



ST CROIX VALLEY PRESS > NEWS

Three WWII veterans describe experiences to historical society

Print Page

'It was a privilege to be from that generation'

by Julie Kink
Contributing Writer

Published:
Friday, October 22, 2010 6:32 PM CDT

STILLWATER — During World War II, a generation of our nation's youth answered a call and served dutifully.

Decades after their wartime experiences, three World War II veterans reminisced about the battles, the good times and the bad, and their profound feelings of patriotism during an interview sponsored by the Lake Elmo Historical Society at Oak Meadows, an Oakdale senior living complex where the vets now live.



WWII veterans Roy Thomson, Matt Sprangers and Pearl Hughes. - Photos by Paul Dols

Matt Sprangers

Born and raised in St. Cloud Sprangers, now 88, enlisted in the Navy in 1942. He trained at Naval Station Great Lakes in Illinois, left boot camp as an apprentice seaman and began working on a destroyer escort, first in supply, then with gunners and finally as the "captain's talker," relaying messages back and forth. En route to Bermuda one night the ship entered Norfolk harbor, when he recalls, "All of a sudden we're lit up like a Christmas tree. The floods and everything were on (the ship). They were saying 'Identify yourself, identify yourself.' We found out later we had a silhouette like a submarine," which could have been mistaken for an enemy, he said.

Sprangers recalls receiving a lot of submarine alerts in the summer of 1943, and vividly remembers picking up five survivors who were covered in oil while in Cape May, N.J., after an oil spill. He ran convoys until the end of that year, when he volunteered to head west and was shipped out to Leyte Gulf in the Philippines where he remembers being in a typhoon.

When the war ended, Sprangers said, he was sent from the Philippines to Guam and then back home. "We didn't have the fanfare. They put us on a troop train heading back to St. Paul. They finally got us back to St. Paul and they gave me a piece of paper and said 'We'll see you another day.'"

He called World War II "a necessary evil," adding that the servicemen "were doing what any American should do — pledge allegiance to the flag, protect, keep everything as level as we can. We have a future generation coming up. Hopefully they will do what is necessary to keep things level. I feel for these young people who are currently on active duty. I don't think they should be there, but apparently somebody thought they have a job they should do.

Pearl Hughes

Hughes, 93, enlisted in the Women's Air Corps in 1943. Originally from Watertown, Wis., she was sent to Daytona Beach, Fla., for clerical training. But the women didn't spend all their time inside.

"We marched on the beach," she said. "You name it, we did it." Eventually, her job was to work with a sergeant, filling out applications for soldiers' life insurance policies — which were around \$10,000, she said. By early 1945, she found herself in Paris, stationed in a headquarters hotel just a block off the Elysses, working as a telephone operator. The Germans had been gone for a while, she said, and the women bicycled everywhere. "The French treated us pretty well," she recalled.

When she returned to the states in December 1945, she was discharged and then went to school under the GI Bill. "But I wasn't making too much so I decided to re-enlist," she said. She went to Arlington, Va., where she fell in love and got married, necessitating a departure from the service. Her husband was in the military for 28 years, and during that time the couple and their two children traveled extensively.

Roy Thomson

At 89, Thomson still has vivid memories of his time in the service. He was born and raised in North Dakota, and was on the West Coast looking for work when he enlisted in the Army. He had been a cook at a CCC Camp (Civilian Conservation Corps, a public work relief program for unemployed men) so he was automatically placed in cooks and bakers school. "When I heard the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, I thought 'I don't have to look for a job anymore,'" he said. He underwent field training in the California desert and was then sent to two other camps stateside before his unit was outfitted for overseas duty.

Thomson wound up in Tunis, where he saw his first combat. "All of our firing was mostly at night," he said. His unit moved into Sicily in 1943. "The Germans had already started getting out of there and were headed back home," he said, adding that the U.S. prisoners the Germans took along with them were forced on a terrible march from Sicily north to Germany. After the Germans left, the Italians "gave up" so the troop lived in an olive orchard. "It was great, like we were on vacation," he said.

But the vacation didn't last long. D-Day saw him assigned to the 62nd Armored Field Artillery with the 1st Infantry Division. "Our guns landed with the 1st Infantry on Omaha Red," he recalled. "We didn't know the Germans were there, ready to fight. We lost lots and lots of people that day."

He became overcome with emotion as he described the landing. "I was right behind this captain. After our vehicles were all in place, he said, 'The tracks that we just came in on have been swept for mines. All of this in between me and you guys has not been swept, so you're on your own.'"

A few days later, the troops started toward St. Lo and "the war was on. We walked right into it." Thomson remembers walking from the beach and seeing bodies everywhere, "mostly Americans." The bodies were so thick there was just room for the six-foot truck, he said. "Everyplace you looked there were bodies."

Thomson also remembers the Battle of the Bulge, commonly considered the last great German offensive of the war. In just over a month, Germany lost 100,000 and the U.S. lost 81,000 killed, captured or wounded. "I had a trailer full of land mines we were hauling around with us," he said. "I tried to get rid of it and they wouldn't let me. Well, during the Battle of the Bulge they called and said, 'We understand you have some landmines. We need them.'" Thomson and two others transported the mines to the 38th Engineer Company, where they laid a minefield one very cold day.

When he came home from the war, Roy married and worked for the Forest Service where he rose in the ranks. "I was the luckiest guy in the world. I got one promotion after another, knowing all the way I couldn't do the job," he laughed. "I was in middle management when I finally retired.

"The Army was good to me," he added. "I feel that it was really a privilege to be from that generation who got to go over there to the war and do the job that needed to be done."

All three of the veterans have traveled to Washington, D.C., with Honor Flight, a program that flies veterans to the U.S. capital to tour the memorials in a whirlwind one-day trip. "There was a royal welcome for us there," Thomson said. "A fire truck even came out and sprayed the plane when it landed. It was a great trip, something we'll never forget. We'll take it to our graves with us."

Copyright © 2010 - Press Publications

[x] Close Window