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Thoughts On World War II

By Margie Cooke Porteus



Weatherford residents, students and G.I.'s, Summer 1942.

Not long ago, Random House published a collection of news dispatches that Ernie Pyle wrote from the front during World War II. Reading the reviews brought back memories.

His stories were the first reports many families read when the daily paper came — all those families that displayed stars in the windows of their homes, stars that symbolized each person in service from that home. Pyle's articles helped all of us understand how and where our armies were living. But those stories came later — after the G.I.'s had trained and gone to England or Africa or Italy or wherever.

First there was Pearl Harbor.

Pearl Harbor? I was a student at Southwestern living in Stewart Hall, the women's dormitory. I can still remember the details of a friend's room where I was when the announcement

came over the radio that the Japanese had bombed our fleet at some place called Pearl Harbor.

Most of us had no idea where Pearl Harbor was; but one student, Ruth Heath, had lived in Hawaii when her dad, then retired from the army, had been stationed there. She filled us in.

Several of our classmates had gone from Southwestern's flight program to more detailed flight training. We wondered what would happen to them. The coming war was all we talked about.

The day after Pearl Harbor, December 8, 1941, there was an assembly in the college auditorium. We heard President Roosevelt give his now-famous "declaration of war" speech. We listened as Dr. Wild talked briefly, giving a background on modern Japan. We listened as though we had never heard

him say those same things in class.

The following weeks were a blur. The war and its effects dominated everyone's conversations. Several faculty members left to add their knowledge to the war effort where it was needed. I learned that Clarence Sellers from my hometown, Thomas, had been killed at Pearl Harbor. It seemed that everyone knew someone who had been killed during those first weeks.

Our lives changed. Travel plans were cancelled. Gas, tires, meat, sugar, and even shoes were to be rationed; each family was issued a ration book so that each would get only its share. Because of gas rationing, the easiest way to get from Weatherford to Thomas was to ride the train from Weatherford to Clinton, change trains, and go to

Thomas.

When Army Air Force supply clerks and airplane engine mechanics were moved onto campus to receive specialized training, they moved into Neff Hall, the men's dormitory; it had become emptier and emptier as its residents joined the various branches of service. The soldiers also used classrooms on campus. Seeing them march to the college cafeteria changed from exciting to the ordinary.

We, the girls on campus, received a new education as many of us met for the first time men from such places as New York and Pennsylvania and Florida and even many from the Aleutian Islands. We even dated those new-found acquaintances with strange dialects. At least two girls from Stewart Hall — Betty Milligan and a small girl whose name eludes me — married their soldiers. There may have been more who married, but I graduated in 1945 and left. About that time, residents of Stewart Hall also moved out of their dorms to make room for still more GI's.

I visited Doris Stockwell, a college friend living and working in Oklahoma City (it was small, compared with its size today). The streets were filled with servicemen from Tinker Field, small bases around the state, and the two Navy bases at Norman. Who would have guessed at the time that I would marry a New Yorker stationed at Norman!

Because of the war, there was a shortage of teachers, so there was no problem getting a job. I discovered that the classroom was no stranger to the war. Large maps were on the walls and with colored pins we kept track of our troops. Students talked of their fathers, brothers, and friends and checked the map to follow their travels. We even knew of some adventurous women who joined the women's auxiliary of their favorite branch of service. Always

there was the fear that someone we knew would be killed or wounded or taken prisoner. Many were.

Schools sponsored patriotism. They held scrap drives in which the students helped haul scrap iron to a central location where it could then be sent to steel mills and reused in the war effort. Professors sold victory stamps for as little as ten cents. When a student filled a book, he could trade it for a twenty-five-dollar war bond. There were posters showing the silhouettes of enemy planes so we could tell if any flew over. It was surprising how many people learned these shapes.

We sang songs from each branch of service: "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli we'll fight...," "Over hill, over dale, we will hit the dusty trail as those...," "Anchors aweigh my boys, anchors aweigh...," "Off we go over the wild blue yonder...," Many popular songs had at least an indirect reference to the war: "Boogie

Woogie Bugle Boy," "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree with Anyone Else But Me," "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," "Missed the Saturday Dance," "There'll Be Blue Birds over the White Cliffs of Dover," etc.

We learned to wear ugly hose — often with darned runners, use rice water for starch, cook with honey instead of sugar, travel less, stand in lines for goods of limited supply when they became available, let service personnel on public transportation before anyone else, and wait and wait for news from the front.

When a letter from overseas did arrive, it was often censored and was often brief, having been sent V mail. V mail was a photograph of a one-page letter, decreased in size to 4 x 5 inches.

It was an exciting, terrible time. I think we all became numb as a result of the worldwide happenings and the effect those happenings had on all of us. ☹

Southwestern coeds and G.I.'s stationed on campus in Weatherford. Author at far left



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most appreciated contributors. After an extended teaching career, she now lives in retirement in Paonia, Colorado.

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