**Up Front**

**Across My Desk**  
By Brian Butko, Editor

**Stories Turn Focus from Heroics to People**

Gino Trombetti was 22, he recalled, when “my father and I were out with our beagles hunting rabbits. My brother Al and my Uncle Andrew were along. When we got back, my older brother, who didn’t come with us, said, “Pearl Harbor was bombed.” And I said, “Who is she?”

The stories are sometimes humorous and sometimes tragic, but each one is engrossing in two books recently sent to me by Dick Wissolik. *They Say There Was a War* (2005) and *An Honor to Serve* (2007) contain nearly 100 stories of men, and some women, who fought in World War II. The two titles are part of a series of World War II books published by the Saint Vincent College Center for Northern Appalachian Studies. Wissolik is co-founder of the center and general editor for these and other publications including *The Long Road*, which launched the series in 1999, and *Out of the Kitchen: Oral Histories of Women in World War II*.

There’s much more than battlefield glory here: most of the subjects reveal a great deal of suffering, though not in a pitiful way, but rather in truth-telling reflection that comes after a half century. As John DePaul writes in one of *They Say’s* introductory chapters,

Readers of these stories will no doubt cringe at the horrors perpetrated not only by the enemies of our country in that distant past, but also by some of our own combatants. There are those who will see these recollections only as testimony to our nation’s greatness. Still others will see only the negative aspect of those personal experiences.

St. Vincent students and alumni prepared the stories from diaries, letters, and oral history interviews that they began taping in 1991. The center continues to collect stories but now from conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East. The WWII efforts began before it was fashionable, and was certainly present, since each day we lose some 1,000 of those veterans who are now all past 80 years old.

WWII left more than 400,000 American soldiers dead and another 79,000 missing. Millions more were wounded, some who appear in these books. Here are a few brief excerpts:

Thomas R. Cable of Pitcairn recalls one of his jobs was waking up the troops at reveille: “I hated that damn bugle call. I got a record player and played ‘Sunrise Serenade’ on that instead. That went over big! The guys came up to me and told me that they thought they had died and gone to heaven. I got away with that for two days. On the third day, the major came up to me and said, “You play that record player one more time, buddy, and you’re done.” I lost my stripes twice over that, but the guys liked what I did. What the hell did it hurt? They had all gotten up.”

Anonio “Tony” Martin Priolette from Greensburg was assigned to put barbed wire in the coral reefs around Oahu. He was also in command of a police dog: “They’d send up K-rations for me, and thick, round steaks for the dog. I fed the dog the K-Rations, and fried up the steaks for myself. Actually, I think it was horsemeat, but it was good, and better than the rations.” Before long, he saw combat and many more adventures in the South Pacific.
right when BOOM! They hit us in the number four engine with a shell, they hit us in the bomb bay with a shell (thank God our bombs were away!), and they hit us on the flight deck with a shell. Those four shells killed the co-pilot and the top gunner. The ball-turret gunner got out of his turret, but his clothes were on fire. We put out the fire, put his chute on him, and dropped him out of the plane. His chute didn’t open…. We opened the nose-wheel door, which was our escape hatch…. I sat and jumped out…. We had learned our lesson about not opening our chute too soon. So, it was free-fall. There was cloud cover below us at about four thousand feet. As I got to it, I pulled the chute ring, and the chute – zip! – came out. You’re falling at 200 miles-an-hour and all at once you’re falling at twenty feet-per-second, you come up short, and I remember looking up and I said, “My God it worked!” It was the first time I ever used a parachute. None of us ever practiced jumping. We just remember being told that if anyone’s chute didn’t work, he could take it back and the manufacturer would give him a new one!  

Alexander Robert “Bob” Nelson of Irving, Illinois, recalls lots of adventures in the Air Force but none as dangerous as how he became a prisoner of war in Germany:

The fourth time we went to Wiener-Neustadt, Austria, we got shot down. Our mission was to bomb a factory making airframes for Messerschmidt…. We were sitting ducks. We opened the bomb bay doors, dropped our bombs, and started a ninety-degree turn to the middle of describing the horrors of war, out pops broader thoughts: “We humans build, we destroy, and we build again. War is stupid!”

Joseph LaValle, the son of Italian immigrants living in Greensburg, was a prisoner in Germany for more than two years: “We had guns at our backs, and we did what we were told. If you had the will to come home, to see mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters, you did anything they told you. Some guys didn’t think the Germans would shoot them, but they were soon dead…. When somebody tells you they were never scared over there, they’re lying.”

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Reader’s Response

William E. Davidson, Potsdam, New York, wrote to point out a typo in the Summer 2009 “Neighborhood Stories” feature. It was of course a blue, not silver, star that families hung in their window to announce a son or daughter in the service during WWII.

1. Gino Trombetti, p. 452, An Honor To Serve. All other quotes are from They Say There Was A War.
2. Thomas R. Cable, p. 45.
5. Peter Messer, p. 228.