

BROWNSVILLE AND WORLD WAR II AT HOME AND ABROAD

The teenagers' conversation stopped abruptly when they heard shouts coming from the house at the corner of Angle and High streets. Fourteen-year-old Conway Keibler and his friends, who were standing on the corner, looked toward the house and saw Conway's father standing at the front porch railing. Seeing that he had their attention, Mr. Keibler repeated his message.

The boys looked at each other in dismay as they grasped the gravity of his news. Near the bottom of High Street hill, sixteen-year-old Jack Crowe stepped out of Hagan's and into the gray December afternoon. His workday at Hagan's had ended at lunch time, and he glanced up at the clock above the open-air newsstand across the street. It was 12:40 p.m. Jack didn't know it, but his life, like many others, was about to change dramatically.

At the Plaza Theatre in the middle of town, fourteen-year-old Bert Sutton was watching the Sunday afternoon movie when the film suddenly stopped. A man walked onto the stage and made a dramatic announcement. Young Bert leaped from his seat and headed for the door.

"It was a rule at our house that if anything bad happened," Bert told me recently, "we were to report home as soon as possible. I never saw the whole movie. I can't even recall the name of it."

Sixty years ago this week, Americans were stunned by news of a surprise attack on the United States military installation at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In the weeks that followed the attack, residents of this area quickly adjusted to the unique demands made upon citizens of a nation at war.

These articles will carry us back to the month of December 1941, one of the most tumultuous times in America's history. Current and former area residents will share with us what they still remember about the terrible moments of Sunday, December 7, 1941 when they learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Through their eyes, we will relive with them the harrowing final weeks of 1941 as they prepared to defend the home

front, sought news of loved ones stationed overseas, and tried to help the war effort in any way they could.

For many folks on December 7, the remarkable news of the Pearl Harbor attack came over the radio.

“That was one day of my life I will never forget,” said Bill Harris, now of LaGrange, Georgia. “My parents, John and Vera, my sister Ruthann, and I were visiting relatives. In the afternoon my uncle’s friend called and asked if my uncle had heard the news. We turned on the radio and were all stunned by what we heard. I was sixteen. We all realized that my cousin and I would probably be in the war before it was over, and we were.”

The radio was also playing that afternoon in a house on Bull Run Road, where twelve-year-old Thom Stapleton was visiting his cousin, Lloyd Sprinkle.

“I remember that day like it was yesterday,” said Thom, now of Casa Grande, Arizona. “I don’t remember why I was there that particular day, but my uncle was reading the Sunday paper and listening to the radio. My cousin and I were lying on the floor reading the funnies.

“Suddenly my uncle made a strange noise, dropped his paper, and ran from the room calling for my aunt. Later he explained to us kids what had happened and what it meant. Neither of us fully grasped the seriousness of the situation, but like everyone else, we soon learned.”

Bill Patterson of Wesleyville, Pennsylvania, was fifteen years old on December 7, 1941. He was upstairs in his bedroom at his Playford Avenue home when the awful news was broadcast. He was the first in the house to hear it.

“It was after lunch,” Bill explained, “and I had gone to my room to waste some time with my baseball card collection. I turned on my little table model radio, a present from the previous Christmas. Expecting to hear the regular Sunday afternoon fare, instead I heard the announcers already relaying the early news of the raid. News and rumors were flying, and the regular network news people such as Lowell Thomas, Gabriel Heatter, H. V. Kaltenborn, and Edward R. Murrow had not gotten in place yet. I listened for a while to try to understand what was happening, then I ran downstairs where my folks, Norman and Bessie, were sitting.

“‘The Japs bombed Pearl Harbor!’ I exclaimed.

“My dad looked at me and asked the most frequently heard question of the day.

“‘What is Pearl Harbor?’ he said.

“I didn’t really know,” Bill told me as he recalled that conversation,

“but I explained that it was ours and it was somewhere in Hawaii. The big floor console radio was immediately turned on and stayed on for the rest of the day.

“I couldn’t stay in with all this happening, so I walked downtown, where I met some other kids I knew. There were quite a few people in the Neck, and everyone was agog with the news. It was exciting to encounter someone who hadn’t heard yet and give them the word.”

Dan Buchan, now of Blue Springs, Missouri, was not one who would listen to the radio if he could attend a movie. He spent that Sunday afternoon at the Bison Theater. When Dan returned to his Middle Street home in West Brownsville, the scene that greeted him unnerved the thirteen-year-old boy.

“I remember that the women in our neighborhood across from the old fire station were weeping,” Dan recalled, “and the men were so somber. One of the weeping women was my own mother, Sally. I realized later that they knew that many of their sons were going to end up as soldiers. My mother and the rest of the family wept together when we received word in June 1944 that my brother, Reid (Fred) Davis, had been killed in Europe. So that is how I remember Pearl Harbor – the mothers weeping.”

Frances Martin of York Street, Brownsville, was an eleven-year-old girl living in Hiller patch on December 7, and she too was confused and alarmed.

“I remember being frightened,” Frances told me. “I was in the living room of our house in the patch, and the men in the neighborhood were all outside, talking about the attack. It was very upsetting to me as a young girl.”

Thirteen-year-old Malcolm Crawford was visiting a family friend when the news came.

“My dad Ed, my mother Rosanna, my sisters Joanne and Louise, and I were visiting friends in West Brownsville,” Mal explained. “It was a gray, cloudy day, and my sisters and I were sitting at their picture window overlooking the river. Then someone came into the room and said that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.”

As was the case with many others who heard the news, the three children were not sure what to think about it.

“It sounded serious,” recalled Mal, who now lives in Raleigh, North Carolina. “But it really didn’t have much impact on us then, because none of us even knew where Pearl Harbor was.”

Ross Snowdon, Jr., now living in Madrid, New York, was a West Brownsville resident in 1941, but Ross was not in West Brownsville when he learned of the attack. He was driving past the Japanese embassy

in Washington, D.C., where a crowd had gathered at the fence surrounding the embassy. Angry Americans watched as Japanese diplomats burned official records in a container on the lawn.

“My home was at 202 Railroad Street in West Brownsville,” Ross told me. “After graduating from Brownsville High School in 1940, I enlisted in the army and was stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky. I had some leave time coming to me, so I went to Brownsville, picked up my mother, and took her to visit her brother in Berwin, Maryland.

“On December 7, 1941, I was driving in Washington, D.C. for the first time, and before I knew it, I was in front of the Japanese Embassy. There I witnessed the mob scene as the Japanese burned their documents. My mother and I returned to my uncle’s home in Maryland, and he advised me to return to Fort Knox because the bombing of Pearl Harbor would certainly lead to a declaration of war.”

War would soon bring casualties. The young men and women who were already serving in the military on December 7 were in everyone’s thoughts.

“I recall being so frightened,” commented Bert Sutton from his home in North Versailles, Pennsylvania. “My older brother Chuck was already in the service, and before that war was over, I had two more brothers overseas. Our mother had a difficult time during those years, as did many others. We lived in constant fear that the Western Union fellow would show up on our street, carrying the awful message that some mother’s son would not be coming home from the war.”

As days passed, news of local boys in action filtered back to anxious area residents. Inevitably came word of the first Fayette County resident to be killed in the Pacific, a victim of the Pearl Harbor attack. He would be the first of many to sacrifice his life. Next, I will share his story and others as we revisit the dark days of December 1941.

ANSWERING THE CHALLENGE AFTER PEARL HARBOR

News of Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor raced over back fences and along sidewalks in every community. As radios blared the awful bulletins from Hawaii, anxious friends and relatives of military personnel began a long vigil, awaiting word from loved ones serving overseas. In one local household, the news of the surprise attack was too much to bear.

“I am relating something that was told to me by my father, Alfred A. Laughery,” Don Laughery of Catonsville, Maryland, told me. “I was only twelve in 1941, and we lived at 311 Catherine Avenue in Brownsville. While I have no independent verification of the following story, I have been told by a relative that it is essentially true.

“My father’s sister, Flora Gummerson, lived in Uniontown, and her son Ellwood was serving in the military in Hawaii. My father told me that when the news came over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, Flora’s husband shouted, ‘My God, Ellwood’s dead!’ and dropped dead of a heart attack.”

Three days later, the December 10, 1941 issue of the Brownsville *Telegraph* included the following item, accompanied by a photograph.

“The first reported Fayette County casualty in the Japanese war in Hawaii was Ellwood Gummerson, 37, of Uniontown,” the *Telegraph* article stated. “His mother, Mrs. Flora Gummerson of 28 Braddock Street, Uniontown, was informed at 9:30 a.m. today by the War Department. Gummerson leaves his mother, two brothers, George and Clarence, and a sister, Mrs. Elsie Holmes of Uniontown.”

“Later in the war,” Don Laughery said, “Flora lost another son, making her the county’s first double Gold Star mother.”

Also stationed at Pearl Harbor on December 7 was Russ Miller of Second Street in Brownsville. Former resident Bert Sutton, who now lives in North Versailles, recalled, “There was much concern for Russ. Later we learned that he was unharmed in the attack.”

Brownsville resident Edgar Rioli was on active duty with the U. S. Navy on December 7, 1941, but fate had other plans for him. Months before the attack, most of his company had been assigned to Pearl Harbor, but Edgar was held back.

“My experience as a lifeguard at West Brownsville beach may have spared me,” Edgar told me. “I had earned my lifeguard certification in order to work at West Brownsville beach. When the navy discovered that I was certified, they held me back for a while to be a swimming instructor instead of shipping me to Pearl. Later I was assigned to serve on the *U.S.S. Wichita* in the North Atlantic.”

“Were you in the North Atlantic on December 7?” I asked Edgar.

“Yes. I was a boat engineer, and I was climbing down a ladder when the announcement was made over the ship’s intercom,” Edgar said. “Part of my original company was at Pearl Harbor that day, but I have never determined if any of them were killed in the attack.”

On Monday, December 8, the Brownsville *Telegraph*’s front page headline consisted of one word – *WAR!* The accompanying article noted that many local servicemen were stationed in the Pacific.

“Fayette County,” stated the *Telegraph*, “is heavily represented in the Japanese-invaded outposts of the United States in the Pacific. There are 73 men in the Hawaiian Islands, 70 in the Panama Canal Zone and 32 in the Philippines. Among the Brownsville district boys stationed at Pearl Harbor are Ralph ‘Brownie’ Garnett on the *U. S. S. Tennessee*; Ardist Blevins, formerly of Newtown and now of Carmichaels; and Paul H. Barrass, son of W. C. Barrass of Railroad Street, West Brownsville.”

While residents read details of the attack in their Monday newspapers, their children returned to school.

“When we got back to school on Monday,” recalled Brownsville native Bill Harris, “there were several teachers missing. They had gone to enlist. By spring of 1943, my senior year, the Brownsville High School yearbook showed twelve teachers in the service. By July, I was in uniform too.”



The 1944 edition of *On The Mon*, the Brownsville High School yearbook, included this tribute to these ten members of the high school faculty and administration who had left Brownsville High School to go to war. The yearbook staff wrote, “The school and community are proud of these men and women who are giving active service to our nation.”

In Thom Stapleton’s seventh grade class that Monday morning, the teacher spent the class period explaining the geography of the Pacific.

“Miss Moffat was my geography teacher at West Brownsville Grade School,” Thom said, “and she showed us maps of where Japan and Pearl Harbor were located. She was apparently well versed on Japan, because

while everyone else was saying we would ‘whup those Japs in six weeks,’ she told us that it would be a long, hard war.”

In Bill Patterson’s eighth grade history class, war was the topic of every conversation.

“Joe Dudzak, our history teacher, was very good at feigning disapproval when in reality he always fully understood what was afoot,” Bill observed. “As we students talked excitedly about the war, Mr. Dudzak said something like, ‘Oh sure, throw away your history book! Who needs it? It’s what is happening now that is important, right?’

“We knew better than to agree with him,” Bill continued, “but it was hard not to. We could agree that it was living history. He would allow for that.

“For lunch, I went downtown to Mitchell’s Restaurant in the Flatiron building for a serving of Ollie Mitchell’s delicious meat pie. It was a nice day, and a lot of doors were open. President Roosevelt was addressing Congress, giving his famous ‘Day of Infamy’ speech. All the radios were on, and as I walked through town and hustled back up High Street for my afternoon classes, I missed very little of the speech.”

On that same Monday, Ross Snowdon and his mother were in his black two-door Dodge, returning from their harrowing Sunday afternoon visit to Washington, D. C. Having watched the commotion at the Japanese embassy and throughout the capital city, the pair was anxious to return to West Brownsville.

“We were en route home and having lunch at a restaurant,” Ross told me, “when we heard President Roosevelt addressing Congress and asking for a declaration of war against Japan. My thoughts went immediately to two of my pals from my school days, Sheridan Forsyth and his cousin Robert Forsyth of West Brownsville. They were both in the Army and stationed at Fort Shafter near Pearl Harbor. Fort Shafter had a rough time on December 7, but they both survived.”

“In the weeks and months that followed December 7,” recalled Brownsville native Hannah Millward Fisher, “I remember walking on different streets in town and seeing the little banners displayed in the windows of many homes.”

A blue star in the window indicated that a member of that family was serving in the armed forces. A gold star signified that the ultimate sacrifice had been made.

“I remember seeing some windows displaying three or more blue stars,” Hannah continued. “My uncle, Charles Keibler, was a member of the local draft board. It was an awesome responsibility, because many of our friends and neighbors went to war, and quite a few never came back

or were permanently disabled.”

Hannah told of a well-known Brownsville High School graduate who served in the Pacific campaign.

“Joseph (Junior) Peters, Jr. was the national champion drum major for Paul Carson’s Brownsville High School band,” Hannah explained, “and had won many awards. Junior also had a tremendous voice. Just before he shipped out, he sang “The Lord’s Prayer” at our church. Then he told my cousin that he didn’t think he would come back.

“Some time after Junior had shipped out, I went to my aunt and uncle’s house for lunch, as I often did. I was met by my aunt, who was crying. She told me that Junior had been at the Battle of Leyte, and while assisting a wounded soldier, he was killed by a sniper.”

When the 1943 school year ended, Brownsville band director Paul Carson, who had mentored Peters throughout his high school career, turned in his director’s baton for a rifle. Carson spent the next two years on the battlefields of Europe.

As battles raged on the European and Far Eastern fronts and gold stars replaced blue, those who remained in Brownsville pitched in to help in the war effort. Next, we focus on the home front as we revisit those unforgettable years of World War II.

DEFENDING THE HOME FRONT

America entered World War II waging the battle against Fascism both overseas and on the home front as well. At railroad stations and bus depots across America, family members, friends, and neighbors waved goodbye to loved ones departing to serve in the military.

Those who remained behind turned to the task of supporting the war effort on the home front. Protection of our shores and vital assets was paramount. The day after Congress declared war, local leaders acted.

The December 9, 1941 issue of the Brownsville *Telegraph* reported, “The executive council of A. Kramer Axton Post 295, American Legion in Brownsville has moved rapidly to coordinate home defense activities here. Activities to be discussed at an upcoming meeting of local leaders at the Legion post are first aid, fire protection and volunteer service for guard duty.”

At Brownsville, the inter-county bridge, the railroad bridge, and nearby Lock No. 5 were all vital links in the nation’s transportation

network. Pittsburgh's steel mills relied heavily upon Mon Valley coal, and no interruption of river, rail, or highway traffic could be permitted.

On December 9, the *Telegraph* reported, "With fixed bayonets, six home defense guards were patrolling each end of the inter-county bridge here today against possible sabotage attempts of this vital link in U. S. Route 40. Local police, at the request of Governor Arthur H. James, guarded the span last night. The bridge is important in moving supplies, and in the last war (World War I) handled thousands of army units."

Mal Crawford of Raleigh, North Carolina, was thirteen years old and living in Brownsville when America entered World War II. His family showed their appreciation to those guards.

"It was exciting to see the armed National Guardsmen, with their old Springfield rifles and heavy woolen uniforms, patrolling the bridges," Mal told me. "We even had some of them to Thanksgiving dinner."

A few local residents needed reminding that the guards were dead serious about their duties.

"A rigid 20-mile-an-hour speed limit has been clamped down on the inter-county bridge here by Home Defense Guards," noted the December 18, 1941 *Telegraph*, "and two motorists who failed to stop upon signals found themselves the object of rifle bullets. Two autoists were brought to a sudden halt when bullets pierced their cars as they failed to stop upon being signaled. In both instances operators were exceeding the speed limit.

"Twenty-mile-an-hour speed limit signs were being placed on the bridge this morning, and all motorists have been cautioned that to ignore them may bring severe consequences. No loafing at any time is permitted on the span."

At Lock No. 5, security was tight. "Lockmaster Michael O'Hare, in an effort to thwart any sabotage attempts, increased the number of guards on Lock No. 5 here by three men," the *Telegraph* reported. "The lock will be patrolled 24 hours a day. Similar precautions are said to have been taken at the Pennsylvania Railroad bridge at Brownsville Junction, although no official announcement to that effect has been made."

Air raid wardens were appointed to help the community react quickly in the event of an attack.

"I was only six years old at the time," recalled Edie Rubin Robin, now living in Delray Beach, Florida, "but I do remember that we had dark, heavy drapes on our living room windows. Every time the sirens sounded loud and clear, my parents would close the draperies.

"Then my mother, Ruth Rubin, would don her white warden's hat, pick up her flashlight, and leave the house to walk to her station. I would

wait patiently in the dark for the 'all-clear' siren, because I then knew my mother would return shortly.

"Sometimes it was very late at night when she got back, but she always read me a book when she returned, as I guess my anxiety was a little high during those times."

"I remember our air raid warden, Marion Whetzel," added Hannah Millward Fisher, now of Corona, Arizona. "He was assigned to Lewis Street, and he patrolled to make sure all lights were out during air raids."

Mal Crawford noted, "Our scout troop served as Junior Air Raid Wardens and Junior Commandos. We became very aware of what it meant to 'Be Prepared.'"

Conway Keibler, now of Pittsburgh, was another young Brownsville boy anxious to help on the home front.

"School students quickly became part of the home front forces," Conway told me. "Boy Scouts became messengers during the periodic blackouts, which were held in case of air raids. My post was at the Brownsville borough building, where I took my place awaiting orders to engage in some heroic act."

Another task that could be handled by young and old alike was the recycling of materials for use by our military.

"We collected aluminum," Conway explained, "old pots and pans that could be made into warplanes. Two other scouts, Tom Bower and Dan Walters, and I also collected several tons of old newspapers. The paper was stored in the Walters' basement and garage. There was so much of it that Mr. Walters, who was manager of the local A & P store, had to leave his car in the driveway."

Cooking fat was also collected for use in the war.

"When I turned fifteen," said Conway, "I began working at Andrew Grueser's Clover Farm grocery store on the corner of Angle and High streets. Customers could aid the war effort by saving cooking grease to be made into nitroglycerin. A sign in one grocery store proclaimed, 'Ladies, bring in your fat can on Friday!'"

Bob Bakewell, now of Morganton, North Carolina, was eleven years old in 1941.

"We had scrap drives in those days," Bob informed me, "and we took everything to Prospect Street School. One day my friends and I were going down the alley by the International Bakery in South Brownsville, looking for scrap. I spotted an old motorcycle in Albert Plato's dad's back yard, so we asked him if we could have it for the war scrap drive. He said, 'Yes, get it out of here!'"

"We couldn't believe it. The next day we took it to Prospect Street School and asked Mrs. McCoy where to put it. She said to take it to our

home room, which I don't think she realized was on the second floor. But we got it up there, and we were heroes with our peers for a long time!"

Rationing of ordinary items became a part of daily life.

"Many food items such as meat, coffee, sugar, and even some canned goods were rationed," noted Conway Keibler. "I remember Mr. Gruesser trading meat stamps for gasoline stamps, because his was a delivery business, and gasoline was rationed too."

Edie Rubin Robin added, "My father, Dr. Leslie Rubin, was head of the ration board in Brownsville, but being the honest man that he was, he never took special favors. We were allotted only the same amounts as everyone else in town. I recall his saying how people would call him and beg for extra rations, but he never consented to the requests unless it was a medical emergency."

On December 11, 1941, four days after the Pearl Harbor attack, the *Telegraph* reported, "All Japanese-made merchandise of the G. C. Murphy Company store in Brownsville has been removed from counters and will not be sold. This was announced today by Lawrence Rau, manager, who stated that the move was made to conform with instructions from the company's Pittsburgh office. The majority of the articles were novelties, and only a few of those were on hand.

"The sale of new automobile tires to the public has been banned by the government until December 22," continued the *Telegraph*, "in an effort to stop a consumers' buying wave. Severe penalties are provided for violation of the order, which includes all new tires and tubes for cars, trucks, buses, motorcycles and farm machinery."

The next day's *Telegraph* brought more bad news for motorists.

"Manufacture of automobiles for John Q. Public will probably cease entirely the early part of March," reported the newspaper. "Assembly lines will be utilized for the construction of tanks and planes and other war weapons."

The sale of defense stamps was another important home front initiative, and newspaper delivery boys played a significant role in the program.

"Thirty Brownsville *Telegraph* newspaper boys today join the battle against Axis aggression as they begin an intensive defense stamp sales campaign," announced the *Telegraph* on December 22, 1941. "These boys will sell the stamps to the subscribers along their routes. The young treasury agents took the pledges of office in the *Telegraph* building late last week under the direction of Circulation Manager Charles Catterall.

"The carrier boys are voluntary defense agents under the authority of the Treasury department. Each of the newspaper carrier defense

agents will wear a badge designating him as a defense agent.”

The community’s young people sold the stamps, and they bought them too.

“Kids were able to buy defense stamps at school,” explained Conway Keibler, “which were pasted into a booklet until \$18.75 was reached. Then the booklet could be converted into a \$25 war bond. We were proud of the privilege to help the war effort.”

Widespread participation in the war effort, at home and abroad, by Americans of all ages, is the recurring theme in stories told by those who recall the dark days of December 1941. Everyone had a stake in the outcome of the bloody drama playing out abroad. Each found a way to lend a hand to insure success in the war. It was that no-holding-back effort by every citizen, young and old, that produced America’s greatest victory.

BROWNSVILLE STUDENTS AND FACULTY WENT OFF TO WAR

It had always been my assumption that when young men were drafted into the military service during World War II, boys who were still enrolled in high school were not eligible to be conscripted. However, a recent note from reader Kirby Davis of Searcy, Arkansas, has proven to be an eye-opener for me, and perhaps it will be for others as well.

“I was wondering,” Kirby wrote, “if there was some way you could find out how many boys were drafted into the service before they graduated from school. I have a brother who was drafted in September 1943 during his senior year at Brownsville High School. As far as we know, he was the only one from his class who was drafted. His name was Parker Davis, and he now lives in Ft. Worth, Texas.”

When I received Kirby’s note, I contacted him to be certain that I was not misinterpreting what it said.

“Are you saying that Parker was still a student in the high school when he was drafted?” I asked.

“Yes,” Kirby confirmed, “my brother Parker was drafted while in his senior year of school. Earlier that year, 1943, he wanted to enlist in the Merchant Marines, but my mother and father would not sign the papers for him. They, of course, wanted Parker to finish school, and they also knew that a neighbor of ours was lost while serving in the Merchant

Marines. In addition, I already had a brother in the Army Air Corps, serving as a pilot on a B-17.

“Parker then tried to enlist in the Army Air Corps,” Kirby continued, “but he was turned down because he was color blind. He started his senior year of school, and he was at football camp up in the mountains. My father had to go up to camp just before they came home and tell ‘Park’ that his brother George had been shot down and taken prisoner by the Germans, and he also told him that he had been drafted into the Navy.

“My father went to the draft board and tried to get him deferred so that he could finish his senior year, but they said no. Park came home from camp, played his final game, and went off to the Navy in September, 1943.”

Kirby’s story prompted me to research when the United States first used a military draft. I discovered that the practice began during the Civil War and was resurrected during World War I. Then in 1940, with World War II underway in Europe and the United States not yet officially at war, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, creating the country’s first peacetime draft.

Within months of U. S. entry into World War II in December 1941, it became clear that there was a large untapped reservoir of young Americans whose services would be needed by the military. The group consisted of 18- and 19-year-old boys, who were not then eligible to be drafted. In October 1942, the War Department proposed drafting from this pool of young men.

On October 10, 1942, the *Brownsville Telegraph* informed its readers, “Congressional leaders today reported that the War Department has submitted a letter to President Roosevelt, recommending legislation to draft 18- and 19-year-old youths. Administration chiefs predicted that the proposal would be endorsed by the President and sent to Congress. The War Department was said to be awaiting clearance of its proposal by the President.”

Roosevelt wasted no time letting his feelings be known on the matter. Three days after he received the War Department’s proposal, the *Telegraph* reported that “President Roosevelt’s declaration of the ‘inevitable’ and ‘important’ need for lowering the draft age to 18 years gave Congress the signal today for action on this military phase of the pressing manpower problem. Both Senate and House leaders predicted speedy action on the proposal to lower the draft age.”

This new policy made men between 18 and 45 liable for military service, and it required all men between 18 and 65 to register for the

draft. The terminal point of service was extended to six months after the war, which officially ended with the surrender of Japan in the autumn of 1945.

One local draftee who was discharged from the military six months after the war ended was my uncle, Melvin Tunney, who grew up in Blainesburg. He had remained in school until he graduated, but he had actually undergone military training during much of his senior year.

“For my last half year of high school,” Melvin told me, “I had my choice of regular school or eighteen weeks of Radio and Communication School at California State Teachers College. I chose the Radio school, and so did other male students in my class. I completed this course on May 21, 1943. Even though I did not attend regular high school the last half of my senior year, I did receive my high school diploma just as if I had attended high school.

“I was drafted into the Navy on June 28, 1943,” Melvin continued, “became a Radioman, and served in the Pacific theater until discharged in February 1946 [six months after the cessation of hostilities]. So even though I wasn’t drafted while still in school, I was trained to be drafted and used as a Radioman as soon as I had completed this course.”

Herb Elias of Miami, Florida, wasn’t even able to finish his senior year before Uncle Sam called.

“I was a senior at Brownsville High School,” Herb told me, “when I was called to active duty in April 1945. I had enlisted in the air cadet program at the beginning of the school year. The recruiters had hinted



From the 1944 Brownsville High School yearbook, *On The Mon*

that all enlistees would be able to graduate and attend the graduation ceremony, but they were wrong.

“That’s the way the ball bounces,” Herb observed. “I tried to get the government to delay duty until after graduation, but no soap. My dad did the honors, representing me at graduation and receiving my diploma.”

1943 was the first full year in which 18- and 19-year-olds could be drafted, and many young men from Brownsville High School entered the military service that year. The 1944 edition of *On The Mon*, the Brownsville High School yearbook, included a full-page tribute to these boys, accompanied by a montage of some of their pictures. The tribute read as follows:

“A number of the young men of our student body, along with the youth of the community, were directly affected by the war. Some were inducted during the summer of 1943 and others left after school began; while others will leave before the term draws to a close. Many boys have volunteered for duty not waiting for Uncle Sam to call them to the colors. Some others, having been called, were permitted to complete their class work before being inducted. . . .

“During the course of the present school term, the Army and Navy V-12, Army Air Cadets, and Radio Technician tests were administered to those students who desired to further their education through a military career. A number of our boys, who successfully passed these examinations, are now on reserve lists waiting to be called.

“The boys pictured below [previous page] were among those who left for the Services before they completed their work at Brownsville Senior High. It was impossible for the staff to picture all the boys who enlisted or were inducted for the entire year due to the necessity of meeting engraver’s and printer’s deadlines. Therefore these ten boys who left in 1943 or early in 1944 represent only a portion of our seniors who are now serving Uncle Sam.

“Since the plates have gone to the engravers, these additional boys have joined the ranks of the Armed Forces:

“(Army) Ernest Christopher, Albert Fanara, Hobert Herron, Walter Knight, Robert McMahon, Walter Oakley, John Savona, John Shunk, Howard Starr, and Nick Vecchio.

“(Air Corps) Will Berwick, Frank Dankovich, William Klosky, Joe Fortuna, Miles Springer, Clarence Stevenson, George Wenick, Andrew Kozup, and Martin Weston.

“(Marines) Frank Zeek.

“(Navy) Homer Crawford, Parker Davis, Fred Diederich, Walter Famularo, Harold Gue, Martin Pintar, Chester Porzucek, Richard Rohm,

William Semock, David Somers, Gerald Twigg, James Vance, and Harold Wellings.”



A crowd assembles to bid farewell to recruits and draftees heading off to war. This 1943 photo was taken just north of Union Station in Brownsville.

The ranks of the student body were not the only ones depleted by war. Many faculty members were also called to join the military, and the 1944 yearbook dedicated a page to these men.

“It seems such a long time,” wrote the yearbook staff, “since these members of the faculty have walked through our halls, yet it is only two years since our former principal, R. E. Austin, left for the air corps. Lt. Austin is now in Florida. A year ago, Paul Carson was in the midst of the Band Concert preparations; now he is in England playing in an army band, as well as performing other army duties. A year and a half in the navy has given Smith Coldren, now stationed in Texas, the rank of Lieutenant, Senior Grade. Pfc. Thomas Easton of the army air corps is also in Texas. First Lieutenant Samuel Jacobs, who has been in the army for two years, has just recently arrived in the British Isles.

“Bernard McCormick, who left the B.H.S. English department for the Quartermasters Corps, is now a 1st Lieutenant and is located in

Mississippi. Our former assistant coach, Pvt. J. McCune, has been in the South Pacific for some time. J. R. Swearingen, who has been gone from the manual arts department for two years, is now an aviation machinist's mate, first class, at the naval station, Chicago. Yeoman second class H. Walter, assistant principal in 1942-43, is now at a naval station in Mississippi. Lieutenant Matthew Wasko, a Marine, is stationed near San Francisco.

"In addition to these Senior High School teachers, there are ten members of the Junior High School faculty in the armed forces. They are Ernest Knapp (army), James Chalfant (merchant marine), Paul Campbell (air corps), Theodore Blasius (army), Samuel Francis (air corps), Frances Swan (navy), Morton Klein (army), George Rehe (navy), Merle Labin (army) and Carl Hough (air corps)."

Smith Coldren was a science teacher at Brownsville High School.

"Smith Coldren taught eleventh grade Physics and twelfth grade Chemistry," recalled reader Bill Patterson, "and he was a very good teacher to my way of thinking. If you did well in Physics, you might get to be a Lab Assistant in Chemistry, and I was fortunate to be so selected. You had to keep a few days ahead of other students in order to answer questions in the lab sessions, but it took some of the pressure off Smitty (as everyone called him behind his back), whose time was spread pretty thin.

"About a year after Pearl Harbor, and I believe during the 1942 holiday recess, I got a call from Mr. Coldren, who wanted to see me. I went to his home in West Brownsville to find that he had accepted a commission as a Lt. JG in the navy, starting almost immediately.

"It is something I have to do," he said to me. He had some papers that he wanted me to return to the other students and some notes regarding the lab to pass on to his replacement. He didn't expect to come back. He said it would be long and hard, and he felt it was unlikely he would survive. His comment reflected the rather somber mood pervading those times."

The massive enlistments and the military draft drained the school district of many of its young men and its male teachers, and this caused the school board to have to scramble to fill the vacated teaching positions.

"How does one replace a key teacher on short notice?" Bill Patterson asked rhetorically. "There was a Mr. McVicker who had once taught chemistry at California High School. He had opted for higher pay, working on the midnight shift in the quality control lab at an area steel plant. Mr. McVicker agreed to finish out the school year in place of Smith Coldren.

“After an all-night shift at the plant, Mr. McVicker would come to Brownsville each morning to teach the classes, and I felt that he did well. But whenever he sat at his desk, it was all he could do to keep awake, a battle which was often lost. He was delighted to learn of the Lab Assistants, and for the rest of the year, he did the classes and we did the labs. That is a frightening thought now, but we all survived and had only a couple of ill-conceived experiments to cover up.

“And by the way,” Bill concluded, “Smitty was wrong. He did survive and came back, as most of us did.”

The Brownsville High School band was mentioned in the earlier series, prompting reader Hannah Millward Fisher to recall a unique halftime show that the band performed during the war at Brownie Stadium in Woodward Plan.

“I remember attending a Brownsville High School football game with my dad,” Hannah told me, “and we eagerly awaited the band’s halftime activities. The Brownie Band came onto the field and started to play patriotic songs. Suddenly they began playing, ‘When the Führer says, ‘We is the master race,’ then we Heil, Heil, Heil, right in the Führer’s face!’

“Then ‘Hitler’ himself came onto the field. He was dressed in the band director’s white uniform. He swaggered around, and the band followed his every move. At first my dad didn’t know who ‘Hitler’ was, but then he said, ‘That can only be Conway [Keibler].’

“Just as suddenly, the band then started to play American tunes and began kicking Hitler off the field, literally. Some of the band members must have thought he was the real thing, because matters got a little carried away and Hitler had to nurse his bruises over the weekend.”

That colorful show took place near the end of the war. A few years earlier, the Brownsville band’s popular director, Paul Carson, had resigned and become another of the Brownsville faculty members serving in the military. Following the war, Carson did not return to Brownsville High School. Bill Patterson forwarded a newspaper article to me from his own scrapbook, and the article revealed what became of Paul Carson after the war.

The July 5, 1980 Brownsville *Telegraph* story announced the establishment of the Paul E. Carson scholarship fund at West Chester State College. The award was named in honor of the then-chairman of that college’s music department.

“Carson attended Connellsville High School,” the *Telegraph* reported, “and received his bachelor’s degree from Central Missouri State Teacher’s College in Warrensburg, Missouri in 1934. He was the director of instrumental music in the Brownsville School District from

1936 through 1942, then earned a master of fine arts from the Carnegie Institute of Fine Arts in 1943.”

The article continued, “Carson was band director with the 28th Infantry Division during World War II and led the bands in the liberation of Paris parade. He also fought in the Battle of the Bulge at Wiltz, where Germans overran his line.”



The 1941 edition of the Brownsville High School marching band, under the direction of Paul Carson.

Bill Patterson added some details of his own. “I have no way of checking this out,” Bill said, “but I remember it was said that he became associated for a time with the newly formed Glenn Miller Army Band as the highest ranking non-com assigned to the orchestra, which eventually alighted in Europe.

“During the Battle of the Bulge,” Bill continued, “large areas were overrun, and I seem to recall that the orchestra lost its instruments. Trapped behind enemy lines, everyone became an infantryman and had to fight their way out.”

In 1952, Carson “received a professional diploma from Teacher’s College, Columbia University,” according to the *Telegraph*. “He has

been voted Pennsylvania Band Master of the Year and is past president of the Pennsylvania College Band Directors Association. He teaches woodwinds, is director of the West Chester State College Rams Marching Band, which he founded, and has been [as of 1980] with West Chester for 28 years.”

One of the most well-known members of Carson’s Brownsville High School bands was Joseph “Junior” Peters, whose flamboyant strutting style and amazing skills with the drum major’s baton earned him a national championship title. Peters graduated from Brownsville in 1942 and joined the military. When the stunning news of his death in combat reached Brownsville in October 1944, the whole community was shaken.

“I doubt if any World War II death shook the whole community like ‘Whitey’ Peters’ death did,” Bill Patterson said. “Everyone knew who he was. His reputation for excellence as a drum major was well earned. He seemed to carry his baton at all times, everywhere, and he twirled it with a skill others only dreamed of.”

One of Junior’s close friends was the Rev. Conway Keibler, now of Pittsburgh.

“Junior had one brother,” Conway told me, “nicknamed ‘Sonny,’ who married Dorothy Dietrich. Junior’s uncle was Dr. Raymond ‘Ras’ Peters, a well-known local physician who was actually younger than Junior.

“Junior was president of both the senior class and the student council. He had a beautiful tenor voice, sang in both the high school chorus and Mixed Quartette, and although he was raised a Roman Catholic, sang solos in South Brownsville Methodist Church. In fact, I think that before going to the armed services he actually joined the Methodist Church.

“He won the drum major championship of Fayette County in 1941, and went on to win the championship at the National Music Festival held that year in Kansas City, Missouri. He was truly Brownsville’s Goodwill Ambassador.”

Another of Junior’s friends was Bob Millward, now living in Indiana, Pa. When Bob saw Junior Peters mentioned in my earlier article, he searched through his scrapbook until he found what he was looking for. It was the *Telegraph* news clipping that broke the awful news to the community.

“Pvt. Joseph (Junior) Peters,” the article read, “21-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Peters, Sr., Coal Hill, Brownsville, R. D. was killed in action on Leyte Island in the Philippines on October 21, according to a telegram received from the War department. He was serving with the

383rd Infantry Division.

“Following graduation from high school, he attended Wayne University, Detroit. He entered the service in March 1943 and went overseas in July 1944. In addition to his parents he leaves a brother, Harold, at home.”

“When Junior’s body was returned to Brownsville,” said Conway Keibler, “he was buried with full military honors. The funeral was held at South Brownsville Methodist Church, with the Rev. Ed Kiefer officiating. I was a pall bearer. I still remember the solemn procession coming up Second Street, with hundreds of mourners paying their respects to this truly outstanding young man.

“He spent much time in our home, being a friend to me and my sister, Marilyn. I will never forget the day I came home from school to find the minister there consoling my mother, because the news of Junior’s death had just come. We all loved him dearly. He would have accomplished much, had his life not been cut short by war.”

Joseph “Junior” Peters is buried in the Veterans’ section nearest Route 40 at Lafayette Memorial Park.

LIFE ON THE HOME FRONT DURING WORLD WAR II

When Don Laughery of Baltimore inquired whether any readers recall the military guards posted on the inter-county bridge during World War II, Harold “Chops” Laughery of West Brownsville gave me a call.

“I remember those servicemen being on the bridge for at least a few months,” says Harold.

“Was this at the beginning of the war?” I asked Harold.

“As I recall it was around 1942. There were also guards at every lock on the Monongahela River from former Lock 2 (Braddock) to Lock 8 (Point Marion), including Lock 5 at Brownsville.

“I was working on the steamboats at that time,” Harold continued. “There was a guard at every gate on every lock. In order to get off the boat at the lock, we had to show a pass to get by the guard, then show it again to re-board. Even when we would leave the boat at Rice’s Landing just to run up to the store and get some tobacco, we’d still have to show the pass to get back on, even though the same guard had just checked us a few minutes before.”

“Now, those guards on the inter-county bridge,” I asked. “Did they

check pedestrians and motorists who crossed the bridge?”

“No. They would just walk from each end of the bridge toward the middle until they met, then would turn around and walk back. They were out there rain or shine.”

Harold laughed and said, “Everybody said their guns weren’t loaded, but no one knew for sure. You could walk right by them, and some of them would speak to you, some wouldn’t.”

“Where did these guards stay when they were off duty?”

“In tents that were put up at West field across the road from Redstone Cemetery.”

North Charleroi native Ben Fisher, Jr., now of Corona, Arizona, corroborates Harold’s recollections.

“My father worked for forty-five years for the Corps of Engineers on Lock No. 4 at Charleroi,” Ben explained. “During the war they were required to perform guard duty on the Charleroi side of the dam. They were issued .45 caliber pistols and had a little shack next to Macbeth Evans (Corning) Glass Works. That shack remained there until the old dam was replaced in the 1960s.”

What did Ben’s father think of being entrusted with such an important duty?

“He hated it,” Ben said. “You were all by yourself, stuck in a dark little shack not much bigger than a phone booth. He said if someone had wanted to do something to the dam, he could have easily been overpowered. I am sure Lock No. 5 at Brownsville was guarded in a similar manner.

“As for the Charleroi-Monessen bridge, I do not remember guards being there. But since that was a toll bridge until May 1957, there were attendants there twenty-four hours a day who may have performed double duty as the locktenders did.”

Judging from the information from these two readers, the Monongahela River, its bridges, dams, and locks were all considered to be of strategic importance during World War II.

While on the subject of the Home Front, let us turn to a column I wrote about milkweed pods. In that article, a reader mentioned a story she had read which implied that the milkweed pods collected by school children were not actually used by the military for life vests. The article she read hinted that the collection effort was merely an ingenious method of letting citizens believe that they were aiding the war effort.

Don Niemela, who lives in Red Line in Jefferson Township, called me about those milkweed pods.

“It’s a strange coincidence,” Don told me. “I purchased some old issues of *National Geographic* magazine at a sale a while back, and

guess what topic I came across in one of the issues?

“I’m looking at a December 1944 issue,” Don continued. “It has a full page Kodachrome photograph showing an outdoor scene at a fairground. Arrayed on the spacious field are row after row of wooden racks, almost as far as the eye can see. Suspended from those racks are thousands of net bags filled with milkweed pods.”

Don sent me a photocopy of the *National Geographic* photograph. The caption reads, “To buoy up fighting men’s life jackets, children picked these 90,000 pounds of fluffy milkweed, drying here at Petoskey’s Fairgrounds. A heavy stand of this waterproof substitute for Java’s cultivated kapok grows wild in this area. In 1943 the crop was collected as an experiment. In 1944 a 29-state campaign was organized to gather 1,500,000 pounds of milkweed for military requirements.”

Kathleen Phelan e-mailed me from Baltimore. “I was intrigued,” she wrote, “by your reader’s questioning the use of milkweed pods that were picked by school children during World War II, so I searched the Internet for information.”

Kathleen found plenty of corroboration that the pods were actually used for their publicized purpose. “Judging from the web sites I sampled, I’d say that if it were a hoax just to make children feel as though they were making a contribution to the war effort, then it was a successful one! No source I found questioned this use.”

One of the sources Kathleen discovered, a 1949 volume by Harold Moldenke entitled *American Wild Flowers*, stated that “milkweed floss is five or six times as buoyant as cork, and a life jacket containing a few pounds of this floss can hold up a 150-pound man in the sea. It is warmer than wool and six times lighter. Flying suits lined with milkweed floss are warm, lightweight, and will act as a life preserver.”

A second web site Kathleen discovered explained, “During World War II, because of the shortage of natural rubber, scientists in the United States tried to turn common milkweed’s latex into a rubber-like substitute.”

So it looks as though the many folks who picked those pods were not laboring in vain!

Don Niemela offered a final observation about the collection efforts in World War II. In a previous column, a reader had described how he turned in cooking grease at Brown’s Grocery Store in the 500 block of Market Street.

“That cooking grease was used in demolition,” said Don. “It was used to make explosives.”

Explosives!

Is it any wonder nutrition experts advise us to avoid greasy foods?

TWO BROWNSVILLE MEN WERE ON THE ILL-FATED S. S. DORCHESTER

While everyone pitched in on the home front, Brownsville residents continued to serve on the front lines. The tragic sinking of the *S. S. Dorchester*, a United States troop transport ship that was torpedoed on February 3, 1943 just a few hours from its destination on the coast of Greenland, was an unforgettable episode of World War II. Two Brownsville men were aboard the *Dorchester* that night. The ship's sinking has been immortalized by the tale of the amazing gift of life that was given that night by the ship's four chaplains.

This is the story of the *Dorchester*, the fate of those Brownsville men, and the four chaplains whose act of faith and love for their fellow man has never been forgotten.

One of the two local men aboard the *Dorchester* that night was James F. Caulley, a Brownsville hardware merchant. In 1924, at the tender age of twenty-one, Caulley had become the owner/operator of the Brownsville Hardware Company. At that time, the store was located in the Barr House, which was on the corner of Water and Bridge streets where the National City Bank parking lot is now. Years later, Caulley's hardware store was moved across Water Street into a building next to Krause's Furniture.

In 1928, after owning the hardware store for four years, Caulley made a significant investment and upgraded his facilities. The following year he placed a display advertisement in the July 1, 1929 issue of the Brownsville *Telegraph* which proclaimed, "Brownsville can now boast of a Hardware Store that will meet the needs of a most discriminating public. A visit to our store will convince you of the truth of this declaration."

In 1922, two years before Caulley entered the hardware business, Charles and Margaret Swogger of South Brownsville welcomed a new addition to their growing family, a boy they named Herman. One of eight children, Herman grew up at the family home in Mitchell Hollow and attended South Brownsville and Brownsville schools. Upon graduating from Brownsville High School, Herman worked in Ohio for a few months, then returned to Brownsville and was hired by a contractor doing repairs on Lock No. 5.

On certain afternoons after Herman's workday was over, he would leave Lock No. 5 and walk down Water Street to Jim Caulley's hardware

store, where he would shoot the breeze with a certain young lady who worked there. Herman eventually began dating the girl. During the course of their courtship, Herman became good friends with her employer, Jim Caulley, even though Caulley was nearly twenty years Herman's senior.

The two men could never have guessed that in the not-too-distant future, the laborer and the hardware merchant would find themselves serving on the *S. S. Dorchester*, navigating the icy waters of the submarine-infested North Atlantic.

Don Swogger, who lives in Hiller, is Herman Swogger's younger brother. This past week, Don and I talked about Herman, Jim Caulley, and the ill-fated journey of the *S. S. Dorchester*.

"I understand that two men from Brownsville, Jim Caulley and your brother Herman, were aboard the *Dorchester* the night it was torpedoed," I said to Don. "Is that correct?"

"They sure were," Don said. "Both of them were in the Merchant Marine, and they were very good friends. In fact, they went to New York together, where Jim got a job on the *Dorchester* working for the purser, and Herman was hired as an 'able-bodied seaman.' They boarded the *Dorchester* together at New York harbor."

"Your brother was older than you?"

"That's right, two years older."

"And at the time your brother signed on with the *Dorchester*, was he married?"

"No. He made plans to marry a girl who worked at Brownsville Hardware on his next trip home."

"Herman was eighteen years old when he signed up for the Merchant Marine. Was he still living at home?"

"Yes," Don replied. "He had returned from working in Ohio, and he was living at home again. After working for that Lock 5 contractor for a while, he signed up for the Merchant Marine. He was still 18 when he signed up in 1940."

"Did Herman and Jim Caulley join the Merchant Marine together?"

"No. Herman had already been to sea three times in the Caribbean before he signed on to the *Dorchester's* crew in 1943. Jim had never been to sea before sailing on the *Dorchester*."

In January 1943, Herman Swogger and Jim Caulley boarded a train for New York, and there they saw the rather unimpressive *Dorchester* for the first time. The government had taken possession of the 1926-vintage ship in November 1941, a month before the United States entered World War II. She had been converted into an army troop ship and had made several successful runs from New York or Boston to Greenland through

the dangerous waters of the North Atlantic.

On January 23, 1943, the *Dorchester* left New York harbor with Swogger and Caulley among the 904 people aboard. She headed north as part of a six-ship convoy en route to Newfoundland and Greenland. The ship carried 130 crewmen, 23 members of the Navy Armed Guard, and 751 military personnel and others. After stopping to pick up supplies at St. John's, Newfoundland, on January 27, the *Dorchester* returned to sea on January 29, accompanied by two other cargo ships and three Coast Guard cutters that formed their convoy.

Many years later, Jim Caulley talked about that wintry journey with a reporter and described how the ship dipped and swayed as she wallowed through the icy seas off Greenland.

"She didn't move according to the law of ocean-going vessels," Caulley said. "She bounced and trembled, just as the boys below decks trembled. She didn't ride the waves, she ploughed through them."

The soldiers aboard did not know what the ship's final destination was intended to be. Various rumors had her going to Ireland or Africa or Norway, or perhaps even to help defend England if Hitler invaded that island. But the four chaplains aboard the ship knew where the ship was going.

Those four men -- George Fox (Methodist), Clark Poling (Dutch Reformed), Alex Goode (Jewish Rabbi) and John Washington (Catholic) -- had spent only a few weeks together on the ship, but they were nearly always together. They knew that the *Dorchester* was sailing to the air base at Narssarssuaq, Greenland, the main base used to ferry planes to England. The chaplains felt it best to keep that information to themselves, and they spent many hours comforting nervous boys who realized the ship was sailing through the dangerous "submarine alley."

On the evening of February 2, the tension on the ship eased somewhat as word spread that the *Dorchester* had broken away from her convoy, which was not an unusual maneuver when a ship was only hours away from port. They were almost there. Below decks, Herman Swogger and Jim Caulley talked quietly while having a beer, then went their separate ways on the ship. Many men went to sleep that night without their life jackets because for the first time in days, they felt the ship was safe from attack.

"The navy escorted the *Dorchester* to Greenland," Don Swogger explained to me, "and when the *Dorchester* broke away from the convoy, a destroyer was to go with her. But when she got near the coast, it was decided that there would be no submarines because it was fairly shallow, so the destroyer broke off and the *Dorchester* proceeded by herself."

Aboard the ship, the four chaplains presided over the evening's

successful entertainment program. The hour was late when the show ended, and they too headed for bed, feeling relief that the ship had made the dangerous journey safely. It was one a.m., February 3, 1943.

As they walked to their staterooms, beneath the frothing surface of the black Atlantic, a command was barked in German. In a heartbeat, German submarine U-223 unleashed a deadly torpedo toward the sleeping ship.

“There was a loud boom,” recalled Jim Caulley, “the ship rose six feet out of the water, and then the lights went out.”

The torpedo had struck the *Dorchester*'s starboard side, exploding in the engine room and killing 100 men below decks. In the frightening darkness, pandemonium erupted as men frantically groped for their life jackets, blindly scrambling to escape the bowels of the sinking ship.

Jim Caulley did a foolish thing. Instead of joining the human surge toward the ship's deck, he bolted from the stateroom where he had been talking with six other men and headed for his own stateroom to claim two possessions he felt he had to save: his seaman's papers and his flashlight.

On the deck above him, men struggled frantically to free lifeboats that were frozen in place, as the ship slowly continued to roll on its side. Those without life jackets crowded in fear around lockers where the four chaplains calmly handed out the precious extra jackets until they were gone. But there were not enough for everyone, and the ship was sinking fast.

As Herman Swogger, Jim Caulley, and 898 others desperately attempted to save themselves from an icy death, the four chaplains, faced with men whimpering in fear as the ship descended into the cold Atlantic, did something that would stun everyone who witnessed it. Next, I will share the story of those four chaplains and the fate of the two Brownsville men facing the frigid waters of the Atlantic.

FOUR CHAPLAINS' SACRIFICE INSPIRES ALL GENERATIONS

At one a.m. on February 3, 1943, German submarine U-223 torpedoed the troop transport ship *S. S. Dorchester* as she neared port in Greenland. 904 men, including Brownsville natives Jim Caulley and Herman Swogger, struggled on the dark ship to save themselves as water poured through a gaping hole in the vessel's starboard side. The ship

was slowly rolling over, and there was no doubt that she would be gone within minutes.

Captain Hans Jorgen gave the order to abandon ship, but only two of the fourteen lifeboats could be lowered because the freezing sea spray had caked the boat-lowering pulleys in thick ice.

Jim Caulley and five other men were together in a stateroom below deck when the torpedo hit. Jim immediately rushed toward his own stateroom to find two items he wanted to save.

“I did not have my life belt with me,” Caulley later told an interviewer, “although we were to wear them at all times.” Because it was so hot below decks, many of the men had slept without their life jackets, feeling that the ship was near port and the danger of an attack had passed.

Jim reached his stateroom, grabbed his seaman’s papers and a flashlight, and headed for the boat deck.

“I started up the aisle to the boat deck,” he said. “I was alone in that aisle, just me and my flashlight.”

When he emerged on the deck, his heart began pounding faster. The ship was sinking fast. Shouting men were running everywhere, and some were chopping frantically at ice-covered pulleys that refused to permit the lowering of the lifeboats.

“We’d had just one boat drill a few days earlier,” Caulley said. “I knew there were only 14 boats with a capacity of 42 to a boat, and there was pandemonium on the boat deck with 900 people seeking lifeboats. Most of the lifeboats were frozen solid or broken in the process of trying to get them loose.”

Caulley was able to get to one of the only two lifeboats that were successfully launched.

“Our boat dropped 15 feet to the water when the lowering mechanism got stuck,” he said. “We had 50 men in a boat designed to hold 42. Once in the lifeboat, we had to bail out the icy water continuously, as the water kept filling the boat. To make matters worse, a terrific snowstorm came up. Coupled with the darkness, it was impossible to see anything.”

As the ship listed further to starboard, some of the men jumped into the freezing black ocean, hoping to swim clear before the ship took its final plunge to the sea bottom. Those who had no life jackets and could not swim did not jump. Instead, they scrambled toward the lockers where extra life jackets were stored.

At the lockers, terrified men crowded around the ship’s four chaplains – George Fox (Methodist), Clark Poling (Dutch Reformed), Alex Goode (Jewish) and John Washington (Catholic) – who distributed

the extra life jackets until there were none left. As the last jacket was handed out, there were still men without life jackets, and the doomed ship was on the verge of rolling into the Atlantic.

No survivor was able to identify which of the four chaplains was the first to make the fateful decision for which they would be forever remembered, but one by one, each man of God removed his own life jacket and gloves and thrust them into the arms of incredulous young soldiers who had no life jackets of their own.

In the midst of the chaos around them, time stood still for those who watched as four men on a sinking ship gave away their life jackets. Those who witnessed the act were momentarily stunned. Said one survivor, "It was the finest thing I've seen, or hope to see, this side of heaven."

The chaplains, now without life jackets, continued to minister to men, calming those who were crying in fear, praying with others, helping the men prepare themselves for what was about to happen.

As the lifeboats rowed away from the sinking ship, some of the men in the boats said they could see the chaplains standing on deck, arms linked together and heads bowed, when the *Dorchester* finally succumbed. Less than twenty-five minutes after it was torpedoed, the *Dorchester* went down with the four chaplains and hundreds of others still on board. Only 229 of the original 904 passengers survived the sinking.

After the ship disappeared, men in life jackets bobbed in the frigid water, slowly freezing in the darkness amidst oil-slicked swells. Only a few made it to lifeboats. Most died of the cold.

"The worst part of the experience was hearing cries in the darkness and not being able to help them," Jim Caulley lamented.

Caulley was one of 229 survivors who were rescued two hours later by the U. S. Coast Guard cutter *Escanaba*. Herman Swogger was one of the 675 who perished that night.

Several days later, two young ladies grimly set out from Brownsville's Western Union office, which was located in the Monongahela Hotel. Their destination was the Mitchell Hollow home of Charles and Margaret Swogger.

"I was not at home when the news arrived," recalls Don Swogger, who is the younger brother of Herman Swogger. "My brother Tom, who now lives in Ohio, was at home. Our house was in the hollow, but it butted up against the hillside and was next to Hollow Road. The upstairs living room door was at street level with Hollow Road, but we never used that door.

"Two young ladies knocked on the living room door," Don said,

“and Tom went upstairs to answer it. They handed Tom a telegram. He gave it to my mother, and when she opened it and read it, she became hysterical with grief. She had lost two babies in infancy, and now we had lost Herman.”

Jim Caulley took just one more journey to sea after the sinking of the *Dorchester*. Illness forced him to retire from the Merchant Marine, and he returned to Brownsville to resume managing his Brownsville Hardware store until his retirement on June 30, 1974.

“At any time after Jim Caulley returned to Brownsville,” I said to Don Swogger, “did you ever talk to him about the sinking?”

“Only once,” Don said. “After the war, I worked for Jim for a year or so at Brownsville Hardware, before I went on my own in the plumbing business. The only time he talked about it was one occasion when Jim and I were doing some work at his house. All he said was, ‘I had talked with Herman just a few hours before the sinking. Herman was off watch when the torpedo hit, and I was surprised that he didn’t survive the sinking. I never saw him after the torpedo hit.’”

And what about the five men who were in the stateroom with Jim when the torpedo hit?

“None of the men in that stateroom survived,” said Caulley, “except me.”

The story of the actions of the four Army chaplains who gave up their life jackets became an inspiration to many who heard it.

“In honor of their sacrifice,” Don Swogger told me, “a museum was established in Massillon, Ohio, and a chapel in Philadelphia. After the war, my mother donated money to the Four Chaplains chapel in Philadelphia, and my brother’s name is registered there.”

The four chaplains were also posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross, and in 1960, Congress acknowledged their selfless courage by creating a “one of a kind” Congressional Medal of Valour, which was given to the chaplains’ families. Three of the chaplains had been married, and two had children. Rabbi Alexander David Goode left behind his wife in Brooklyn; Methodist minister George Fox was survived by his wife and two children; and Dutch Reformed minister Clark Poling left a young son and pregnant wife.

Was their sacrifice worth it? No sailor among the 229 survivors ever said that he had been given a life jacket by one of the chaplains. The four chaplains’ heroic actions may not have actually saved anyone’s life that night. Yet the enormity of their decision and their powerful example of living their faith stands out, whatever the fate of the four soldiers whom they tried to help.

We live in another of many eras in history when people of different religions throughout the world feel antagonism toward one other. In some parts of the world, people are giving their lives in a more malevolent cause – the cause of killing others whose religious beliefs are different. Jews and Muslims engage in a deadly struggle in the Holy Land. Calls for a holy war against Americans are issued on religious grounds. Dying for your faith has taken on a different meaning than it had for the four chaplains of the *S. S. Dorchester*.

Each of those chaplains is distinguished by the question he did not think to ask when he decided to make his supreme sacrifice. Not one of them, Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, asked the religion of the man to whom he handed his life jacket.

Gerhard Buske, First Officer of German submarine U-223, later expressed regret at the pain the *Dorchester*'s sinking had caused for the victims' families. He said, "We all should try to live in the sense of these immortal chaplains. We ought to learn to love where others hate."

Another Veterans Day has passed. We have once again honored the men and women who have placed their lives on the line for their countrymen. Perhaps someday, in the best of all possible worlds, all men and women will emulate the values and love of fellow man displayed by the four chaplains of the *S. S. Dorchester*. And perhaps if they do, in that best of all possible worlds, there will be no more veterans.

Because there will be no more war.

ONE MORE CASUALTY: THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

On that fateful April afternoon, Richard Wells was in the basement of his home at 320 Grays Lane on Brownsville's South Side when he heard his mother scream. The little boy sprinted up the cellar steps, terrified at what he might find.

"I ran upstairs," says Richard, who is now retired and living in Michigan. "I found my mother crying and saying something about our president. She cried all day. Later when Dad came home from work, he was very quiet. He had heard the news at work. It was a terrible day."

It was Thursday afternoon, April 12, 1945.

The evening edition of the Brownsville *Telegraph* revealed the grim details. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had died that afternoon at his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia. The sixty-three-year-old president,

who in January had begun his fourth term and thirteenth year in office, had been stricken by a cerebral hemorrhage. He had been simultaneously sitting for a new portrait and working on government papers while seated in a big leather easy chair. Before him was a collapsible bridge table that he used for a desk in his study.

At around 1:15 p.m., the president had suddenly placed his right hand to the back of his head and said to his cousin, Laura Delano, "I have a terrific headache." Those were his last words. He then closed his eyes and lapsed into an unconscious state from which he never awakened.

For many of Brownsville's young people, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the only president whom they had ever known.

"I was a sixth grade student at Prospect Street School," recalled Art Solomon, who moved to Tucson in 1951 and lives there today. "My friends and I were dumbstruck at something we couldn't fully fathom."

"It seemed unreal to us," echoed Hannah Millward Fisher of Corona, Arizona. She too was a student at Prospect Street School. "How could someone who had guided us through a great depression and a world war be dead? We wondered, 'What else can happen?'"

"Usually when I came home from school," remembers Norma Ryan of Brownsville, "I would come in the kitchen door and be greeted by my smiling mom. But that day I found her so down that I knew something had happened. She told me the news with great compassion, then paced the floor waiting for my dad to come home from work. She knew he would be so sad to hear that FDR had died.

"My father was a coal miner, and he and his friends truly adored Roosevelt. When those fireside chats were on the radio, my brothers and I had to remain silent while the family listened to the president speak."

Richard Wells' father, Joe, was also a coal miner. "My dad used to take me with him when he went into the UMW Local headquarters in Clarksville," said Richard. "There on the wall were two huge portraits. One was of John L. Lewis, and the other was of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. These two men were revered as gods."

"My parents were heartsick over the president's death," said Art Solomon. "They looked upon him as a true friend of the people. He helped to create programs that brought the United States out of the Depression, and he was leading us to victory in a really nasty war. Everyone looked to him for leadership."

Pauline Paling Keller, now of Palm Coast, Florida, wrote, "I remember that day so well. I knew something was wrong from my father's voice as he called from downstairs. As I was partway down the

steps, he told me of FDR's death. I hung on the newel post and cried. My husband was in Italy, where the war was winding down, but the war in Japan was far from over, and a landing in Japan was a formidable obstacle."



In this photo taken on a quiet April morning in 1945, the American flag flies at half-staff in memory of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Conway Keibler of Pittsburgh was just finishing his senior year at Brownsville High School. "My family lived on Angle Street," Conway wrote. "My friend Ray Godfriaux, a member of the class of 1945 and now a retired insurance agent living in Virginia, called to tell me that Roosevelt had died. Even though my family members were staunch Republicans, they were deeply saddened by the news. I felt his loss deeply because he had brought our country through two of its most difficult periods."

On Friday, April 13, the community's schools all conducted memorial services at 10:30 a.m. and students were dismissed at 11 a.m.

"Several memorial observances were held around Brownsville," explained Conway Keibler. "Along with other trumpeters from the high school band, I played *Taps* at some of them."

Geraldine Beaver Howe, now of San Diego, was a seventh grader at Front Street School on that somber Friday morning.

"The sounds of *Taps* could be heard being played somewhere in the

school,” Geraldine remembered. “It was echoed seconds later by the return of *Taps* from another part of the building.”

Geraldine and her classmates stood at attention next to their desks, heads bowed in prayer. “We saluted our dead soldier in the only way we could at the time,” she said. “It was the most awesome feeling of remorse that spread throughout the school. Although we could hardly absorb the true meaning of the event or its impact upon our nation, each of us, students and teachers alike, was moved to tears. A feeling of gloom remained with me and my classmates for days, and that same feeling carried over into my family life as well.”

On the south side of town, students at Prospect Street School were assembled by their teachers in the building’s large central entry hall. Hannah Millward Fisher was among them.

“The building had a staircase that divided at a landing,” she described, “then it went up both sides of the building. The landing was used as a stage, and it was there that the principal was standing. Next to him stood Mrs. Bertha McDonough, a fourth grade teacher. The principal spoke kindly to the children for a few moments, then Mrs. McDonough read from the Bible. Following remarks by a few teachers, the children were dismissed and sent home.”

In her classroom at Brownsville High School, Pauline Paling Keller was struggling with her emotions. “The morning exercises still included a reading from the Bible,” she told me, “which I was supposed to read. A wonderful student realized how stressed I was, took the Bible from me, and did the Bible reading. I have always treasured her understanding.”

A union religious service sponsored by the Brownsville Ministerial Association was held at 7:30 on Friday evening. The Rev. William Howard Ryall was the main speaker at the service, which was held in the auditorium of the Brownsville Junior High School and attended by nearly one hundred people. Among the musical selections performed at the service were “The Lord’s Prayer,” sung by Julian Hawthorne, and “An American Prayer,” sung by Betty Somers. Afterward Albert Davis, president of the congregation of Temple O’Have Israel, announced that a memorial service would be held at the synagogue on Second Street at 4:30 on Saturday, coinciding with Roosevelt’s funeral.

William J. Long, burgess of Brownsville Borough, requested that all clubs and places of business, entertainment, and amusement close their doors from 3:30 to 5:30 on Saturday afternoon during the funeral, which was scheduled to begin at 4 p.m. in the East Room of the White House.

A poignant photograph appeared on the front page of the Brownsville *Telegraph* on Saturday. Pictured was a small black Scottie



A somber community reflects upon the loss of our nation's leader.

dog sitting on a carpet, listening attentively to the floor model radio next to him. It was FDR's beloved pet, Fala. The picture's simple caption read, "His Master's Voice . . . Silent."

Late Saturday afternoon the Monongahela valley began to echo with the ringing of nearly two dozen church bells. All of the churches in Brownsville and West Brownsville tolled their bells for a solid five minutes until the funeral began at 4:00.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a giant among men. Only Lincoln presided over a more difficult time in our nation's history. The Brownsville *Telegraph*, attempting to give some perspective to Roosevelt's impact on our lives, editorialized, "Not all men agreed with the President on all of his domestic or foreign policies, but even the most bitter of his economic and political foes admitted his powerful personal magnetism and his leadership. He gave the country dynamic leadership through two trying periods, and he was a fighter to the last.

"The greatest tribute a grateful nation can give him in this tragic hour is a renewed pledge to fight on to complete victory," the editorial continued. "We on the home front must not waver. We've got to mine the coal, make the steel, manufacture the munitions, and tighten our economic belts until final victory is assured. That is the only measure of tribute that Franklin Roosevelt would ask."

Four months later, the war which had claimed the lives of so many

of our community's brightest and best, as well as that of their commander-in-chief, was finally over. Those who wore the uniform in the service of their country, and those who sacrificed in many other ways during the four-year struggle at home and abroad, were united as our nation may never be united again.

They have truly earned the oft-spoken accolade.

They are our greatest generation.