

# Veterans' Oral History Project

by Lee Augustine

*(Since the summer of 2001, the Oral History Project has resulted in the recording of some sixty interviews with Ellenville-area World War II veterans. Following is a recollection of narratives, written by Lee Augustine, Interviewer and Project Historian for the Veterans Speak Oral History Project of the Ellenville Public Library and Museum.)*

My son and I marched with the Cub Scouts on Memorial Day 2001. Speeches noted that WWII vets were dying off at a rapid rate, and their memories were going with them. I have always had an interest in history, and had taped my parents' stories in the 80s. I had heard that the library had an oral history project and that they planned to interview local WWII vets, so I called Library Program Manager Diane DeChillo.

The library had assembled an impressive collection of video equipment, paid for by a grant sponsored by our then Assemblyman Howard Mills. In July 2001, the oral history crew had its first meeting, and made plans to get going as soon as possible. Some other people instrumental in the project were Dennis Warner, A-V coordinator, Kathleen Anderson, artistic consultant and videographer; Zachary Lapidus, a home-schooled ninth grade student, videographer and editor. I volunteered to act as interviewer and started calling veterans I knew from a short list.

We had our first interview on July 13, 2001, using a basic list of questions we had compiled. From that point on, we learned by doing and our small list grew by word of mouth and a lot of time on the phone.

Most vets were very interested in participating, but some were reluctant and some refused outright. One said, "I remember too many bad things." Bruce Gillette said that he used to hear other vets talk about their experiences when they played golf together, but he never said a thing. He said that he forced himself to participate because he knew it was important.

We have interviewed close to 60 veterans so far, and it has been a fascinating educational experience for all involved.

I have compiled some of the vets' reminiscences and categorized them below. Time permitting, I will attempt a sequel and include more of these stories. We encourage Ellenville-area WWII veterans to call the library to set up an interview.

## Historical Aspects

Eugene Houck's ship helped shadow the Bismarck for the British as they sought to sink it in the Atlantic and later in the Pacific; they were part of the effort to search for JFK's PT 109.

Renée Dubois Dawes worked in Eisenhower's headquarters and she saw him many times. She also saw Charles DeGaulle. She saw Winston Churchill several times when he stopped to give the girls a pep talk and flashed the "V" for Victory for which he was well known. She attended a concert that Glenn Miller and his band put on for the troops. It turned out to be his last concert before his plane disappeared.

Tony Percoco witnessed the devastation of the second A-bomb. He walked the streets of Nagasaki only days after the bomb that forced the Japanese to surrender.

Leon Friedman and his company spent ten days in a barn, pinned down by the Nazis. They were about to be overrun when they were saved by the much-decorated Japanese-American troops who were sent to fight in Europe so they would not have to fight against fellow Japanese.

A. Dean VanEtten's ship, Fairfield City, was in the most deadly of 40 convoys sent to Murmansk, USSR. In the ill-fated PQ17 run to Murmansk, 22 of 33 ships were sunk in the icy water. The British escort ships were ordered to abandon the convoy because the Admiralty thought the German battleship Tirpitz and the battle cruiser Scheer were coming. They never showed, but the convoy was left to be cut up by the U-boats and torpedo bombers. It was the second ship that he was on that was sunk.

Harry Christian's captain ordered the men to abandon the SS Oneida Victory after it was accidentally hit by another ship. Harry and some of the men worked around the clock anyway to save the ship. The United Fruit Company stopped their pay at the point that the ship was abandoned.

Joe Tso had a unique perspective. At 13 years of age, he and his family fled 2,000 miles across China due to the invading Japanese army. In 1943, he served in the Chinese infantry and in 1945 he came to this country at the request of our Defense Department to help train Chinese pilots to fly American planes so they could return home to fight the Japanese.

## The Role of Fate

Bob Constant's orders were mixed up, and it was a good thing too. He was to have sailed on the Ticonderoga but he was sent instead to the Alaska. The Ticonderoga was sunk almost immediately.

Mr. VanEtten's best friend Jimmy Scantlebury and he were taking cover as three German dive-bombers were bombing their ship. They hit the deck twice as they ran along the deck. VanEtten hit the deck a third time but Scantlebury ran on to his doom. ➔



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