

The World War II Home Front in Arlington, Virginia

BY TOM VIRNELSON

In March 1939, two-and-a-half years before Pearl Harbor, my family moved from the Davenport Terrace apartments on Connecticut Avenue to the brand-new Buckingham apartments in Arlington. There I spent my elementary-school years—years which largely coincided with World War II. My memories of that time include much that is war-related, for the war touched the civilian population in many ways that I will describe in the following pages.

Buckingham was just north of Route 50 (then Lee Boulevard, now Arlington Boulevard) and mostly just west of Glebe Road, with a main entrance off Route 50 at George Mason Drive. Just west of Buckingham was Arlington Forest, a new development of small cube-shaped all-brick homes that sold for around \$7000 new. Buckingham and Arlington Forest were served by the Kate Waller Barrett Elementary School. West of Arlington Forest, the landscape was rural, extending out to a country intersection called Fort Buffalo or Seven Corners and beyond. The city of Falls Church was a little farther west. If I walked about half a mile east on Route 50 from my apartment in Buckingham, I could see the top of the Washington Monument rising in the distance above Ft Myer. That's a vivid picture of the times: living nearly at the edge of contiguous westward expansion, I could see the monument from my neighborhood.

Pre-War Life in Arlington

It was a different culture—most mothers stayed at home with their children—up until the war started. There were very limited organized sports for kids (and those were for teenagers) and no recreation classes for adults. Thank God my childhood pick-up games of one-knocker or two-knocker weren't ruined by a bunch of uptight, rude, pressuring little league adults! We just played for fun and the outcome really didn't matter. The only organized activities I remember were Scouts for the kids and civic associations like the Lions or Kiwanis for adults. No television or microwave ovens. Mothers cooked meals and families were all home to eat dinner together. Families listened to the radio, read, and played board games. When the kids went to a Saturday matinee, parents didn't have to worry about the content; movies had no bad language, nudity, or sex. Outside of some scattered Little Taverns in Washington which were very small and sold very small hamburgers for 15 cents and Howard Johnson's, there were no fast-food restaurants and thus no wide availability of jobs for teenagers. Often, teenagers couldn't find

a job during the summer. May that lifestyle rest in peace, wherever it went—I remember it fondly.

Life in Arlington then was city-oriented rather than suburb-oriented. A lot of families, like ours, didn't have cars then and didn't need them. Grocery stores, drug stores, 10-cent stores, cleaners, barber shops, banks, bakeries, and florists were within walking distance (carrying groceries home two long blocks in a paper bag—without handles unlike today's plastic bags—was an expected part of life). Everything else was downtown, accessible via the Arnold Bus Line, later consolidated into the WV&M bus line, which went to 11th and E or 15th and Pennsylvania Avenue. From there, you could walk no more than three or four blocks to the big department stores: Woodward and Lothrop's, Jelleff's, Hecht's, Kann's, Lansburgh's, or Garfinckel's or other downtown businesses. From Buckingham and many other areas, the only convenient way to Clarendon, Arlington's small business district, was by car. You'd laugh at the size of that era's grocery stores; they literally would not fill the produce section of one of today's new supermarkets.

Some services came to your home. Believe it or not, the doctor made house calls, usually after working hours. By the end of the war, he brought along the dreaded penicillin shot, the first of the antibiotics, which was administered where you sat down. In the 1940s, the milkman delivered to your home in glass bottles since milk was one of the heavier grocery items to carry. The milk came with or without cream. The cream was in a bubble in the neck of the bottle just below the lid and was scooped out with a special little aluminum ladle or spoon. Bread (Wonderbread) was also delivered to homes and the delivery men had miniature sample loaves they sometimes passed out to us kids. Local laundries provided home pick-up and delivery; the Pioneer Laundry truck carted away the dirty laundry and brought it back, cleaned and ironed. As a measure of how close we were to the city, we even had a few itinerant tinkers through the neighborhood, carrying pots and pans on their backs and carrying a knife sharpening grindstone, which generally was well subscribed. I remember one organ grinder with monkey coming through our block.

A favorite time of day for the kids was when the ice cream trucks would come. We had two: the Good Humor man and, for just a few years, the Jack and Jill man. You could get Good Humors in four combinations: vanilla ice cream covered with chocolate (regular) or vanilla (angel food) and chocolate ice cream covered with vanilla (devil's food) or chocolate (I don't remember the name), not to mention peanut butter or toasted almond over vanilla. Popsicles were 5 cents, creamsicles, Good Humors, Dixie cups, and ice cream sandwiches 10 cents, and drumsticks 15 cents.

Coping with Washington's summer heat was an art form since there was no residential air conditioning, just fans and wet wash cloths. My parents

switched from a wool rug to a sisal (fiber) rug for the summer to let the coolness of the floor come through. Downtown, people would ride the streetcar for the breeze on hot summer evenings. Swimming pools were few—just private country club pools (in Arlington, Washington Golf and Country on North Glebe Road and Army Navy off South Glebe Road) and four public pools. The public pools were the Glen Echo amusement park pool, East Potomac on Hains Point, and two indoor pools: the Ambassador Hotel's and the YMCA's. There was also a public pool at Washington's old Hoover Airport, which was located where the Pentagon now is but moved during the early 1940s to its current location at Reagan National Airport. At some point, the Wardman Park's pool became available to the paying public. The polio epidemic in the 40s caused some parents to nix swimming in these pools.

Pearl Harbor

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, I was 7 years old and in the second grade—too young to understand the event's significance. I remember the day and that my family went upstairs to talk about it with Mr. and Mrs. Teagarden (in the apartment right above us that Red Auerbach and his family occupied in the late 1940s when he was coaching the Washington Capitals basketball team). After that, I became increasingly aware of the war through its intrusions on life on the home front.

Patriotic Symbols

The patriotic attitude of the country during WWII has never been seen since until post-September 11, 2001. I was unaware of any anti-war protests. Everyone seemed to be doing what he could to help out. The symbols I remember most were the "V" for Victory sign and the four freedoms posters by Norman Rockwell, which were on the walls of Kate Waller Barrett. I believe the "V" sign was originated by Winston Churchill holding up his first and second fingers to form a vee. The musical version of it, also used during the war, was the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony da-da-da-dum, which coincided with Morse code for the letter "v" (•••—). The "V" showed up as the upraised wings of the American eagle on a purple three-cent stamp in 1942 and was the standard stamp for most of the war. Families with sons in the war hung rectangular emblems in their windows that had a red border around a central field of white with a blue star for each son in the service in a vertical row in the center of the white field. I remember the term "blue star mother." People realized the war would not be short and used the phrase "for the duration" to characterize the persistence of activities or conditions that would last to the end of the war. Lucky Strikes changed the colors of their package from green and gold to today's red and white, claiming a patri-

otic motivation: the green dye was needed for uniforms and camouflage. “Kilroy was here” drawings were a curious and popular symbol starting about 1944 or ’45 but slipped into obscurity after the war. I never understood the meaning of the easily-drawn cartoon of a bald man with a big nose looking at you over a fence with his two hands holding on to the top of the fence.

Air Raid Preparations

Arlington, along with other local jurisdictions, prepared for air raids during the early days of the war. We had air raid drills at school and we had an organized corps of air raid wardens. Kate Waller Barrett held air raid drills, at least for a year or two. We would be taken into the basement and would sit in rows along the structural walls with our backs to the wall. I don’t remember these drills as being frightening to the children, so the teachers did a good job in showing us what to do without scaring us. My father was an air raid warden and during drills wore an armband as a designation of that capacity. The air raid drills were held at night, consisted of enforced blackouts, and were monitored by the wardens, who were supposed to patrol their areas to ensure no lights were visible. My father, like others, made blackout shades from heavy black paper attached to window frame-fitting wooden frames. Lights on inside, dark outside. During the blackout drills, cars were supposed to stop so that headlights could not be seen by enemy bombers. I remember my father describing arguments between some wardens and drivers who didn’t want to stop for a blackout drill. Wardens were issued various pieces of equipment but the only one I remember was the stirrup pump. It was basically a large bucket with a bracket at the bottom that could be held down with a foot while the operator worked an attached hand pump to pump water out of the bucket via a short hose that could be aimed at a fire with the other hand. I remember a large nighttime demonstration for the area air raid wardens on the football field at W&L High School—large practice fires were set and extinguished. I don’t think the air raid warden activities lasted very long, maybe just the first year or so of the war.

Elementary School during WWII

The standard dress for elementary school boys in the early 40s was knee-length corduroy knickers with long socks. The knickers made a swish-swish-swish sound when you walked. We also wore leather so-called aviator helmets that buckled under our chins. Back in those years, families bought “buddy poppies” through the schools every Decoration Day, as Memorial Day was then known. These were bright red paper poppies made by disabled WWI veterans and the proceeds went to support them. When WWII started, the schools started selling savings stamps. They came in denominations of 10 cents (green) and 25

cents (red) and had a picture of a minuteman on them. You pasted them into a booklet and, when it was filled, turned it in for a savings bond. We used to get the Weekly Reader, a small four-page newspaper for kids, which must have had some war-related stories in it.

I got my first inoculations from the school system—I think our first-grade class got smallpox vaccinations and we got some kind of a diphtheria test on the underside of the wrist in one of the early grades. That was it in the 40s. Measles, mumps, chicken pox, and whooping cough you just got.

We got little recess (15 minutes) in the morning (free play), an hour for lunch, and big recess (30 minutes) in the afternoon (organized team play). Little recess was followed by milk and graham crackers for 25 cents per week. The favorite outdoor game was “slug” or “slog.” It was played with baseball rules only there was no pitcher and the ball was an inflated rubber ball a little bigger than a soccer ball. You’d stand at home and hit the ball out of your hand. With the large, soft ball, you could play it year around. In the upper grades during the spring and summer, we’d play softball.

One year a marble craze hit. Kids would take a shoe box, throw the top away, cut small square notches along one long edge of the bottom, and then set it on the ground upside down. It would resemble a building with a number of little open doors. A number was written above each door to denote how many marbles you could win by rolling one of your own marbles through it from a set distance. If the marble banged off the front wall instead of going through a door, the house kept the marble. I didn’t have many marbles until I started operating one of these houses and then I had a lifetime supply.

Plastic ocarinas, also called “sweet potatoes” because they resembled a sweet potato-shaped flute, were big one year around 1946-7. Right after the war, yo-yos were a big fad.

Bond Drives

In addition to the sale of savings stamps at schools, bond drives were a big activity supported by movie actors and actresses who would tour the country making appearances to encourage people to buy bonds. The small towns were covered by making train stops. A famous war song was “Buy a Bond Today” by Bing Crosby.

Military Presence

There were visible signs of the military in the area throughout the war. Military convoys were not infrequent on main area roads—I used to see them on Route 50. We commonly saw military planes overhead. In the early 1940s, the Washington area sky was more interesting than it is today, what with sky writers, military blimps, lower-flying propeller-driven fighter planes of the lat-

est types, searchlights at night, and planes in military formations, maybe 10 or 15. These latter were often connected with parades. Speaking of sky events, there was a tremendous aurora borealis, or northern lights, display, rarely seen in this area, in 1945. I remember it as consisting of pastel-colored shafts of light directly overhead, shifting back and forth. Every summer there was a display of military equipment on the mall and around the monument and, as 10-12 year-olds, my friends and I would ride the bus down and go through all the exhibits.

Before the war, a private girls' school, Arlington Hall, operated just across Route 50 from Buckingham. The War Department took the school over early in the war and set up the predecessor to the National Security Agency (NSA) in its facilities and some added temporary buildings. Lots of military and civilian workers would disgorge from its entrance around 5:00, providing us kids an opportunity to ask for military shoulder patches, which were a popular collectible during the war. Although the military personnel didn't carry spare patches around with them, some had apartments within walking distance, so occasionally we got lucky.

Impact on Car Owners

In the first place, car production stopped during the war. As kids, it was easy to learn the cars since new models weren't appearing every year. Furthermore, all prewar cars had distinctive hood ornaments so that made it even easier. People had to keep their pre-war cars going, but gasoline and rubber tires were rationed so they weren't logging a lot of miles anyway. Throughout the war and until about late 1947, traffic remained light. Pre-war cars had manual transmissions, running boards, and no turn signals. Right and left turn lanes were rare indeed so people signaled turns with arm signals: up for right, straight out for left, and down for stop. All street parking was parallel to the street—that was the toughest part of the driving test.

Impact on Consumers

Apart from the automobile restrictions, consumers were impacted in many ways during the war. A lot of things were rationed in addition to gas and tires: sugar, coffee, and meat among others. These items were controlled by Government-issued ration books. With meat scarce, we ate a lot of spam (hated it; American pilots pledged to bomb the spam factories as soon as the war was over), Vienna sausages, codfish cakes, creamed chipped beef, corned beef hash, hot dogs, and scrambled eggs and shad roe for dinner although we got chicken, lamb chops, or pork chops maybe once a week. Margarine, when it first became available was, at the insistence of the dairy industry, unappetizingly white and packaged in see-through plastic with a little coloration tablet that you could use

at home to turn the margarine the color of butter. The Government encouraged victory gardens. One of the local farmers dedicated some of his unused land for this, so many families from the Buckingham apartments, including mine, raised vegetables all through the war.

Collection drives for various materials were popular and allowed everyone who participated to feel that they were making a contribution. We collected newspapers, scrap metal, and cooking fats. I belonged to Cub Scout Pack 114 and Boy Scout Troop 143 in the Buckingham area and participated in countless newspaper collections. Scrap metal included tin foil so most families had a tinfoil ball amassed from candy and cigarette wrappers. There was a fenced-in area in front of the Pershing Market on Glebe Road at Pershing Drive that served as a collection point for scrap metal and tinfoil balls.

The Washington area housing shortage was a famous war-time problem, brought on by the substantial influx of defense workers and Government girls. There were stories about people sleeping in shifts in the same bed. Hollywood made movies about this situation, "Standing Room Only" and "The More the Merrier" being two. In Buckingham, some families rented rooms to help out. One novel solution to the shortage was the building of concrete igloo-shaped houses using a large inflated balloon as a building form. I remember going to see them under construction. The workers would inflate the balloon, pour the concrete over the balloon, and then deflate the balloon after the concrete had hardened. There was an article about these houses in the Post a couple of years ago but I don't remember where they were—somewhere off Lee Highway I think.

WWII in the Media

Media treatment of the war made huge impressions on me as a young child. With no television, the media consisted of the newspapers, radio, and movies.

My father bought an upright RCA radio and record player about 1940. AM radio was all there was. The radio had a green circular tuning eye with a slightly darker piece-of-pie-shaped sector that would narrow up as you tuned onto the station. It also had push buttons labeled with the call signs of the major Washington stations: WMAL, WJSV (later WTOP), WOL, and WRC. We followed the news of the war through that radio. No one who ever heard Gabriel Heatter open his newscast by saying "There's good news tonight" could ever forget the experience. His voice still rings in my head after 50 years. Other newscasters heard often by millions included Eric Sevareid and H. B. Kaltenborn. Of course, the music industry cranked out a lot of patriotic songs, including "Red, White, and Blue (We'll Fight for You)," "Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer," "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," "Johnny Got a Zero" (about a young pilot who got zeroes in school but grew up to shoot down the Japanese fighter planes known

as Zeros), “This Is the Army, Mr. Jones,” and “We Heil! Right in the Fuehrer’s Face,” a song disparaging Hitler by Spike Jones.

The Government decided to continue war-time sports, so we followed the Washington Nats (short for Nationals) or Senators (both names were used) over the radio. The broadcaster was the much-beloved Arch McDonald. Away games were covered by teletype from a play-by-play man in the home town. Arch would read the teletype account and then bring it to life by announcing it several seconds late as though he was watching it, but he decided to let the teletype machine be heard in the background. We would hear the teletype clatter away for a while, hoping it was good for Washington, and then get Arch’s “live” account. Arch had a chime that he would strike once for every base on a base hit. Four chimes when Washington was at bat followed by “and there she goes” was what we fervently prayed for. In 1945, Washington finished in second place behind the Detroit Tigers, 1½ games out. In 1946, Ted Williams and all the other stars returned from the war and the Nats slipped back down into more familiar territory.

There were four major newspapers in Washington in the 40s—the Washington Post and the Times Herald in the morning and the Evening Star and the Daily News (tabloid size but not sensational) in the afternoon. Many families got both a morning and an afternoon paper. In addition to the news stories about the war, I remember several series of drawings of allied aircraft and warships with accompanying data on the comics page which could be cut out and collected. There were color drawings of airplanes and ships in bound books, many in a smaller than standard format, and in flash card packs. I had such a book about battleships. I also had story books about the war such as “Dave Duncan in the RAF” and “Dave Duncan at Dunkirk.” These were stories about an American pilot who volunteered into the RAF and his English friend Freddy Farmer.

The movies were a lot different in those days. A show would consist of the movie house’s introduction (often a commercial for the snack bar), followed by the newsreel, followed by a cartoon, followed by a short (if the movie had a short run time), followed by previews of the next two movies, followed by the main attraction. Previews and main attraction were introduced by well-worn screens saying “The Buckingham Theater presents . . .” with lots of sparkles and glitzy graphic effects. The newsreels were the first opportunity to see action coverage of news events and were available weeks to months after the event itself. 1940s cartoons featured mainly Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Tweety Bird, Woody Woodpecker, Heckel and Jeckel (two crows), and later Mr. Magoo. Some of the better shorts were “The March of Time” (black and white) and a series of quality Technicolor travelogues. There were countless war movies but “Bataan” and “The Story of Dr. Wassell” really made a lasting unpleasant impression on me as a kid. Dr. Wassell was a doctor trying to escape the Japanese somewhere in Southeast

Asia with a group of patients. This Technicolor movie ended with Dr. Wassell surrounded in a clearing in the jungle with a female nurse at his side and firing at the Japanese as they closed in from all sides camouflaged with jungle vegetation. The outcome was hopeless and seriously depressing to a 9 or 10-year old. "Bataan" was black and white, equally hopeless for the Americans resisting the Japanese in the Philippines, and equally depressing to me. Other popular 40s war movies included "They Were Expendable" about PT boats, "Twelve O'Clock High," "Guadalcanal Diary," "The Sands of Iwo Jima," and "Battleground."

The Soldiers and Sailors

Every so often, one of our uncles in the military would pass through Washington and pay us a visit. I remember getting several neat things to take to show and tell. One was a flashlight with a red hemispherical plastic lens for use on a darkened ship. Another was a battery-powered light you would clip to your life vest to make you visible in the water at night. We would get an occasional V-mail from one of them—the original, which could be a letter or one of some number of standard greeting cards, had been microfilmed and then sent from overseas by plane; it was then reproduced with a thermofax or other reproduction technique of that era onto this extremely lightweight paper. The paper was then mailed to you in a slightly-smaller-than 4 inch-by-5 inch envelope.

My Final WWII Memory

My last WWII memory concerns my father, who was a draftsman for the District of Columbia's Municipal Architect's Office. In 1944, he went with several other neighborhood men to Richmond to take an induction physical. He had been drafted at age 38. The upper age limit on the draft had been increasing during the war and finally caught up with him. My father failed the physical because he had had a collapsed lung as a young man. So fortunately, my mother, sister, and I got to keep our father at home, and my father got to keep saving for the 1946 Pontiac he bought right after the war, a very immediate symbol to us that the war was over.

Tom Virnelson grew up in the Buckingham apartments in Arlington, attending Kate Waller Barrett Elementary School near Buckingham and Gordon Junior High and Western High Schools in Washington. He later attended the University of Virginia, thereafter pursuing a career in engineering. He has lived in Fairfax County since 1959.
