

CARENCRO
VETERANS
MEMORIAL



VETERANS DAY 2016
TRIBUTE TO WORLD WAR II VETERANS

BY LEE VERRET

As the third decade of the 20th century closed and the 4th decade opened, violent and oppressive forces spread across the earth. The United States lay largely protected by two vast oceans until December 7, 1941. On that infamous day, the security of our homeland was shattered and we, too, were plunged into the abysmal conflagration that would soon be known as World War II.

Before it was over, 72 million people worldwide would be dead.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans rushed to defend their homes, families and their ways of life. Nearly 16 million Americans would eventually serve in the conflict.

As we pause to honor those patriots, our minds conjure a vision of young men roughly between the ages of 17 and 30, and some even younger than 17, who misrepresented their ages in order to join the struggle.

The youngest U.S. serviceman was 12-year-old Calvin Graham, USN. He earned a bronze star and a Purple Heart and was then given a Dishonorable Discharge for lying about his age. (Fortunately, his benefits were later restored by act of Congress).

Our stereotype often overlooks the large number of young women who also left the safety of their homes to protect their beloved country. Of the 16 million Americans who served, 350,000 were women.

Local women like Mrs. Anaise Marmatoin Guilbeau (recently deceased) and Retired U.S. Navy Commander Aline Arceneaux who was born, raised and still lives in the North Lafayette Parish area.

Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, said of the Womens Army Corps, "During the time I have had WACs under my command, they have met every test and task assigned to them...their contributions in efficiency, skill, spirit, and determination are immeasurable."

Whether male or female, this generation of heroes fought – and won – an epic battle for freedom and liberty.

It was, indeed, an epic battle.

World War II was the most destructive conflict in history. It cost more money, damaged more property, killed more people, and caused more far-reaching changes than any other war in history.

During World War II, 61 nations were involved in the conflict, together suffering over 72 million deaths – approximately 3 percent of the world's population in 1940.

413,000 of those lost were Americans and another 670,000 Americans were wounded.

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In the modern world of cell phones, FaceTime, Skype, Facebook and Twitter, it is easy for us to forget how isolated and lonely these young people must have felt – many of them leaving home for the first time to face a frightening and uncertain future.

A friend of mine who served in World War II once told me, in a very emotional voice, the story of how he left his family farm in central Louisiana for the first time at age 17 to enlist in the U.S. Army. His unit was badly needed in the war effort and, consequently, was not given the traditional leave following basic training. They were loaded onto a transport ship headed to an undisclosed destination within days of graduation. During that journey, he became friendly with a member of the ship's crew who admired a medallion my friend wore on a chain around his neck. The crew member offered to buy the medallion. My friend offered to give him the medal and asked only that the crew member call his family the next time the ship returned to an American port to let them know he was safe and did not know where he was headed or when he might be home again.

Journalist Tom Brokaw christened these heroes, "The Greatest Generation" and said of them, "At a time in their lives when their days and nights should have been filled with innocent adventure, love, and the lessons of the workaday world, they were fighting in the most primitive conditions possible across the bloodied landscape of France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, and the coral islands of the Pacific. They answered the call to save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled; instruments of conquest in the hands of fascist maniacs. They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest. They succeeded on every front. They won the war; they saved the world."

Upon returning to their homes, they continued to serve their country and their communities. Here in Carencro, members of that greatest generation formed the Carencro War Veterans. Once again, they chose to serve, not themselves, but their community.

Through the years they sponsored the annual Carencro Christmas Parade, collecting and providing Christmas toys for needy children. They sponsored frequent fundraisers for schools and the public library and were always available to support community activities.

And finally, these heroes have served as role models for subsequent generations of Americans inspiring us to serve and defend what we all hold dear.

My friends and my fellow Americans, today as we leave this hallowed place, this place dedicated to those who made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of liberty, and we return to the security of our homes and families, let us always remember and never forget that "Freedom is not free – a veteran paid the price."