

Ridge Historical Society

Newsletter

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER, 2000

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WORLD WAR II EXHIBIT CONTINUES TO EXPAND

Viewers of the ongoing RHS World War II exhibit are sometimes reminded of memorabilia they have stored at their homes and generously bring it forth and volunteer to loan it to the RHS display. Thus new material continues to come in and the display grows ever larger and ever more interesting. For example:

A very young **John Meyer**, photographed years before he became a doctor, is pictured in full dress uniform as a U.S. Navy ensign. His early training was in the V12 Program at Westminster College in Fulton, Mo. beginning in August, 1943. This was followed by Reserve Midshipman School graduation in June 1944. John's battle assignment was as commander of the U.S.S. LSM 117, a landing craft.

His widow, Marcella Meyer, loaned a photograph of John's LSM, as well as the huge certificate issued to all personnel when they crossed the Equator. Also included are numerous communications as they reached shipboard. One announces the death of President Franklin Roosevelt. Another reads "Destroyer damaged by depth charge attached to a floating plank. Avoid striking similar booby traps. LCI 628 has been detailed to destroy any seen in our area."

Displays also include a simple arrangement of yellowed clippings, telegrams and photos taped to a deliberately simple display board. We call it "A Mother Remembers."

Another item on the display is a photograph of **Pvt. August William Diedsch** taken at Boot Camp, June, 1943. There are two telegrams: one, dated July 18, 1944, informs his mother that Bill is missing in action. The second, dated December 27, 1944, also from the War Department, confirms that he was killed June 6 on Normandy Beach. Nearby is the certificate and presentation case with his Purple Heart and a slot for his mother's gold star.

Tattered clippings tell of his funeral and relate that his twin, Robert K., a Marine, was shell-shocked, wounded and snow blinded in Europe, and after a year's recovery had been sent to the Pacific. Although he returned, he never recovered his well being.

Items described above were loaned to RHS by Jack Simmerling, a cousin to Bill Diedsch. He accompanies them with a print of his painting of the two-flat owned by their grandmother.

Ridge Historical Society member, **Ray Siegel**, had been in training for more than a year when his outfit was sent across the English Channel to France as replacements for D-Day forces.

In a taped interview he tells how they went on line in France in early July, 1944. They fought through the difficult hedgerow country for the breakthrough at St. Lo; then with the Ninth Army to St. Malo.

"We always knew we were going back on the line from a rest period of from three or four days to a week. One: we got a steak dinner, two, the priest came up and said mass. Then you knew you were gonna go. On the way up we saw only German dead

Calendar of Events

Sunday October 1	General Meeting & Program: 2:30 p.m.
Monday October 2	RHS Board meeting: 4 p.m.
Monday November 6	RHS Board meeting: 4 p.m.
Sunday November 12	General Meeting & Program: 2:30 p.m.
Monday December 4	RHS Board Meeting: 4 p.m.
Sunday December 10	General Meeting & Program: 2:30 p.m.

and German tanks on the side. We never saw American dead nor an American tank pulled out. Now that I read about it I realize they got those out of the way so we wouldn't see them."

By early November they were defending the Mosel River, and in mid-December pushed into the Huertgen Forest, where Germans fired into the tree tops at night. Shells exploded above the trees, shrapnel would hit the trees, then burning limbs broke off onto the soldiers hiding in the forest, frightening and/or killing them. "It was impossible to sleep. You couldn't rest.

"Rain and snow began to fall and we were lumbering through mud. Our feet had been wet for many weeks. Orders came down 'take off your socks and dry them against your body. You may have trench foot.' But it was very cold and there were no extra dry socks."

The roads were mud and it kept snowing and getting colder and colder. My feet were so bad just as the Battle of the Bulge was beginning. I was sent to an aid station and then to a field hospital." He had gangrene, was returned to a hospital in England, then to the U.S. for hospitalization.

"We saw the Statue of Liberty through a porthole and we all were cheering. The hospital train was all bunks. We were all still in bed, stacked three high. We were headed to Camp Carson, Colo. on the B & O tracks, and when we got to Chicago, guess where we went? Through Brainerd! I looked out and saw the station, and Loomis Street where Betty, my fiancée lived."

At Camp Carson there were two surgeries to remove parts of his right foot and he was eventually able to walk without a noticeable limp. Ray and Betty were married August 18, 1945 in Chicago.

HIGH INTEREST PROGRAMS to CONTINUE WORLD WAR II THEME

An extra general meeting and program has been added to the RHS schedule to provide members and the public the clearest, most complete picture possible of the World War II era. As the World War II exhibit continues, augmented by new information and artifacts, each of the three programs will focus on a different aspect of the war.

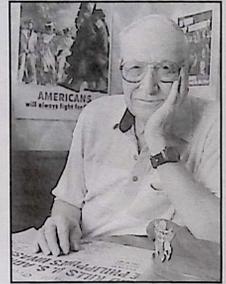
On **October 1**, the program will be a **roundtable discussion** featuring **Pacific Theater veterans**. They are local residents who participated in the harrowing battle for the Pacific.

On **November 12**, further **tales from the front by local veterans** of that experience at a time when the fearsome odds of battle left the possibility of ultimate victory very much in question. Hearing the experience stories from participants in those conflicts will bring later generations as close as possible to understanding the dangers and the fears that catapulted the United States to the position of leadership it has maintained since World War II.

On **December 10** local resident **Fred Olivi**, a member of the crew that flew the atomic bomb to Nagasaki, will offer a **presentation and video** on the **atomic bomb** and the end of the war with Japan. Mr. Olivi's

presentation is featured in World War II programs throughout the country. It is RHS's good fortune to have engaged him to speak to its December 10 meeting on a subject he knows so well.

Each program concludes with informal conversation and light refreshments. The programs are free to RHS members. Non-members are charged \$3.



Left to right: Veterans Robert Wirtshafter and Cliff Hullinger photographed by Lloyd DeGrane. The exhibit photograph on page 1 is one of a series of the entire WWII presentation taken by Mati Maldre.

RIDGE HISTORICAL WAR EXHIBITS **Shift from Europe to the Pacific**

by Paul Petraitis, Director

Ernie Pyle's dispatches from the front were a breath of fresh air. The plain-speaking Hoosier developed a modern, you-are-there style that brought the action of World War II home in a way glib newsreel reporters never could. The antithesis of the professional, Kaltenborn, the jaundiced yet jocular Pyle presaged Hunter Thompson and CLTVG, and made him a media star.

After years in Europe, officers warned Pyle that his luck must be running out and that he should go back to the States. More comfortable around combat troops than with his wife, family and neighbors, Pyle spent a miserable four months in the States. Restless and disoriented, he soon put himself back in the fray—but this time in the Pacific Theater.

"Everything here is different from what we have known in the European war," he wrote, "our enemy, geography." Hundreds and thousands of miles of ocean separated campaigns. "The days are warm, the food is good and the days go by in their endless sameness, and they drive you nuts. They call it going pineapple crazy."

Like Pyle, Ridge Historic is shifting its exhibit and program focus from the European Theater to the Pacific Theater of Operations (PTO). On October 1, at 2:30 p.m., the program will consist of stories by the veterans of "the other war".

The ongoing WWII exhibit has brought well deserved publicity to Ridge Historical Society. In addition to splendid coverage in the *Villager* and by Andy Dunning, the new editor of *Beverly Review*, the exhibit got special attention from editors of the *Chicago Reader*. Beverly resident and freelance writer Sue

DeGrane attended the RHS July "ETO" program and editorially conveyed the feeling in the room on that hot afternoon. Extensive interviews with panelists Cliff Hullinger and Robert Wirtshafter gave her article special flavor. Photographs by her husband Lloyd DeGrane, a New York Times photographer, supplemented her editorial coverage which was seen by thousands of Chicagoans. (DeGrane is donating prints of his photographs to RHS).

In addition to coverage in print media, RHS was subject of an hour of air time on Earl Hundt's "VET TV" show, again devoted to the WWII exhibit. It included interviews with Paul Petraitis as Director and President Pat McGrail, in addition to capturing the entire "ETO" program. Initially broadcast September 10 on Channel 19, Cable Access TV, the program transmits very well the look of the exhibit, RHS members, Driscoll House and grounds, as well as Dave Daruska grilling and shucking corn for the pre-event luncheon. RHS will be informed when the show will be rebroadcast. Until such time borrow one of the several tapes of the show that are circulating in the community.

Thanks to those whose volunteer efforts helped to make the ETO program a success.

In addition to Dave and me on the grill, Jim Smenos helped serve the vets, and during the program young Sam DeGrane (Sue & Lloyd's son) and my oldest, Adam, made sure that everyone enjoying the round table had a cold drink in their hands at all times.

Incidentally I'd like to thank my sons, Adam (12) and Eric (9) for help gardening around the manse: not only the "casual garden" accumulating along the driveway in front of the neighbor's garage, but also for crawling under the evergreens out front and uprooting pesky grape vines and trees of heaven.

Those not involved daily at Driscoll House would be amazed to know the number of veterans and collectors who have come forward to contribute their stories and artifacts to the RHS World War II exhibit and programs. They include Bruce Walker, Nancy Brown, Jim Gorman, Jack Simmerling, Carl Spencer, Joe Kelly, Harold Wolff, Norma Millwe, Steve Lewellyn, Cliff Hullinger, Russ Riberto, Robert Wirtshafter, Dick Arnold, Joan Scheckner, Peggy Linss, Cliff Taylor, Clifford Willis; and many others including my dad, Len Petraitis, who single-handedly defended Chicago on night watch on Navy Pier before getting shipped out to Hawaii.

Not all current Ridge Historical Society activities are WWII related. In the past month RHS has "in-serviced" teachers from Sutherland School as well as playing host to students from Plaid Academy and several seniors groups. History packs continue to sell briskly.

Clearly identified displays of community history, organized and installed by Ridge Historical Society, will be located in the 95th Street and 103rd Street Metra commuter stations. Four cases have been purchased by Metra and billed to Ridge Historical Society. The RHS September Board meeting voted authorization to advance these funds for the four cases, with the RHS account to be reimbursed through grants and fundraisers.

Just in— Mo Gardner from the Department of Housing telephoned to report approval for RHS's first grant from the City of Chicago.

BOARD NOTES

by Kate Eaton

A generous gardener in Lake Forest is donating a wonderful collection of plants and flowers to RHS. A convoy is being organized by Board Member Linda Lamberty to transport this donation of plants and flowers to Driscoll House. Convoys volunteers, please call Linda at 773-779-7727.

Board member Dave Daruska reports that Metra has begun its rehab of commuter railroad stations in Beverly Hills/Morgan Park. Currently, stations at 95th Street and 103rd Street and 111th are focus of the project which will continue over the next eight years.

Dave also reported that the **Publicity Committee** has opened the new RHS web site. Internet users can now find out about upcoming events, what RHS is all about and how to contact RHS. Upcoming features of the web page include member Harold Wolff's articles on residential architecture of this community. Thanks to Jim McGreal, Grace Kuikman and Dave for their ongoing work of this project. The web address is

www.ridgehistoricalsociety.org.

After a short summer hiatus, the **Costumes Committee** has resumed its work. The committee and its Chair, Pat McGrail, are organizing, mending and cataloging the extensive RHS costumes collection. They've made such good progress that they recently requested 100 more accession numbers so they can continue their work.

The **Museum Objects Committee** has broken free of the attic, having added all the stored objects it could find to its preliminary list. The committee is now completing its work on the first floor of Driscoll House and will soon move on to the basement. When all objects in the house are accounted for, the committee will approach Eileen Klees of the Archives Committee for help with computerizing its list.

The **Bylaws Committee** is making impressive progress with its review and update of the society's mission statement and bylaws. Doris Moulton, Sue Delves and Kate Eaton are involved in various phases of the project.

ITEM of GENERAL INTEREST

The Chicago Historical Society's files include a Chicago Tribune article that says Morgan Park used to have two other names. When Blue Island was already "old and flourishing," Morgan Park was called North Blue Island. And when brigands established camp in the area Morgan Park was known as Horse Thief Hollow. Both of these names preceded 1869, when James Morgan, a South Park Commissioner, decided the area should be named for his ancestor who settled on the ridge in 1844.

DATED MATERIAL — FIRST CLASS MAIL

REPRINTED from the "LETTERS TO THE EDITOR" COLUMN of BEVERLY REVIEW

WWII exhibit a victory for Ridge Historical

The exhibit on World War II at Ridge Historical Society is well worth seeing. For those who have heard their parents and grandparents speak

of those trying times, it will help bring the era to life. To those who lived through the war, it will bring back a flood of bittersweet memories.

Instead of history book descriptions of a string of battles, this exhibit opens the floodgates to personal emotion with letters, pictures and diaries of the men and women who fought the battles or held the

home front. A number of those people still live in our community, and you may recognize some of them.

I highly recommend this exhibit to everyone and commend the Ridge Historical Society for its thoughtful and thorough treatment of the subject.

Catherine Sorich