

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

April 5, 1995

Memories of World War II

The fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II has brought forth a series of commemorations, from the winter assault on Iwo Jima to the August anniversary of VJ Day. The Longmeadow WWII Commemorative Community Committee yesterday hosted a reception for Veterans, Home front Workers and their families, and they invited me to speak to the assembly. These are my memories from the war years of my childhood that I shared at that meeting.

First, let me state that I don't claim personal knowledge of Pearl Harbor, which happened the year I was born. But many of my early memories stem from the life of a wartime family. When the war started, my father was on already on active duty in the Navy, and he spent the war years on a ship, on Guadalcanal and at US Naval Air Stations.

Ours was a family of three little girls at the time. We lived in Kansas, except for a short assignment at the Naval Air Station in Iowa City. My universe knew only about the Pacific theater, because that was our family connection. "Bombs away for Tokyo" was our playtime chant, and I had a toy aircraft carrier that I told strangers was "like the boat my daddy is on."

There must have been travel restrictions because of gasoline shortages, but they made little impression on me. Gasoline rationing would explain the bicycles my parents bought and the trip on an inter-urban train we took one Easter to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I thought at the time that we were going not to Cedar Rapids, but to "See the bunnies." The family car that made the strongest impression on me was my uncle's old Chevy coupe. It had jump seats in the back, and it was quite a treat to take a ride in that coupe.

The economic balance between guns and butter meant that we had to get used to oleo at home. The exciting part of having oleo was that you got to mix the color pellet into the white base. It may have been a chore for the cook, but it was fun for the cook's helper.

I remember ration books, shortages of sugar and I remember Postum. I tasted Postum a few years ago, and discovered that it had lost the magic flavor that was carried in my memory. The shortage of coffee might have been the hardest wartime scarcity for my mother, who remains an avid coffee drinker to this day.

My mother tells me that she took me downtown for the VJ Day celebration so that I would remember that exciting event. But the day made no impression on her four-year old Mary. The event that marked the end of the war for me came on the night my sisters and I were awakened, dressed and taken to Union Station to meet the troop train. The family reunion was brief, because the military required that the discharge go through channels and through Chicago before it was a reality. But the war was over, and my father was coming home.