylvania, and eventually northern Virginia. In 1960 Max and Elaine became members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where they both served faithfully in many leadership and service positions. Max volunteered many years as a worker in the Washington DC Temple. He was a lifelong church choir member, boasting a confident bass voice until the last few weeks of his life.

Max's appreciation of music has been a constant. He kept his devotion to Big Band era music, even playing the saxophone at his 95th birthday party. He recorded and never missed the weekly "Music and the Spoken Word." He loved anything by Celtic Women (especially their beautiful long hair). On Easter, just days before his death, he was incredulous that a bass solo in the Messiah production he was watching on TV was sung by an alto. And just a day and a half before his death, he insisted on watching the Andrea Bocelli concert on PBS.

Another great love of his was watching sports --all sports but especially baseball. Witnessing the Nationals win the World Series in the fall of 2019 may have been one of the pinnacle joys of his life.

Max is characterized by his mantra of family love and service. When his wife Elaine became incapacitated with illness, Max stayed home almost exclusively for many years to give her constant specialized care. His patience is legend. He has always had a tender heart for the children, and a magic touch with all the babies. Perhaps his most defining quality is his consistently positive attitude. He was unfailingly courageous and uncomplaining, unphased by life's curveballs, and exuding a healthy approach to adversity. In the last minutes of his mortal life he said, "I'm OK." He was humble, modest and self-effacing, always caught by surprise at others' high opinions of him. Max is a true hero, because he showed up every day, for any task, for his family, his God, and his country. We honor his life.

*Some of you have asked if there is a designated charitable cause to which you could donate in remembrance of our father Max Follmer. A project which he enthusiastically supported was the National World War II Museum, located in New Orleans. The facility with its ongoing educational outreach provides a valuable service to our entire nation. This link is a tribute donation page. <https://secure3.convio.net/nw2m/site/Donation2?>

8056.donation=form1&df_id=8056&_ga=2.24584056.39925285.1587671293-1301207360.1587671293 Just type “in memory of Max Follmer” into the Honoree Information boxes. Alternatively a check to The National World War II Museum could be mailed to Jack Follmer, Jill Farrell, or Jan Thelin.

Comments



“ I loved reading about your father's life, Jill! He had so many interesting experiences, and was a true hero. We love you and Dan, we think of you often, and we offer our condolences at this time.
- the Evans family

Matthew Evans - April 30, 2020 at 08:38 AM



“ Brother Follmer was and is a Spiritual Giant. He was the kindest most loving, incredibly helpful, humble Christ-like man I ever knew. He always had a smile and his face was full of love. His memory always brings tears because he accomplished greatness - in that he truly loved.

Carol Hawkins Pacheco - April 26, 2020 at 10:59 PM



“ Dear Jill and Family,
Our hearts reach out to you all at this time as you are comforted by the promises of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and especially the Resurrection. One of our greatest blessings is to be part of a family and how wonderful it is that your parents were such loving, faithful, multi-talented examples. Sending our love and prayers.
Vicki and Ken Rich

Vicki Rich - April 26, 2020 at 10:59 AM