

Grandfather's war

A prize-winning essay explores the aftermath of war on a World War II veteran.

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Michael Carolan, of Belchertown, never met his maternal grandfather, who died before he was born. But he always sensed that the handsome, well-liked man, a churchgoer and a dentist by profession, was never quite right after he got back to Missouri from the war.

World War II, that is. The war whose veterans seemed barely to falter, just picked themselves up, put their noses to the grindstone and went on to successful lives. That's what Carolan's grandfather did.

Except that it wasn't true, as Carolan suspected even before he plunged into research on his grandfather.

Now the prestigious magazine *The Atlantic* has awarded Carolan second prize in its Student Writing Contest for his 31-page essay titled "Breaking Point: The Search for a Post-War Grandfather."

Carolan, 41, is enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts Program in Poetry and Writing at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, where he also teaches classes in literature.

He and his wife, Ruth, have two children.

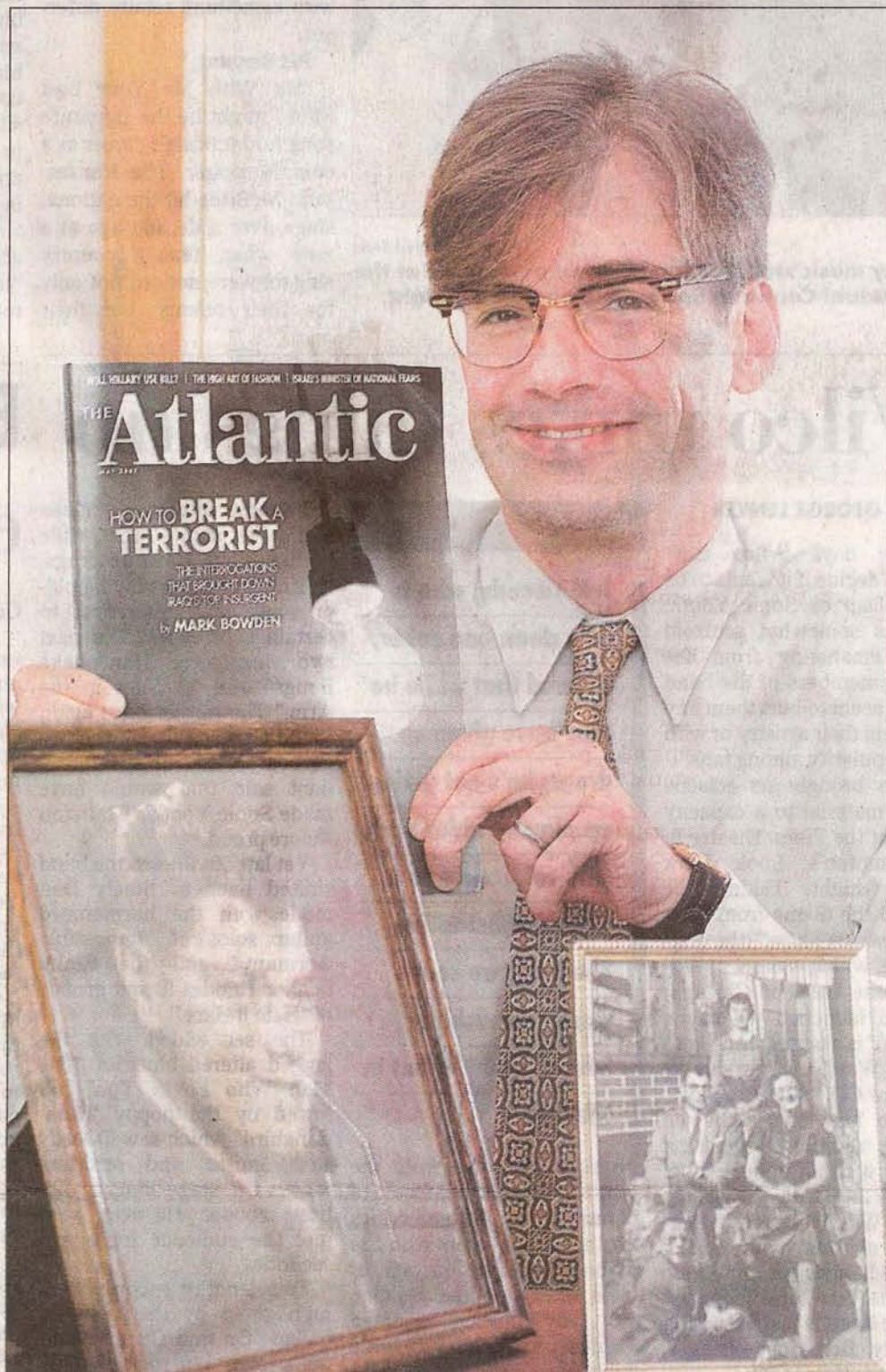
A former journalist and editor, the Missouri native is writing a novel which he expects to finish by December and submit as his MFA thesis. It's based on his prize-winning essay.

Carolan has been pursuing the story of his grandfather, Charles W. Felt, for more than five years. Felt's fiddle is propped on a shelf of the dining room in Belchertown. Carolan also has photos, medals and a military uniform that belonged to the man.

"For a long time all I knew was that he died in a car accident," says Carolan. "But there were a lot of things that didn't add up when I talked to my family about it, and a lot of shame connected with it."

It was apparent to him that there was some kind of addiction involved, a response to trauma. "My mother would never tell me about it," says Carolan. "She idolized her father."

Felt was 44 when he died in 1957.



Staff photo by **DON TREEGER**

The Atlantic has awarded Michael Carolan of Belchertown second prize in its Student Writing Contest for his 31-page essay titled "Breaking Point: The Search for a Post-War Grandfather."

Carolán set out to immerse himself in his grandfather's world. He attended a reunion of the man's unit, tracked down his war-time bunkmates, visited the National Archives in Maryland, even found the 92-year-old former patrolman who had reported the fatal accident.

When his own younger sister died in a car accident in 2003, "I took all that grief and turned it into my work," says Carolán. He wrote the first draft of his essay in "two or three days."

It's an exploration of trauma, how it was understood and treated in the 1950s – and what's left of that tradition today.

Back then, the military recognized that many men returning from war suffered from what was called "psychoneurosis." But the prevailing ethic was to keep a stiff upper lip, and what Carolán found was a litany of denial.

A pamphlet of the period titled "What's the Score in Cases Like Mine?" advised veterans to deal with their mental suffering

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by playing competitive games, sawing wood or pounding a punching bag.

"Remember that a man's condition is his own problem," it reads, "whether it is a pain in the belly or an ache in the soul. Try to whip it yourself."

Carolán's grandfather did try. After all, he hadn't seen combat. He was a dentist. Even in the military, he was known for his high-spirited pranks.

But his wife later told Carolán that she knew something was wrong "the moment I laid eyes on him at Union Station in St. Louis when he returned."

In the mid-1950s, there were more than 117,000 beds for psychiatric patients in VA hospitals across the country, according to Carolán. Barbiturates were doled out increasingly.

But already, he writes, professionals and the public had begun their "cyclical forgetting," attributing psychic wounds not to war, but to personal defects that had been there all along.

Once home, his grandfather began to un-

Please see Essay, Page E2

Essay: Belchertown man explores grandfather's past

Continued from Page E1

ravel. He had nightmares and sleepless nights. He had wild mood swings. He drank. He raged. He raced his car up and down the streets at night. People pitied his wife.

In the end, Felt went to Detroit to see a psychiatrist during a 10-day stay. The verdict: Nothing wrong. Years later, Felt's sister-in-law in Detroit told Carolan of the relief on his grandfather's face.

Soon after that, back in Missouri, Felt would die in the car crash at a curve in the road. A truck driver reported to patrolmen that the car had passed him at high speed. A bottle of addictive barbiturates was found in the wreck. Later a neighborhood gossip told Carolan that his grandfather used cocaine.

The local newspaper, which put Felt's picture on the front page, reported that Felt had tried to pull the car back onto the road before it crashed.

Not so, according to the accident report. He just kept going.

In an interview with author and VA psychiatrist Jon-

athan Shay, Carolan learned that human beings are especially bothered by disfigurement of the face because it is key to distinguishing identity.

His grandfather, struggling to treat an avalanche of casualties after the Americans moved into France in 1944, treated faces reduced to "moldy cheese," writes Carolan. He wasn't just pulling teeth. He was wiring shredded jaws together, fashioning fake eyeballs for red sockets, handling torn tongues.

"I've thought many a time I couldn't take any more," Felt wrote to his wife in 1946, "but somehow I've struggled through."

And there was something else, something called "caregiver guilt." Felt's sister-in-law told Carolan that during their talks, his grandfather would get most upset remembering the soldiers he'd had to turn his back on because they were too far gone. He couldn't save everyone.

Carolan says addiction runs in his family. He also believes the experience of war has a "trans-generational" effect. Men of his grandfather's age who "came back

in some form damaged" often expressed their pain through alcoholism, workaholism, domestic violence. Children were affected by it.

Also transferred from generation to generation, Carolan said, is the habit of denial – "this idea that there's nothing wrong – in the face of everything being wrong."

With the current understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder, will this generation of soldiers and caregivers be better able to cope? "It'll be interesting to see how it's going to play out," says Carolan.

When he compared records of psychically disturbed veterans in the 1950s and today, "the numbers were pretty much the same," he says.

Men like his grandfather weren't counted back then. Still, he wonders if the results are always going to be the same when the human mind is exposed to more horror than it can handle.

Carolan won \$500 for his essay. He spent it on plane tickets for himself and his daughter Hattie to visit his mother, Felt's daughter, in Arizona.



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on page 1