

From Work, to War: RHS Witnesses the 75th Anniversary Close of WWII

On this 75th Anniversary of the Japanese surrender in World War II, the Rockbridge Historical Society shares particular tribute here to the Rockbridge men and women who served. In looking back to the war's close, RHS is also extending the commemorations through a series of 'pop-up' exhibits in local Rockbridge libraries, on display through September. See RockbridgeHistory.org for more in-depth profiles and images from its running virtual series. This article is written by RHS Executive Director, Eric Wilson.

Uncertain, risky, bloody to its nuclear end, World War II ended 75 years ago today, Sep. 2, 1945, when Japan's imperial delegation formally signed its surrender on the deck of the battleship U.S.S. Missouri.

As readily recalled from Rockbridge neighbors and family, one late local WWII veteran, William 'Dick' Cash, was among the U.S. servicemen on that boat, on that historic day.



Japanese Delegation surrendering on the deck of the battleship USS Missouri, Sep.2, 1945, formally ending WW II. Arnold's Valley native William 'Dick' Cash was among the U.S. soldiers aboard.

Over 16 million Americans served in the largest global war on record. Over 350,000 women, beginning to show their own collective force. Among the 417,000 United States military deaths accounted for: 75 were lost from Rockbridge-Lexington (both registers jurisdictionally combined, at the time). 25 from Buena Vista, distinctly named at the [Virginia War Memorial's](#) chronicling of all Virginia's war dead: by each city and county, within this war, and then each campaign beyond.



Virginia War Memorial, Richmond: Buena Vista's 25 Dead, from WWII

From a local history perspective, it's a pointed but important challenge to reckon with the wide and long-written span of wartime histories, while chronicling them in new, meaningful, and memorable ways.

Other organizations and media can best frame the largest sweeps: Ken Burns' 14-hour PBS series, bluntly titled "[The War](#)"; the [National World War II Museum](#) in New Orleans, or the long-negotiated [World War II Memorial](#) strategically aligned between the Washington and Lincoln Memorials, on Washington DC's National Mall; the [National Museum of the United States Army](#) that just opened this June, in Fairfax.

But rather than tell the story of that global war in its most global, comprehensive scale, a local historical society brings other capacities and value. Whether through familiar connections - through new or half-known cues to things nearby - these turns to the past don't just invite personal intimacy, individual profiles. They also spotlight local networks. These stories and histories are sourced and accessed at the level of community, no less than families and the neighboring social institutions still grounded here, even as they've broadly evolved over the better part of a century's arc.

To look to a different register, in other words, is not merely tell the story of the memorial dead, but of a community honoring its living: hoping for the best, while celebrating the collective impact they'd already had on the homefront, within the war's first year. That commemorative witness isn't just the assembly of contemporary historians. It's also the product, even at the time, of a driven, local workforce.



PRESENTATION
of
THE ARMY-NAVY AWARD FOR
EXCELLENCE IN WAR PRODUCTION

to
THE MEN AND WOMEN

of the
BLUERIDGE COMPANY, INC.
GLASGOW, ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY, VIRGINIA

February 10, 1943



OUR MEN AND WOMEN IN THE ARMED FORCES

Lawrence Albertoli
Carl Anderson
Robert Ayres

Curtis Beard
Roxey Beard
Preston Birmingham
Leonard Blackwell
Lee Blankenship
Alvah Brads
Hugh Braford
Harry Bright

James Caldwell
Hubert Camden
Frank Campbell, Jr.
William F. Campbell
Edward Cash
Thomas Childress
Cecil Clark
Kenneth Clatterbaugh
A. Gordon Claytor
Eugene Claytor
Melvin Claytor
Phillip Claytor
Talmadge Claytor
Charles Coffey
Winfred Coleman
Joseph Comer
Allen Covington
Theodore Craft

Russell Dale
Adolphus Davis
Cecil Davis
Howard Davis
William Dickinson, Jr.
Everett Dixon
George Dixon
Lawrence Dixon
James Donald
Clayton Douglas
Elmer Driscoll

Harold Eastridge
Creighton Ehler
John Ellington
Charles Entsminger
Jennings Entsminger
Edward Ewers

Earl Fainter
James Falls, Jr.
Vance Fezell
Kenneth Ferguson
Rodney Ferguson
Samuel Ferguson
Everett Fix
Henry Fix
Chester Flint
Osbey Flint
William Flint
Edward Floyd
Wayne Lee Foltz

Frank Garrett
Rockford Gearhart
Francis Gilkerson
Poague Ginger
James Gippone
Edward Green
Richard Gregory
Morris Grim

Edward Hall
Robert Hall
Douglas Harris
Charles Hartwill
Cecil Hickman
James Hickman
Jesse Higginbotham
Rufus Higginbotham
Travis Hill
George Horton
Carl Hostetter
Thomas Hostetter
Eugene Hotinger
James Hubbard
Floyd Huffman
Leo Huffman
Robert Huffman
Warren Huffman
William Hunt
John Hunter
Samuel Hurt

Leslie Irvine

Thomas Janney
Robert Allen Johnson
Staurd Johnson
Theodore Jones

Aubrey Keller
Thomas Kerr

Francis Larew
Ray Lavinder
Chester Layman
Graham Leech
Odell Lineberry
Joseph Lucas
Garland Luckado
John Lynn

Harry Maddox
James L. Manspile
Richard Martin
Raymond Mays
Otha Meeks
Christian Merritt
Leroy Miller
Andrew Moore
Hunter Moore
James Moore
Joseph S. Moore
Lawrence Moore
Willie Moore
Thomas Moran
Kenton Morris
Fred Murispagh

Coleman Nicely
Johnnie Nicely
Franklin Nixon

Ralph Ogden

Lewis T. Painter
William E. Painter
Robert Parker
Joseph Parrent
Roy Parrent
Harold Paxton
Kent Perry, Jr.
Harry Ponton
Mary Jane Powell
Charlie Prease

Karl Radford
Loyd Radford
William Ramsey
Roy Reid
Dell Reynolds
Preston Reynolds
Calvin Rice
Nelson Rice
Dean Routon

Elzie Scott
Hull Scott
Samuel Shafter
Addison Siler
George Silvea, Jr.

Howard Slough, Jr.
Ralph Slough
Russell Smedley, Jr.
Owen Smith
Robert L. Smith
Vaughn Smith
Bernard Snead, Jr.
Elmer Staton
Lester Staton
William Stoltz
Kayece Strawbridge
Charles Swink

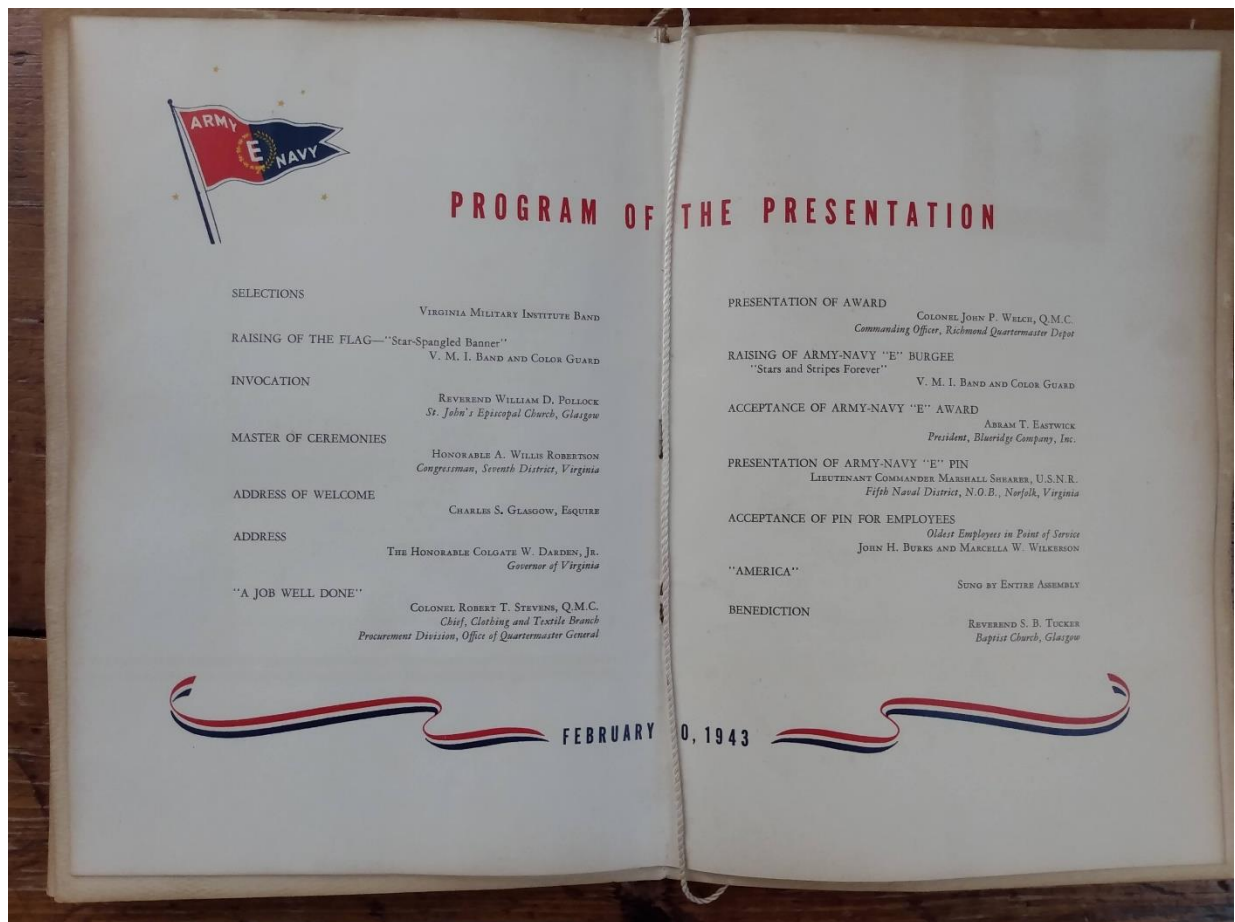
Glen Tolley, Jr.
William A. Tolley
Roy Tomlinson
Hugh Tooley
Raymond Trail
Hilton Tuck
Lloyd Walker
Robert Walker
Owen Watkins
Reaford Watkins
Eldridge Watts
James N. Watts, Jr.
Abraham Waugh
Augustus Whitten
Roger Wilhelm
Bruce Williams
John R. Wilson
Isaac Woodson, Jr.
Charles Worley



Listing of the 178 men and women who'd worked for James Lees & Sons Blueridge Division, then serving in WWII, as of Feb. 1943. Featured in this ceremonial program for the company's Wartime Production Award.

Printed here is a different kind of document relative to those conventionally found in bequests of family papers and mementos: these, from Natural Bridge High '41 and [USAAF Airman Sgt. Leroy Miller](#). “Our Men and Women in the Armed Forces” – 178 to be precise, at the time of its printing – doesn’t draw from school annuals, or a countywide census. These four columns, perfectly balanced – 89 names each on both sides of this ceremonial program’s centerfold – embody, in many senses of the word, a corporation. A corpus of young Rockbridge workers; a corps -- newly off to war – of local residents being recognized for the foundation they’d already set for their company’s and country’s economic boom. Their corporate discipline and habits already crucial to the needs of homefront; their skills and flexibilities now crucially adapted to combat and support.

The list steers us specifically to one place, and one point in time: a Blueridge Company Award Ceremony for Wartime Production, in Glasgow, February 1943, fourteen months after Pearl Harbor. Virginia Governor Colgate Darden, future U.S. Senator A. Willis Robertson were among the dignitaries on hand to salute the commercial and industrial contributions to the wartime economy by the local Blueridge Division of James Lees & Sons Carpets: an enterprise that’s anchored the Rockbridge community for generations.



In an important sense though, while trying to concentrate and weave together these names into more recognizable place ... our sense of their lived place has already shifted. Because the 178 men and women listed cued here are no longer working at the plant, in Glasgow. They’ve already deployed: representing their company, their community, their country across various branches of service, types of duty, and ports of call. Not all of them would return.

For us, today, this roll-call inevitably heralds a look back to the passing of 'The Greatest Generation,' their collective twilight dwindling with the loss of approximately 250 American veterans, per day. But glimpsed here in 1943, credited by their employers, their names feel vital, more personally recalled by the company bulletin board that would post letters and updates sent from those training and fighting across the globe, back to colleagues and friends at the plant.

To hone in on this cohort is not to overlook the many more who served from greater Rockbridge, who represented their own workplaces and schools, churches and families. Within months though – we now know from hindsight, and from other more tragic records kept, and lists compiled – some of these names would soon mark gravestones.

One of them was Leroy Miller, his posthumous Purple Heart sent to his family on Plank Road after his bomber was shot down over Belgium, and later honored as part of a special December 1946 Memorial Service for the seven Blueridge employees who died during the war. As WW II's landmark 75th Anniversary commemorations extend through the year, Miller stands as one of the featured soldiers in a Rockbridge Historical Society exhibit installed at the Glasgow Library: near his pre-war worksite, high school, and home: one of four brothers to have served, and the only one not to return.

In fuller family complement, even, five Glasgow sons of Mr.&Mrs. C.L. Claytor served in the War, some of them similarly listed in the Blueridge register themselves. Two would die in Europe, buried next to each other in France, their loss noted in the obituaries for Sgt. Eugene and PFC Elwood Claytor, flanking Leroy Miller's, taped to the last page of a 1939 NBHS yearbook.



[In a special coincidence of timing, this densely annotated yearbook was donated to RHS this summer, after being kept with care by Helen Cash, widow to Dick Cash: the serviceman noted above, who survived to see the war's concluding signature aboard its iconic battleship].

Others would live long, and locally. Including another Claytor brother, Talmadge, who earned the French Legion of Honor while serving in the US Air Force Signal Corps, then returned home to work once more at James Lees, as would many other veterans. A lifelong resident of Buena Vista, he only belatedly received his due military honors, his earned bronze and silver stars presented to him just four days before he died, age 97 ([as profiled in the News-Gazette last April](#)).

Soldiering on for even a few years further, PFC Everett Dixon would not only survive being wounded four times. He eventually entered the ranks of Centenarians, as he kept steadily building on the foundations of a long American life. Dixon, too, is noted among the Blueridge Company's 1943 service roster, next to his brother George. Everett would serve as part of the 93rd Infantry Division, the only African-American Division to serve in the Pacific (only after the War would President Truman desegregate the U.S. Armed Forces through Executive Order 9981, in 1948). As a military guard for a Japanese POW camp, Everett would earn four Bronze Stars, witnessing his repeated heroism. Returning home to southern Rockbridge, he worked in construction, at the James Lees plant and elsewhere; for decades, he worked in the maintenance department at W&L, also remembered warmly as an events driver there, in memorial tributes.

Dixon died in March, 2020, having celebrated his 100th birthday the previous October, with family and Glasgow neighbors gathered in the home that he built, with his own hands ([as chronicled in the News-Gazette in October 2019](#)).



Eric Wilson speaks with Everett Dixon, at his 100th Birthday Party in Glasgow, about his experiences in WW II, and growing up in pre-War Natural Bridge.

These are some of the people and social patterns that have emerged relative to RHS' continued, current work: core attentions to local community networks, as they've evolved over four centuries of work, of war, of social warmth. But those attentions depend on your own, and your own distinct Rockbridge perspectives, footholds, and legacies.

Honing in from the overwhelming sweep of history's largest war, we ask readers and audiences:

Can you find the names, in these documents or exhibits, that bring memories of the era home to you, or to your families? Do you see relatives here?

Are there recognized names, perhaps unexpected, but quilted into the stories you've personally known, or heard more passingly mentioned, over time?

When you do spy out names in such litanies, or more singularly etched into local headstones or military or family cemeteries beyond, or those looking out to you from the eyes of living room portraits and scrapbooks: it's important that you consider means to share those stories in community contexts, to help illuminate others' interconnected lives, along with your own family legacies.

Oral histories, memorabilia, letters and photographs (whether in copies, or originals to be preserved) are all valued materials that can be newly featured in the types of displays now on offer in local libraries, and online through digital exhibits.



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RHS 75th Anniversary WWII Exhibit, Lexington Library, with Rockbridge Regional Library Director & RHS Board Member Julie Goyette, and RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson.

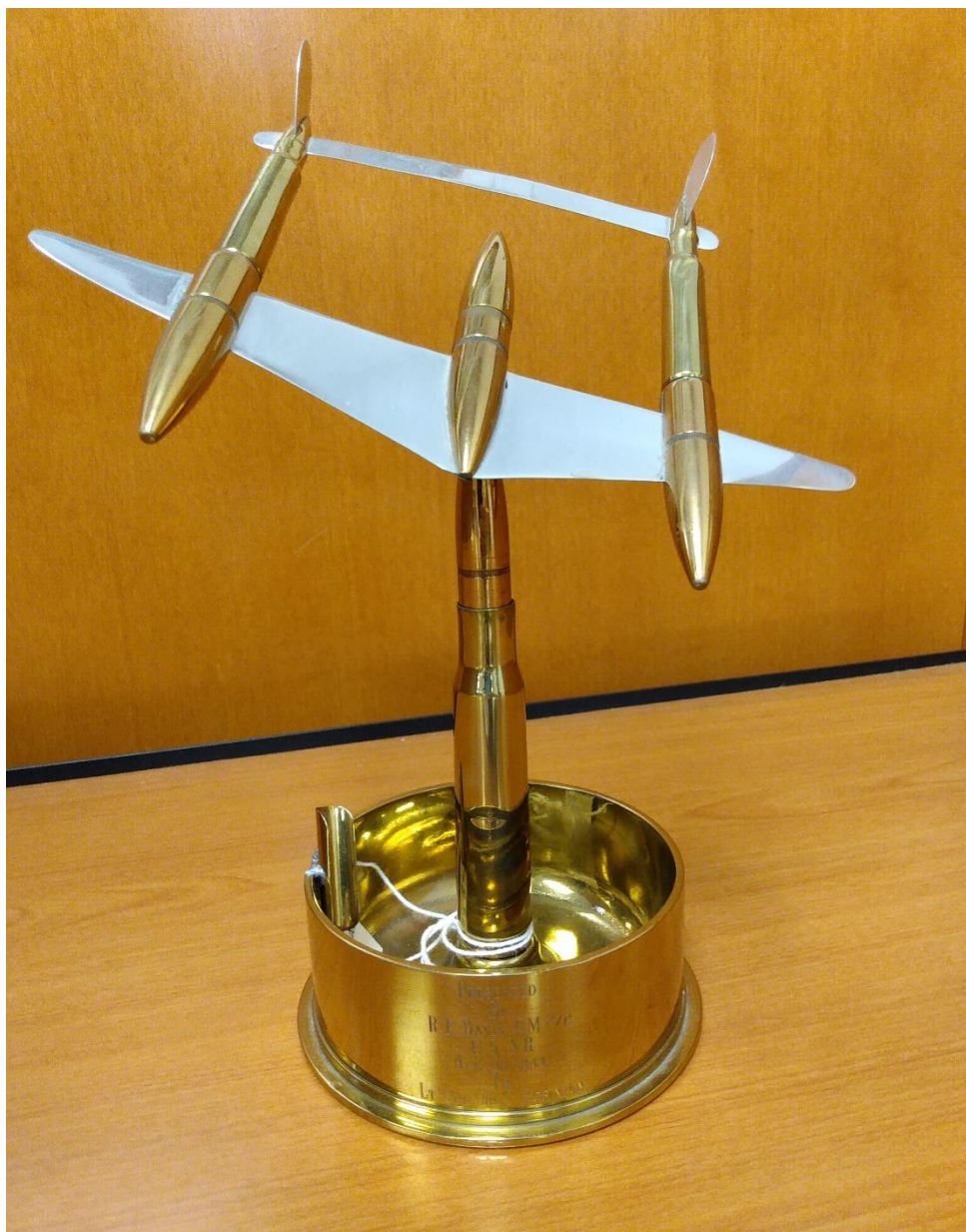
At least through September, with libraries now re-opened, make good time and space to explore some of these items, and associated histories, in more particular detail. The [RHS World War II Web-Portal](#) will cue you to some of the figures whose lives are featured in accessible scale, and telling detail, at the Lexington, Glasgow and Buena Vista branches.

RHS is grateful to library staff for helping to arrange this opportunity for community engagement, and also to the [George C. Marshall Museum](#) for its loan of some special objects and pictures to supplement these local and regional displays. In the Lexington library's entryway displays, large-format photographs show striking images taken by wartime aerial photographer Howard Hammersley (founder of [The Roanoke Times](#) photography department).



A second after this photo was taken, the damaged B-26 flipped over on its back and spun into the hills beyond the river.

In Glasgow, another aerial artifact from the Marshall collections looks even more arresting. This piece of ‘trench art’ was a commemorative tribute given to USN Lt. Edward Coyle Robinson (whose extended family’s ties reach deep into Rockbridge history). When the landing boat he was commanding found itself beached on a sandbar, unable to move during a Japanese attack, he directed his crew below for safety, staying topside with his gunner and shooting down a kamikaze plane strafing the scene. His gunner would fuse silver shards from the plane’s shrapnel with the bullets and shell casings brightly pictured here, to create a ‘memorial model’ for his leader. Its burnished beauty suggests it was never used as the ashtray it was also more practically crafted to be.



Please check the RRLIB website for current library hours, and contact RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org for more information on these exhibits and histories, or to share on the legacies of work, war, and community commitment that saw Rockbridge, and the United States, through the century’s defining war, 75 years ago.