



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green



Bill McComiskey c 1938

The First to Fall

by Meg Costello

The first Falmouth serviceman to die in World War II was William “Bill” McComiskey. He was born in North Falmouth in 1915, the oldest of seven children. His grandfather, Capt. William McComiskey, once worked for Boston’s famous clipper ship builder Donald McKay. Bill’s father, Foster, also knew his way around a boat. Foster moved to Falmouth in 1896 and became an assistant to Ephraim Lincoln, the carriage painter and marine artist.ⁱ Later, Foster supported his family by working as a mechanic and house painter, but his favorite pastime was always painting pictures of ships.ⁱⁱ

In hindsight, it seems obvious that Bill would end up in the Navy. But

getting there wasn’t all smooth sailing for him. He dropped out of high schoolⁱⁱⁱ and ran with a rambunctious crowd. Their escapades must have kept his mother up late at night. In August 1931, 16-year-old Bill was riding in a model T Ford that careened off the county road in Bourne, “crashed through a wooden fence, fell fifteen feet down an embankment, taking several somersaults on the way, and landed on its side, shortly after midnight” on a Saturday night. The four youths inside walked away mostly unscathed, although the 17-year-old driver, Dana Freeman, was “thrown head first through the windshield” and required several stitches.^{iv}

Just a year later, Bill survived another car wreck. His cousin Robert Evans was driving a car packed with eight boys and men, none of them wearing seat belts, of course. They were hurrying home at 10 p.m. to catch the Schmeling-Walker fight on the radio. About a mile north of the Palmer Avenue railroad bridge, on the West Falmouth state highway, Evans collided with another car. His sedan “turned end for end three times, being almost demolished.” Once again, Bill walked away with cuts and bruises.^v



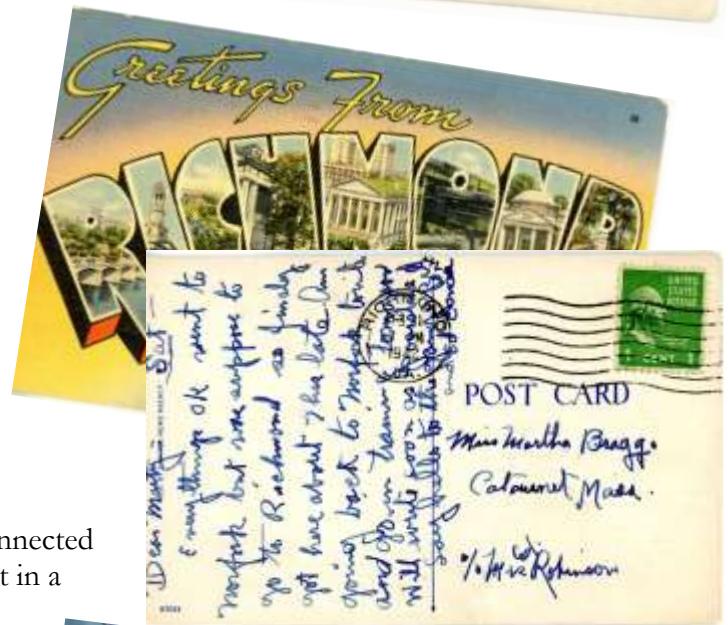
Top: Bill McComiskey, 1942

Bottom: Bill McComiskey and Martha Bragg, winter 1942, on a beach likely in Falmouth.

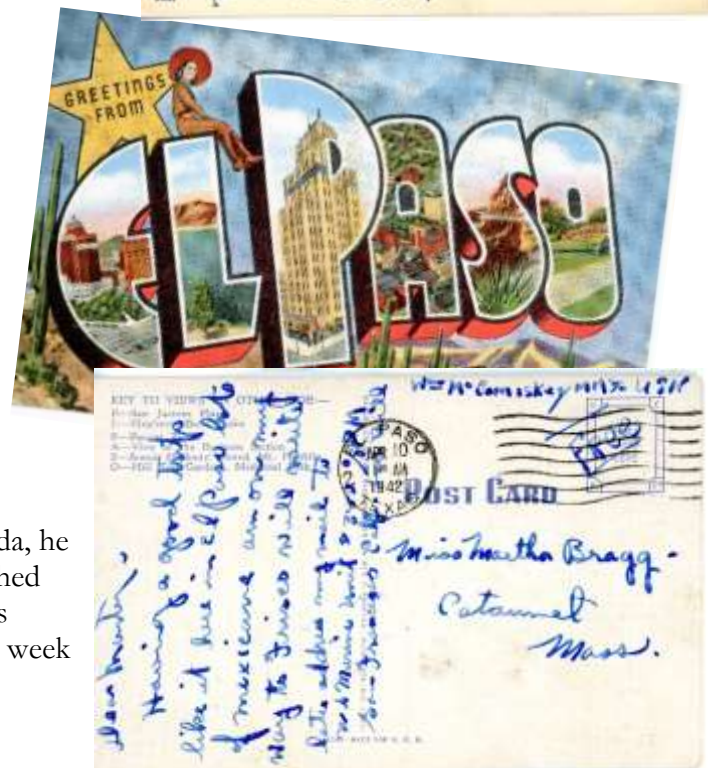


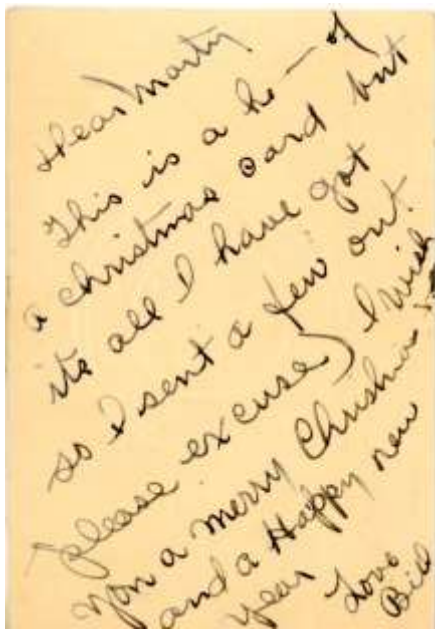
As a passenger, Bill was unlucky, but when in charge of a situation, he could be capable and responsible. In July 1937, Eric Ericson and his wife were in a jam off Scraggy Neck, unable to force their rowboat through a stiff wind back to the shore. Bill and his pal Howard Nye were fishing nearby, saw the Ericsons' distress, and came roaring to their rescue in a powerboat.^{vi}

Bill was employed for a while as a mechanic at Noyes's garage in North Falmouth, but his roving spirit drew him beyond his hometown. A fellow who was handy with boats and cars and engines could find a job almost anywhere. In January 1941 he set out for Florida, probably looking for work connected to the winter tourist season there. He also did a stint in a defense plant in Newfoundland, presumably at some point between 1939 and 1941, when Canada was already at war.^{vii}

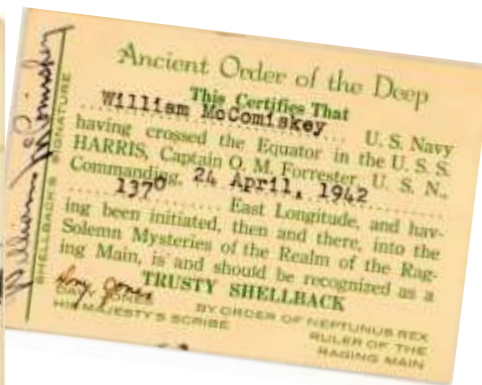


But something kept pulling Bill back to the Cape. A big part of the attraction was a girl from Cataumet named Martha Bragg. Bill called her "Marty." In the archives at Museums on the Green, there are several postcards that Bill sent to Marty between January and April 1942. He was roaming throughout New York, North Carolina, Florida, and Virginia, apparently looking for defense work or possibly a place in the merchant marine. The Navy was his fallback option. He signed the postcards "Love, Bill," and once included three kisses (xxx). From Hollywood, Florida, he wrote, "It's a beautiful warm moonlite nite out. Wished you were here. You'd like it very much." A few days later, from Miami, he told Marty, "May be home in a week if possible and have not joined the Navy."





Dear Marty,
this is a he— of
a Christmas card but
it's all I have got
so I sent a few out.
please excuse I wish
you a merry Christmas
and a Happy New
Year.
Love,
Bill



Two weeks later, Bill was in the Navy and headed for “Norfolk,” Virginia. The last two postcards track his progress to San Francisco and take note of his rank, MM 2/C, machinist’s mate second class. By May 1942 Bill was aboard the USS *Harris*, but he couldn’t tell Marty the name of his ship or where it was.^{viii} At Christmas that year, he sent her

his “trusty shellback” certificate. This had been issued to him months before, when his ship had crossed the equator. Bill wrote on the back, “Dear Marty, This is a he— of a Christmas card but it’s all I have got.”

The next communication Marty received was the last thing she wanted to hear. The news reached her through a report sent to Bill’s parents, which they shared with her.

Joseph H. McCarty MM 2/C USN
Marine Corp. Unit #385
c/o Fleet Post Office
San Francisco, Cal.

16 Jan 1943
Dearest Jean,

Although you had never met Wild Bill McComiskey, from my letters you knew that he was the best friend I had in the Navy. He became sick to his stomach six days ago and died last night at the Navy hospital. I stood within five feet of him the last half hour he lived, but he never knew I was there. He received the best medical attention possible, equal to any he might have gotten in the States. Death came painlessly. Thank God.



Bill’s grave marker in the military cemetery at Honolulu.
Photo from [findagrave.com](https://www.findagrave.com), memorial ID 3784540.

I intended to write about the things Bill & I have done in the past and the things we planned to do in the future. How he slept in the bunk beside me or the bunk beneath me at Norfolk, at Manassas, Va., on the train across country, on the ship and in every tent on this island. He was a good friend to me and one of the best workers in the outfit and most of all, he was a real man, well liked by everyone. I never once heard him complain.

Bill was buried this afternoon in finest and most impressive service that I have ever witnessed. The commanding officer suspended all working parties for twenty four hours. The wake was very short but he was laid in an expensive, walnut, vacuum coffin in full dress of the U.S. Navy. He really looked at peace. The funeral procession consisted of seven jeeps carrying all of our officers, a Chevrolet rack body truck as the hearse, with Bill covered with the American flag. Then a Marine travel truck carrying the pall bearers, of which I was one. Then another Chevrolet carrying his closest friends, and bringing up the rear were ten construction trucks carrying three hundred of his shipmates, dressed in whites with black ties, all with sidearms and rifles. The cemetery itself is located in a small coconut grove with green grass, well kept, growing all over it. We were met there by the Marine Band and a Marine firing squad. The Band played a hymn, then the chaplain conducted a short service. The firing squad fired three times into the air and Bill was lowered away while taps was sounded.

He was buried beside a Marine Captain who also died here. Besides the Americans present there was also a company of foreign troops and officers whose nationality I can’t disclose. It was a fine tribute to a great guy. Till this day in my life Bill’s death has been my deepest sorrow.

Joseph H. McCarty, 104th U.S. Marine Corp. Unit # 385
 16, Jan., 1943 To Fleet Post Office
 San Francisco, Cal.

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 things Bill & I have done in the past
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 beside me or the bunk beneath me
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First page of Joseph McCarty's letter, 1943.

It is my wish, Jean, due to the fact that Bill and I were pals, that if you think that reading this letter might help ease Mr. and Mrs. McComiskey's sorrow or enlighten them to the whereabouts and care that Bill received, that you personally visit them and let them read it. If you don't think you could, ask my brother Paul. Convey to them my deepest sympathies.

All my love,
 Mac

The address:
 Wild Harbor Ave.
 North Falmouth, Mass.

The official telegram received by Bill's parents stated that he was "killed in action" and "died of a perforated liver, colitis, and peritonitis due to injuries of war."^{xix} His friend Joseph may have felt compelled by censorship, or by compassion, to withhold the details of how Bill "became sick" and died. A later news article mentioned that his injuries were sustained in an air raid.^x He died on Wallis Island, a Polynesian atoll in the South Pacific controlled by Free French troops and fortified by U.S. Marines.

In 1960, the American Legion post in Falmouth proposed that the new dual highway through West Falmouth be named after William McComiskey. The planning board turned down their suggestion, saying that since the road would not be entirely in Falmouth, it should "bear the name of a personage of more national significance."^{xi} Bill might have gotten a kick out of the idea of the high-speed road

being named after him, given his history with car crashes.

Bill's parents refused the government's offer to return his remains to Falmouth. By that point, in 1947, he had already been disinterred from his grave on Wallis Island and reburied at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. His mother, Rachel, said, "We decided to leave our boy where he is. He has already been moved once... We will leave him where he is. There has been heartbreak enough already."^{xii}

ⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, 1/20/1956, p. 13.

ⁱⁱ World War I Selective Service System draft registration cards, 1917-1918, "Foster McComiskey," accessed at Familysearch.org. Also, U.S. Census, 1940, Massachusetts population schedules, Barnstable County, accessed at Familysearch.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Census, 1940, shows that 24-year-old William's highest completed grade was the first year of high school. Census accessed at Familysearch.org.

^{iv} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 8/27/1931, pp. 1, 8.

^v *Falmouth Enterprise*, 9/29/1932, p. 3.

^{vi} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 7/27/1937, p. 1.

^{vii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 1/22/1943, p. 6.

^{viii} For information on the U.S.S. *Harris*, see www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/h/harris.html and www.navsourc.org/archives/10/03/03002.htm.

^{ix} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 1/22/1943, p. 6.

^x *Falmouth Enterprise*, 5/6/1955, p. 1 mentions the air raid.

^{xi} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 2/19/1960, p.1.

^{xii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 10/3/1947, pp. 1, 3.