

Topic: Yesterday's Heroes

The Many Faces of Yesterday's Heroes
by Liz Gibbons

My brother and I were playing with friends outside on a cold snowy day in early December. In late afternoon our mother called us to come home. My dad had been painting our living room that weekend, but when we got inside he was seated next to our radio, a RCA Radiola floor model, listening intently. He looked up and told us that Japanese planes had bombed Pearl Harbor that morning and that the United States was at war with Japan. I did not understand the full significance of what he was saying but knew it was a very serious situation.

Thus began changes in our lives. Rationing of various food items, clothing, and gasoline was established in early 1942. Communities had drives of scrap metal, tin cans, and rubber to be recycled to make military weapons. Many families grew Victory Gardens. The Rosie the Riveter campaign was a call to women to join the work force. Many women went to work building tanks, airplanes and other defense industry items needed for the war effort.

Radio reports kept us abreast of the fighting overseas. Two newscasters stand out. First, there was Edward R. Murrow. He was in Europe in the thick of the war, not broadcasting from the safety of a studio reading prepared script. He sometimes flew on combat missions with airmen and gave vivid reports of what was going on below, which were recorded for a delayed broadcast. The other was Ernie Pyle, a correspondent who reported from the front lines with the soldiers. He is best known for the stories he told about the ordinary American soldier fighting in the war. Pyle was killed during the Battle of Okinawa by enemy fire. It is rare to get this kind of on the scene reporting today.

Housewives were urged to save used kitchen grease as it could be used to make glycerin to make explosives. Since housewives regularly saved grease to reuse in cooking, some were reluctant to part with this resource, but many did. Girl Scout troops were one method used to collect the used grease. My best friend, Sis Bauman, and I each month took my brother's wagon and made the rounds to homes in about a three block radius from our neighborhood to collect grease that housewives had saved in cans or jars.

Several times a year there was a contest among the classrooms in our elementary school to see which classroom could buy the most war bonds. The classroom who won was given a cupcake party. One time the contest was very close between my classroom and another classroom. At the last minute classmate Ginny Barnes' mother bought a bond which made us the winner.

My mile walk to school passed a home on the corner of one street where the family had six children. Their sons were in their late teens and eligible for the draft. One day a small flag-like banner with a gold star appeared in their dining room window. One of their sons had been killed in the war. Soon it was replaced with a flag banner with two gold stars. Even though I was just ten years old, I felt much sorrow for this family,

Those young men, just barely out of puberty, called to fight a war were definitely heroes. But this was a time when all Americans, regardless of age or circumstances, came together to work toward a common cause. To me, they all were yesterday's heroes.

