

Columbian Squires
Circle #4457



WWII Veterans
Project

Columbian Squires Circle #4457 WWII Veterans Project

This project describes the experiences of our veterans and how they have contributed to the war. All of the veterans we interviewed are members of the Knights of Columbus Council 7343. The veterans we interviewed are:

Chuck Alberto
Harold Bittleman
Ed Comiskey
Steve Ferraro
Francis T. Hallett
Deacon Joe Mack
Wally Mason
Edward Servicky
Ed Serwin
And
James Shields

We have gained the knowledge of what they experienced in combat and their everyday life back then. We learned many interesting facts such as sometimes the guns they carried were not always loaded, many of them were drafted into the military, and most have a very different life style today then they did back then. Gas prices and everything else were a lot cheaper back then. They got to visit many different areas in the world, and they helped us realize how many veterans sacrificed their lives protecting their country and the citizens of the United States of America.

All of the members of our circle contributed in some way to this project. This includes: D.J. O'Sullivan, Matt Hoang, Kyle Danzer, Jacob Major, Daniel Crow, Gabe Hemple, Ben Stanley, Daniel Hasty, Andrew Schoen, Joey Koomen and Kyle Clorite.

The Columbian Squires would like to take this opportunity to thank the veterans not only for their contribution to this project but mostly for the sacrifice, time and service that they provided during the war.

Chuck Alberto

- Sergeant
- Serial-41252733
- Army infantry 1 ½ yrs. Korean War
- 78th Infantry Division

Chuck Alberto was from Patterson, New Jersey and married his wife Carolyn. Chuck served many positions in the army. He guarded the Spandeanu prison, which held the notorious Rudolph Hess (friend and accomplice of Hitler). He also participated in the barter center whose main goals were to help weaken the black market. As a senior in high school, Chuck was selling programs at a football game when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Chuck grew up 50 miles away from West Point and wanted to go there since he was a kid. West Point required a minimum height of 5'6" but Chuck was not tall enough. He did attend VMI in Virginia. There he received his draft notice and did his 12 weeks of basic training. Chuck graduated from Seton Hall and stayed in the reserve for another 15 years after the war. He retired as a captain in the inactive reserve. Chuck accomplished a lot in his life, he worked on the nerve gas and he worked with other troops in the chemical factories. He has been in the textile industries for about 40 years. Chuck as many others felt that what they did in WWII was a big accomplishment and he has no regrets about what he did for his country.

Harold Bittleman

Corporal Army/Air Force

Serial #32868102

Married to Marilyn

Born in New York, but currently resides in Charlotte

He was drafted in 1943 at the age of 18 yrs old. Hal spent one year in the southwest pacific jungles of New Guinea and was trained in self survival in the desert as part of scout unit. The unit would land ahead of primary invasion for info on enemy. Their diet consisted of deer, ants and other insects. Patrols were at night to find and locate Japanese looking for Army base, arriving by ship and take smaller boats by night to landing area. Soldiers had to cool 50 caliber machine guns down with water. Americans took guns from Japanese crates made by U.S. Red Cross International laws stated they should not shoot at the Japanese, but the Japanese would shoot at them. Navy land unit arrived on last island in the Philippines. They found out they were on the wrong side of the island and had to walk on land from there to find airbase in Borneo and had to hike over Mountains. The Japanese were hard to find because of the camouflage. Natives on the island were brainwashed by the Japanese and were resistant to US landings. The Japanese hid in coconut and palm trees so they could snipe at us. While in New Guinea they lived in jungles. The people there were married at young ages and were on their own as soon as they walked. He made swords out of Army truck springs. Slept in pup-tents, always moving with radar. Very uneasy feeling while trying to sleep, every little noise was nerve racking. They had boa constrictors, wild boars, etc. And Hal was never captured.

When World War II first started, Hal worked as a mechanic for a defense company on war equipment and old aircraft equipment. Hal went to Manhattan to work on them and eventually left NY to go to war. Hal feels that he accomplished a lot and feels good about his accomplishments and that the US did the right thing. After the war, Hal got a job in the vending machine industry making jukeboxes, and was still a mechanic. Hal also worked manufacturing vending machines for good part of his life and supervised 72 employees. His wife Marilyn used to work for him and has been married for 46 years with no children. Hal has lived in Charlotte for 28 years, 3 ½ yrs in Charleston and 3 yrs in Maryland.

Ed Comiskey

Command Sergeant Major with the U.S. Army for 28 yrs.

Social Security number was used as our serial #

Wife, Mary, died in 1984

Currently resides in Charlotte, but was born in Massachusetts

March 1940 turned 18 and went to the National Guard unit. In June 1940 graduated college. September 1940 went to Army to protect the Boston Harbor. Started in 1940 in Europe, then 2 tours in Korea, Thailand and in the U.S.

Started off as a company clerk then became company administrator.

During his assignment he did not kill any Germans. Ed was part of a non-combatant unit that gathered intelligence on Germans.

Experiences:

His Good experiences were in the administration

His Bad experiences were when he had visited Buchenwald to see the German concentration camp and go through camp to see what took place there. Prisoners included Jewish boys, Yugoslavians and Czechs and interviewed the people that were still there.

In U.S.

Normal – military post. Everyday experience.

3 children, son and daughter are living, but we they lost one child 13 yrs ago.

He felt he did a good job in the Army and was glad to have had a part in stopping Hitler who Ed described as a maniac. It was a good move to go for Hitler, but he is still sorry for the thousands of deaths on D-Day. They did what they were required to do and Ed felt like he did what he had to do.

1945 discharged from Army in Massachusetts for the first time.

Then went to training for the undertaking business. Worked for McLowens

Funeral Homes as an embalmer but returned to National Guard/Army in 1952.

Volunteered to go back to Army and was put as the Master Sergeant there.

How did you feel about the concentration camp? Ed was mad. There were body parts and dead bodies lying around and ovens found with human bones. It was nothing anyone would believe. “Bitch of Buchenwald” , as she was called, cut tattoos off of the people’s skin to make lamp shades.

Steve Ferraro

-Rank Cadet

-Serial- 3294820

-US Army Air Force

Steve Ferraro lived in Brooklyn NY and was married to his wife Estelle. Steve has been many places in his lifetime. He has been to Newfoundland, Ireland, Greenland, Scotland, Paris, Berlin, Casa Blanca, Hawaii, Guam, Philippines, and Japan twice. Steve had never fired a gun until his basic training. Steve wanted to be a fighter pilot. He soon learned just how many tests a pilot has to take. He flew his 1st plane in Fort Myers with his instructor after only 8 lessons with an instructor; Steve was now able to fly solo. Steve went through a lot of sticky situations when in the pilot seat. Steve was in Newfoundland when he hit a snowstorm and dove. The plane reached about 1000 ft. before Steve could straighten it out. After the war Steve decided not to go to college. He decided to help his family for \$20 a week. Steve really wanted to be a toolmaker and learned the trade in about 3 years. Steve moved to Charlotte in 1958 and had 59 years of married life. In all, Steve had mixed emotions about the war but overall he believes that what he did was right.

Francis (Frank) T. Hallett

Nickname: Mickey
US Army Private
Serial Number 42271423
Wife's Name: Alice
Charlotte, NC

Mickey was drafted into the U. S. ARMY for 15 months in January 1946 and sent to Fort Hancock in N.J. for basic training. He also trained as a Medium Tank Crewman here as part of the Tank Training Company. Mickey was then assigned to Camp Kilner, N.J. for deployment to Italy as replacement personnel. At the last moment, he was selected to participate in a new concept in military communications as part of the 61 Signal Battalion, III Corps at Camp Polk in Louisiana working with mobile power generating equipment. At the end of 1946, the Army abandoned the idea and Mickey was assigned to Fort Sam Houston in Texas for the Headquarters Company of the Fourth Army as a heavy equipment driver.

Describing his experiences at home before the war, Mickey recalls “growing up in New York City didn't present too much of a problem. We had the streets as our playground and the only equipment we needed was a piece of chalk, a broom handle, Spalding ball, football, etc. Money was not a problem everyone worked but there were not too many places to spend your money. In fact in my senior year in High School I worked for Emerson Radio in their electroplating department making the chemical solutions for plating. The main inconveniences were food, gasoline and clothing. Most of this was rationed.”

When asked about the U.S. Role in the war, Mickey said “There is little doubt that Germany, Italy and Japan wanted to destroy the free world and impose their dictatorial government. They were pretty close to succeeding but made the mistake of bringing the US into the war. After a rocky start that lasted a few months, the US got it together and led what was left of the European forces to victory. How do I feel about this? Besides achieving its objective, the US established such a massive war effort (manpower, production and innovation) that demonstrates to me the patriotism, spirit and will of its citizens to overcome the challenge that I hope exists today (I'm not too sure).”

When asked if he had any regrets, Mickey responded, “This is hard to answer. You are only a minute piece in a gigantic puzzle. I did my job to the best of my ability and hopefully this effort contributed to the over-all success.”

After his discharge in 1947 Mickey graduated from college (1951) thanks to the GI Bill. After a few smaller jobs, he was employed by Curtiss-Wright Corporation on the corporate staff. After Curtiss-Wright he worked for Robert Bosch Corporation, Milo Electronics and finally Sandoz Chemicals from which he retired after 25 years. At all these jobs he practiced his chosen career in advertising and public relations. He has spent his whole working life in the New York metropolitan area and Charlotte, NC. His work has required much travel in several European countries. Mickey has been married to his wife Alice since 1955 and they have five children.

Deacon Joe Mack

Joe Mack

Wife's name: Helen Mack (deceased 2007)

Born in Endicott, N.Y. (Home of IBM)

Army Staff Sergeant 28th Infantry

Serial #: 3284915

Drafted on 04/05/1943 and completed 29 Months (4/5/43-9/19/45)

Went to St. Louis, MO for basic training. The 28th Infantry division, which became known as the "Bloody Bucket Division", was part of convoy that was sailing to England to prepare for the D-Day invasion of Normandy. The convoy was repeatedly attacked by German submarines and had to use depth chargers to distract the subs. Went to Normandy, Northern France, Central Europe, Ardennes, and Rhine Land. Mr. Mack was in the Battle of the Bulge. In this battle, Mr. Mack was in a foxhole during a German attack and an 88 tank shell was shot and landed right next to him. And, luckily, it was a dud. Another thing that happened to him was during another battle. Him and one of his war buddies were behind a hedgerow. Wanted to hit the tank with the bazooka they had but the tank broke through. He dove into a foxhole just as an American Pilot eliminated the tank. In some of the battles that he was the 1st Scout, Squad Leader and eventually a Platoon leader. During the war, Mr. Mack also had to battle the weather. Especially during the Battle of the Bulge. They didn't even have the proper winter gear, no heated tents for the command posts, ammunition was low and k-rations were minimal, which kept the soldiers "lean and mean". At times of battle, your adrenaline was flowing and the months of training kicked in and reactions were automatic. It was often kill or be killed. Mr. Mack was also part of squad that had freed one of the concentration camps. Some of the lighter moments were when he was on a patrol, he was observing 2 German soldiers as they entered a farmhouse. He heard the sounds of a happy reunion and let the soldiers go. He also was able to meet and shake hands with General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was accompanied by Generals Patton, Montgomery and Bradley. Mr. Mack was discharged in 9/19/45 after 29 months of service. Some medals that he received were the Purple Heart, the Victory medal, the European Service Medal, Combat (infantry badge), and the Good Conduct Medal and was also put in for Bronze and Silver medals.

Before the war, he was in high school. He had a paper route for 19 cents an hour. He graduated high school. Then, he went to IBM and worked 40 hours a week. Mr. Mack was 17 years old when he started.

When asked if he had regrets, Joe said if he had the choice to go to war, he wouldn't of gone. But on the other hand, he thought it was a tremendous experience.

After the war, he went back to work for IBM. He got married and became a knight in 1946. He and his wife Helen had 6 children. He became a deacon in 1983. He became a deacon because he was giving back to God for all the goods things God did for Mr. Mack throughout the war. He retired from IBM in 1983. This past March, Deacon Joe received an award and was recognized for his 25 years of service for the church in Charlotte and New York. Unfortunately Helen, his wife of 60 years, passed away last year.

Wally Mason

Rank: Army T4

Serial Number: 32762158

Spouse: Margaret Mason

Place of Birth: Jersey City, New Jersey

Wally was in the United States Army for three years. He was inducted for an additional six months. Wally Mason first underwent infantry basic training in Georgia. After completing the course, he joined a convoy of 125 ships and crossed the Atlantic in approximately 21 days. His ship glided through the Straits of Gibraltar and Wally landed in North Africa. Here, he guarded 300 Italian prisoners of war for approximately two weeks with a rifle and no ammunition. Afterwards, Wally went aboard the HMT Rohna in the Mediterranean as an infantry combatant, and was then asked to volunteer as a gun crew member. On the ship, he was designated to a massive 12-lb gun managed by a British officer. During this period of time, the HMT Rohna was a part of a 26 British convoy, and unknown airplanes were already airborne above.

Wally recalls Thanksgiving Day upon the ship. Apparently, the British did not celebrate the holiday, so for Thanksgiving dinner Wally received a warm heap of turkey mush and hard biscuits. The next day, 30 German airplanes were observed above the convoy before any warnings emerged. Within moments, the planes began dropping bombs on the convoy and the assault began. The HMT Rohna battled the airplanes for approximately 30 minutes, and then it hit. Wally observed a small plane cross the ship and drop a guided missile. The missile struck the starboard side and exploded with a force of over 1000 lbs of TNT. The missile blew a clean hole through to the other side of the ship. 500 crew members were killed instantly upon the impact of the missile.

Everyone subsequently went under deck to avoid the assault. After approximately 30 minutes, 8 bombers had been shot down, but it was then announced for all to abandon ship. The wooden structure above caught fire from the explosion, and all communications eventually died. Wally was then told by the British officer to abandon the ship. Upon reaching the tilting deck, Wally attempted to assist others “frozen” to the deck. Eventually, however, he released his life vest and followed his officer on a rope down the 20 ft. drop. The ship sank at approximately 6:00, and the great vortex dragged Wally towards the ship. Wally latched on to the rope and struggled to get his combat boots off. With the boots removed, Wally was finally able to escape the vortex of the ship.

As Wally remained afloat in the water, the convoy continued to move, and German planes began strafing over the water to shoot down stragglers. Several dead bodies and pieces of debris floated about the water. Wally attempted to avoid large groups in his struggle to remain alive. Eventually the planes departed as the darkness approached, and Wally supported himself with a hatch cover, alongside an estimated eight others. During the night, several individuals tragically let go of the hatch.

Wally remained within the water for almost twelve hours before rescue arrived. That morning, Wally recalls that a vast cargo net was thrown over the ship towards the hatch door. Four individuals still remained, and all let go to grasp the net. It was a difficult struggle to ascend the side of the ship and Wally nearly fell from the net with exhaustion. He exalts a British officer aboard the ship for assisting him, as otherwise he may not remain alive today.

Safely aboard the ship, Wally was stripped of his drenched clothes and was declared to have been suffering from hypothermia. He was given civilian clothing to replace his uniform. Wally was taken aboard the British ship to Phillippeville, North Africa. Here, he was issued a British uniform, which he wore for two weeks until he reached American lines.

Immediately Wally was put on another British convoy that traveled through the Red Sea to reach Bombay, India. From here, he traveled to Ledo, India to prepare the Ledo Road. The road was prepared to form connections to better combat Japan. Here, Wally Mason spent two years in a jungle environment, and transferred from being an infantry soldier to becoming an engineer.

Upon arriving home in America, Wally almost instantly went to work as an automotive mechanic within a week. After the war, Wally settled into a fulfilling life. He has been Buick mechanic, has opened up an automotive repair garage, and has been an IBM employee.

Wally feels that overall, America was able to accomplish a great success, yet the war could have been conducted with greater organization. Wally also feels satisfied with his personal accomplishments during the course of the war.

Edward Servicky

Ed Servicky

Wife's Name: Helen Servicky

Born in Cleveland, Ohio

Navy Coxswain

Serial #: 8575124

Ed was drafted into the Navy in 1942 and finished basic training in Great Lakes, Illinois. He was in San Diego, CA where he trained at the Land Craft School and proceeded to the Amphibious base in Oahu, Hawaii.

Stationed in Pacific Theatre in the Gilbert Islands and spent a lot time in Tarawa on Betio Islands. When in Tarawa, they had a loss of 1000 Marines, and killed 4500 Japanese. Pill boxes provided cover from bombings. Mr. Servicky provided supplies from ship to the shore. Ed recalls one night the troops were trying to relax and watch a movie but the Japs were firing down on the hall and destroyed the tent. He also talked about searching for Cat's Eyes in the water when an octopus engulfed his arm as he was reaching into the water. At the end of the war, Ed did not have enough points to be discharged and had to complete points at Guantanamo Bay which is known as Gitmo. Ed was discharged in 1946. Mr. Servicky said there were no regrets when he was in the war. He liked the Navy experience and thought of it as a stepping stone.

Before the war, Ed lived in Cleveland, Ohio and stayed with his brother John and worked in factories. Helen recalls that leading up to and during the war there were rationing of milk, butter, flour and powdered milk. People would wait in long lines for hours to be able to get a fresh stick of butter. If you were to get gas you were provided A, B and C stickers.

After the war, he stayed with his brother and worked for a Cleveland press. He was a printer/press operator. Mr. Servicky used his G.I. Bill to buy a house. He also had a job with a Pontiac dealer for 30 years. Left Cleveland and came to Charlotte, N.C. in 1978. He and Helen have 5 children, 4 boys and 1 girl. He joined the Knights of Columbus 20 years ago in 1988. They have 8 grandchildren and one great grandchild. Ed retired one year ago in 2007.

Ed Serwin

- Army Private First Class
- Serial Number: 36830568
- Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Married to Elizabeth (Betty)

Ed was first drafted into the Army at 18 years old, two months after graduating from high school. He began his basic training in Portland, Oregon. Months later, he was transferred to San Diego. He went into the signal corps starting with 570th Signal. Then he went into the new 593rd JASCO. The 593rd JASCO, formed in 1943, was meant to supply artillery fire for the Navy. They would also radio ships and give coordinates to where the artillery should hit. As you could have guessed, these men were considered primary targets of the enemy. Ed was part of the first wave in the Pacific theater on beaches when the LST's (Land-Ship Transports) would dock. His task was to shoot flares for protection. LST's were ships that would carry at least 100 GI's.

Starting from basic training, Ed traveled to Oahu, Maui, Leyte Gulf, New Guinea, Marshall Islands and Okinawa. Ed's worst experience in the Army was on Easter Sunday, 1945 when the U.S. landed in Okinawa, Japan with over 40 LST's. This was the largest amphibious invasion of the entire Pacific campaign. On June 14 when they headed south, the Japanese attacked. They never spotted the Japanese because they would hide in the trees. Ed and the rest of the men still standing won the battle of Okinawa. Ed was then transferred to Luzon Island for additional training preparing for an invasion of Japan. In August 1945, after the European conflict had ended, Ed received the good conduct medal. In 2001, Ed also received a Presidential Unit Citation.

When Ed came out of the Army, he took advantage of the GI Bill and went back to school in Salt Lake City and studied for accounting. This is where he met his wife Betty. He also worked selling tractors and water meters. He worked at Libby's Foods for 10 years which was eventually sold to Nestles. He continued to travel with his job moving to Charlotte, Atlanta, Memphis, Houston, Kansas City Chicago and back to Charlotte. In 1963, Ed became a Knight of Columbus in Memphis, TN and has been one for 43 years. He retired in 1992.

Ed said, "I am glad I helped out with the war, someone had to do it."

James Shields

- Army Private First Class
- Serial Number 32848707
- Artillery Division
- Originally from Liberty, N.Y.

James Shields was 19 when he was drafted in March 1943. He entered the army and received the serial number 32848707. He completed his basic training at Fort Dix in New Jersey. Following basic, he was first stationed at Fort Bragg with the radio school and played in the band there before being shipped off to Northern Ireland for training. From there he went to Normandy where he landed 30 days after D-Day in DIVARTY (Artillery Division) in the radio section. They were also paired with the 5th Infantry Division among several other divisions including some support outfit. Altogether they formed the 20th Corp. From Normandy they advanced towards Germany.

Mr. Shields remembered a few things about being in the radio unit such as the privilege of using the General's kitchen to make breakfast. He was part of division HQ which was a mobile command post. He also recalled riding in the back of a truck and not paying attention when a bunch of tanks fired. The Allied tanks were firing on enemy positions and their truck was so close he fell out as the tanks fired! He also recalled working with the FFI (French Freedom Fighters) who helped remove Germans from their positions as they liberated small French towns while they moved towards Germany. He was also part of Patton's 3rd Army who was known for its participation in the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne, Belgium.

After the war the entire division was scheduled to move on to the Pacific theater, but Jim had come down with some foot fungus after using the showers. He recalls the doctors using boric acid to kill the fungus but somehow the acid got in his eyes. This cycle continued a couple of times until he was released from the hospital three months later in September 1945. Before he went into the hospital, he had two German Lugers, one from 1917 and another from 1937. When he was released, both guns had been removed and he never saw them again.

Before the war, Jim recalls some economic changes in the country such as rationing of gasoline. Most people were given 5 gallon stickers but if you had a specific job, you could get two 5 gallon stickers. After an honorable discharge, he took advantage of the GI Bill and went to Ryder College in Trenton, N.J. After graduating, he worked in his hometown of Liberty, N.Y. before starting his 35 year career with IBM in the accounting department. He married Dorothy in 1948 and moved to Charlotte in 1981. He retired from IBM in 1987, joined the Knights of Columbus in 1988 and became a charter member of the th Degree Assembly. Jim still lives here in Charlotte, N.C.

Counselors' Summary

At the risk of sounding redundant, we would like to thank all of the veterans that participated in this project. Additionally, we would like to thank all veterans who have served our country in any way, during wartime or during peacetime. Our goal when we presented this project to the Squires was to bring awareness to these young men the sacrifices that have been made to preserve the freedom we all enjoy today.

We focused on the WWII veterans for several reasons. First, we wanted to get a verbal recollection from the veterans themselves. We can all recall history classes and textbooks where dates and foreign places were jammed into our memory for the sake of passing the next test. Hearing it first hand from a veteran on how it felt to be on a sinking ship in the Mediterranean or being in a foxhole as the enemy is firing on your position is something that paints a entirely different picture. Secondly, it is sad to say but these veterans are dying at a rapid rate. It is reported that worldwide, we are losing about 1,000 WWII veterans a day. When we first started looking into this project in November 2007, we had 16 WWII veterans in our council. Since then Guy Forcucci and Walter Karasiewicz, a long time SJN parishioner and Past Grand Knight of our council, have passed away.

Due to various health issues, we were only able to interview ten of the veterans on our list. We thought it would be a great tribute to all of these Knights to document their experiences and perspectives while we can. Additionally, we wanted these young men to see the differences of "The Greatest Generation" compared to their own. At the time of the war, some of the veterans themselves were only a couple of years older than the Squires who conducted these interviews. Their daily lives back then were so much different from the lives of our young men today with the increasing dependency on the internet and the rapid advancement of today's technology.

Personally, we found this project to be very fulfilling. Many of the men you see weekly in church or monthly at Knights meetings are heroes of their generation, but when you ask them they say that the heroes are the ones who did not make it home. As this project was evolving from the planning stage to the actual interviews, several of the Squires were reluctant participants. As these generous veterans started opening up and sharing their stories and experiences, these same Squires were not only excited about what they were learning but they were disappointed that the interviews were over.

Squire Counselors: Brother Knights Dan O'Sullivan and Tony D'Angelo