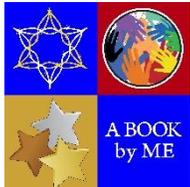


75th Anniversary: 1945-2020

A BOOK by ME Remembers the End of WWII

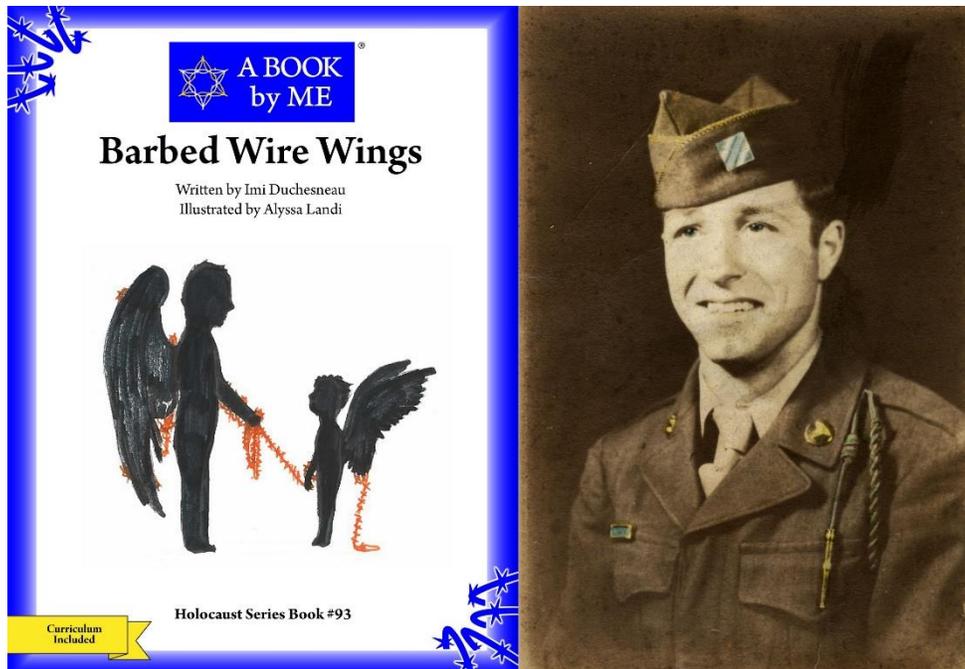
understandingworks.org

"If I told you my story, you would be amazed."



Barbed Wire Wings Reader's Theater

Based on the book by Imi Duchesneau and Alyssa Landi
This title found in Social Justice Superstars book set
at understandingworks.org



#suicide

Veteran John Gualtier was a medic on the front-line during WWII, and his decisions each day meant life or death to his patients. After the war, his unit liberated a concentration camp where a Jewish man he was feeding died in his arms. After the war, John became suicidal but managed to get help and even into his 90s, he volunteered at the VA hospital helping young veterans who have suicidal thoughts.

Cast:

[Narrator 1](#)

[John Gualtier](#)

[Narrator 2](#)

[Wounded Man](#)

[John's Father](#)

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Alyssa Landi, John Gualtier and Imi Duchesneau

Scene 1

Wellsville Ohio

Narrator 1: World War 2 happened a long time ago but the lessons learned are relevant today. The lives of the young soldiers were hard. Scared and far from home, shooting at real people and being shot at every day. Each day bringing new horrors of the war. Many of them brought those feelings home with them. It made them numb to their loved ones as they relived these things in their minds. A British psychologist in World War 1 called this being “shell shocked”. Today it’s called post-traumatic stress disorder, also known as PTSD. This story tells about John Gualtier who was traumatized by events in the second world war.

John’s Father: I moved from Italy to the United States when I was just six years old. My parents saw America as the land of opportunity and I believe it is. I got married and my folks lived with me, my wife and our six children. It was good to have the grandparents under the same roof. We loved being together. I worked on the railroad and while it was hard work, it was honest work that helped provide for my family. My son John was born in October of 1925.

John’s Teacher: I remember the Gualtier kids very well. Four of them got up on a big horse named Dobbin and rode to school each morning. The oldest child in that family lit the fire that warmed the school house each morning. It was his responsibility to keep us all warm and snug during the cold winters. Most of the time I loved being with the children but sometimes, my patience would snap and I would beat a child. Back in those days it was acceptable to if the teacher felt it was needed.

Dobbin the Horse: I loved the kids riding me to school each day. I was tied up outside and waited there for the children. One day I heard the school teacher yelling angrily at young John. I knew this teacher had been a soldier in WWI and thought he was probably shell shocked by his war experience. My boy John was whipped with a switch that day. A switch is a long tender branch off of a tree and, back in those days, many of the whippings were done on the child's legs. I know I'm only a horse but I don't think adult humans should hit children who are smaller and weaker. I know for sure horses and dogs don't learn anything by being beaten. Both humans and animals respond better to love. I felt bad for John that day and tried to nuzzle him to remind him I loved him.

Narrator 2: John and his siblings grew up during the Great Depression when most people had no money and no jobs in America and around the world. At 17, John enjoyed boxing and he was offered \$3 to box in a match. He knocked his opponent out with one punch. What he really wanted to do was go fight the Nazis but his father would not sign the paper for him to join up before his 18th birthday. When that birthday came around, John was in line ready to go fight for his country.

Scene 2

European Theater

John Gualtier: I was shipped to France first and as a medic, was sent to the front lines. Medics cannot carry a weapon. We wore a red cross on our arms which made us a target for the enemy. One night when the shooting was especially bad, I ran to the front lines six times to drag wounded men to safety. It was scary business and remember I was just a teenage kid. The toughest part of my job was deciding who would live and who would probably die. My days and nights were filled with torment.

Wounded Man: I knew in my heart my wounds were serious and I wasn't going to make it. I also knew that the medics had limited amounts of medicines on them to take care of those who were going to live. The pain was so intense I couldn't stop myself from calling "doc, doc, give me something for the pain." Still John was right, I was too far gone.

John Gualtier: News that the Nazis had surrendered traveled fast and we celebrated having no idea what we would see next. My orders came through to liberate a concentration camp in Austria. The Nazis had starved the prisoners until they looked like walking skeletons. We learned they were innocent Jews imprisoned there. I felt like the war, in just a few months, had taken a young kid.

Jewish Prisoner: I was in this camp barely alive when John and his unit came to help us. My camp was a sub-camp of a famous concentration camp called Mauthausen. John thought I was a young boy because I didn't weigh much, but I was a grown Jewish man. He pulled me onto his lap and gave me small bites of food. After the first bite, I smiled at him and that gave him hope. But after the second bite, I died in his arms. It almost broke his heart. I wish he knew how happy I was to look into his kind eyes after months of being treated like an animal by the Nazis. His kindness meant so much to me.

John Gualtier: I continued this heartbreaking work as a liberator at another camp as well. Then I received news that I was being transferred to Nuremberg where the trials against war criminals were being held. I was a medic for the soldiers guarding the captured Nazis. I often saw the infamous Hermann Goring, second in command of the Nazi party under Adolf Hitler. Goring killed himself the night before he was to be hung.

Scene 3

Back in the U.S.A.

John's Mother: Finally, our son came home. As his mother, I knew that not all parents were so lucky to have their sons come back from the war. We moved to California and were surprised when John started behaving oddly. He scared us. Said he knew he was "wacky as a bed bug." Sometimes he would disappear into the mountains and be gone for days. We worried, but finally, he met a nice army nurse and married. They moved to Iowa where she was from originally. We hoped for the best.

John's Father: John had all kinds of jobs in Vinton where they now lived. One was at the Iowa Braille School where the author Laura Ingalls Wilder's sister, Mary, went after she went blind. But John's flashbacks from the war made it impossible for him to hold a regular job so he started working as a handyman. He could set his own hours and that helped but life was far from perfect.

John Gualtier: I was tormented by my memories of the war and I tried to commit suicide twice. The doctors at the VA Hospital in Iowa City helped me out a lot. I started attending a group session with WWII veterans and when they all passed on, I went to sessions with men who had come back from Vietnam. I've spoken to many young veterans coming home from today's wars. The subject of suicide came up a lot. Many have credited me for saving their lives. It makes me happy to think that's true, that my life has purpose. I believe everyone's life has purpose.

Jill Gualtier: I'm John's second wife. We married after his first wife passed away. I'm thankful that John has conquered his suicidal thoughts and helped so many other veterans. It's brave of him to do this. He also speaks to children in schools and talks openly about teen suicide to children who are up against bullying, stress, confusion, fear and more. John encourages students to talk to someone if these thoughts come. I don't think too many people from the WWII generation would do this but my John is one in a million. Like me, our community is so proud of him. In June of 2020, 75 years after the war ended, John finally received his Purple Heart for being wounded in the war.

Narrator 1: There are many reasons people think about killing themselves. Some have abusive relationships at home, drug or alcohol addiction. They may be afraid, feeling unloved or be mentally unwell. There may not be enough money or not enough contact with people. This is especially hard now during the Covid-19 epidemic with so many people spending too much time alone.

Narrator 2: It's a challenge for many people to talk about something like this. This could be the time to have the courage to remind a person that their life has great value. It's important that you ask how they are feeling and be careful not to judge them. To let them know you care and offer to go with them to talk to someone experienced who knows how to help. Let them know you care and be a good friend.

John Gualtier: It makes me sad that over 6,000 veterans commit suicide each year. It also makes me sad that every day over 3,500 students in high schools nationwide try to commit suicide. That's not counting kids in middle school who also battle suicidal thoughts. Someone needs to reach out to them because there are often clear warning signs. Maybe that someone could be you and me.