

World War II Memories of a Pre-teen on the Home Front



A Paper for the Hopkinsville, Kentucky
Athenaeum Society
March 3, 2005

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In general it appears that when Athenaeum members are relatively new, papers tend to be about a topic with which the person is already quite familiar, perhaps some special personal interest. Then, when a somewhat more seasoned member, perhaps the second or third paper, the topic is likely to be about the person's career, and when still older and in a position to take more and longer trips we get travelogues, thanks in part to Wendell Rorie's fine examples. Still later it is not unusual to get a paper about family members or early experiences, papers that border on being "memoirs." Well, brace yourselves, I recently hit age 72 after being an Athenaeum member since 1979, so here goes. The title of my paper this evening is, "World War II Memories of a Pre-Teen on the Home Front."

The inspiration for choosing this topic as an Athenaeum paper started about four years ago when my wife and I were driving across Texas and were to go through the town of Midland. I knew that one of the branches of the Confederate Air Force was located there and I made a special effort to visit their museums. As many of you know, the Confederate Air Force is a large group of persons with sufficient interest and money to restore World War II aircraft, and others, to flying condition. You are likely familiar with the phrase, "You know you're getting old when...." Well when I entered their large hanger where many of their planes were on display, I immediately noticed out in the center a bright, shiny US Air Force T-28. Hey, this is a museum and this is one of the planes I flew during Air Force training! In another museum area there was a life size display depicting a World War II family at home in their living room. They were

listening to the radio with the two young children lying on the floor showing eager interest. I noticed on the floor near them a world atlas. It was exactly the same edition we had in our home at the time depicted and that I still have in my possession today. What memories came to life! Shortly after that came the thought that perhaps these memories needed to be recorded. Then still later there was the thought that perhaps this could be an Athenaeum paper, so here it is.

To set the time of the rest of the paper relative to my age, it was the day after my ninth birthday the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Since I started the first grade in school at age five, I was in the middle of the fourth grade at the time. We were living in the small southern town of Moultrie, Georgia. Just on the edge of town there was an Army Air Corps training base, Spence Field, and between the base and town there was a USO. I since learned that, nationally, the USO was founded February 4, 1941. As a fourth grader I was really not tuned in to world affairs but there was apparently something about the start of the war that changed my life. The memories of my life prior to this time have always been very brief, isolated scenes, but since December, 1941 the memories are a fairly continuous story.

One of the first of my World War II memories is of my fourth grade classroom. The teacher had hung a large length of paper on the wall all around the room and sketches of scenes from "America the Beautiful" had been drawn for us to paint. One scene I especially recall was, "thine alabaster cities gleam." I guess this was my first introduction to a much later interest in rocks and minerals since I learned, at least basically, what alabaster is. "America the Beautiful" has been one of my favorite songs ever since then. I also recall that, just as we have tornado and fire drills in schools around here today, we also had air raid drills during which we would all go outside. I remember that at times during these drills some of the other kids would tell scary

stories about how the Germans would take the children away from their parents. There were also frequent air raid drills throughout the community since the air base was close by. When these occurred at night they would involve complete black outs of all light. Uniformed Air Raid Wardens would go all through town to make sure there was no light of any kind in any home.

Shortly after the start of the war, my mother started working at the USO and my two older sisters, then in their teens, would go to participate in dances and parties held for the military. It was a thrill for me to go because there were always treats available, movies to see and a chance to talk to some of the guys and watch when they would record messages to send home on 78 rpm records. Then there was an occasional air show at the base that was surely the start of a life-long love of flying. Still today I can see the time when a fighter plane appeared to be diving straight down to then pull sharply up just in time to zoom right over the crowd at a rather low altitude! One of the guys at the base was named John F. Crahan and judging from some of the pictures I have of him he was at least for a time in pilot training. John and my oldest sister became well acquainted and were married on July 3, 1942. Some time after that he was sent overseas to England where he served on the crew of a B-17. Later records indicate he was a Master Sergeant and served as a nose gunner. Apparently he did not make it in pilot training. I remember that he had what is called a pompadour hair style, combing it straight back without a part. Since I looked up to him, I copied his hair style then and continue with it even today, though it is getting harder and harder to do! He also gave me his A-2 flight jacket which I cherished and wore for many years until it was in very bad shape. I don't know for sure what I did with it, but I surely wish I still had it, whatever the condition.

Today, many people have a difficult time dealing with such wartime inconveniences as

having to go through tighter and tighter airport security and facing increased gasoline and other fuel costs. During World War II the home front participation in the war effort was far more invasive than most people today could imagine or peacefully deal with. Many items of daily living were very scarce or impossible to get. Many of those that were available were limited and were strictly rationed. At my age most of the limited availability and rationing did not bother me much. However, I do well recall one thing that did. Near the beginning of the war there was a small café near where my mother worked at the time, where I would go and order a cheeseburger and coke. Those cheeseburgers had meat patties that were hand formed and cooked and were bigger and better than most of you have likely seen and were topped with real cheese, a large slice of tomato and lettuce, and all for no more than fifteen cents. I am aware that long term memory sometimes changes things, but those burgers were something else! Then when meat rationing started I recall going to another café with friends and ordering cheeseburgers. I clearly remember that when they came out we looked at them and someone said, "What did they do, put the meat on with a paint brush?" I learned much later that rubber rationing was probably the first thing on the rationing list having started on December 27, 1941, with one result being the difficulty of getting tires. Gasoline rationing was imposed on July 22, 1942 with strong emphasis being placed on not traveling anywhere you didn't have to. A very popular slogan seen on posters, in newspapers, in news reels at the movies and elsewhere simply said, "Is this trip really necessary?" (See posters) A comment regarding news reels at the movies might be helpful for some of you. Today we are accustomed to getting instant news and views of events by way of television, but in the days of World War II there was no television. I saw TV for the first time in New York City in 1949. Any live action views of the war came on Movie Tone News having

been filmed on site and sent to the U.S. to be shown during intermission at the movies. This of course was always days or weeks after the fact. Coffee rationing started on November 28, 1942, followed by shoe rationing in February, 1943. Then came meat, cheese and butter rationing in March. Also on January 18, 1943 a ban on pre-sliced bread went into effect to spare the metal parts needed for slicing since there was now a general rationing on metal. Sugar was also on the ration list. Margarine replaced real butter, but even this was white when purchased. This did not appear very appetizing so they started including small packets of yellow food coloring that could be carefully mixed with the margarine to make it look more like butter. I remember often helping my mom do this blending. Another very scarce item that I recall hearing a lot about was nylon stockings. Nylon was used for parachutes. Apparently many women valued nylon stockings as more precious than gold (probably in part because they were so hard to get). To help combat this problem cosmetic companies put out a creamy-like product of such color that it could be rubbed onto the legs to give somewhat of the appearance of wearing nylons. I knew about this primarily from having a mother and two sisters in the home! These and many other items were not only very scarce and hard to get but as just indicated were also strictly rationed on a per- person basis. The rationing was controlled in part by issuing a certain number of ration coupons and tokens periodically. I still have some of the ration coupon books and tokens issued to members of my family. They are here for you to view during the break. Paper was also one of the scarce items, with this being part of the following brief account. A now famous painter of religious art during this time was Warner Sallman. He painted perhaps the most famous and popular picture ever done of the head of Christ. Another of his very well known paintings is the one known as, "Christ at the Door," painted in 1942. A few years later I purchased a 16 x 20 print of this

painting that was printed on cardboard in 1942 and framed. Remember that paper was scarce at this time. Some years after getting this print I took the brown paper off the back of the frame to do some restoration to the frame, and was quite surprised to see the back of the print. It had been done on the back of a cardboard cigarette advertisement. Some early re-cycling! (Show photos of this)

As indicated, shortages were handled in part by rationing, and there was also a widespread effort to re-cycle and to donate needed items that a person might have. As a Cub Scout I often participated in scrap paper drives and the collecting of all kinds of metal from any source. With my wagon behind me many people would load on bundles of paper and cardboard they had gathered and saved. The scrap metal drive was challenging and at times surprising. One item I recall was tin foil. Aluminum foil was not around at that time nor was the use of plastic as we know it today. To preserve freshness, the insides of cigarette packs were covered with a thin sheet of tin foil joined to paper. Individual sticks of chewing gum were also done this way. Therefore the challenge was to find as many empty cigarette packs and gum wrappers as possible and to peel off the tin foil which would then be rolled on to an ever increasing ball of tin. Cans were also collected as was any other kind or source of metal. I remember going house to house in our neighborhood and asking for any kind of metal they might have to donate. I well recall the time that one lady instructed me to come to the back of her house where the garage was and where she then donated two slot machines! People were also encouraged to save used grease and to take it to their meat supplier. This was used in the making of explosives. Victory gardens for fresh food and for canning were encouraged to help save the food supply. Even small garden spots out in the yard were seen. (See posters)

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People also joined together in the financial support of the war effort. There was always a continuing effort to encourage persons to buy war bonds. As with other campaigns, there were in magazines, newspapers, on posters and in newsreels at the movies as well as on the radio, ever present reminders, "Buy war bonds"! (see posters) This effort also included the sale of savings stamps in denominations of ten cents, as I recall, which would be pasted into a savings stamp book until there was enough to trade the book in for a bond. I recall buying the stamps even at school. There were probably other denominations of War Bonds but the one I recall was the one purchased for \$18.75 that would yield \$25.00 at maturity which I believe was in ten years.

One memory has in recent years caused me to watch and listen with amazement and almost to the point of disbelief when attending to TV news broadcasts. During World War II great emphasis was given to the importance of strict secrecy. At home there would again be reminders in all places urging everyone to be very careful regarding what they talk about, pointing out that the enemy might be listening. Loose talk could cost lives. (See posters) Any letters to and from persons in the military were read and censored with any words that had the slightest potential for revealing classified or possibly important information to the enemy being blacked out or physically cut out of the letter before it was sent on. (See posters) Contrast all this to the CNN and other TV broadcasts about war today. The whole world is not only often told but shown on maps and in pictures exactly where troops, ships, planes and everything else are located and specific battle plans are sometimes announced well in advance! What a contrast.

Many things during the war would use the letter "V", "V for Victory", and ...-, the morse code for V. The closed fist with the first two fingers raised and spread to for a "V" was commonly seen as a "V for Victory" sign. Then there was "V-mail", often written as "V ...-

mail.” This was a process of using a special single page form for overseas letters which were , in effect, microfilmed before sending them. After arrival they were enlarged and printed for delivery with the message page being folded and sealed to serve also as an envelope. With this process, 2,575 pounds of mail could be reduced to forty-five pounds. This process was very widely used although probably a big majority of persons still used regular first class mail. I remember hearing about V-mail as a kid but I learned about the process, etc., later. (See posters about uses of “V”, including Victory Gardens)

Certainly a big part of my memories of World War II is the music, the songs. Here are a few of the songs I remember. Oh, I have listened to these and many others over the years, but these are a few I remember from the years they were first popular. I will give just a few of the words to a couple of them. The first one was described by one author as the song and saying that went in to history as the quintessential slogan and battle cry of World War II. It is, “Remember Pearl Harbor.” “History - in every century, records an act that lives forevermore. We’ll recall - as in to line we fall, the thing that happened on Hawaii’s shore. Let’s REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR - as we go to meet the foe - Let’s REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR as we did the Alamo. We will always remember - how they died for liberty, Let’s REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR and go on to victory.” This next one was the top song on the “Lucky Strike Hit Parade,” a very famous radio show of the time, for almost a year. Here are a few of the words to “They’re Either Too Young or Too Old.” “They’re either too young, or too old, They’re either too gray or too grassy green, The pickings are poor and the crop is lean. What’s good is in the army, what’s left will never harm me. They’re either too old or too young, so darling, you’ll never get stung. Tomorrow I’ll go hiking with that Eagle Scout unless, I get a call from grandpa

for a snappy game of chess.” Some of the other songs I well recall include: “Coming In On a Wing and a Prayer”, “The White Cliffs of Dover”, “This is the Army Mr. Jones”, “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition”, “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere” “The Stage Door Canteen”; “I’ll be Seeing You”, “Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive”, “When the Lights go on Again”, “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy”, “Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima Isle”, and of course, “The Army Air Corps”, and all the Glen Miller music!

It was in the summer of 1943 that my family moved from Moultrie, Georgia, to Natchez, Mississippi. Natchez, with all of its fabulous pre-Civil War plantation type homes. These were normally open to the public during a special Spring Tour season, but the tours had been cancelled for the duration of World War II. However, it turned out that a few of my classmates and friends lived in some of the homes so I still got some first-hand tours. One of these friends and his family owned and lived in the one known as The Parsonage, since many years ago it served as a parsonage – not like any parsonage you would see today! When I turned twelve years old I graduated from Cub Scouts to Boy Scouts and this friend’s father was my Scout Master. I stated earlier that one of the air shows at Spence Air Base was probably the beginning of my strong interest in flying, but the clincher came near the end of the war. This Scout Master happened to own a Piper J-3 Cub and he took each of us up for our first flight. That was about sixty years ago, but I can assure you that in my memory I can still see what it looked like from inside that plane and can still feel the movements of the flight just as though it happened this morning! I was hooked! Partly because of my interest in flying and partly to continue trying to help the war effort, I joined some of my friends in becoming plane spotters. We got special training “Spotter Cards” that showed in silhouette the front, side and bottom views of many military airplanes,

both U.S. and allies, and enemy planes. (Show reproduction cards) We would then take time to watch the skies to see what planes we could we could spot. I recall that while watching one day the largest formation of airplanes I have seen before or since flew over. It looked like there must have been hundreds! Yes, childhood memories sometimes exaggerate things, but there were a lot of them. I guess they were on some practice maneuver or changing locations.

Another special memory is of that now famous day in June – June 6, 1944. My next door neighbor had what must have been a rather powerful short wave radio and he invited me over to listen. This may not sound like much today with television and CNN, but for that day it was quite a treat for an eleven year old! We sat there and listened to the D-Day invasion as it was happening! We could hear first-hand, conversations, etc., from ships and other sources. Then just over six months later, I had just turned twelve, came another event I recall, briefly, but quite vividly. I earlier mentioned my brother-in-law who was a B-17 crew member stationed in England. On this day, shortly after December 27, 1944, I was outside in front of our house when I saw a telegram messenger stop and go up to our front door. I can still see my sister as she came to the door and received the telegram and then sank to her knees in tears. It was that, by now, infamous and dreaded message, “We regret to inform you...” I later learned that John was just leaving on a mission with many other B-17s to bomb Germany. All planes returned home safely this time, except for one that had exploded in mid air shortly after take off. Sabotage was suspected.

Soon after this both of my sisters entered the Cadet Nurses Corps. (See poster) The older sister, who’s husband had been killed, got out of the program when the war ended, but the other sister stayed in to become an RN and to work as a nurse until retirement. Today she still works a

little on a part-time basis doing nurse related work.

It was May 8, 1945, VE Day, Victory in Europe Day that Germany surrendered, ending the war in Europe. Then just over three months later, August 14, came VJ Day, Victory in Japan Day, when the Japanese surrendered and ended World War II! I well remember some of the celebration with a huge crowd down town. Private planes were flying overhead and from several of them rolls of toilet paper were being thrown out, unrolling as they came down, creating a giant display of streamers and confetti. I am sure that other similar celebrations and far bigger ones were taking place at the same time all over the nation.

So, to this pre-teen on the home front, much of World War II was filled with interest, challenges, some excitement, and concern on a level that a nine to twelve-year-old would have. It of course did not have the same meaning and effect for me as I am sure it did for adults. After all, to a great extent that was the only life I had known. However, as I look back on those memories now, coupled with things I have learned since then, I realize what a massive and all-inclusive involvement there was on the home front. Add that to what I now know about the far more important involvement and sacrifice of our military, then my pre-teen memories take on a much different meaning.