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WWII Army nurse found love and adventure in the Pacific: 'Letters from Tinian' is collection of Pauline Denman Webb's WWII letters.(Letter to the editor).

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Dec. 29--On the small Pacific island of Tinian, men were secretly preparing to deliver the deadliest weapons in history. Elsewhere on the island, Lt. Pauline Denman had more down-to-earth things on her mind: Going to the beach. Going on dates. Falling in love. It was 1945, and she was an Army nurse with few patients. That would change, she knew, once the expected invasion of Japan was launched. Still, she was hardly bored: The slim, bespectacled blonde from Delmar, N.Y., had no shortage of attention from the American fighting men clustered on Tinian, part of the Northern Marianas Islands, an outpost captured from the Japanese the year before. She chuckles now at her younger self. "It was a lot of fun, and I guess you could say I was going steady with this guy. Here I was, 40 men to one woman, and I was going steady." The object of her affection? An Army major named Roy, a tall man with reddish-blond hair. She mentioned him, repeatedly, in letters she wrote letters home to her parents. "He's homely like Spencer Tracy," she wrote in one letter. "He has a sense of humor like Uncle Irving," she wrote in another. She signed each letter "Pill," her nickname from childhood. Her parents saved all the letters, bundled in ribbons, and kept them in their attic. They came to her again when her parents died, and she tucked them away. Decades passed, and her daughter, Debra Webb Rogers, a dance teacher at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts, read them and encouraged her: These are too good to stay on the shelf. Do something with them. She did, though it took years of stop-and-start effort and a crash course in computer use. The letters are now collected in a self-published book, "Letters from Tinian 1945," just published under her married name, Pauline Denman Webb (it's available on amazon.com and in some local book stores).

Sprinkled around the letters are snippets of narration, most of them true, some a little bit fictionalized. But at the heart of it are those letters from a woman not yet 25 -- breezy, chatty missives about the things that make up an everyday life, albeit a life that was unspooling at the crossroads of history. You should see the guys stop and stare when we go by in a jeep. Lots of 'em haven't seen a white woman that near in ages. I've seen lots of B-29's and they are really beautiful. We watch large groups of them take off for Tokyo raids. -- from a letter dated Aug. 6, 1945, the day Enola Gay left Tinian for Hiroshima. On Tinian, the war often seemed far away, though Denman was told that Japanese soldiers were still holding out in the island's jungles. Part of the island was off-limits, and people whispered and wondered about what might be happening there. Within months, they knew: Planes had taken off from Tinian's secret airbase, planes carrying Little Boy and Fat Man, the nuclear bombs that would level much of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, three days apart. On Aug. 10, the day after Nagasaki was bombed, Denman wrote a letter home about Roy, about swimming in the rain, about seeing a balloon fish and a sea urchin. Toward the end, she inserted one line: "What do you think of that new bomb?" Her daughter said she was fascinated by her mother's letters. "I think I was struck by how young she was, yet she was in the middle of a history-changing event," she says. "The fact that she was young and apparently unaware of the gravity of the situation. But of course nobody knew what was really going on on the other end of the island." Went out with my major again last night. What a character! ... Can't figure out why he takes me out -- don't know if it's the pigtails, my muddy boots or the creaseless slacks. You just can't be neat, clean and feminine on this island. -- from a letter dated Aug. 10, 1945 In late October, the Army sent Denman to hospitals in Japan, while Roy, her major, stayed on Tinian. She knew they would not stay apart for long, though, because before she left, he gave her his prized Parker pen and pencil set, engraved with his name, and told her to practice writing his name, with "Mrs." ahead of it. She did.

Sure, he had told her, weeks into their relationship, that he was engaged to a girl back home. But he also said he didn't want to marry the girl. "That's not my problem," Denman wrote her parents. "He can figure it out himself." Still, she harbored hopes that he would break off his engagement, even though she knew that sounded selfish. But she had seen a picture of Roy's fiancée. "She's 27, a brunette and very attractive," she wrote her parents. "I'm worried." It is impossible to put into words the destruction caused by that one small yet powerful bomb. -- from a letter dated Jan. 2, 1946 In Japan, 64 years ago this month, Denman visited Hiroshima, seeing the devastation firsthand. There were few signs of life, but already she could hear the buzzing of saws as some new wooden buildings went up.

This struck her: The Japanese people, though defeated, were kind to her, again and again. Many wanted to touch her

blond hair. She even stopped into a Japanese photography studio and posed for a picture, dapper in her Army uniform, legs crossed and a smile on her face.

"Then they put the picture in the window," she says, laughing. "To advertise? To scare people away?" In Japan, she wondered about Roy. His letters had stopped coming. Perhaps they'd been held up in the mail. Not much to say except that I received a letter from Roy's mother today announcing the fact that Roy and Maggie were married Dec. 20 in Detroit. Guess that's about all for now. I know he'll never be happy without me. But I can get along without him because I have a lot on the ball and can get almost any man I want if he is worth having. Love, Pill -- full text of a letter dated Jan. 11, 1946 Pauline Denman was 25 when she got what she calls her "Dear Jane" letter. She was, she admits, floored. Devastated. But she had enlisted in the Army, volunteered to go overseas, to the action. She had been to the other side of the world. She'd seen Hiroshima. She could handle this. "Well, I got on with my life and got married and have two wonderful kids. And here I am," she says. Pauline Denman Webb turned 89 last Saturday. She has been married twice, and widowed twice. Her second husband, Cecil Webb, died when their daughter Debra was 14 and son John was 10. Pauline was 49, a stay-at-home mom in South Florida. She went back to working as a nurse, then moved to Jacksonville 22 years ago to be close to her daughter, then a professional ballet dancer, and settled into a comfortable house south of San Marco.

She says she didn't think much of her wartime love over the years. When she got married, she burned all the letters he'd written, though she saved some envelopes for her stamp collection. It all happened so long ago that details of that relationship are fuzzy; it's only the letters of her younger self that bring them to life. When she began work on the book, though, she did wonder what had happened to Roy. So in the 1990s, she tracked him down and wrote to him, using just her initials instead of her name, Pauline. His widow replied: They'd had four children, and he had passed away a few years earlier.

At the end of "Letters from Tinian 1945," though, she wrote a scene in which she finds Roy at a home for seniors in Detroit. Then she confesses that it was just a dream -- "but what a beautiful dream." Meanwhile, Pauline Denman Webb had time to think of the missions that flew from Tinian's air base, and on the destruction she saw in Hiroshima. "It was correct to do it, when you think of all the death that would have occurred had we invaded Japan. There are a lot of people of the opinion that it should not have happened. But when you're in war, you have to do something to make it end. There had been enough death."

As for those few months, more than six decades ago, that were brought to life in her letters? She's not one for overstatement. "It was an interesting adventure," she says. "The rest of my life has been, well, normal." matt.soergel@jacksonville.com -- (904) 359-4082

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