

## Wilmington, North Carolina

### The First American World War II Heritage City

#### **Contributions to the War Effort “The Defense Capital of the State”**

##### **Strategic Location Vulnerable**

Until 1944, government told citizens to fear German sea or air attack; civilian defense drills - blackouts, air raids; rationing, food shortages; U-boats ravaged off coast; one fired on Ethyl-Dow Chemical plant at Kure Beach July 1943.

##### **All 5 Armed Forces here or nearby**

Army - Camp Davis on U.S. 17 at Holly Ridge, anti-aircraft artillery training base; Fort Fisher advanced training base

Navy - Anti-submarine warfare patrol craft at Southport and along Cape Fear River

Army Air Forces - Bluethenthal Army Air Base/Wilmington Army Airfield, ASW base then P-47 training field

Marine Corps - Camp Lejeune at Jacksonville/New River

Coast Guard - Patrol craft bases at Wrightsville Beach (Inland Waterway), Southport, and Wilmington  
Also British ASW vessels operated here

##### **North Carolina Shipbuilding Company, 1941-46 (Wilmington Shipyard)**

243 Liberty and C-2 hulls constructed for Navy and Maritime Commission; state's largest employer: 23,000 employees at height in late 1943; 20% blacks, 20% women

##### **Defense Industries**

Fertilizer plants, pulpwood, Block's Shirt Factory, numerous small manufacturing, creosote products, bromine (Ethyl-Dow), truck-farming, dairies, small ship/craft repair works, floating drydock construction

##### **Total Manufacturing**

110 establishments employing 28,000 men and 6,000 women; retail trade area extended 75 miles inland reaching 275,000.

##### **Principal North Carolina State Port**

Principally downtown docks and wharves; Lend-Lease shipments to U.K./Soviet Union; petroleum imports center.

##### **Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Headquarters and Terminal**

A principal Southeastern railroad; transported war material and troops; also Seaboard Airline RR operated here.

##### **3 German Prisoner of War Camps**

From Feb. 1944 to April 1946; first one at Shipyard Blvd. and Carolina Beach Rd. (historical marker), then moved to Robert Strange Park (marker, main camp, 8<sup>th</sup>

& Nun); detachment at Bluethenthal Field; maximum 550 German POWs captured from *Afrika Korps* in 1943; caused no trouble, no breakouts, worked dairy and truck farms, fertilizer and pulpwood industries.

##### **Public Housing**

5,495 units constructed (federal/local) in 7 projects (some still in use: Hillcrest, Maffitt Village, Lake Forest/Village).

##### **Population 1940**

New Hanover County 43,000; Wilmington 34,000; county late 1943 peak around 100,000.

### **Armed Forces Service**

Thousands of area men and women served in uniform; bomber and fighter pilots and crews; P-51 Mustang ace; submarine skipper; Navy frogmen and special operations; Marine and Army infantry; Army artillery; physicians and nurses - crewmen on destroyers, carriers, amphibious ships; served in, over, and undersea in Central-Western-South Pacific, Atlantic, Mediterranean, Europe, North Africa.

### **Deaths in Service**

191 County men died, plus 57 more with county connection = 248 did not come home; men died in combat on Guadalcanal, New Britain, Peleliu, Saipan, New Guinea, the Marshalls, Okinawa; in and over Holland, Italy, Sicily, North Africa, France, Philippines, Germany, Burma, Belgium, Luxembourg.

### **Congressional Medal of Honor**

2 recipients, both New Hanover High School (NHHS) graduates - Capt. Charles P. Murray, Jr. 1938, U.S. Army), and Pharmacists Mate 2<sup>nd</sup>/Class William D. Halyburton, Jr., 1943, U.S. Naval Reserve.

### **Other Decorations**

2 Navy pilots, both NHHS and Naval Academy graduates, awarded Navy Cross for helping to sink the Japanese carrier IJN Kaga at battle of Midway; one of them Lt. (j.g.) Clarence Earl Dickinson, awarded total of 3 Navy Crosses for valor by June 1942; featured role in the 2019 movie "Midway." Ensign Carl David Peiffer was lost at sea.

(A memorial/exhibit honoring them at the HBHUSO/CAC is underway.)

One Army Air Forces pilot awarded Distinguished Service Cross for Midway; 1 Army DSC recipient (posthumously) for Normandy; numerous Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Distinguished Flying Crosses, and Air Medals.

### **13 New Hanover County United Service Organizations (USO) Facilities**

Main location at 2<sup>nd</sup> & Orange Sts., now the Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center.

### **War Bonds**

\$40 million raised in New Hanover County in 7 drives.

### **Race Relationships**

Wilmington was, of course, The South, and segregation and contemporary prejudice appeared everywhere. Blacks had their own war bond drives and events, night clubs featuring nation headline performers, and worked in menial jobs.

### **Biggest Problems**

No planning; seat-of-the-pants, trial-by-error; housing (many private homes rented rooms to workers and military); few streets/thoroughfares (Shipyard Blvd. and Military Cutoff constructed); food shortages; cramped schools; long lines for buses, restaurants and theaters; crowded school; total racial segregation; inadequate transportation, horrible accidents; crime (As in Sin City, per FBI):- murders, rapes, fights, thefts, muggings, prostitution, black marketeering, moonshining.

### **Principal Sources**

*A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs of a Wartime Boomtown*; and  
*The Journey Continues: The World War II Home Front*  
[www.wilburjones.com]