

Washburn during the war years

— The Boys At War — 14

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Robert W. Forbes, a former Washburn resident, entered the Navy in September 1943, serving in northwest Africa from March 1944 to July 1945. He was discharged from the Navy in February 1946. In November 1944 the Times published a letter from him describing his visit to the graves of two Bayfield County men who had been killed during the landings in northwest Africa in November 1942. "Today I have visited a small American military cemetery near Port Lyautey, French Morocco, and found the graves of two Bayfield County men who gave their lives just two years ago this past week in the landings in North Africa. The graves I have seen are those of James K. Saunders of Bayfield and Francis Soulier of Washburn. These men belonged to Co. G of the 60th Infantry and both fell in the first day or so of the landings. On each cross there is the date, November 12, 1942, along with their name, service number, rank, company attached to, and their grave number. Their identification tags are nailed near the top of each marker.

"It was a strange mixture of chance and a hunch that brought me out to these graves. Recently, in The Times I was glancing over the Killed in Action section of the Honor Roll page and noticed the names of the two local men and that they had died in North Africa. It seemed like the chance of finding a needle in a haystack that both these men should lie in the small cemetery or that I might find even one of their graves. You can imagine my feelings then when I found the two names not more than ten or twelve feet apart. Four other crosses separate these resting places of two men who came so far from towns



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so close together.

"Although I never knew either of these boys during their lifetime, it somehow seemed, as I stood looking at their graves, that they were very close to me and that I knew them well. Coming from the same locality and being so far from home probably heightened that feeling. However, it did seem as if they were there in life and I stood there in their company looking out across the endless miles of ocean, stretching north, south and west as far as the eye could see. From that spot it is really a very panoramic and beautiful view, but somehow, at the same time, desolate and lonely. The American flag flies over the graves of these men who were among the first, if not the first, men from Bayfield County to fall in this Second World War. To the parents, relatives and friends of these boys, and to all of you back home, I want to say that this experience has given me a new and greater feeling of humbleness when I compare my own discomforts, homesickness, and uncer-

tainty of the future with the supreme sacrifice made by these boys and many others with them.

"Before closing, I want to say 'Hello!' to everyone in the old home town and to assure you that my thoughts go back there many times. The Chequamegon bay region never has looked better to me than it does right now! No matter how big the world, it is one place you don't forget."

James K. Saunders and Francis Soulier are buried in the North African American Cemetery and Memorial in Carthage, Tunisia, along with 2,839 American dead.

Alfred C. Bratley, son of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Bratley of Washburn, entered the Army in August 1942 and was discharged in December 1945. Kiska, a small island in the Aleutian Islands chain, was occupied by Japanese forces on June 6, 1942; the next day they occupied Attu, another small island at the end of the chain. On August 15, 1943, expecting heavy resistance from the Japanese, a large naval force, including transports carrying over 35,000 troops, arrived offshore. Bratley's letter relates what happened: "We fully expected to be met by a hail of hot Jap steel and we were all sweating plenty as we pulled up to that beach in the fog. The landing beach was small and only two of our barges could land at a time. Those first two boats wouldn't have stood much of a chance if there had been any resistance.

"The suspense was pretty bad for a while as we fanned out and waited for the Japs to open fire. To make matters worse, the rocks on the beach were so slippery that we could hardly stay on our feet. It was a couple of days before we were sure there were no Japs on the island and could really breathe easy."