FRIENDS OF WOMPATUCK

WOMPATUCK NEWS

The War Years Remembered

Depot employees hear pep talk by the ammunition depot's commanding officer, Captain Davis.

By Peg Charlton

With this year commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, I'm reprinting a past issue written by the late Peg Charlton from her book "The War Years Remembered" covering the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot and Bethlehem Shipyard's role during the war.

Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian

A Background Sketch of Hingham's Military Past, 1909 – 1941

In 1909, the Naval Ammunition Depot opened in West Hingham on land off Fort Hill Street that earlier had been acquired by the Navy. In a few short years the torpedoes, ammunition, and mines stored and assembled there would supply the North Atlantic Fleet.

By 1914, the Depot, also called the "Magazine," boasted a complement of Marine personnel and civilian workers. Built on what was once farm land, this vast area also contained barracks for enlisted Marines and a scattering of houses for Navy personnel and their families.

Peg Charlton's 1942 graduation photo. She volunteered as a Nurse's Aide during the war.

Today the former Depot is divided into two areas that are known as Bare Cove Park and Conservatory Park. What is now the South Shore Conservatory once housed the naval commandant, his wife and sons. Knowing many of the "Depot kids" in the '30s made us quite aware of a military presence in town long before Pearl Harbor.

Even then, in the late '30s, it was as though we lived with an "at war" mentality. The awareness of impending disaster and ultimate U.S. involvement was very clear to us when in 1939 the Nazis overran Poland on September 1st. I was fourteen and still recall the event clearly.

Another reminder of the war raging overseas came in 1940 with the arrival of a dozen young English evacuees fleeing the London air blitz. Ranging in age from six to thirteen, they lived with Hingham families and attended school here for the duration of the war.

The summer of 1940 saw start-up plans for home defense. As war clouds darkened the skies of Europe, defense

preparations began here. As early as March '41 the Hingham National Defense Committee had formed. Civilians were asked to register for emergency service as home defense volunteers. Schools for civilian air raid wardens began the summer of 1941 in the John A. Andrew community house at 178 North Street near the Lincoln Statue.

Ruth Bates, aunt of former park director Steve Gammon, is on the left with the floral dress. She worked at the Depot in administration. She is now 101.

In September 1941 the Navy announced its plans for the construction of a naval ammunition annex off Union Street. Public hearings were held and were well attended by concerned citizens. The Navy acquired seven square miles to build this ammunition storage facility within present day Wompatuck State Park, a part of which was then called Third Division Woods. Families who lived there were evicted. All roads entering from Hingham and surrounding towns were blocked off except for the access road that ran from Union Street to the main gate.

Come fall, the East Coast was warned to be on guard against German air attacks. Hingham would likely become an objective for enemy strikes.

Relations with Japan in the fall of 1941 were very strained; yet when the attack on Pearl Harbor came on December 7th, our total disbelief left us in such shock as can never be described. Overnight, Hingham (population roughly 7,800) found itself an emerging, bustling war center. Army convoys rumbled over its roads as troops were preparing to guard the town, which had become a viable munitions center now open to possible attack.

The Depot with its stores of high explosives, the Annex, and the soon-to-be Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard would become vulnerable targets.

This unexpected influx of troops and equipment came with such swiftness we hardly had time to grasp it, when on December 9th, we suddenly found ourselves facing another unnerving situation: a full-scale air raid alert (perceived to be the real thing) was sounded. Soldiers from Camp Hingham, recently built on farm land on Prospect Street, were on patrol; air raid alarms rang out; schools were evacuated. What had been taught over the past months by our civilian defense teams was put to its first test.

My Ride Home

I recall vividly that ninth day of December 1941. It will remain etched in my memory for all time. My uncle, having served in World War I, returned to service with the Army Air Corps Fighter Wing in Boston. By noon, his headquarters had begun to receive contradictory messages from New York City of a bona fide air alert: red lights, yellow lights - our planes, enemy planes - imminent attack; the real thing? Reports spread quickly that enemy bombers were off the coast and heading our way: German planes rumored to be one hour away, their numbers not known! At 12:30 a "yellow" air raid warning reaffirmed the rumor.

Recreation Center on Main Street (now a private home).

Shortly after, my uncle called my dad at work to pick me up at school in Brookline and get back to Hingham on the double. When he arrived at the school, I could not be located immediately and that caused untold confusion. At about the same time, I had heard the rumor of a possible air strike and had been trying frantically to call home, but no calls were getting through. I thought, "Oh my God, they've blown up the ammunition depot!"

Captain Davis

The drive home was one I will never forget. As we approached Wollaston Beach around 2 p.m. soldiers with anti-aircraft guns were out in force waving all cars through at top speed. When we reached Neck Street in Weymouth, barricades were blocking Route 3A. We were stopped and had to show an I.D. to prove we lived in Hingham before we could proceed over the Back River Bridge. My dad spoke hardly a word to me the entire trip, and I had the sense to stay quiet.

When we pulled into our drive, my mother had my kid brother bundled up, her car packed with food and warm clothing...ready to flee! Just exactly where would we flee to? As it turned out, we went nowhere, for within an hour, fire whistles sounded "all clear."

Earlier in the day, the rumor of the sighting of an unidentified plane had triggered fears of a real air threat, and as a result, local defense measures were quickly set in motion.

* 2300 Boston police and riot squads were mobilized.

* All civil defense units were called out for 24-hour duty.

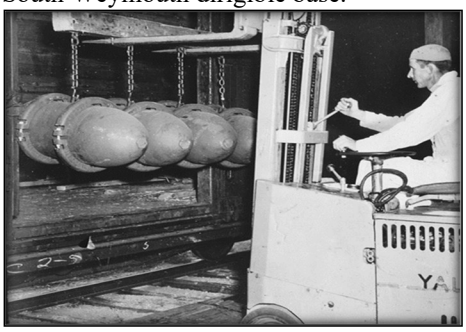
* Autos were barred from entering the city.

* Early Christmas shoppers on the streets were ordered inside stores.

* Civilians were told to remain in their homes.

* All hospitals were on alert.

The military were mobilized, and 400 Army trucks rumbled down from Fort Devens to help defend the Navy Yard in Charlestown. The Army rushed anti-aircraft weapons and 1,200 soldiers from Camp Edwards into Quincy and surrounding areas. Batteries (artillery emplacements) were established at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot and South Weymouth dirigible base.



Bombs unloaded from an ammo train at the Depot.

The air threat closed down the Quincy shipyard: 14,000 workers on the day shift evacuated Fore River and headed for home. A massive traffic jam resulted as Army vehicles were simultaneously entering the area. For a brief time, chaos and confusion had taken hold.

That unforgettable day in December will be remembered always as one beyond belief. It is hard to imagine that all of these events had taken place within a span of some 48 hours from the time news of the attack reached us from the island of Oahu, far away in Hawaii.

On December 11, 1941, ***The Hingham Journal*** ran this banner headline:

"U.S. IN ALL OUT WAR WITH GERMANY, JAPAN AND ITALY"

Followed by a list of "Air Raid Instructions for Householders" ... and so it began.

A Brief Look at Hingham Shipyard

January 1942: 150 acres were acquired to build the Bethlehem Hingham shipyard on Hewitt's Cove, which at the turn of the century had been the Bradley estates polo grounds, and later in 1935, the site of the 300th Anniversary Pageant. From then until 1939, it operated as the Bayside Airport for light planes, and lastly as Don Rand's Dude Ranch. As teenagers we'd bicycle over to watch the doings.

February 1942: Construction began and the Yard would soon start building convoy ships, destroyer escorts, on sixteen outfitting piers and shipways. Its largest building, the steel mill, covered almost ten acres.

June 1942: The first keel was laid, and three months later in September the first destroyer escort (DE) eased down its "way."

October 1943: A world record was set when DE K-556, the H.M.S. Halstead, commissioned for the British Navy, was laid keel to launch in 119 hours (four days and 23 1/2 hours). In the beginning, DEs were built for delivery to the British Navy. British crews arrived here to pick up their ships, and barracks were built close by to house them during the wait.

A special train from South Station brought workers from the city to the shipyard. A spur line branched off from the main line at West Hingham, followed Beal Street and crossed Route 3A into the yard. Supplies were also brought in over the same spur.

Peak employment came in late 1943, topping-off at 24,000. Of these, 3,000 were women working at the assembly line - "Rosie the Riveters" and others who held down clerical jobs.

Hingham Shipyard

With the sudden influx of defense workers and military families, the population of our small town rose rapidly overnight. Rentals were scarce in Hingham, and soon a federal housing project was started off High Street to house these new "transients."

Later, in 1944 with the sub menace over, the Yard shifted to building LSTs (Landing Ship Tank) for our navy. Initially, in late 1942, 40 LCIs (Landing Craft Infantry) were built for the British Navy. Between June 1942 and June 1945, 227 ships were built at Beth-Hingham.

Defense For Our Town

In the closing weeks of December 1941, the town was declared a dim-out area. This was the beginning of frantic preparations for we knew not what would come. The top halves of automobile headlights were painted black. After dark, cars were to be driven no faster than 15 m.p.h. showing only parking and tail lights. A flashlight with a special filter was okay, but if you foolishly lit a cigarette, you were in big trouble! A single light hung from each railroad gate. Hingham Square was virtual darkness.

All homes were required to draw heavy blackout curtains. As our house faced the harbor, we put up thin plywood panels as well to hold back possible flying glass. Army installations guarded the entrance to Boston Harbor from the hills of Hull and would shoot off rounds shaking our old Cape Cod to the rafters. We never knew just what was happening. The local lumber company ran huge ads in the Hingham Journal for "Plywood Cut to Order for Your Windows," with another advertising blackout paper to tape over window sills: this would reduce the reflection from indoor lights.

A large map of the town was divided into two blackout areas, a Sky Glow and a Dim-out, each with a different set of regulations. Any glow that silhouetted an outbound vessel posed a real threat to our merchant ships. All of these preparations were of extreme importance. Violations incurred severe penalties. You did not ignore blackout orders!

The towns people soon put together a 24-hour emergency phone center. A civil defense network was made up of wardens, auxiliary police and fire fighters, and a top notch Motor Corps which would later be called on for civilian disasters as well. Later in May 1942, Red Cross first aid classes would begin at the John A. Andrew House with hundreds of women and young girls enrolling to earn a

certificate qualifying them to treat casualties.

Also, as part of this network, plane spotters and ground wardens (civilians whose orders you followed strictly) played a vital role. The wardens main function was to admonish householders who were not complying with blackout regulations, and when necessary, reporting them to area captains. My mother was a warden. She wore a hard hat, an arm band, brandished a whistle and during the many drills and occasions when army convoys came through Hingham, handled and directed local traffic at the rotary circle. She was a very diplomatic lady - good at her job (and I write this with a big smile remembering her).

Training air raid wardens continued, and in February 1942 the town was to undergo its first blackout test. In the event of an enemy air attack, a series of long and short blasts would sound to alert the town's people.

* One combination (blue signal) meant:

"PLANES PROBABLY COMING"

* Another combination (red signal) meant:

"PLANES ARE NOW OVERHEAD"

Throughout the town, certain public buildings were designated as shelters. A sign that read: **District Wardens Post - First Aid,** was affixed to buildings. Most were wooden frame, some made of brick. The police and fire stations, the schools, Wilder Memorial Hall, John A. Andrew House, G.A.R. Hall, and the old Town Hall were but a few of those shelters.

Hingham As An Emerging Bustling War Center

In winter 1942 the town had become a vital defense area. Soldiers were at Camp Hingham on Prospect Street. Regular Marine and Navy detachments were at the Depot; and soon to come - a rotating group of naval officers who would receive schooling in ammunition handling and palletizing at the Depot. These young men promptly dubbed it (Lieutenant) "Simpson's College of Ammunition Knowledge."

Because of tight security at the Depot, Beal Street, which ran parallel to it, was patrolled as well by military guards. As residents entered their street at sundown, they were asked to produce an I.D. Eventually, it became so upsetting for one elderly widow, she just up and sold her house and left.

Servicemen's Center (now Talbot's)

And looking seaward...the U.S. Coast Guard soon formed a voluntary auxiliary. Hingham Flotilla "508" made up of local boating men who patrolled our bays and inshore waters in boats that were armed and flew the Coast Guard flag. My father was an active member of this auxiliary.

Ant-submarine nets of steel cables running lengthwise were placed underwater across Hull Gut to Peddocks Island as a defense measure to prevent German U-boats from slipping into Hingham Bay where they could inflict crippling blows to shipbuilding at both Fore River and Hingham Yards. If just one sub made it through, then with a single shot, production could be paralyzed for weeks to come.

As German U-boats continued to prey on and sink ships in the North Atlantic, Nazi saboteurs and espionage agents actually landed on our shores - notably in Maine, Florida, and Long Island. This was very hush-hush and not made public for some time. A family friend on volunteer patrol in Maine waters disclosed none of this to anyone at the time.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, emotions ran high as we followed with continuing disbelief the tragic defeats of our men in the Pacific. The coming winter found us praying for those captured in the Philippines - the forced Bataan death march, imprisonment, and in time to come for some, slow starvation and death.

In early 1942 our thoughts never strayed far from these overwhelming events thousands of miles away. We watched and waited through the discouraging and desperate days of fighting to regain island footholds by air, land, and sea.

From the very start, everyone rallied to avenge the terrible "infamy" of Pearl Harbor and dug in for the long haul to victory.

The American people were finally united in a common cause.

On September 2, 1945, after three years and nine months of global conflict, the signing of the document of surrender took place in Tokyo Bay on the deck of the battleship *Missouri,* bringing down the curtain on an incredible odyssey that had spanned both ocean and earth.

At last, this long journey taken – the road we had travelled together – came to an end. The war was over.

Reflections

The war years at home became a time of enormous unity exemplified by the cohesion of family and neighborhood. Brought together by home front challenges, we shared a sense of responsibility…knowing what we did really mattered. With a determination, we carried our part of the load and seemed to gain added steam as we tackled whatever came along. Commitment to the war effort took precedence over all else. Still these difficult and wearisome years were also a time of self-assurance and of unabashed patriotism.

Looking back on that Sunday morning in 1941 – seemingly a lifetime ago – a door had slammed shut on life as we know it. To quote a time-worn phrase, "It was the end of innocence." How quickly our outlook changed from the insularity of our youth to a new worldwide awareness. We came some distance!

Editor's Note:
Peg Charlton's history knowledge was a great asset for Wompatuck State Park and also for Bare Cove Park. She was a real treasure and will be missed. R.I.P. Peg!