

# Veterans Remembered-World War II 1941-1945

World War II for the United States began with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 1941, followed by the declaration of war on the United States by Germany and Italy a few days later. In 1939, responding to German aggression in Europe and Japanese threats in Asia, the government began to mobilize the United States for national defense. War industries, including DuPont Barksdale Works, expanded to fill orders from the government and allied powers, once again bringing war prosperity to Washburn. On September 14 1940 Congress enacted the first peacetime conscription law for men 21 to 35 years old. Before the nation was at war the periodic draft quotas for Bayfield County were small-the first quota was for two men-but after war was declared every able-bodied male who did not have an exemption of some kind was eligible to be drafted. Many men volunteered rather than waiting to be drafted. On the day they were ordered to report, draftees and volunteers assembled at the court house, and after refreshments, inspiring speeches, and final goodbyes, they marched to the Goody

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Shoppe on Bayfield Street to board a bus for Ashland, then traveled by train to Milwaukee to be inducted.

A total of 423 men from Washburn served in the

## Lars Larson Guest columnist

armed forces during the war, 34% of the 1940 male population of the city. All except 36 were in the Army and Navy. Eighteen women served in the various women's auxiliary services, such as the WACS and the WAVES, and six served as nurses in the Army and Navy. World War I veterans, Harry B. Randall Jr. and William F. Peterson joined their sons in the Marine Corps, while World War I pilot, John Jacobs, served in the Air Force. Several Washburn men served together on ships, on bases, or on Pacific islands, and there were many coincidental meetings of Washburn men, occasionally brothers or cousins, all over

the world. Incredibly, Private Danforth Welty came across a tattered copy of the Washburn Times on a remote Pacific island. Five men from Washburn-Robert L. MacDonald, Donald W. Beaulieu, John P. Swanson, Stance Guski, and John B. Manning, the first man in the nation to be drafted-were killed in action, while two men-Hugo V. Dittbrenner and Danforth G. Welty, died of service connected illnesses. At least seven men were wounded and one man, Private Duane Falk, was a prisoner of war.

The Times published many letters from men in the services in which they described their experiences during training and while stationed overseas. Their descriptions of their combat experiences were unpretentious and totally devoid of heroics. For example, Lieutenant Richard Olson was aboard one of several small escort carriers confronting a large Japanese fleet of warships during the battle of Leyte Gulf, in October 1944. Faced with annihilation, aircraft from the carriers finally managed to drive away the enemy fleet. His comment on the battle was that "It was a good show, and exciting show, and for a while, there is

no doubt about it, we were uncomfortable about our future." Private John Rantala was trapped behind German lines for ten days without food, water or sleep. Forced to hobble around on his heels because of frozen feet, his only comment was "So that's all that is wrong with me now. That's nothing to worry about-I'm lucky that I am alive." And Sergeant Fred Frostman concluded his matter-of-fact description of a ferocious battle between his rifle platoon and a large Japanese force in the jungle of a Pacific island with the casual remark-"Seems like I was ducking hand grenades and rifle fire all the time."

The discharge of men from the services began after the surrender of Germany on May 8 1945 and became a flood after the end of the war with Japan on August 15 1945. Most Washburn veterans returned to their hometown, resuming lives that had been interrupted by the war. Some of the men joined the American Legion, taking over leadership positions from the aging World War I veterans, while others established the Washburn Memorial Post of Veterans of Foreign Wars.