

## WINCHESTER CIVILIANS KEPT VIGIL TO WARN OF INVASION

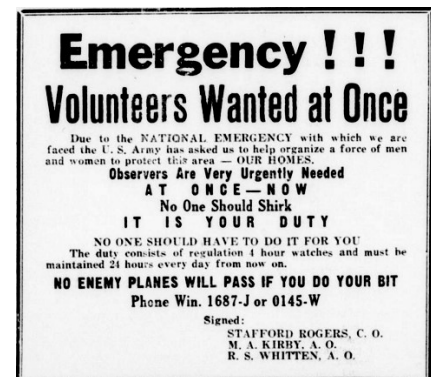
By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

For six days in October, 1941, Army planes doubling as enemy aircraft flew over Winchester (and other eastern Massachusetts towns) between 6 a.m. and midnight in simulated raids such as would occur if the country were invaded.

On the ground, members of Post 97 of the American Legion watched the sky over Winchester to spot the planes, note the number, type, direction in which they were headed, estimate height from the ground, and immediately flash the information by telephone to Army authorities. These exercises were part of the readying of the nation's defenses in case of war. A network of thousands of aerial observation posts was set up from Maine to Florida, including 256 in Massachusetts, and one of these was in Winchester.

The Army selected the location of the Winchester observation post, choosing the premises of Harry Locke, 111 High St., one of the highest spots in town. In July 1942, a new site was chosen, about 200 yards away, on a higher knoll. Located "off Ridge Street," its precise address was never printed in the newspaper.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately upon war being declared, all the posts went into continuous operation. The Legion, which was in charge of keeping the Winchester post manned, published a call for help. "Emergency!!! Volunteers wanted at once. Due to the NATIONAL EMERGENCY with which we are faced the U.S. Army has asked us to organize a force of men and women to protect this area – OUR HOMES. Observers are very urgently needed.... NO ENEMY PLANES WILL PASS IF YOU DO YOUR BIT."



In February, the Legion appealed to all the local women's organizations to help transport people to the post and to do daytime observation duty while the men were at work. In response, women of such groups as the Legion Auxiliary, En Ka Society, Fortnightly [women's club], and Winton Club helped the Legion man the post. In addition, Sea Scouts, high school students over age 15, and individual citizens volunteered. For about two years, Winchester civilians—men, women, and youth—manned that post in four-hour shifts 24/7, until late in 1943 when the likelihood of an invasion had dwindled and the post operated part-time.

"Unnoticed, unhonored and unsung, a good sized army of New England men and women have quietly taken their posts among us and now 24 hours every day, rain or shine, cold or warm in any and all kinds of weather, they keep their vigil unbroken, waiting, watching and listening for the first distant sign of the approach of an enemy plane," Carlyle H. Holt wrote for the *Boston Globe* in March 1942. Though sponsored by the Legion, the post was directly responsible to the

Aircraft Warning Service of the First Interceptor Command, U.S. Army Air Corps. Observers wore a blue felt arm-band with the insignia of the service.

The first building was not all that could be desired. Stillman Hilton (WHS Class of 1944) described it as “a small, one-room shack.” It had an old oil stove, electric lights, and telephone connection, a drinking-water jug, a new coat of grey paint, and shingled roof. “The interior boasts two chairs, a rug, table, shelves, two windows, and a quaint Dutch clock.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the most important piece of equipment was a pair of binoculars, though the new heater and fuel tank which the En Ka Society donated for the drafty shack (later reinstalled in the new look-out tower) were very much appreciated. Watchers scribbled things on the plywood walls. There was verse like “Don’t assume that noise is a train/Go and look, it might be a plane.” and “To be specific/It’s our Pacific./Not to be pedantic,/But we also like the Atlantic.” And there were jokes like “Why does Hitler change his socks three times a day? He smells defeat.”

In 1942, a new tower was designed by resident Winthrop Upton and built by many volunteer workers under his direction. On July 5, it opened for public inspection, and over 275 visitors climbed to the work deck to enjoy the view. The district director of the Aircraft Warning Service, First Flight Command expressed his approval of the site and structure, considering the location ideal as providing a wide view of the countryside and allowing observation of many land marks by which to estimate the distance of the planes sighted from the post.

The tower included a cabin from which observations could be made at the 16-foot mark during inclement weather, plus the upper deck, 25 feet above the ground. The deck was entirely surrounded by a chin-high rail for protection from winds. Telephones on both decks made it possible to report a plane in seven to ten seconds.

The invasion never came, but the work of all the posts was nonetheless invaluable. In August 1943, it was reported that “the importance of these observers becomes apparent when it is known that without their service more than 50,000 soldiers and 16 times as many airplanes would have to be kept constantly on patrol.” Between Dec. 9, 1941 and Oct. 4, 1943, a total of 692 observers were enrolled for the Winchester post. A large proportion served between 100 and 400 hours each. Over the course of almost two years 54,976 planes were recorded.

“The loyal support given has come from all segments of the community and all walks of life,” Chief Observer Stafford Rogers observed. “This is but another indication that the present generation of America will do even the tedious, unpleasant things necessary to perpetuate national and personal freedom even as our forefathers did to establish and protect them.”<sup>4</sup>



*In Boston, Winchester’s “Pete” Joy (left) helped plot sightings of “enemy planes” during a 1941 Air Defense Command drill*

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2023 by the author Ellen Knight is a revision of an earlier article by the author published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Oct. 18, 2016. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> It was located on a site loaned by William L. Thompson of Ridge Street.

<sup>3</sup> Stillman P. Hilton, *The Ben Franklin Junior*, a periodical he produced while in high school (class of 1944), using a printing press set up at his grandfather's home.

<sup>4</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 5, 1943.