

BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC AFFECTED RESIDENTS RENDERING SERVICE

By Ellen Knight¹

While many Americans in 1941 were hoping their country would stay out the war, the conflict was not far away from New England due to the Battle of the Atlantic.

Beginning in 1939, the Allies and Axis powers engaged in a battle to control the Atlantic shipping lanes. When war broke out in Europe, the British and French immediately began a blockade of Germany, and the Germans responded with a counter-blockade. This continued through the defeat of Germany in 1945.

Winchester residents undoubtedly knew about American ships being attacked and even sunk, despite American's neutrality, from the local papers. A few stories in particular brought home that this foreign war was impacting their country and their own people.

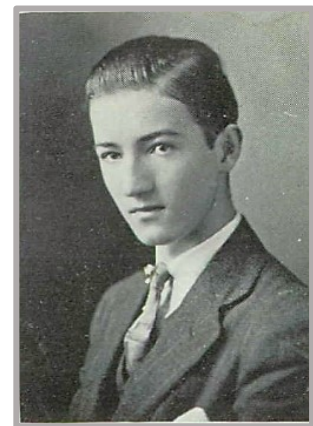
Right at the start of 1941, the National Guard began beefing up the defense of the coast. In January 1941, 535 of the first draftees, including Winchester's William P. Baugher, Samuel W. Joyce, and Robert P. Wild, were immediately assigned to Forts Andrew, Warren, and Strong. Their induction into the 241st Coast Artillery brought that unit up to wartime strength with 2,100 men.

At the induction ceremonies, "Many of the selectees were attired in wrinkled uniforms of the World War vintage," the *Boston Globe* reported, though that deficiency would also be soon rectified.

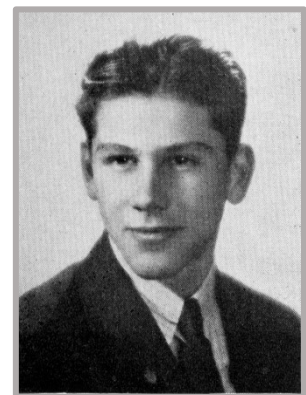
There was more danger expected on the water than on the coasts. Not only British ships but also American ships were attacked, even before the United States was formally in the war.

A young Winchester native, John Gage Carlson, was on his second voyage as a crewman for the American-Hawaiian Steamship Company. His ship, the *SS Arkansan*, was engaged in trade between the U.S. and the Red Sea, the ship was presumably carrying supplies for British forces in the Middle East. On the night of Sept. 11, 1941, the *Arkansan* was hit by shell or bomb fragments during an air raid on Suez.²

(Later, during the war, Carlson served as Second and Chief Mate on numerous liberty ships in the Mediterranean War Theatre. In 1945 at age 23, he received his Master Mariner's papers, becoming the youngest



William P. Baugher
Class of 1929



John G. Carlson
Class of 1939

Master Mariner in U.S. history and entitling him to command merchant ships of any size in any part of the world.)

Although damage to the *Arkansan* was reportedly small, the addition of this incident to the growing list of damaged and sunk U.S. ships fueled arguments for the arming of merchant ships, then forbidden by the Neutrality Act.

Once Europe was at war, anyone traveling the Atlantic was at risk. For one example, the grandsons of Dunbar Burnham, evacuated from England in July 1940, said that their ship was attacked in mid-ocean by a prowling German submarine.

And when the U.S. did join in the conflict, it was not at Pearl Harbor or anywhere in the South Pacific that the first marine casualty among Winchester residents occurred. While patrolling the Atlantic coast, Lt. Cdr. Hugh D. Black, skipper of the U.S. destroyer *Jacob Jones*, lost his life when his ship was torpedoed on Feb. 28, 1942 by a German submarine off Cape May, N.J.



Cdr. Hugh D Black

TRAVELING IN A CONVOY

To protect ships crossing the ocean, a convoy system was introduced. Starting in April 1941, U.S. warships began escorting Allied convoys as far as Iceland, sparking a number of skirmishes with U-boats.

Seventy-five years ago, in June 1941, nurse Mary Louise Carpenter, who grew up on Ravine Road, made the crossing in a convoy. She was one of 65 American nurses—11 from Massachusetts—chosen to go to the American Red Cross-Harvard Field Hospital in Salisbury, England. She described the experience and her arrival in a letter which her family shared with the *Star*.

“Traveling in convoy is a remarkable experience....

“Some of the ships we see lean and hungry beside us, plowing forward. And a line stretches out behind us and these we see bow-on. Once in a while signals are flashed from one ship to another, or messages conveyed by flags or whistles, and the convoy changes its course and then changes back and then changes once again.

“It all seems mysterious and nonsensical to us passengers; it makes us feel as pawns must feel in a chess game. The additions, subtractions and independent maneuvers of corvettes, destroyers, and the vessels of war give us plenty to watch that is at once interesting and baffling....

“It has been cold almost all the time, sometimes very, so I’ve worn woolen underwear both day and night. We sleep in our clothes, ready to pop into a lifeboat. We had one alarm one night and made ready to get into the lifeboats, but the trouble disappeared.

“I don’t think any of us nurses are worried – the crew are much more so, but there is a tension to this war business so that dry land seems wonderful. But probably bombings will be similarly disturbing.

“London, June 24. [They took a train from Liverpool to London and boarded in a nursing service hotel in Cavendish Square.] After dinner we walked down to Trafalgar Square, but I was so tired I couldn’t really take it in. Today, however, I know it’s London and I love it.

“You don’t forget it’s war, of course, with windows boarded up and patches everywhere, arrows to air raid shelters all over, sandbags and barbed wire. There are a good many scattered buildings wrecked, but there hasn’t been a raid for six weeks and all the debris is out of the way. So for the most part the wrecked buildings give me the feeling merely of buildings being taken down rather than of war, though some are horrible.

“Our own hospital is not ready yet, as a lot of the beds and other equipment were bombed on the docks at Liverpool. So, after staying here two days to get rations, registration and other red tape, we are going to be sent into an English hospital, the Middlesex.”³

She would not, of course, forget it’s war. When the Army took over the Salisbury hospital in July, 1941, she became an Army nurse. After serving in several hospitals in England, she applied for transfer to a field hospital and was assigned to the 13th Field Hospital three months before D-Day.



*Lt. Mary Louise
Carpenter*

¹ This article © 2020 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 27, 2016. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Carlson was named in the news report in the *Boston Globe*, Sept. 14, 1941.

³ “Winchester nurse writes of England,” *The Winchester Star*, July 18, 1941.