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# *review* **Rhode Island**

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# The Rhode Island Homefront in World War II

by James Anderson

December 7th, 1981 marked the 40th anniversary of America's involvement in World War II. Although volumes have been written about the war in Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific, there is very little documentation on the war effort on the home front.

From the moment of the first outbreak of hostilities, the United States prepared to defend her shores from enemy attack. Narragansett Bay was considered a strategic site, and for some time it was feared Newport might be a target for a Nazi version of Pearl Harbor. Six battleships, eight cruisers, thirty destroyers, two submarines, two destroyer tenders, and two supply ships were stationed in the Bay, making an appealing target to German air and naval forces. Plans were quickly drawn and executed to protect Rhode Island from such an attack.

The expert on this subject is Walter Schroder, whose book **Defenses of Narragansett Bay in World War II**, is now in its second printing. Mr. Schroder spent three years researching the book and now gives lectures and slide shows on the subject throughout the state.

The **Rhode Island Review** recently had the pleasure of accompanying Mr. Schroder on a trip aboard the **Bay Queen**, where we examined the coastal defenses of Narragansett Bay firsthand.

On August 27, 1940, over three months before the United States entered the war, the Army Reserve and National Guard were mobilized. In Rhode Island the 243rd Coast Artillery Regiment was assigned to the existing forts on Narragansett Bay for intensive training.

Most of the existing fortifications of the Bay in 1940 were built between 1876-97, when the coastal defenses of the United States were modernized following a study headed by Secretary of War William Endicott. Since these sites were not adapted to combat the advanced sea and air technology of World War II, they were hastily modified in the 1940s. Fort Adams, located about three miles southwest of Newport Harbor, was the largest existing fort in the Bay when the war broke out. The first fort to be built on the site was named in

1799, and was rebuilt in the 1824-57 period. This 2½ acre stone, brick, and earthen complex was one of the largest seacoast forts of its time, capable of holding 468 cannons and 2400 troops. By the time of the Civil War, however, the fort was virtually obsolete and further modifications were made in the "Endicott Period." When the Coast Artillery arrived in 1940 the fort had again been stripped of most of its armorment.

Fort Wetherill was constructed on the southeastern shore of Conanicut Island, approximately two miles across the Bay from Newport. Built atop three high rock outcroppings, the fort commanded a view of the ocean to the south, with Block Island and Point Judith clearly visible on a good day. Although Revolutionary earthworks preceeded the fort, permanent fortifications were built between 1905-06 when the fort was named in honor of Captain Alexander Wetherill, who was killed at Santiago, Cuba during the Spanish American War. By December of 1940 some of the Coastal Artillery were moved here to man four of the seven batteries.

Fort Getty stands on Fox Hill on the western shore of Conanicut Island. The site was used by both the Americans and the British in the Revolutionary War, but the permanent fortress was not built until 1901, when it was named for Colonel George W. Getty, who served in the Mexican and Civil Wars. The 243rd Artillery Unit arrived at Fort Getty late in 1940. In 1974 landfill operations began to turn this site into a park and picnic area.

Fort Greble was built on a tiny Dutch Island, about one mile west of Jamestown. Although small fortifications had been constructed earlier, the fort received little attention until 1898 when it was officially named in honor of Lieutenant John Greble, the first officer killed in the Civil War. With the outbreak of the Spanish American War the fort on Dutch Island was rebuilt and equipped with heavy mortars. After World War I ended the fort was deactivated and used as a rifle range until 1940.

Fort Kearney is situated 1½ miles west of Fort Getty on Conanicut Island. Construction began in 1906, and the complete fort was named for Major General Phillip Kearney. The fort was manned in the First World

War and reactivated in 1941; in February of that year it was occupied by the 10th Coastal Artillery Regiment of the Regular Army. In 1942 the 10th was replaced by an anitmotor torpedo boat battery of the 243rd Coastal Artillery and some units of the 22nd Quartermaster and 132nd Army Engineer Regiments. Two 3" guns were present until 1943, when they were moved to positions on the South Shore. Two new 37mm guns served as heavy weapons from then until the end of the war. The U.R.I. Marine Laboratories has used these existing fortifications in construction of their contemporary buildings.

Even in 1940 the army realized these early forts were not modern enough to deal with new naval and air warfare. Construction of long range artillery bases was begun along the southern shores of Rhode Island, each armed with large guns concealed in casements of reinforced concrete, steel, and earth, so that only the barrels would protrude. Ammunition was stored in underground chambers which connected the guns.

Four of these strongholds were built in Rhode Island in the early years of the war. Fort Church, located at Sakonnet Point in Little Compton, was opened on December 11, 1941 and consisted of two batteries of six-inch and sixteen-inch guns. Fort Green was built at Point Judith in Narragansett and was composed of three batteries of sixteen and six-inch guns. Fort Burnside, located at Beavertail Point in Jamestown, had two batteries of six and three-inch guns, as well as a Harbor Entrance Control Post, which monitored Bay traffic during the war years. Fort Varnum was built off Boston Neck Road and housed two six-inch rapid fire rifles as well as 90mm and 37mm guns for anti motor torpedo boat operations.

In the summer of 1940, Naval expansion in the Bay began to increase as well as an expansion of training facilities. These shore installations played an important role in the overseas war of later years, and Rhode Island based warships and aircraft carriers saw much of the action of World War II.

The Navy's first shore-based training station was established on Coasters Island off Newport in 1883, where the Naval War College was



*USS Moberly (PF-63) in anti-submarine action, May 6, 1945, sinking of the U-853 off Point Judith.*

founded a year later. The training station was expanded to accommodate the increased number of recruits who passed through its doors during the war. Over 204,115 men were trained here before the end of the war.

The Naval Torpedo Station on Goat Island, established in 1869, became the largest employer in Rhode Island during the war years with 12,600 men and women on its payroll. Altogether it produced  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the 57,653 torpedoes manufactured by the Navy from 1939-1946.

The Motor Torpedo Boat, or P.T. Boat Training Center was established at Melville Rhode Island on February 17, 1942. By mid August the center had trained 2017 officers and 17,500 enlisted men; John Kennedy was one of the officers who passed through this facility.

Construction of the Naval Air Sta-

tion at Quonset Point began in July of 1940 and this installation was to become the largest naval air facility in the East. The work was complete in one short year in one of the largest and most efficient construction programs of the war. The Davisville complex, the "sister" of Quonset Point, was established in 1942 to house the "SeaBees" construction battalion. By the end of the war over 100,000 men had been trained at Davisville and thousands of officers — including Richard Nixon and Henry Fonda — had received their instruction at Quonset.

These coastal defenses might be considered unimportant by those familiar with the war in Europe and the Pacific, but the fact that the defenses of Narragansett Bay were never really tested can largely be attributed to their effectiveness.

Throughout the war the enemy presence was always close; America's shores were in constant danger. Indeed, enemy U boats sank a total of twelve merchant vessels off the New England coast alone with the loss of 205 allied lives resulting. On November 28, 1944, a German submarine actually entered Bar Harbor Maine and landed two enemy agents at Hancock Point.

Several U Boats were sunk off the New England coast between 1942 and 1945. The war came closest to home in May of 1945 when the U 853 torpedoed and sunk the **SS Black Point**, a 5,458 ton American collier (this was the last American ship lost in the Atlantic in World War II). The American vessel went down on May 5th with the loss of twelve lives; her 34 survivors were taken to Point Judith, Newport, and Quonset. Responding to the ship's distress signal, the **USS Moberly** (a Coast Guard frigate) and the destroyer escorts **Amick** and **Atherton** rushed to the scene. Several other ships arrived soon after and trapped the U boat. It was finally sunk just seven and one half miles east of Block Island.

Strangely enough, the war effort here at the homefront directly effected the war against the Nazis in North Africa. One morning in 1942 a young "Ham" amateur radio operator was casually scanning the airwaves when he began picking up transmissions in German. He noted the radio frequency and recorded the transmission, then took the recording to the Naval Base at Newport. It was learned that, through some strange fluke of nature, he had received transmissions from Rommel's Africa Corps! A monitoring station was established at North Scituate where the signals continued to be picked up, revealing the movements of the "Desert Fox" before they were actually carried out. Largely because of the North Scituate monitoring station, the success of Rommel was halted and the allies emerged victorious in North Africa.

It is all too easy to forget that a war is won at home as well as on the battlefields. Rhode Islanders should be proud of the effort this state made to help the cause of freedom. It is an important story in the chapters of local history, and thanks to Walter Schroder it is a story well told. Thanks to his efforts, the war effort in Rhode Island will be remembered, even though the Navy has all but left, and the fortifications have fallen into disuse.