

Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian
Richard Forliano

Why They Fought (Part 2)

1917 to 1945

By MIKE FIX and RICHARD FORLIANO

“This is a land where no one has to bow. In this place at last a man could stand up free of the past. True freedom was begun here and it would spread eventually all over the earth...We are a different kind of army...If you look at history, you see other men fight for pay, or women, or some other kind of loot. They fight for land, or because a king makes them, or just because they like killing. But we are here for something new...We are an army out to set other men free...Here we judge you by what you do, not by who your father was. Here you can be something...It’s the idea that we all have worth...What we are fighting for is each other.”

We believe the best answer to why collectively the men and women of Eastchester, including the villages of Bronxville and Tuckahoe, were so willing to fight in the wars of the first half of the 20th century is found in an historical novel that Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, the American commander of Operation Desert Storm, called the best and most realistic novel about war he had ever read. In *The Killer Angels*, a novel of the Civil War, a speech is made to a number of disgruntled soldiers who are refusing to fight as a protest against the incompetent generals that they had been forced to serve. The above passage is paraphrased from a supposed speech that Lawrence Chamberlain made to reluctant soldiers from the State of Maine whom he was asking to join his regiment.

The men and women who went off to serve in World War I and World War II never read the above passage because this Pulitzer-winning novel was written in 1974. But we are sure the vast majority would have agreed with the words Chamberlain might have said that day. It is impossible at the present time to know how little the men and women who went off to fight in 20th century wars knew about the rich history of this town. But it is safe to assume that they were aware of many of the ways that the citizens of Eastchester contributed to America’s democratic traditions. But there were other reasons why so many went off and so many paid the ultimate sacrifice.

The high school for Eastchester and Tuckahoe up to 1929 was Waverly. Still today inscribed in marble on the north wall of the school is the inscription, “Enter to Learn - Leave to Serve.” These words were the credo by which many of the citizens of the town lived.

Carl Schorske was a famous resident of Tuckahoe, active in community affairs, and trustee of the Village of Tuckahoe. In 1981, in an oral interview he made at the age of 102, Schorske made some very telling comments about the character of this community. In that interview he commented on selfless public service. He mentioned that “as chairman of the improvement committee I would go out at 5 a.m. in the morning before going to business in New York City and measure the setback and side lines of the house...I never got home before 7 or 7:30 at night.” He went on further to comment, “In those days the Board of Trustees in the Village of

Tuckahoe was all voluntary. They weren't compensated...I was out four or five nights a week on civic matters." Schorske was one of many who went out to serve others for the sake of the community.

Lucille Gorman, in another oral interview conducted in 1981, when she was running Sunday school for over 500 students at the Immaculate Conception Church, she commented on how this ethos of serving others helped to mitigate the impact of the depression that hit this community so hard. She stated, "Everyone was friends or related in Tuckahoe. I don't remember being poor during the depression. I think my mother and father might have been worried...Everyone helped each other...Passed clothes on to one another, a great sharing, more than now...more volunteer work during the depression. The churches had lots of volunteers. When anyone died, the whole block cooked for the bereaved family."

This feeling of a strong sense of community and service is illustrated by the life of Harold Dunn. Harold Dunn was a Tuckahoe resident who attended Eastchester High School. Although small in stature, he had tremendous athletic ability. He is the only athlete to hit a baseball to the roof of Eastchester High School and had a tryout with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He went to Manhattan College but was unable to get a teaching job during the depression. He volunteered for the Army Corps of Engineers but after an explosion punctured his eardrum was forced to retire. In 1941, when he learned about the attack on Pearl Harbor, he volunteered to fight in the air force and discreetly told no one about his hearing loss. After the war ended, he became a beloved physical education teacher in the Eastchester school and retired in 1968.

In history classes, students thrilled to the words of American heroes. John Paul Jones, when asked to surrender his ship, said, "I have not yet begun to fight." The 21-year-old Nathan Hale, before he was hung by the British as a spy, when asked if he had any regrets replied, "I regret I only have one life to give for my country." Israel Putnam's instructions to his troops at Bunker Hill of, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes" must have inspired young boys getting ready to fight. Today the teaching of social studies is much more sophisticated. Both the good and the bad aspects of the past are emphasized. However, when documents like the Gettysburg Address are removed from textbooks and emphasis is placed more on our shortcomings than on our triumphs, something is amiss.

It is wrong to glamorize war. Robert E. Lee put it best after the slaughter of Union troops at Fredericksburg: "It is wrong that war be so terrible or we would make too much of it."

That does not mean that homage should not be made to the men and women who serve our country. Please come to the OSilas Gallery at Concordia College to view the exhibit entitled, "The Hero Next Door: Local Stories of Wartime." This exhibit tells the story of more than 70 men and women who died in the service of our country in World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.

The exhibit continues through the 4th of July.

Part 1 of "Why They Fought" was published in last week's edition of The Town Report.

A mother and daughter during WWII viewing the inscription at Waverly School, "Enter to Learn - Leave to Serve."

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