The Impact of World War II on Soldiers, Scientists, Civilians and the Town of Falmouth

T. Richardson Miner, Jr.

To commemorate the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2010, the Falmouth Historical Society held a series of discussions with veterans. Those dramatic years are still vividly recalled by veterans and other survivors. The town of Falmouth is grateful to these men and women. Spritsail is proud to present some of their stories.

Falmouth was transformed during the years leading up to World War II, a transformation that continued throughout the war years. All its residents were affected, as were the men and women who passed through on their way to war. The very landscape of the town was changed to meet military needs.

In 1935 the state had bought 9,000 acres from the Coonamessett Ranch company to use as a training camp for the National Guard. Eventually 200,000 acres of land in the Upper Cape, including 225 acres in Hatchville, were acquired for the construction of Camp Edwards and the landing strip that became Otis Field. At the east end of town, Waquoit Bay and Washburn Island became training centers for amphibious landings in Europe and the Pacific.

Convoys bound for Europe made up off the town's western shore in Buzzards Bay. The small village of Woods Hole on the southwestern edge of Falmouth rapidly grew into a national center for marine research overseen by the Navy.

On December 6, 1941, the 26th Yankee Division returned to Camp Edwards from maneuvers in the Carolinas. Their tour of duty would be up at the end of the month. On December 7, "A day which will live in infamy," the Imperial Forces of Japan attacked the U.S. Naval fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor on that far away island of Oahu in Hawaii. On December 8, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed a joint session of Congress to ask for a declaration of war. The 26th Yankee Division's tour of duty was immediately extended.

When the United States entered the war, the activities at Camp Edwards intensified. The railroad spur to North Falmouth was built to bring supplies and troops to the Cape. It is still used today for the "trash train" taking refuse off Cape. Camp Edwards eventually became the home and training grounds for more
than 100,000 men who, at different times during the war, lived in 438 barracks which were quickly constructed at the outbreak of hostilities. Other areas in Falmouth came under the control of the military for training: the Tower Hotel in Falmouth Heights, the Waquoit Yacht Club and the marine railway located in the Falmouth Inner Harbor.

Camp Edwards also housed a convalescent home and a 1,722 bed hospital for those returning from combat. It even served as a German POW Camp. Many of the prisoners worked in Falmouth's numerous strawberry farms which yielded more than 90,000 quarts of strawberries in 1944. Such a crop could never have been harvested in wartime without the work of the POWs. Following the hurricane of 1944, more than 2,000 German POWs who had been captured in North Africa were assigned the duty of helping to remove trees and to work in saw mills on the base to turn logs into lumber.

Amphibious landings were vital to the Allied effort, not only in France on D-Day, June 6, 1944, but also in Italy, North Africa, Leyte in the Philippine Islands and other landing sites throughout the Pacific Theater of Operations. The Amphibious Training Command was established at Camp Edwards in 1942 to oversee the training for these landings. For eight months DUKW's were hauled into the Falmouth railroad station at the rate of 32 a day six days a week. They were trucked to Falmouth Inner Harbor to be put into shape for training exercises. The term DUKW was originated by General Motors Corporation and quickly used by the American military forces: D - indicated the vehicle was built in 1942; U - a "utility"/amphibious vehicle; K - all wheel drive; W - 2 powered rear axles.


The Spirit of Falmouth, purchased by the people of the Town of Falmouth in the Third War Loan, 1943. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Postcard showing Tower House, Falmouth Heights. Courtesy E. Graham Ward.

North Atlantic where they were joined by other merchant marine vessels carrying additional troops, aviation gas, tanks, aircraft and supplies to the Allied forces.

Woods Hole became a “Navy town” using the expertise of the scientists at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution to try to counter the threat from German U-Boats. WHOI scientists had already played a significant role as war approached, working on anti-fouling paint to keep the hulls of warships as clean as possible. By the end of the war, the navy estimated it had saved more than 10% of the fuel oil budget for all the ships in the fleet. Throughout the war, these dedicated and talented members of the scientific community worked on many new projects such as experimenting with ways to camouflage a ship’s wake, developing techniques for survival at sea, and running a major training facility.

Training facilities were located at Camp Canduit in Cotuit, Camp Havedoneit in Osterville, and Camp Washburn in East Falmouth. Using the pristine beaches of the Cape and the Islands, in October 1942 the Engineer Amphibian Brigade trained for the “invasion” and “liberation” of Martha’s Vineyard, storming ashore after paratroopers had landed to secure the beaches. The airport on the Vineyard was a major objective of these soldiers.

Buzzards Bay became the staging site for some of the largest convoys bound for Europe and North Africa. German U-Boats were patrolling off the coast of the Outer Cape from Chatham to Provincetown and even as far north as the site of a major submarine construction facility in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Convoys with as many as 60 ships formed in Buzzards Bay. Under the cloak of darkness, having observed a full blackout in the ships and homes along the shore, convoys would weigh anchor in the middle of the night, proceed through the Cape Cod Canal and on through the submarine-infested waters of the

Bridge to Washburn Island from what is now Seacoast Shores, East Falmouth. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Camp Washburn, where Seacoast Shores is today. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

The development of the bathythermograph was one major success. This temperature sensing device could also measure changes in water pressure, enabling naval officers to detect the thermal layer under which enemy submarines could otherwise roam with impunity. Woods Hole also became the base of operations for small boats which towed barges used for target practice by navy ships and aircraft.

The Japanese surrendered on August 14, 1945, signing their formal surrender on board the USS Missouri in Tokyo Harbor in September. Falmouth’s men and women in uniform started to return home, many to parades and cheers from a grateful nation. Some 13,000 men and women were discharged from Camp Edwards. Their service and sacrifice to

the country had ended. Others, much to their disappointment, sailed west under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco to be part of the occupation forces in Japan. For them, the war continued.

Falmouth Veterans Remember

The men and women featured in this article represent scores of Falmouth men and women who served to defend the freedoms we all enjoy today. Future generations will be indebted to each of these veterans.

Charlie O’Connell was a young boy in Texas who volunteered for the
Army Air Corps right out of high school. After extensive training, he flew combat missions over France and Germany in P-47 single engine fighter planes. After the war, he continued to serve his country in the U.S. Air Force flying missions in Korea and, later, Vietnam. "The P-47 was a real workhorse," said O'Connell. He continued, "She would take multiple hits from the ground and air, but she always brought us back safely." He has photographs of the multiple hits he took in his aircraft.

In April and early May 1945, Charlie was flying from bases in France and Germany. Two days after the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald, Charlie and several of his pilot colleagues drove to the site of one of the worst atrocities the world had ever seen. Shaking his head, he paused and thought, "How could any one person do such a thing to another human being?" He paused again, "It was just awful, ...awful," he said with considerable emotion, shaking his head. Charlie retired as an Air Force Colonel after a 34 year career.

**Wesley Ko** volunteered for army duty and, disillusioned with the leadership he experienced in the early days of his enlistment, applied for Officer Candidate School. He was sent for training in the southwest and then went to Europe by way of Florida and South America, across to North Africa, and finally to Wales for additional training to prepare for D-Day. Wesley was assigned as a Second Lieutenant to a glider group. Gliders were engine-less aircraft loaded with infantrymen that were towed by plane across the English channel and released to glide to the ground behind enemy lines. Wesley still has a short piece of the glider cable/rope used to tow his glider prior to release. The planes towed single gliders on 350 foot ropes and used 400 foot ropes when towing two gliders. Three planes would fly together at altitudes of 600 feet, 800 feet and 1000 feet before releasing their gliders.

Wesley was in the first wave on D-Day. He spent 30 days in Normandy while the Allied forces secured the beaches and surrounding countryside, preparing for the long march to liberate Paris. He proudly displays his "survivor map" to be used in case he was shot down and had to escape capture. A painting of a glider crash landed with troops escaping enemy fire hangs in his living room, a staunch reminder of the dangers of each mission. In June 2010, he and other
World War II veterans were honored in Washington D.C. at the World War II Memorial.

**DeWitt (Dick) C. Jones III**, a Princeton University student, accelerated his education and became a B-24 navigator. Like Wesley Ko, Dick and his crew flew to Florida, on to South America and across the Atlantic to North Africa, eventually flying to Wales for additional training in preparation for the Allied landing in France on D-Day. Dick's plane flew the same circumspect path to Europe that Wesley Ko followed, and for the same reason, to avoid the dangerous North Atlantic route.

Flying across the Atlantic Ocean from South America to North Africa, the plane was struck by lightning that knocked out the radio and one of the four engines. Dick's watch had also frozen. Flying above the clouds and using only the stars for navigation, he guided the captain of his aircraft to a perfect landing in North Africa. "As we got close to our destination and the ETA (estimated time of arrival) drew near, the Captain became more and more skeptical about our position," he reminiscenced. The pilot could not see the ground due to cloud cover, "but we landed at the right spot and at the right predetermined time. He thought I was the best navigator in the entire Air Corps!"

Dick flew 31 exceedingly difficult missions in sub-freezing temperatures from England. "I had a cold one day and could not fly one mission, so a replacement took my place. The mission failed and the plane never came back." Like Charlie O’Connell, Dick returned to England from many of his missions with numerous bullet holes in the fuselage.

**Richard Backus** also became a B-24 navigator and was assigned to the same base in England, but they did not know each other at the time. Both Dick Jones and Dick Backus served under the same executive of-
WaJ{cr JusLCZ y k , 8 · 1 7
[105x393]Bell y G un Turrc{ Opcrator . Co unc sy
Waher Ju suzy k .
[45x362]Iicer ,
the film
[79x362]Star
[95x362]Jimmy Stewart.
[161x362]One
[181x362]of Di c k ‘s m ost
[23x348]vivid memori es was the tim e he was flying a bombing
[23x335]run , as navigator , when the plane was hit by heavy
[23x322]flak. At the sa me time the plan e w as suffering from
[23x309]se parate m ec hanical pr o bl e m s. Th e pilot d ec ided to
[23x296]land in Switzerland , a neutral co untry . According
to the Geneva conventions, said Dick. the
[204x282]Swiss,
[231x282]as
[23x269]n eutrals, h ad the right to keep
[154x269]“ belligerents ”
[213x269]out of
[23x256]the co untry - by force if nece ssary . The result w as
[23x242]that the
[56x242]Swiss
[81x242]fired on the plane when it entered their
[23x229]s pa ce. Fortunately, the plane land e d successfully and
[23x216]Dick was preparing to disembark when a uniformed
[22x203]Swiss
[47x203]“s tuck
[76x203]a Lugar in my
[137x203]ribs, ”
said Dick and told
[23x190]him to get off. The crew w as s ubsequently interned
[22x176]at a hotel. Tho se who attempted to escape w ere
[22x163]imprisoned . There was nowhere
coco anyw ays inc e
Swirz.e rland
[74x150]was a t the time surrounded by German
[22x137]and Italian troops. They waited to cross th e border
[22x123]until Allied force s had taken over .

A piece of shrapnel, safely stored in a display case, is
a vivid memento of Walter Juszczyk’s 50 missions
in Europe as a belly turret gunner hanging from the
belly of a B-17. He was too young to enlist when
Hitler invaded his native Poland on September 1,
1939, but he enlisted shortly after his 17th birthday
to seek revenge.

General George Patton’s 3rd Army became the focus
for Tom Moseley and his fellow infantrymen as they
raced northward toward the Battle of the Bulge. The
German Army’s last major effort through Belgium
was thwarted when the 3rd Army’s open-air vehicles
loaded with infantrymen and moving relentlessly
through the cold European winter of 1944-45 de­
feated the enemy. Tom recalled that January 20,
1945, was the coldest day he had ever experienced.
He said, “I swore I would always be in a warm place
on that date.” Tom particularly remembered his New
York welcome when the city greeted his returning
troop ship with blinking lights and dancing girls on
the wharf.

Don Graham served in a nontraditional way, but
one which was vital to the Allied effort. Serving in
the Merchant Marine, he was in command of ships
taking aviation gas and other supplies from the
United States to Europe. He plied the exceedingly
dangerous waters of the North Atlantic that the
flight plans for Wesley Ko, Dick Jones, and Dick
Backus carefully avoided when they flew the usual
Walter Juszczyk, standing second from right, with his B-17 crew. Courtesy Walter Juszczyk.

Excerpts from Walter Juszczyk's log books. Courtesy Walter Juszczyk.
dogleg from Florida to Wales. "It wasn't only the weather out there, but the real threat of the German submarine fleet which got our attention," said Don. German submarines operated in groups called "wolf packs," prowling for merchant ships and destroyers used in convoy duty. With submarines operating almost with impunity, Don guided his ship through infested waters and rough seas. He watched many other merchant ships and navy destroyers used for protection explode before his eyes when a torpedo scored a direct hit, sending the ships with all hands and cargo to the bottom of the sea. Yet many of these gallant seamen and survivors returned time and again to make certain the necessary supplies were delivered to the fighting forces. Submarines and Kamikaze attacks sank a total of 1,554 merchant ships during the war in both the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters of Operation. After the war, he became captain of the merchant vessel Manhattan, traveling the Northwest Passage, breaking ice 20 feet thick. Don ended his merchant marine career by commanding the largest Exxon tanker in the world.

Harold Demone enlisted in the Army shortly after his 18th birthday. As an infantryman, he found himself in Europe during the winter of 1944-1945 (the coldest winter in years), racing north toward the Belgium forest and the Battle of the Bulge. Little did he know that another Falmouth resident, Tom Moseley, was also responding to General Patton's order to "move out swiftly" and engage the enemy. Captured by the Germans, Harold was a prisoner of war (POW) and spent four months in Stalag 4B, the notorious camp in East Germany. While incarcerated in the spring of 1945, rumors spread throughout the camp that the Allied forces were closing in. The German reaction? March the POWs toward Czechoslovakia. In April of 1945, he escaped three times, only to be captured each time. Finally, the Allied forces closed in and Harold and his fellow POWs were free men in Allied hands near the end of the war.

A Japanese flag, taken from a post office in occupied Japan, is one of Larry Harlow's prized possessions. It is signed by numerous shipmates and brings back vivid memories of his service to his country as an enlisted man in the navy. Initially assigned to a British Escort Destroyer, he saw duty and witnessed Kamikaze attacks at Tarawa, the Solomon Islands, and the Slot (the waters between the Solomon Islands)
PT boats played a significant role in the war in the Pacific. Although PT 109, commanded by a young John Kennedy, is the most famous, clearly the ones on which Larry Palmer served played an important role intercepting Japanese supply ships in New Guinea after the Battle of the Coral Sea. "We would look for the wake of the ships in total darkness and then move in," Larry recalled. On numerous night patrols (each patrol lasted two or three nights in a row from dusk to dawn 50 miles from shore), Larry could hear the shells overhead, but "I was in the engine room and could only hear the enemy, all the time praying for a miss." He considered the "boat" his home and all the crew part of his family away from home.

Irene Weeks proudly hangs her First Class Navy Petty Officer uniform in her closet and a large 48 star flag in her hall. She was a radiology technician in the first WAVES class of medical personnel. The WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service) played a vital role in the war effort, both here and abroad. Irene had been asked by the physician radiologist in her office to deliver some x-ray films to the Navy recruiting office in Minneapolis. "One of the sailors asked me why I didn't join up," she remembered. She felt at the time that she should serve and knew that although her brother was skeptical about her enlisting, "that my mother would be proud of me."

Navy boot camp at Hunter College in New York City was followed by an assignment at Smith College. "The Navy took over the college," she remarked. She was stationed at the Naval Dispensary in Chelsea, Massachusetts, taking care of the medical needs of dependents who served the country in an "invisible way while loved ones were in harm's way."
Newt Gresser was a medical school graduate in internal medicine when he became a member of the medical corps of the U.S. Navy. He was aboard a destroyer en route from North Africa and 600 miles from Bermuda when he was faced with the task of performing an emergency appendectomy. He used the wardroom table while the ship tossed from wave to wave. Later, in December of 1944, he was on a minesweeper in the Pacific when his ship was ordered to ride out a massive typhoon headed for Okinawa.

Al Irish was in the Signal Intelligence Service, assigned to a photographic unit in Brisbane, Australia. He still treasures a letter from General Douglas MacArthur commending his unit for photographic excellence and contributions to the war effort.

Harry Stuermer was in medical school when he decided to join the Navy, but was denied. "They told me they would need doctors and I should finish before going into the service." After graduating, he was commissioned by the Navy as a Lieutenant in the Medical Corps. He was eventually assigned as the medical officer on the USS Bushnell, a submarine tender maintaining submarines returning from patrols in the Pacific theater. Mostly stationed in Guam, Harry recalls a time transiting from San Francisco to Guam when an American submarine came to the surface to report a crewman with a broken leg. Harry was transferred to the submarine, but he did not like the experience. "It was an awfully big ocean and I was in a very small boat." He served his country well, retiring as a Commander, Medical Corps, U.S. Navy, but admits with a smile, "I got more out of the Navy than they got out of me."

Fifi Burton was too young to enlist when the war broke out, but on her 18th birthday she signed up, wanting to join the Medical Corps. After training and indoctrination, she was assigned to a naval hospital in Idaho. Fifi was the first woman on the west coast to be trained as a "neuro psych" technician working with soldiers returning from the Pacific with "battle fatigue," now known as posttraumatic stress disorder. There was a German POW camp on the hospital grounds. "They always went in front of us in the chow line," Fifi recalled. "This really got to us. But they were nice young boys a long way from home and the victims of a brutal totalitarian regime which sent them to a war they didn't want to fight." Fifi continued to serve her country at the Naval Hospital in Bremerton, Washington, for the duration of the war. She was discharged as a Third Class Pharmacist's Mate.

The town of Falmouth is grateful to these men and women and to all our veterans. We shall not forget!
M. M. 1/C William McComiskey

The first Falmouth man to lose his life. He died in the South Pacific from peritonitis following battle injuries. He was 28 years old. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Newspaper clippings. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society and E. Graham Ward.


Landing craft on beach at Washburn Island. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Landing craft lie alongside one of five huge wooden docks on Waquoit Bay shoreline of Washburn Island. U.S. Army Signal Corps photo. Courtesy Doc Taylor of Menauhant.