

## AN EARLY BLUE STAR SERVICE FLAG AT THE ERIE MARITIME MUSEUM

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**ABSTRACT:** Blue Star Service Flags note the military service of a family member. They began during World War I. One early such flag hung in the Erie home of USS *Wolverine* sailor William H. Stine. Stine, the flag, and their history is discussed as a way for the Homefront to quietly, proudly, and publicly, note the service of a loved one.

**KEYWORDS:** Blue Star flags, William H. Stine, USS *Wolverine*, Erie, PA, Erie Maritime Museum

Good Friday, April 6, 1917, 9:15 p.m.: Orders to mobilize come in code to USS *Wolverine*'s Lieutenant Commander William Leverett Morrison, waiting at the naval militia headquarters in Erie's Federal Building. He immediately issues a call for the crew to report for duty by noon the next day. They spend Easter and beyond on board the vessel, until these 100 sailors and their officers, Divisions C and D of the Pennsylvania Naval Militia, march from the Public Dock to Union Station at 6:00 p.m. on April 10, 1917.<sup>1</sup> These men will be the first from the city of Erie to see service in World War I, but they are not the only *Wolverine* men who answer their country's call.

The Erie Maritime Museum preserves one of the earliest Blue Star service flags used in Erie during World War I, displayed in the window of a West Public Dock home in 1918. It honored the service of William Henry Stine, a US Navy veteran who served on the *Wolverine* as part of the Naval Reserve Force in 1913 and returned to service in 1918.

Designed and patented in 1917, the Blue Star service flag quickly became an unofficial symbol indicating the home that proudly displayed it had a man serving on the frontlines during World War I. By the end of World War II, the flag was made official and standardized.<sup>2</sup> Its use was also codified,

properly displayed only “in a window of the place of residence of individuals who are members of the immediate family of an individual serving in the Armed Forces of the United States during any period of war or hostilities in which the Armed Forces of the United States are engaged.”<sup>3</sup> It was meant to be hung vertically in a front window for the public to see.

Stine’s flag was commercially made, attesting to the popularity of and demand for service flags during 1918. It currently measures 14.875 inches by 23.75 inches, and is made of cotton muslin. The binding on the hoist is stamped in blue ink: “PATENTED NOV. 6, 1917” (see fig. 1).

Not much is known about William Henry Stine’s early life, except that he was born in June 19, 1887, in Albany, New York, and orphaned sometime before he was twelve.<sup>4</sup> His mother had died, and his older sister too young to take care of her siblings. At seventeen, he hopped a freight train and joined the Navy.<sup>5</sup> He listed twelve years of prior service in the US Navy when he registered for the draft on June 5, 1917, serving on the USS *Rhode Island* and *Maine*, as well as the USS *Washington* (see fig. 2).<sup>6</sup>

Stine also served on the Pennsylvania Naval Militia vessel USS *Wolverine* under Commander Morrison. Stine appears in a 1913 crew photo, part of



**FIGURE 1** The Blue Star service flag honoring William H. Stine’s service. Courtesy of the Erie Maritime Museum, catalog #FN2011.9.1.



**FIGURE 2** Photograph of William Stine in US Navy uniform, “USS *Washington*” on flat cap band. Through the early twentieth century, Navy crewmen wore the name of the vessel on which they served, embroidered or painted in gold on their blue uniform flat cap ribbon. Collection of Barbara Stoll, used with her permission.

the Erie Maritime Museum’s USS *Michigan/Wolverine* exhibit (see fig. 3).<sup>7</sup> During that year he met and fell in love with Leila, daughter of Erie harbor-master Henry Seidel. Their courtship continued after Stine left Erie to serve on the USS *Maine* via postcards she kept until his return. They married on June 18, 1917, and were briefly “at home” with Leila’s parents on the West Public Dock before he was called to serve again.<sup>8</sup> It is likely Leila or her parents displayed the flag at their home.



FIGURE 3 A 1913 view of the USS *Wolverine* crew. Stine is in the front row, far left, holding a puppy. Courtesy of the Erie Maritime Museum, catalog #FN2003.1.1.

March 1918 found Stine in Boston, ready to serve as a coxswain on the USS *Shawmut*, part of Mine Squadron One on its way to the North Sea.<sup>9</sup> The Navy converted ten merchantmen and passenger steamers, and they joined two Spanish-American War cruisers commissioned in the 1880s to become minelayers.<sup>10</sup> Because it was a most hazardous operation, naval staff referred to these men as “living on the edge of eternity,” for they went to sea in ships packed with high explosives.<sup>11</sup> The makeshift mine-layers steamed out to position, formed three- to five-abreast at 500-yard intervals, then dropped three-foot diameter Mark VI mines containing three hundred pounds of TNT and returned to base. In five months, they planted 56,571 mines in the 250-mile North Sea Strait between Scotland and Norway.<sup>12</sup>

William Stine was released from active duty in January 1919, and honorably discharged on March 4, 1922.<sup>13</sup> He and Leila raised their family in Erie, living most of their life together in their new home on West Second Street, still near the Erie waterfront. He worked for the Girard Manufacturing Company and died of stomach cancer November 17, 1948, at age sixty-one.<sup>14</sup>



He is buried in Erie Cemetery. The flag was given to Erie Maritime Museum by their granddaughter, Barbara Stoll.

LINDA BOLLA currently assists the Erie Maritime Museum (PHMC), Erie PA, with research, exhibits, and curatorial matters. In her long affiliation with the US Brig *Niagara*, and with the Erie Maritime Museum since its inception, she has assisted with design, fabrication, and development of the museum's permanent exhibits and interpretive programs, as well as with educational outreach and public events.

## NOTES

1. *The Erie Dispatch*, page 1, April 7 and April 11, 1917.
2. "About the Service Flag," Blue Star Mothers of America, <http://www.bluestarmothers.org/service-flag>.
3. *The United States Code*, Title 36—Patriotic Societies and Observances, Ceremonies and Organization, Chapter 10, Patriotic Customs, Section 179, Design for service flag; persons entitled to display flag, US Government Printing Office, 1994; retrieved from <http://law.justia.com/codes/us/1994>.
4. Twelfth Census of the United States, Schedule no. 1, Population, Albany City, Albany County, New York State—Albany Orphan Asylum, June 5, 1900; retrieved from Ancestry.com.
5. Author's interview with Barbara Stoll, Stine's granddaughter, May 19, 2016.
6. US Draft Registration Card, Wm. Henry Stine, June 5, 1917, at Erie PA; retrieved from Ancestry.com; Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 Population, US Atlantic Station, USS *Rhode Island*; postcard written by William Stine to Leila Seidel, postmarked October 22, 1914, collection of Barbara Stoll.
7. Catalogue #FN2003.1.1.1, Erie Maritime Museum (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission) collections. The *Michigan/Wolverine* was scrapped in 1949; only the prow now remains, on display at the museum.
8. Original marriage certificate, Trinity Memorial Church, Erie, PA, collection of Barbara Stoll; marriage announcement, collection of Barbara Stoll.
9. US Navy World War I pension index card, retrieved from Ancestry.com.
10. "U.S. Navy Temporary Auxiliary Ships, 1917–1919: World War I Era Converted Minelayers," Register of Ships of the US Navy: Auxiliary Vessels, [www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/wwi/w1cm.htm](http://www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/wwi/w1cm.htm).
11. "The North Sea Mine Barrage," The Doughboy Center: The Story of the American Expeditionary Forces, Great War Society, [www.worldwar1.com/dbc/nsminebr.htm](http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/nsminebr.htm).

12. Capt. Reginald R. Belknap, USN, *The Yankee Mining Squadron* (Annapolis: The United States Naval Institute, 1920), 10, 39; Navy Department, *The Northern Barrage and Other Mining Activities* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1920), 25, citing August 15, 1917, memorandum for Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet. Both sources digitized by the Internet Archive.
13. US Navy World War I pension index card, retrieved from Ancestry.com.
14. Stine Death Certificate no. 97193, Pennsylvania Death Certificates, Ancestry.com; original at Pennsylvania State Archives.