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A World War II Corporal's Wartime Gift

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Corporal Robert Bostian gifted this white satin nightgown to his wife, Mary Woodcock Bostian, during World War II.

Bostian, a salesclerk from Sunbury, PA enlisted in the Army in December 1940 at the age of 20. He trained as a Survey and Instrument Man with the 190th Field Artillery Group at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Bostian

married Mary, his high school sweetheart, while home on furlough from Camp Shelby, November 9, 1941. In the fall of 1942, the 190th deployed to Europe, first landing in Scotland and eventually making their way to England. In England, the unit prepared for the D-Day invasion of Normandy. Bostian, along with his unit, landed at Normandy on D-Day. In addition to the Normandy campaign, Bostian and the 190th participated in the Rhineland, Ardennes (The Battle of the Bulge), and Central Europe campaigns. He was honorably discharged August 15, 1945.

Corporal Bostian sent the nightgown to Mary sometime during his years in the Army, likely while he was overseas. During World War II, the United States was unable to import silk from Japan, which caused major shortages. Other fabrics typically used to construct satin lingerie such as nylon and rayon were rationed for military use, making such a nightgown quite a luxurious wartime gift. How was Corporal Bostian able to acquire such an item?

A striking example of ingenuity in the face of hardship and shortages of material goods, the nightgown was fashioned from a military parachute. Parachutes made of white nylon, rayon, or silk, became a prized source of fabric as it could be fashioned into lingerie, wedding gowns, or other special occasion garments. Sometimes, women made their wedding dress from the parachute that saved her future husband's life. Other times, soldiers gathered spent parachutes and sent the fabric home, or had it made into garments for their loved ones.

After the war, Bostian attended Penn State University, earning a master's degree in Education. He spent his career in Bellefonte, teaching industrial arts. Corporal and Mrs. Bostian shared 77 years of marriage together. Family members rediscovered the parachute nightgown lovingly packed away among the Bostians' wartime mementos. The nightgown, along with three scrapbooks documenting Corporal Bostian's service became part of the museum's collection in 2019.