

# Coming of Age in a Burning World

by Joan Wehlen Morrison • Edited by Susan Signe Morrison

Excerpted from the new book *Home Front Girl: A Diary of Love, Literature, and Growing Up in Wartime America*



COURTESY OF SUSAN SIGNE MORRISON

LIFE WAS A MERRY WHIRLWIND for Joan Wehlen in December 1941. The University of Chicago sophomore lived with her parents while studying, chatting at the campus coffee shop, and dating. She confided her life, thoughts, and feelings to a diary in frank, often poetic language, as she had done since she was nine years old.

The December 7 Pearl Harbor attack changed everything and nothing. Life went on, haunted by the constant backdrop of war, with its potential to destroy Wehlen's world and the young men who were her friends and flames. She kept up with school and social life, knitting for GIs, volunteering for the Red Cross, and inspecting cans at a war factory. Through it all she recorded the news of her times, her feelings about it, her opinions, fears, and hopes.

The result ended up in an attic. Wehlen married graduate student and navy officer Robert Morrison in 1943, graduated from

college in 1944, and became a mother and an author of newspaper and magazine articles and oral history books. After her death in 2010, her children found her diaries and college notebooks between two wartime pamphlets. Her daughter, Susan Signe Morrison, edited them to create a collection of Wehlen's writings from 1937 to 1943, now published as *Home Front Girl: A Diary of Love, Literature, and Growing Up in Wartime America*.

The following entries are excerpted from the book. More of Joan's writings are online at [www.homefrontgirl diary.com](http://www.homefrontgirl diary.com).

## Sunday, December 7, 1941

WELL, BABY, IT'S COME, what we always knew would come, what we never quite believed in. And deathly calm all about it. No people in noisy excited little clusters on the streets. Only silent faces on the streetcars and laughing ones in windows. No excitement.

Above: Chicago high school student Joan Wehlen mulls the big news from across the Atlantic in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* on September 3, 1939. War would form a persistent backdrop for Wehlen's college years, especially after America joined the fight in December 1941.

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I WAS THERE

Only it's come. I hardly knew it, never believed it. Was saying only today to Ruth as we sat by the fire in Palos Park that I would hate it—would never believe it. War with Japan. And other people there discussed, the way we used to discuss the "Road to Peace"—as though we could turn it over and put it away and think about it again sometime. [FDR made a speech announcing the second New Deal on October 31, 1936. It ended with the words "That is the road to peace."] And last night as we went out, the radio told of the possibility and we said it was just another war scare. I guess it wasn't. I know now it wasn't.

Today Japan declared war on the United States. She bombed Pearl Harbor and the Philippines while her diplomats were talking peace to Roosevelt. This afternoon at 2:30. My God, we never knew! We were drying dishes out at Evelyn's place and I churned butter and went for the well water with Ruth like Jack and Jill. As I churned, I could see my image—in my red jerkin and light sweater and pearls in the mirrored curved face of the pots, in the kerosene lamp. Three images, all churning and I looked out at the peaceful frosted autumn hillside. "That time of year...when few or no leaves hang" [Joan's version of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73]. And the earth was turning and it had happened. The cheery rattle of the dishes and our laughter and the crackle of the fire. We went out to the pasture and brought back the horses and saddled one and rode him in turns...till we froze and came in.

Right then most people knew. Not we. One of the fellows drove us into the city and then Ruthie and I took the streetcar and saw a bright headline. US and Japan near war. And waited in a quiet tavern for another streetcar and got on and gasped to see in black placid letters as though it had been said before: "Japan Attacks U.S. We are at War." And saw two Japanese on the streetcar, gravely watching us. Came home, discussed it excitedly through supper. Listened while they broke into programs on radio to give flashes.

But somehow, it had already happened. Somehow we were looking through a window at a future that had been written down a long time ago. God, God.

Betty called up and we were excited....

Japan has formally declared war on US and Britain. God, God, all the world is in this now. I'd much rather be at war with Germany than Japan. I like them better.... Funny logic. But I wouldn't be so afraid to have them win. God, what is there to be



Wehlen's busy life included movies. But an outing to see *Citizen Kane* ended early, leaving her to wonder what Rosebud was.

left of our world when it is all over? I guess it won't be the same. Or will it?

Tomorrow Roosevelt talks to Congress to declare war. Twelve o'clock.... The days are here, the days are coming. Oh God, God.

We never knew. We always knew.

Dutch East Indies and Costa Rica and Canada have already declared war on Japan. Us tomorrow.

Well now I must read my MVC methods. Methods, Values and Concepts. That's almost funny.

We listened to *Sherlock Holmes* and then Ruth left.

Last night we met Bill of all things and things weren't too friendly for a while. I met Kenny through him, you know. We went to Capitol to see *Citizen Kane* which I didn't understand, as the mental morons I was with made me leave in the middle. Who the heck was Rosebud? Then bowling at 1:30 and to Sam's for Tom Collins [the gin cocktail] and then home—3:30 and read Phy Sci for an hour. It's amazing!

#### Monday, December 8, 1941

WELL, THE FIRST DAY IS OVER. It's unbelievably calm. Walking to school with Ginny Banning, discussing it and listened

with great crowd in Reynolds Club at 1:30 to Roosevelt's declaration. England declared war at 8:30—beat us...my God—we are at war!

#### Tuesday, December 9, 1941

NOW THAT THE DAY HAS COME, we are unbelievably calm. There are black headlines but no excited voices. One plays bridge and asks what is trump and repairs lipstick and reads Plato and John Keats. One reads the comic strips and the headlines eyes equally unmoved, face like the images of gods.... Not with excited bravery are we now, who always knew it was to come, never believed it would, but with a still acceptance that bids life go on....

And yet today planes flew over San Francisco, planes with the Rising Sun upon their wings, and ships were sunk and men were killed and blackout in New York. [Such rumors, all false, were common just after Pearl Harbor.] The quiet faces, the unbelievably quiet days.... Tonight walking home over the dark campus, I looked up and saw great Venus shining calmly and red Mars like an eye watching gravely. One red leaf rasped noisily over the cement caught in the wind, yellow lights shone from the houses. The bells were ringing. The world was gently quiet. And yet the day had come.

"Thee, when death conquers us, others shall praise."

Heard Roosevelt tonight on the radio; he said we must be prepared for a long hard war.

Saw Purr [fellow student Bob Purring-ton] today—he says he's getting ready. Mr. Yerke [fellow student René Yerke] says he's going to volunteer. And then tonight I went over to the store and as I walked along the quiet cold street, I was thinking about the draft—they're planning to extend the age limits. And all the sudden, I thought, "Burman [a fellow student Joan dated] will have to go." I hadn't thought of it before in connection with him. Oh my God—the world we half-dreamed of is here!

#### Wednesday, December 10, 1941

...THE JAP PARATROOPS have captured Luzon in the Philippines and sunk two British ships, the *Repulse* and another near Singapore. Hitler speaks to Reichstag tomorrow. We just heard the first casualty

lists over the radio. Lots of boys from Michigan and Illinois. Oh my God!

Life goes on though. We read our books in the library and eat lunch, bridge, etc.....

#### Thursday, December 11, 1941

WELL, THE WORLD IS wheeling around, 24 hours a day, never ceasing, never pausing, never hesitating. We cannot relive the ecstatic moment, we cannot repeat joy, but life is just, neither must we repeat pain, suffer again what once was suffered. Only the world repeats itself. Today Germany has declared war on the United States. And Italy too, of course. Remember, I told you yesterday Hitler was to address the Reichstag today.

Well, he did. I was combing my hair this morning when they broke into a *Morning Melodies* program to tell us the news! Before I had grasped it the music switched back on. I walked in and told Mom. She said I was having delusions. They'd say more about it. But I was right. Ten minutes later the announcer told us all. Well, I guess we always knew. But we didn't think we'd be so calm about it. But it's really not

exciting. Really, it has happened already. For us, it has happened already....

#### Friday, December 19, 1941

HELLO. WELL, THEY'VE PASSED the bill for conscription of all men 20 to 45—registration of all 18 to 64. That includes purty near everyone. Daddy brought home wine tonight. I knitted and drank too much and am still slightly dopey from it with a pleasant unwillingness of my bones to do anything—as you can no doubt tell from my handwriting. My last night of 18—Remember last year? Poor Dale in the army air corps now. We never thought these things last year. Poor Philbrick. Last night I was studying my Phy Sci in the *Maroon* [student newspaper] office and the *Chicago Sun* called up and asked for information about him. I gave it. Poor Dick.

Heard [University of Chicago president

Robert Maynard] Hutchins speak today. Banning and I and Betty waited half an hour outside of Mandel Hall to hear him. He's wonderful. He came out all alone and spoke in front of that great red curtain and smiled and then went out while we were still clapping. [Two thousand] people there, *Tribune* says.... He's wonderful, he's God.... He says we should win the war now that we're in it. You know how he felt before: "The Proposition is Peace." Well, he changed his mind. I don't know what else he could say though.

It's different from last year at Christmas. Last year, they had candles in the C-Shop [the coffee shop on campus] and played Xmas carols and everyone sang and was jolly. This year it was warm and springy out and bright sunlight in C-Shop and no singing. Some people half-heartedly tried....

#### Friday, December 26, 1941

Well hullo, Xmas and all that stuff all over. I'm not as cynical as I sound, of course. But it's over. We lost Hong Kong, and Manila we declared an open city. Merry Christmas, Japan. Churchill is here

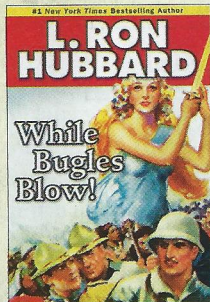
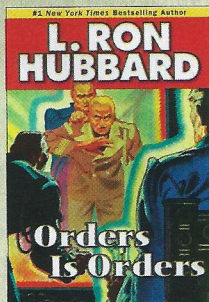
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and all comradesly, etc., with FDR. Brotherly-love, et al. Pigface! Christmas night it rained pourpour and the skies weeping. I doubt that the gods really care though....

**Sunday, December 28, 1941**

HULLO. MERRY CHRISTMAS or whatever it is. The Japs are bombing Manila. Declared an open city, you know. Well, I guess we never really had any delusions about dove-winged peace....

**Tuesday, January 20, 1942**

HEARD [PULITZER PRIZE-winning author] Stephen Vincent Benét tonight on "Poetry and History." He was remarkable. Clear yet forceful. He appears to think we can come out of the war thumbs up....

Mr. Benet was talking about diaries in history and I believe I have written mine with the intention of having it read someday. As a help, not only to the understanding of my time—but to the understanding of the individual—not as me—but as character development. Things we forget when we grow older are written here to remind us. A help not only in history but in psychology (I

can't even spell it). If I can do that, I believe I shall have done all that I could wish to. I rather like the idea of a social archeologist pawing over my relics....

**Wednesday, February 4, 1942**

...HAD A VERY PECULIAR DREAM last night and woke up still dreaming it. I will relate it here as I have nowhere else to tell it.

Well, to begin with, the situation was this: we were in a house surrounded by a small garden or yard. We were a nondescript group of about 20 people, myself in there and Miriam Petty that I remember and one young man I do not know. But as to the rest whether they were friends or strangers, I cannot say. Anyhow, we were in this house—or outside of it and all about us were flames—at first far away and then later getting closer and closer.

Somehow everyone there knew that the whole earth ("world" I said in my dream) was aflame, through some catastrophe or what I do not know, and knew also that we were the last people alive and that soon we too would perish in the flames. But outwardly it didn't seem to affect us.... We

were as calm or rather they were as calm as if life stretched ahead of them forever. That was what astonished me. "Don't they realize," I thought, "that in a few hours we will be consumed?" But when I mentioned it, it was as if I had said an awful thing to speak openly of our impending doom. "Let us at least," said a voice, "die like ladies and gentlemen, like human beings." "But there will be no one even to know we did," I protested.

"Let there be no hysteria among us," was repeated.

So I was silenced and only once remarked that I wondered if I should smell like roast beef. And even the humor of that seemed unappreciated.

They were all calm, as though really it didn't affect them and I began to think perhaps it didn't. Some of them were playing bridge outside.

Meanwhile the flames kept getting closer and closer and as if I were far away I would see our small island of shelter surrounded by fire.

The young man and I explored the limits of our rapidly shrinking safety zone and



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seemed, I cannot remember it clearly, very excited as the flames licked closer and on the verge of doing something—I do not know what, but it apparently was of great moment.

The other people continued to move about as phlegmatic as before.

At this point I can remember no more. My last sensation is that of thinking: in a few moments I shall be burning—will it hurt? Will it last long? And then thinking again: No one will ever know; we are the last people that are.

That is all I remember, but I was not alone at the end. Perhaps we still anticipated some action. There seemed to be a hurry about us.

Isn't that a peculiar dream? I suppose I can trace most of the symbols in it. So often have I seen cartoons in the paper of the earth aflame and our America the last stronghold. Now lately we realize that even this too is catching fire and that we also shall perish.... As to the indifference of the people. That is what astonishes me truly about the war in the people around me. Somehow they have kept aloof from it. As I

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I WAS THERE

captured them. Didn't feel at all human in my dream. No thinking: after all, they are human beings. All I thought was to get rid of them. My baser side in dreams, I guess....

#### Spring 1943

*"Morale in Wartime: With Special Emphasis on Morale Factors and Problems in World War II"*

[This entry came from Joan's school notebook; these notes are for a paper with this title.] Victory in the present war has been said to depend upon which of the warring countries can maintain the highest morale. Certainly in this war, more than ever before, especially civilian morale takes on a new importance. Much has been written and said, especially in Germany, about the fact that the defeat in 1918 was due not to the physical defeat of the German armies but to a collapse of the "Home front," i.e., of civilian morale. Certainly this is at least true in part....

No country can go on fighting when its citizens fail to perceive an object for their sacrifices. In this country we have heard, again and again, on the radio and in the

say, no one seems affected. The day war was declared, we played bridge with impassive faces after hearing the declaration.

At least I hope we can do as the voice in my dream said: die like ladies and gentlemen, like human beings, without hysteria....

#### Tuesday, February 10, 1942

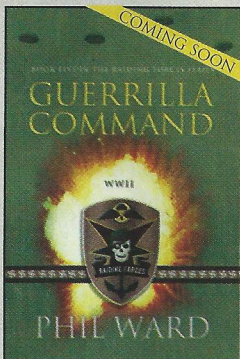
HELLO. SINGAPORE A-FALLING! All the faery-tale capitals of the world. This started a long time ago with Addis Ababa.

School today. The clocks have been set back one hour or rather ahead, I guess—anyhow we get up an hour earlier—so I slept through MVC this morning. They call it Wartime, not Daylight, Savings....

Daddy's still working nights. It's awful hard on him.

Dreamt last night I was soldier in Philippines. The Japs snuck into our fort and I lassoed them all with measuring tape and

## WWII ACTION BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS



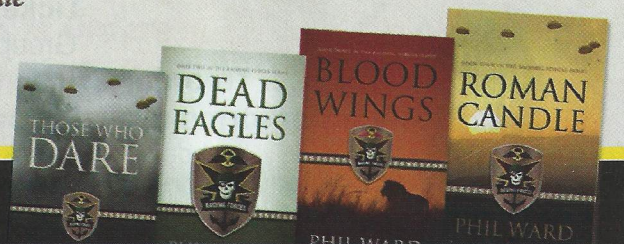
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newspapers, of the "coming breakdown of German morale." We are told that the German people could not sustain a defeat like that of the British at Dunkirk and that their morale is maintained only while one victory follows another. It is true that the German morale has not been exposed to any "trial by fire" such as the British experienced in the summer of 1940. But it is also true that the Germans have been subjected to a well-formulated and deliberate plan to increase their morale. Only recently have American and British sociologists and psychologists been employed by the government to study civilian morale and to advise methods of improving it. The German government has followed such a policy since 1935....

*Special Problems in World War II*

...Except in Germany, it is perfectly true our leaders have ignored the psychological effects of conscription and later of war upon a generation which grew up in the intervening 20 year period of World Wars I and II. This generation had grown up exposed to a variety of factual and propagandistic analyses of the first world war. They had come to believe that war was a "racket" created by munitions makers and international bankers and the best recourse was to keep clear of it. Suddenly to throw these children of the "Lost Generation" who grew up with the only too evident reminders that the first world war had accomplished nothing—to throw them into a war with practically the same goals, slogans, and parties was ignoring their very probable negative reactions.

Many times has it been said that the price we paid in ships and airplanes was well worth the unifying result of American indignation over Pearl Harbor. Many people are fighting in a war which they cannot fully believe in—they are defending something rather than fighting for it. That is why it is important while we are still fighting war to formulate our peace objectives and give meaning to what seems to many to be only another futile struggle.... ★

*Excerpted from Home Front Girl: A Diary of Love, Literature, and Growing Up in Wartime America by JOAN WEHLEN MORRISON, edited by SUSAN SIGNE MORRISON. Chicago Review Press. ©2013 Susan Signe Morrison.*

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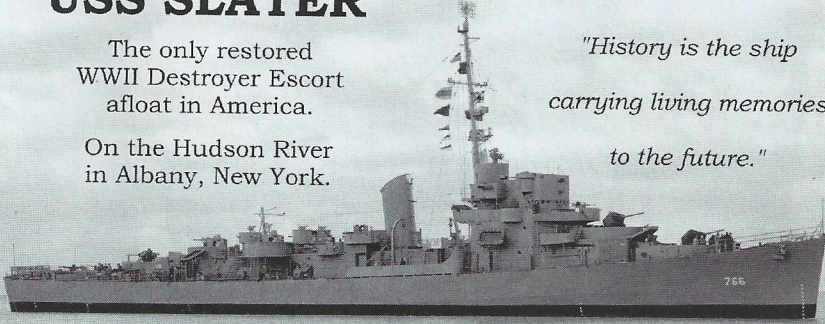
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