

VE Day in Baraboo in 1945 was Muted

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It would have been inconceivable 72 years ago, but the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, “A Date Which Will Live in Infamy”, passed last week with little recognition. It is presumed that the 75th Anniversary in 2016 will properly recall the death of some 2400 Americans in a short hour or so. Some 1100 more men were injured and ten ships lost, along with 300 planes.

World War II has countless memorable days for combat veterans, but on a national scale at least four stand out. Pearl Harbor Day is one of course, as is D-Day (6-6-44). Also seminal are VE Day (5-8-45) and VJ Day (8-15-45). At least one of those days is seared into the memory of the service man of that generation from his own personal experience, whether combat veteran or not.

As for the general population, VE (Victory in Europe) Day is especially significant, for it gave the first real assurance that victory was possible in Europe, though a similar conquest of Japan might still take years. What a day that would be—and was—when the atomic bomb brought an early Peace.

For those on or near the battlefield on VE day, the victory seemed to be celebrated by the heavens. This was evidenced in the form of seemingly millions of tracer bullets streaming their way across the night sky. In at least one tent encampment in Wurzburg, Very Pistols were used to produce flares drifting to the ground from small parachutes.

The VE Celebration in Baraboo

Despite the significant victory over Hitler’s empire in fortress Europe, The Pacific Combat Zone remained. The existence of the atomic bomb was unknown even to president Truman when he was Vice-President. It was assumed that the Japanese would continue to fight to the death for even the slightest piece of land, and it appeared that there were years of combat ahead.

As a result Baraboo and apparently Sauk County, heavily invested in explosive production, paused but briefly to mark the significant turning point in Europe. True, church bells rang incessantly, and sirens blew on occasion that day. In anticipation, the Chamber of

Commerce had distributed signs "Closed for the Day" for the expected victory, and thankfully the taverns closed also.

It being spring, one storekeeper suggested it would be a good day to work in your Victory Garden. School as not dismissed, but assemblies were called. Superintendent Gordon Willson spoke solemnly about BHS students who had made the supreme sacrifice to make this day possible. Assemblies were also called to listen to radio speeches by President Truman and Prime Minister Churchill.

VE Day in Schools, Badger

Superintendent Willson listed by name well over a dozen casualties among the young men who had recently graduated. The most recent casualty that spring was Harlan Page, of whom we have written. Not yet known was the death of Otto Baumgarten of which we have also reported. Willson said we should walk proudly but humbly as the heirs of Washington and Lincoln, and also of school comrades who had given their lives in the current conflict.

At the nearby Badger Ordnance Plant, Major Pruden told the employees "Let's celebrate Victory in Europe by going all out and finish Japan. We have not forgotten Bataan and the Death March", he said.

The closing of the taverns was of interest, forestalling a victory celebration fueled more by alcohol than by patriotism. Police Chief J.W. Nietz reported that "the least number of drunks the city has entertained in many a night. Just one, in fact, and he's an old customer."

Below: Sometime after WWI, Servicemen received, a chance to parade:

