BY KATHLEEN M. MUCERINO

ASHES WILL TRAVEL

My father always had planned on growing old, retiring and traveling. He had done a bit during his short 53 years. This is the story of his last journey.

During the cold war, the Army assumed that sitting in foxholes in Nevada watching atomic bomb tests was a harmless pastime for soldiers. Decades later, those soldiers started dying from various forms of radiation-induced cancers. By the 1970s the federal courts were deluged with lawsuits by these soldiers and surviving families. Those courts had no choice but to throw out all of these lawsuits under the Feres Doctrine.[1]

My father, Ralph P. Mucerino, received his diagnosis in the fall of 1980. He recalled sitting in a foxhole in 1953 and being told to close his eyes and cover them with his forearm and hand. When the bomb exploded miles away, he could see the bones in his hand and arm like an X-ray.

He chose not to attempt to become part of the lawsuits. Fourteen months after his diagnosis, he passed away, on January 9, 1982. He was buried in Mount Carmel Catholic Cemetery, in Hillside, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago.

In 1988, Congress passed legislature that gave "Atomic Veterans," as they had come to be known, service-connected status.[2] *The surviving relatives were entitled to veteran's benefits, and there was government recognition that their deaths were in the line of duty.*

Life goes on, and by 2006 the family had relocated to Arizona.

"None of you are going back to Illinois to visit our grave if I'm buried with your father," my mother began. She announced that she was thinking of moving my father's remains to Arizona.

"I can't even go back now and visit his grave," she added, "and I don't think I can take those cold Chicago winters anymore."

"You'll be dead," I had reminded her helpfully.

"It will cost less to move him here than to send my body back there," she replied, playing to my frugalness.

"How can it be cheaper? We move his body here, or yours there, the cost should be the same."

"They cremate the remains before they ship the body," she said, obviously having researched the issue. "Otherwise, the health department has to okay moving the body and I'm not paying to dig him up only to have some government bureaucrat tell me we can't move him. So, we'll have him cremated."

"I thought you planned on being cremated?" I asked. "We'll just be shipping your ashes back to Chicago."

"I am not going back to those winters, and that's final," she announced. "We can bury him in the National Cemetery right here in Arizona. He'd like that."

"We can send the ashes registered mail," offered the funeral director in Illinois whom we had contacted.

It sounded like a good idea to me.

"You are not mailing your father," my mother said. "You'll have to pick him up."

She would not bend on the issue, even when I found all sorts of statistics that showed if the ashes were sent registered mail the chances were pretty slim that her dear Ralphie would be lost somewhere in the bowels of some old U.S. Post Office.

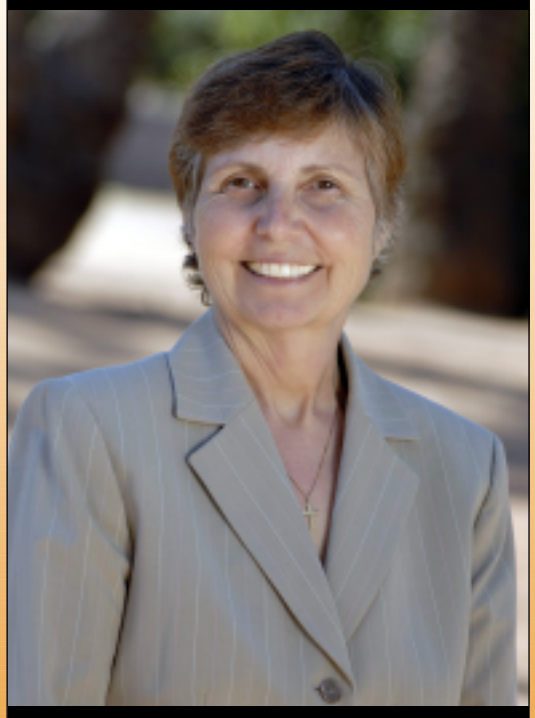
"I don't want him ending up in Pakistan or something," she insisted.

"He always wanted to travel," I reminded her.

She ignored me.

The disinterment and cremation scheduled, I and my youngest son, who had been born years after his grandfather died, flew to

WINNER



nonFICTION

Kathleen M. Mucerino is an attorney in Peoria, Ariz., who focuses her practice in adoption and juvenile law. She is a mother and veteran. Her younger son plans to join the military after college, and her older son currently serves with the 82nd Airborne in Iraq.

Chicago. Although only early November, it was freezing. It reminded me of my father's January funeral, during one of the coldest Januarys in Chicago history.

The funeral home packed the ashes in plastic, then in a sealed wooden box, and finally placed that box in a cardboard box for the trip home.

"Don't lose the certificate of cremation in case security needs to see it at the airport," we were told.

That task accomplished, we still had nine hours until our flight home. We thought of lots of things to do with our time instead of sitting in an airport, but what were we supposed to do with dad's ashes?

"The Science Museum," my son insisted, remembering many vacations to visit family that included a trip to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry.

"What about your grandfather?" I reminded him.

"We can leave him in the trunk of the car."

He had little bonding to a grandfather who died five years before he was born.

"This is Chicago. Criminals break into cars in Chicago. Suppose someone steals the car with your grandfather in it?"

"We'll think of something," he replied. He is always the optimist.

I didn't want to sit in an airport, so I resigned myself to the fact that I would be carrying my father's ashes around the museum.

"The coat check," my son announced as we walked into the museum and saw the sign.

I was leery, but was already finding a box of ashes far too heavy to carry around for the next few hours.

"Please open the box," said the young girl in charge of the Coat Check Department. I pointed to the label on the side of the box: "Remains of Ralph Patrick Mucerino."

She stared at me.

"I can't check the box unless you open it," she insisted.

"Okay," I said, opening the cardboard box, "but the wooden box inside is sealed."

"Why is it sealed?" she asked suspiciously. "We can't check anything unless we know what it is." Then, before I could stop her, she picked up the phone and called her supervisor.

"It's my father's ashes," I told her.

"Like a dead body?"

"Yes."

She stared at me and did not say a word until her supervisor arrived.

"Can we check a dead body?" she asked her supervisor.

"It's just his ashes," I insisted again. "He's too heavy to carry around the museum. We came into town to pick up his ashes, and our plane doesn't leave for hours."

With suspicion, the supervisor inspected the box.

"This was his favorite museum," I argued. "He grew up in Chicago," I finally told her, hoping to play on her sympathies.

"We can't be responsible if he's lost or damaged," she said.

Now I was concerned.

"How often do you lose anything?" my son asked, not wanting me to change my mind and cancel the museum visit.

"Never have since I made supervisor six years ago."

"You wouldn't plan to change that now, would you?" my son asked, charming the young woman.

"Nope. Give her a ticket, and keep the box right under the counter," she told the Coat Check Girl.

A few hours later, as we were ready to leave the museum and head for the airport, we found the same young woman guarding Ralph's ashes. The moment she saw us, she gingerly pulled the box out.

"We've all talked about it," she told us, "and this is the strangest thing ever checked at this museum."

"Thanks," I told her.

At the airport, we entered the X-ray line with our carry-ons. I watched without surprise as the young Homeland Security employee gazed at the screen and then signaled to his supervisor. Fortunately, though, it was clear as she looked at the image that she'd seen human ashes come through the airport before. And she was going to have a good time with this fledgling subordinate.

"It's a dead body," she told him.

"What?" he said, sure he had misheard.

"Dead body. Ashes. Cremated."

"Ma'am?" he said to me, sure his supervisor was messing with him. "What's in the box?"

"My father's remains," I said as softly as I could. Still, fellow travelers heard and took a step back, but they lingered long enough to peer at the box as it emerged from the X-ray machine.

"Do you need the Certificate of Cremation?" I offered.

The young man's expression begged me to quit messing with him.

He sent the box through the machine, and I retrieved it from the conveyer belt. He wore a good-bye look that told me he still figured his boss had set him up.

"You checked your father in a coatroom?" my mother asked in disbelief. It was the next morning and we were driving dad's ashes out to the National Cemetery.

"It was always his favorite museum," I reminded her.

At the cemetery she completed the paperwork while I asked questions.

"What niche will he get?" I asked, knowing the National Cemeteries placed you in the next open space.

"I can't tell you for sure until that day, but it looks like he'll be on the top row, right here," the clerk told us, pointing to a map of the cemetery.

"The top row's good," I told my mother. "He always told me never to rent an apartment unless you were on the top floor so you didn't have to hear the people upstairs moving around."

"No one will be moving around," the clerk said. "We make sure they're dead."

A cemetery clerk with a sense of humor. I liked that.

"We have to decide what will be placed on the niche," my mother said.

"His name, your name, dates of birth, and dates of death. Leave your date of death blank," I suggested.

"Don't be smart. I know that. We can say something, too. What saying should we put on it?"

"Ashes Will Travel," I proposed.

"You're not funny. We'll come back to the saying."

She worked on the rest of the form.

"Are you putting Helen or Elaine on it?" I asked.

Like all events familial, this one came with a story.

My mother had been born premature. Both she and my grandmother were not expected to live. It was a Catholic hospital, and the priest was called to baptize the baby. With no time to go out to the waiting room and ask my grandfather what he wanted to name the baby, the priest named my mother after the doctor and the nurse: Helen Frances. That's the name on her birth certificate. Everyone lived.

Even though the Catholic Church goes with a one-baptism rule, my mother was later taken to church to be re-baptized.

"You need to do it the proper way," an aunt had told my grandmother.

In those days, Italian mothers stayed at home and prepared food for the baptism celebration, and the godparents took the baby to church for the baptism. That same aunt was the godmother, and she hated the name Helen. When the priest asked for the baby's name, she told him, "Elaine."

My mother spent the rest of her life having her family call her Elaine. But at school and everywhere else, she was called by her legal name, Helen.

"I'm not putting either name on it right now. Wait till I'm dead. You can put it on then."

"That might cost extra money," I reminded her.

"Not my problem," she said.

"Which name do you prefer?" I asked. I'd never asked her that question.

"Elaine. But most people know me as Helen. I should have changed it when I turned 18.

"I never knew that," I said.

"That's because you are too busy making jokes," she said, referencing my earlier 'Ashes Will Travel' suggestion."

"I could do a legal name change for you," I told her, reminding

Ralph Patrick Mucerino, in about 1980.

her that I was a lawyer.

"I'm too old," she replied.

She completed the form, except for the space for any saying we wished to have on the marker.

She looked up at me.

"They have a list of suggestions here," she said, handing me the form. "Otherwise we can put in what we want. We just need to fill in the blocks."

"I really like 'Ashes Will Travel.' It tells everyone who walks past his niche something interesting about him. He flew from Chicago to Arizona 24 years after he died."

She stared at me.

"How about, 'Our New Year's Baby'?" I offered. My father had been born at home, in Chicago, on New Year's Day, 1926.

"No."

Funerals are much easier to plan decades after death.

"Ralphie With the Baby Blue Eyes?" My father had blue eyes.

"Not funny."

"Ralphie the Red-Nosed Reindeer," I suggested, recalling as children how we had personalized the words to the Christmas song about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

"No," she said. "That's it. Pick one off the list."

I'd like to tell you that my father's niche says, "Ashes Will Travel." It doesn't. My father now rests in the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona. His niche says, "Forever in Our Hearts."

He is on the top row.

endnotes

1. Federal Tort Claims Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2680, the combatant activities exception, 28 U.S.C. § 2680(j), and the Feres doctrine, *Feres v. United States*, 340 U.S. 135 (1950). Military members cannot bring a lawsuit against the federal government because of injuries sustained while they were in the military.
2. Radiation-Exposed Veterans Compensation Act (Pub. L. 100-321).