

RECOLLECTIONS OF  
WORLD WAR II

December 7th, 1941. I remember it well. It was a beautiful, sunny winter Sunday. After church, my father suggested a short ride "to enjoy what may be the last good day we may have for some time." Little did we know how true that would be. Returning home, full of the splendid day, as we pulled into the driveway the radio suddenly cut through our happy mood: "The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor." There would not be another "good" day for 4½ years.

Within days most of the able bodied men of our community were gone. With a sense of urgency, patriotic responsibility, they enlisted, taking their various talents as doctors, dentists, communications technicians etc. with them. The cut off age for enlistment, except for critical needs such as doctors, was 45. My father, a lawyer, missed the age cut off by 107 days and was refused enlistment. For the duration of the war he was the area's Chief of Civil Defense. Civil Defense drills quickly became a regular fact of life. If the sirens went off while we were in school, immediate response to procedures was required: we went directly to the basement. Sometimes the siren cut into nighttime hours. My father would rush out because one never knew if this time it might be "the real thing" or not. We, at home, extinguished all lights, turned off radios. To not do so meant being arrested for jeopardizing security.

My mother was an airplane spotter and manned the tower regularly in 4 hour shifts. I was fascinated by the aircraft manual which had descriptions, pictures from several viewpoints, and silhouettes, as they might appear from below, of every airplane in existence in the world. Every aircraft spotted had to be identified and called in to a central reporting station 24 hours a day.

To say that nothing, from December 7th, 1941 on, would ever be the same again would be an understatement. The War Effort became the central theme of every activity. Food, gasoline, heating oil were all rationed by means of a ration stamps system. But having sufficient stamps did not guarantee anything- everything was in such short supply. Store shelves were empty, you could not buy tires for a car. In fact, after the few 1942 models that had been manufactured late in '41, no more cars came off the line until after the War. Many put cars up on blocks for 4 years, the main means of transportation was on foot.

Winters were especially tough, heating a real problem. For those with central heat, 65 degrees was the mandated high temperature in any building. We learned to live with it with long underwear, sweaters, wool shirts and pants. To this day, I find the 72 - 74 degrees of most buildings too hot. Heat for many homes, including mine, was a pot bellied stove in the kitchen, the only room in the house that was warm. A glass of water would freeze in any other room.

On the homefront, we became very self-sufficient, we had to, there was no other way. We raised our own food: chickens (for eggs and meat), vegetables and fruits. Many teamed up with neighbors to raise and share a pig or a cow. We canned, (Freezers were not yet a household appliance), preserved, learned how to churn butter, make bread. We hauled wood for the stove, made, mended, patched clothes. Remember, most men were in the service, this was all done by older folks, women, and children.

We all had a part in the War Effort. We collapsed tin cans and turned them in much like recycling today, peeled tinfoil from gum wrappers (it was shredded, dropped from planes to screw up enemy radar), collected milk-weed silk (used in flotation jackets), bought War Bonds, and knitted mittens, gloves, scarfs, socks, knee warmers to be turned in to the Red Cross for use by servicemen in far away battlefields. I got very tired of khaki green and navy blue.

Most of all, World War II was a time of ever present, cold, gripping fear! Would loved ones ever come home from those blood soaked fields in France, Germany? From those far away South Pacific regions with strange names like Iwo Jima? Would the War end up in our own backyard? Japanese submarines were off the coast of California, the Japanese had a brief landing in Alaska, German U boats were spotted in Long Island Sound, a German spy ring was discovered in a remote farmhouse just 12 miles from my home! That fear deepened daily as accounts on the radio told of the dark days of 1942, 1943, 1944: the blitzkrieg in London, Auschwitz, Corregidor, and the casualties continued to mount. It wasn't just numbers, people we knew died, were wounded, some maimed for life. Communication was minimal, letters took weeks to go between families and servicemen, and all were censored. While happy to receive news of a loved one, somewhere way out there in the South Pacific, as you read the letter, the thought lurked, "he wrote this three weeks ago, I wonder if he's still alright today."

Many things we take for granted today just didn't exist then: TV, sporting events, vacations, travel, new products (all manufacturing went into the War Effort). In many communities, mine included, public recreational facilities were closed throughout the war: theaters, movies, skating rinks, bowling alleys etc., fuel and resources couldn't be wasted on recreation.

VE Day (Victory in Europe) and VJ Day (Victory over Japan) came rather quickly following D Day (invasion in the European theater) and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in 1945. Sirens, church bells, all over the nation, began to sound and we turned to the radio to hear that the War was over. It was a sober moment (celebration didn't really break out until the troops came home) -- millions had died, families had been separated for 4½ years, making strangers of husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, parents and sons. It should be noted that many women served heroically on the battlefronts, too.

Those of us who lived before, through, and after World War II remember December 7th, 1941 as the day that forever changed us. That War stole my childhood! (I was 9 when it began, 13 when it was over) In many ways, World War II brought us together as a nation with a purpose. Yet, because of the great sacrifices we all endured, World War II tore us apart: when it was over, and for the first time in nearly 5 years we weren't living in fear and deprivation, the whole nation shouted, "it's over, never again," and went on a binge of self indulgence, from which it has never really recovered.

You can't really know, only imagine in a small way, what it was like then, even for people your age, (my age then). This whole nation joined together: soldiers, sailors, marines, flyers, those working in Defense plants, those of us who toughed it out at home, doing our part for the War Effort -- all of us sacrificed four and a half years of our lives -- for you, here today in the 4th Grade -- so that you could live in this nation of freedom established by our founders -- so that you wouldn't have your childhood stolen away -- so that you wouldn't have to live with the fear we did, as you plan for your future.

*Barbara L. Leitoch*

Otego Elementary School  
Otego, New York 13825  
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Dear Mrs Loitack,

The Fourth Grade social studies curriculum includes learning about local history through research and study. An important part of Otego's history which has not been explored is World War II. In order to preserve the memories and experiences of present and former residents we would like you to answer the following questions. Please feel free to write on additional pages. If you would like someone to write your answers please contact Helen Groves 988-2225 or Marjorie McMorris 988-6368.

1. Were you married to a serviceman at the time of the war?

No

2. Where were you during World War II and how did the war affect you?

Stamford, N.Y. Please SEE attached

3. What are your memories of World War II? Please include such topics as ration stamps, black outs, airplane spotters, volunteer services, war bonds etc.

Please SEE attached

