

The Declaration of Independents



We Want You to Define Reading, No Reading Necessary

by Dianne K. Salerni

I asked my students: “What did Natasha say about men walking on the moon?”

Chad had an answer. “She said it never happened. She told Toughboy that his teachers were lying, because it was impossible for men to walk on the moon.”

“Were you surprised by what she said?” This was the more important follow-up question, requiring inference and analysis.

“I wasn’t,” volunteered Carlotta. “Natasha always has something negative to say, especially when she doesn’t know the real answer.”

“Yeah,” added Loren, “and she really hates modern technology. I wasn’t surprised either.”

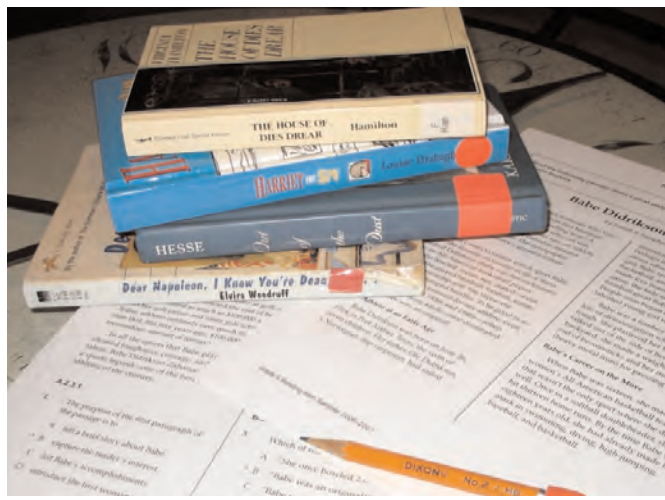
We were discussing *Winter Camp* by Kirkpatrick Hill. Elsewhere in my classroom, the other fifth grade students were preparing for their own reading group meetings. One boy, who was reading *Call it Courage*, had just Googled the longitude and latitude of the island Hikueru and was trying to locate it on our world map. Students with *The Music of Dolphins* were supposed to be reading independently, but Dallas and Andy had their heads together, whispering excitedly about the chapter where Mila breaks the TV with a chair. I should have been pleased with my students’ enthusiastic involvement with their literature. But instead, I was worried.

Were my current classroom activities adequately preparing students for the upcoming state test?

Every state in the country has its own set of assessments, mandated by the No Child Left Behind law. In Pennsylvania, we face the PSSAs, a daunting battery of tests composed of multiple choice and open-ended

responses. The fifth grade test is disproportionately difficult, and more points are required to reach “proficiency” at this grade level than any other, including eleventh grade.

A person might think that any meaningful instructional activities provided in the classroom would help students score well on a test of reading skills. However, experience and research have shown that children must practice with activities that greatly resemble the assessment in order to meet the testing standards. This is because the paper and pencil tasks do not really reflect



what readers do with books on a daily basis. In real life we converse about books and learn from other readers; we don’t answer questions in isolation for an anonymous and distant judge who offers no appeal.

It all comes down to your definition of literacy.

Our repeated test practice turns up plenty of potential trouble spots. Many of my students have had trouble with a PSSA practice item that asks: *Identify the turning point in this passage. Support your answer with three examples from the text.* As an adult, I know that describing the problem, the turning point, and the resolution will satisfy the require-

ments of this task. But my literal-thinking students try to find three examples solely related to the turning point, and most of them end up describing the same event three times. In conversation, these students could prove their understanding of turning point, but they are confused by the written prompt and do not score well on this exercise. I also observe students stumped by terms used on the PSSA that don’t match the ones they learned in class. One English Language Learner was lost when the test asked for the “characteristics” of the grandmother in the passage, instead of “character traits.” Another student didn’t realize that the word “passage” meant the text. Talking to these students could have cleared up these problems and enabled them to show off their abilities. Too bad it violates test validity for me to clarify a question.

English Language Learners especially have it rough in

Pennsylvania. The state allows them only one year before requiring that they take and pass the Reading PSSA. Of course, proficiency on this test means being able to make inferences, identify text structure in a non-fiction passage, and distinguish between similes and metaphors. I’ve had the honor of teaching many highly intelligent, non-native English speakers, but none who could reach that level of expertise in a single year.

Sadly, a lot of schools have given up teaching with novels in favor of more test practice with short passages and multiple-choice questions that directly mimic the state test. I find this a worrisome trend, considering

the downward spiral of American interest in reading. A recent New Yorker article reported that in a survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2002 only 47% of the participants had read a work of creative literature in the previous twelve months. That's over half the participants admitting to having not read a single book in a year. I guess that explains a conversation I overheard at a recent school event. Two parents were discussing an extra credit project involving reading books over summer vacation. One mother said without apology that her child wouldn't be doing it. "He didn't read any books last summer. Well, neither did I. We were just too busy."

The high pressure demands of the No Child Left Behind law have forced many schools to make the same choice, and suddenly students are much too busy in reading class to read novels. Instead, they use anthologies and test-prep books that utilize short passages on a multitude of subjects to teach discrete reading skills and application of these skills on standardized tests. At the school where my sister teaches in Kansas, novels were put away for a 12-week period, replaced by intensive test preparation. Reading books will have to wait until the state test is over.

In my school, we have tried to strike a balance, alternating three weeks of anthology instruction with three weeks of novels. It's a compromise I've learned to live with, although I sympathize with my student Maggie, who asks every day as she closes her anthology, "How many more days until we start our next novel, Mrs. Salerni?"

And still, the worries keep piling up. On the day of my *Winter Camp* meeting, teachers had received notice that the 2008 PSSA would include the concepts of bias and propaganda. No samples of test items were provided by the state, so we don't know if students will be tested with advertisements or editorials and whether they will need to identify specific types of propaganda. Several

teachers offered to locate passages that demonstrate bias and create teaching activities to accompany them, so that we could all prepare our students to answer whatever the test asked them.

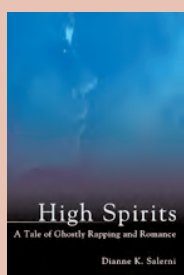
Again, I ask myself, what is the true definition of literacy?

I was reflecting on this question when I wrenched my attention back to the *Winter Camp* group. "Yes," I said, "I would agree that Natasha has a real bias against modern technology, and that includes astronauts walking on the moon." I turned and looked expectantly at Loren, seated on my right.

She didn't let me down. "What's bias mean?" she inquired, as I knew she would.

"I'm glad you asked," I said. "Let me explain it to you and give some examples from our text." ■

Dianne K. Salerni is an elementary school teacher and the author of High Spirits: A Tale of Ghostly Rapping and Romance, an historical fiction novel about nineteenth century spiritualism. Learn more about this author and her writing at www.highspiritsbook.com.



The Mighty Eighth: The Army Air Corps in Europe in WW II

by Mary Lydon Simonsen

In the earliest and darkest days of the Second World War in Europe, when Britain stood alone against the greatest threat to modern European civilization, Prime Minister Winston Churchill looked to the neutral United States for the food, fuel and war materiel that it would need in order to survive. This was only possible because both Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt recognized the enormity of the menace created by Adolph Hitler's Third Reich.

In his famous "Arsenal of Democracy" speech, in which the President committed the industrial might of the United States to defeating fascism in Europe, Roosevelt educated the nation as to the perils

America faced if Britain should fall to the German onslaught. But Churchill and Roosevelt wanted more from the American people than bread and bullets. Both leaders felt that the future of the free world depended upon the defeat of the Nazis in Europe. Although sympathetic to Britain's fight against Germany, Americans had no desire to send its young men to fight in another of Europe's wars.

Ironically, it was Adolph Hitler who was the answer to Churchill's prayers. On December 11, 1941, four days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Germany declared war on the United States even though it had no treaty obligations with the Empire of Japan. With that declaration, America was in the fight, and Roosevelt adopted a "Europe first" policy.

The first opportunity to engage the enemy came from the air. In June 1942, the first of a tidal wave of heavy bombers arrived in England. Over the months, B-17 Flying Fortresses and the B-24 Liberators, along with fighters and medium bombers, would occupy 100 newly-built airfields in East Anglia and Hertfordshire. With the British bombing German targets at night, the plan of the Eighth Air Force was to execute daylight precision bombing raids from 25,000 to 30,000 feet. Armed with the Norden bombsight, the Americans were confident that they could drop "the pickle right into the pickle barrel."

The earliest missions were against targets in France and the Low Countries where fighter planes were able to protect the bombers. The raids on marshalling yards, submarine pens, and airdromes gave the pilots an opportunity to fly in formation; the navigator, bomber, and radio operator a chance to test their skills in combat; and the five gunners of the Forts and Liberators their shot at taking on German Messerschmitt and Focke Wulf fighters.

Even with shallow penetration to cross-channel targets, casualties began to mount. From the beginning, it became obvious that there were so



The B-17 Flying Fortress known as the "Nine-O-Nine." Photo courtesy of the United States Air Force, Wright-Patterson AFB, www.wpafb.af.mil.

many ways to die when you flew for the Eighth Air Force. Planes exploded on the runway for no apparent reason or collided in the fog during assembly. They crashed on takeoff or were shot out of the sky, sometimes by gunners from their own squadron. They went down in the channel and crashed on landing. And this was before the bomb groups had executed

a single mission against a target inside Germany, but that was about to change.

On January 27, 1943, when the curtains were drawn back in the briefing rooms of American bases across East Anglia, the target

for the day was the shipyards at Vegesack outside the city of Bremen. It would be the Mighty Eighth's first raid into Germany. After a prolonged silence, the men began to cheer. They were finally taking the fight to the enemy on his own turf. Unfortunately, when the bombers arrived over Vegesack, the target was completely covered by low clouds. A

decision was made to go on to the secondary target at Wilhelmshaven where the shipyards and docks were bombed. The damage inflicted was slight, but this mission was the thin end of the wedge.

In the early days of deep penetration into Germany, the American and British fighters could not protect the bombers all the way to the target because of fuel limitations. Once the escort withdrew, German fighters descended on the exposed squadrons of planes, and it was only by maintaining tight group formations with maximum fire power that the bombers were able to survive wave after wave of hundreds of fighters. The vulnerability of the bomb groups was seen on August 17, 1943 on a mission to destroy a ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt. Thirty-six of 230 B-17s following a group attacking Regensburg did not return to their bases. A second mission to the same target saw even greater losses. On October 14, 1943, "Black Thursday," 291 B-17s left their airfields in England; 60 of the ten-man ships did not return. Such losses were unsustainable, and it was not until the P-51 Mustangs with their drop fuel tanks and expanded range of operation arrived in significant numbers in England, that deep-penetration raids resumed.

The effectiveness of daylight precision bombing is still being debated. What is not subject to debate is the bravery of the men of the Eighth Air Force who did all that was asked of them and more. According to the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum website, "The Eighth Air Force suffered half of the U.S Army Air Force casualties in World War II (47,000 plus casualties with more than 26,000 deaths). The Eighth's personnel also earned 17 Medals of Honor, 220 Distinguished Service Crosses, 850 Silver Stars, and 7,000 Purple Hearts."

In the early days of the war, German Field Marshal Herman Goering was quoted as saying that, "If Allied planes ever bomb Berlin, you can call me Meyer." As the tide turned in favor of the Allies, Goering watched

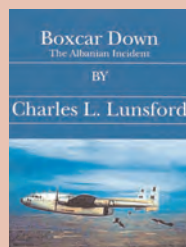
BOOK REVIEW

Keeping with the flying theme, this month's review is a fictional tale starring a USAF radio operator.

Boxcar Down by Charles L. Lunsford

Airman Jim Wilson is a radio operator stationed in Europe in 1958, when the Cold War is still going strong. He is a crew member on an airplane known as a C-119 Boxcar, and the plane is shot down over Albania by Communist soldiers.

The only survivor, Wilson must find a way to make contact with the American military, as well as evade the Russian soldiers and Albanian police who are searching for him. Luckily, he is discovered by an Albanian teacher who was a former resistance fighter with no love lost for the Communist regime. The radio operator and the teacher are joined by a steadily growing cast of characters as they travel through Albania to cross the Iron Curtain into Greece, and freedom. At the same time, the Air Force is trying to locate Wilson and organize a rescue mission without starting



an international incident. Along the way there is humor, romance, action, and suspense.

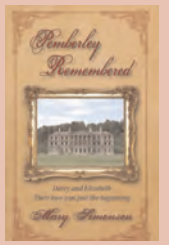
Boxcar Down is a solid book and Lunsford writes in a nice, smoothly-flowing style that makes 600-plus pages go faster than you would expect. The book contains a lot of military and aviation jargon which should be of interest to pilots and soldiers, but doesn't get in the way of those readers who aren't interested in such topics.

Spelling and punctuation errors do not get in the way of enjoying the book. And even though at 600 pages you are definitely getting your money's worth, some people might find that too many characters are included in the book, and some of the subplots are unnecessary and slow down the main event. But overall, Lunsford does a nice job of putting the reader behind the controls of military aircraft and transporting them back in time half a century. *Boxcar Down* is Lunsford's second book, and first work of fiction, and although it has some rough spots it shows he has the potential to entertain fans of Robert Ludlum, Clive Cussler and Tom Clancy.

- review by Michael S. Katz

as waves of Fortresses and Liberators, escorted by P-51 Mustangs, dropped their bomb loads on the capital of the Third Reich. The sight caused the Field Marshall to remark in despair, "When I saw Mustangs over Berlin, I knew the jig was up." So sayeth Mr. Meyer.

Mary Simonsen is the author of *Pemberley Remembered*. One of the main characters in the story is a navigator on a B-17 Flying Fortress during World War II.



Who, What, When, Where and Why: Not Just for Journalists Anymore

by Laurie Pooler Pelayo

When we think of who, what, where, when, why, and how, we think of journalism and murder mysteries. But there's one other group of individuals who use the 5 W's and the H, and that's genealogists.

Genealogy is a hobby for some, a profession for others. It is a pursuit of the unknown: unknown ancestors, dates, places and events. It is a window to history, ours and our ancestors'. We use the who, what, where, when, why, and how just like a detective in a novel or a journalist getting the big story.

For genealogists: Who is the person we're searching for? What did they do for a living, and what historical events shaped their lives? Where did they live, worship, and die? When did they live, move, travel, or give birth to their children? Why did they move, fight for their cause, choose one occupation over another, leave their homeland, marry whom they did, or why didn't they marry? How did they worship, endure a winter in the middle of nowhere, survive on forty acres (or less) of land through depressions, epidemics, and famines? If one had enough information, one could really run with a family history. It's the genealogist's chance to bring all of those names, dates and places

to life. But sometimes that task isn't so easy to do. If you ask any genealogist they will tell you about brick walls: family lines or family members who simply lack something the genealogist needs in order to progress. Their lives are an open book if you will—anything can be interpreted because the possibilities are endless. Some family historians/genealogists are fortunate enough to break through these walls, but some of us simply don't have all the pieces to do so. Those for me are the lines that make a great mystery.

I have loved mysteries since I was a child. I loved the act of figuring out who done it. For me it was the journey, the road to getting to the solution that piqued my imagination. They say write about what you know, so I decided to take one of those genealogical quandaries and make it a murder mystery. Finally I could break through that brick wall—fictionally—and have a blast doing it.

Just as fictional detectives in literature incorporate their 5 W's and H to formulate the path to a killer, I did the same to make and solve a murder from the past using present-day genealogical research tools. I chose an ancestor on my father's side that I found quite interesting and a bit perplexing. A genealogy printed on his family surname covered everyone quite thoroughly, but seemed to ignore him. His feats of prowess were not found anywhere in the book, only names and a few sketchy dates. Later research proved him to be a rat to his neighbors and relations, a man who went through his wives like tissue paper (they all died within just a few years of the marriage, maiden names and burial locations unknown). What a gem to use as my first character.

The 5 W's and an H became: Who: the fictional Captain Andrew Bower. What: did he murder his wife? Where did it happen? When: turn of the century Ohio. Why: his motive—what possessed him to do it, if he did do it? And How—as in all good detective and cozy mysteries—was the method of murder.

The same sorts of resources were used during the course of the investigation as would be used in a present day mystery, but in a slightly different way. Neighbors as well as relatives were interviewed (past and present), court records were viewed, diaries read, letters and other correspondence scrutinized, newspaper articles investigated, coroners' reports examined, and so on. The footwork was still there, but just taken from the past and brought to the present. In order to accomplish that feat, libraries and living relatives were visited; the Internet was employed, along with the telephone and the ever fading snail-mail.

In the process of solving the mystery, I was teaching genealogical methods too. Sneaky, huh?

You're probably asking: Were the answers conclusive in either real life or in the book? In real life: I wish. Less so as time passes, but then my saving grace is that nothing in genealogy is ever truly finished, new information is found all the time—so there's still hope that I might be able to someday fill in the gaps in my ancestor's life. As for the book, well, it's as conclusive as it can be since it's my version of events. It's as close to an answer as my fictional protagonist Lydia and I will ever get.

And you know what? I had fun creating the road to getting there.

Laurie Pooler Pelayo is a Cataloging Library Technician, genealogy enthusiast, and author of the Lydia Proctor mysteries. Information on her books, including *An Old Fashioned Murder*, can be found at www.lydiaoproctormysteries.com.



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