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# Never Leave Your Dead: A True Story Of War Trauma, Murder, And Madness



## Synopsis

In March of 1953, Donald Watkins, a former Marine who served in China during the Japanese invasion of 1937, murdered his wife and mother-in-law. After serving twenty-two years in Farview State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, he was released and eventually married again. A decade later, Donald may or may not have been the cause of his second wife's death, as well. Author Diane Cameron uncovers the true story of her stepfather, Donald Watkins. Was he a traumatized veteran? A victim of abuse in the mental-health system? Was he a criminal? Mentally ill? Or just eccentric? As she unravels this mystery, Cameron finds healing and understanding with her own struggles and history of family abuse. She discovers an unlikely collection of role models in the community of the China Marines, as they were known. Together, they help put the pieces of shared war experience in perspective and resolve the more complex issue of understanding trauma itself. With insights drawn from diverse experts such as Thomas Szasz and Bessel van der Kolk, Cameron unlocks the connection between the experience of veterans of past wars and those who deal with the war trauma today. Diane Cameron is an award-winning columnist. An excerpt from *Never Leave Your Dead* was first published in the *Bellevue Literary Review* and was nominated for a 2006 Pushcart Prize.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a search for answers and combines all of the elements of a memoir, biography, true crime, psychological inquest, and Marine memorial. Cameron's goal here is to try to understand her stepfather, Donald Watkins, a former Marine who returned from duty and subsequently murdered his wife and mother in law. Since he was declared insane, Watkins never stood trial for the murders, and was shunted off to an asylum where he faced 22 years of abuse and deprivation. This man did not have an easy life. As witness to the horrors that the Japanese inflicted on the Chinese, Watkins suffered what we today define as PTSD, which in the early 40s lacked classification. Not only did he have to stand by helplessly as the Japanese brutally massacred the Chinese, he also had to clean up the mess of human remains. When he finally "cracked," he was not given the proper treatment for his trauma, leading to even more tragedy. Cameron attempts to understand how a man could have endured such horrors and how that would motivate him to kill his own family. She also struggles with her own past, especially her strained relationship with her mother who married Watkins despite his dubious history. It's an intriguing piece of investigative journalism, incorporating military history and mental illness to define the unfortunate life of Donald Watkins. I received a complimentary copy of this book from the publisher.

I received a complimentary copy of this book from the publisher. I have to be honest - this book was a total surprise for me. The story sounded interesting, but I had no idea truly how interesting it would turn out to be. I could not stop reading and I ended up taking so much away from these compact 176 pages! Though the writing and story-telling is a bit choppy, the story of Donald Watkins blew my mind. He likely suffered from PTSD 40 years before it was acknowledged by the military and received years of counter-productive treatments. In telling Donald's story, Cameron explores the history of mental illness as it relates to the military, conditions at an infamous mental hospital (St. Elizabeth's), and a little known part of WWII (the American pre-Pearl Harbor presence in China and POW Camp Palawan). I was almost equally enthralled with the story of Cameron discovering and pursuing Donald's story. The book is structured in the order in which Cameron learned each new piece of Donald's background, giving the reader a sense of her emotional journey. *Never Leave Me Dead* is quite an eye-opening read if you're at all interested in trauma and recovery, PTSD (particularly in returning soldiers), less well-known parts of WWII, and/or the history of mental illness treatment. Check out my blog, Sarah's Book Shelves, for more reviews.

This compelling book covers a wide range of topics while exploring the traumas experienced by the

author's stepfather, Donald. He was one of the China Marines who served in that country just before World War II and witnessed the barbarism the Japanese would routinely use throughout the war against both civilians and enemy combatants. The lasting effects of the horrors he witnessed led him to later murder his wife and her mother, for which he was institutionalized for 22 years. Diane Cameron's exploration of Donald's story shows the ripple effects that exposure to violence can have and how they can affect lives and relationships years later. While this is a deeply personal story, Cameron offers both a warning and a promise of hope for survivors and those whose lives are intertwined with theirs. Madness, love, war and evil itself --- the best and worst of life --- are examined with compassion and understanding.

This book is for everyone who is trying to successfully go through life. It is for people who have an interest in History. This book is also for teachers, counselors, and just about anyone else who deals with other people. I liked the presentation style. Ms Cameron's writing, while very approachable, is also instructive and deeply personal. I will recommend this to everyone I know. Thank you Diane for sharing this with us.

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