



*Writing the War: Chronicles of a World War II Correspondent* ed. Anne Kiley, Thomas Pellechia, and David Kiley.

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*Writing the War* is a collection of letters between war correspondent Charles Kiley and his sweetheart, later wife, Billee Gray. Charles had been a sports writer for the *Jersey City Journal* before he was drafted in October 1941 at age twenty-seven. In the Army, he was a staff writer for the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper (Nov. 1942 to summer 1945), reporting on the war from England, France, Belgium, and Germany. During this time, he formed a lifelong friendship with Andy Rooney, another *Stars and Stripes* correspondent, who went on to a stellar postwar career in journalism and television.

Charles and Billee met in the mountain resort town of Ashville, North Carolina, in January 1942 while he was in basic training at Camp Croft, South Carolina. The twenty-one-year-old Billee was living with her divorced mother, who operated a tourist home and boarding house in Ashville called Oak Lodge. Billee had worked as a billing clerk at a local department store since graduating from high school. She also helped her mother with the cooking and cleaning for the guests at the lodge. Charles and several of his army friends decided to go to Ashville on a weekend pass; he and Billee met at a canteen party held at the Ashville YMCA. They immediately fell in love. After only three brief meetings together, Charles proposed marriage just before he left for Europe in April 1942.

Throughout the war years, the couple exchanged almost eight hundred letters in all. Indeed, their wartime story typifies that of millions of young couples who conducted a “courtship by mail” and later married. As the editors observe, “Charles and Billee’s wartime experiences, captured in their letters, were shared by much of the country, and, indeed, much of the world. Theirs is a universal story of love in the time of war, of a people’s upheaval from the known to the unknown, and their strange and difficult work in the face of adversity” (14).

The volume’s editors are Billee and Charles’s daughter, son-in-law, and son. Although not formally trained as historians, they are experienced writers. Daughter Anne is a freelance writer, editor, and photographer; son-in-law Thomas Pellechia has published many articles and books on food and wine; son David, an award-winning journalist for, among other media outlets, the *Huffington Post* and CNN, has written two books about the automobile industry. So the book is well edited but not a work of scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

Charles and Billee’s letters vividly evoke the challenges faced by soldiers in active service and the loved ones they left behind on the home front. The following is from Charles’s 9 March 1944 letter to Billee from London:

I love you because when my eyes first found you I tingled all over; because you are soft, tender and sincere; because you are intelligent with just enough devilry; because your eyes are sleepy and because I ha-

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1. Thus, its one-page bibliography omits, among other relevant works, Judy Barrett Litoff, ed., *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor* (Athens: U Georgia Pr, 1990; rpt. 2013), Robert and Jane Easton, *Love and War: Pearl Harbor through V-J Day* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 1991), and Jane Weaver Poulton, ed., *A Better Legend: From the World War II Letters of Jack and Jane Poulton* (Charlottesville: U Pr of Virginia, 1993).

ven't lost the taste of your first kiss; because you like to dream the way I do and are sensitive the way I am; because you love children and because you are beautiful, even in the kitchen wearing an apron and unruly curl on your forehead; ... because I have missed you so much the ache misted my eyes; because I wouldn't or couldn't go on from here without you; because you are all that matters to me. (303)

Billee reciprocated such intimate declarations of love. On 7 February 1942, less than a month after they met, she wrote:

I still have to stop and wonder if it isn't all a pleasant dream, but then I have your perfume and your emblem on my coat too. There is a certain indescribable element within me that wasn't present before. I feel almost complete. There's more than just a corner of my heart reserved for you. (27)

Two years later, on 21 June 1944, just days after Charles landed in Normandy, Billee envisioned the happy moments they would share when they were reunited:

You know I was thinking the other day there are so many things we haven't done together. I've never taken your picture, we've never shared a steak dinner. I've only been to two shows with you. We have to go on a picnic together, swimming. So many things to do. (359)

In early August 1944, Charles, covering the war from Paris, received orders to make an unanticipated trip to New York City for a thirty-day furlough and a two-month stint with the newly established New York bureau of *Stars and Stripes*. Learning of Charles's new assignment, Billee immediately traveled to New York, where she and Charles, after twenty-eight months of separation, were reunited at Penn Station. After their marriage on 17 August in Jersey City, they visited Billee's relatives in Ohio and North Carolina and then returned to Manhattan, where they lived in a sublet studio apartment while Charles worked for the *Stars and Stripes*.

In late November, Charles returned to the Paris office of the *Stars and Stripes* and reported on the war from various postings in France. Billee remained in New York and worked for *Time* magazine and later as a secretary at Standard Oil. She was able to quickly learn of Charles's assignments in France through the New York bureau of the *Stars and Stripes*.

Back in Europe, Charles met many Allied commanders, including Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander of the European Theater. Charles was the only reporter invited to witness Germany's unconditional surrender at Reims on 7 May 1945. His long, page-one *Stars and Stripes* article, "Eyewitness Describes Surrender of Germans," published on 9 May, is one of several reprinted in *Writing the War* (440-46).<sup>2</sup>

Billee's letters describe her defense industry work—rolling bandages for the Red Cross, selling war bonds, volunteering as a civil defense plane spotter, knitting Bundles for Britain, and planting victory gardens. She also wrote about the transformation of Ashville as more and more military personnel were stationed in the area. During the early years of the war, Axis diplomats were interned with their staff and families at the historic Grove Park Inn, whose guests have included ten US presidents. Grove Park later served as a rest and relaxation center for sailors and soldiers returning from battle.

In mid-June 1945, the couple permanently reunited when Charles flew to New York City to cover General Eisenhower's homecoming celebrations. After the war, they settled in Westfield, New Jersey. Charles continued his journalistic career, at first with the *New York Herald Tribune* and, after its closure, as managing editor-in-chief of the *New York Law Journal*, retiring at age seventy-five. In 1974, he was ordained a deacon in the Catholic Church. Charles died in 2001, fifty-nine years after meeting Bil-

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2. The editors incorrectly state both the title of the article ("Details of the Surrender Negotiations: This Is How Germany Gave Up") and its date (8 May). See [WartimePress.com](http://WartimePress.com) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1616.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1616.htm).

lee at the Ashville YMCA. Throughout her postwar life, Billee was active in the church and the Westfield community. She was the center of her large extended family, including six children, and a wide circle of friends. She died on 17 August 2007, her sixty-third wedding anniversary.

*Writing the War* tells a most engaging wartime story through the correspondence of two young people whose abiding love never faltered despite years of wartime separation. Their carefully edited letters, with their almost day-by-day account of devotion in a time of war, will interest a broad general readership. Historians, too, will learn from the letter collection, though they will regret that the editors have not placed it in its wider historiographic context.