

DOING THEIR DUTY

Vermonters served in the armed forces in every theater of World War II. They were present at every major action, from Pearl Harbor to the final occupation of Germany and Japan. Some Vermonters landed under heavy fire on the Normandy beach in France. Some flew bombers through flak-streaked skies over Germany. Some were truck drivers who carried food and ammunition or mechanics responsible for keeping the planes flying. Others were typists, cooks, and military policemen, or nursed the sick and wounded.

All knew moments of fear and uncertainty. All left behind their families and what they had been doing before the war.

In the tense months before Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called up the National Guard for duty. In March of 1941 young men from the Vermont Guard found themselves on active duty. The Vermont Guard's 172nd Infantry was sent to Camp Blanding, Florida, for training.

Vermont had always paid a bonus to its servicemen during past wars and wanted to do so now, but there was a hitch. We were not yet at war. So the Vermont legislature declared that a state of armed conflict existed on September 11, 1941. Some people took this to mean that Vermont was declaring war on Germany all by itself. But this was really done so that we could pay our guardsmen with state funds.

The 172nd Infantry sailed for New Zealand in October, 1942. They were part of the 43rd Division, commanded by General Leonard "Red" Wing of Rutland, and were known as the "Winged Victory" Division. In the Pacific Ocean their ship, *USS Calvin Coolidge*, struck a mine and sank off the New Hebrides Islands. There were two casualties, but the soldiers abandoned ship and made it to shore.

The 43rd fought in some of the toughest battles in the Pacific. They stormed and captured Rendova, the largest Japanese base in the New Georgia Islands, landing on the beach from amphibious vehicles. They

also fought at Munda, the Lingayen Gulf in the Philippines, and in the desperate battle for Guadalcanal.

After the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, many Vermonters rushed to enlist. Lindsay Donaldson was among the first. He left Brandon High School to join the army. Katherine Johnson, also of Brandon, became an army nurse and was one of thirteen women from that town in the service.

Not everyone who wanted to join had an easy time of it. Jerome L. Kelly of Montpelier was turned down by the U.S. Marines. He was underweight, only seventeen years old, and did not have his parents' permission. He went to Montreal and joined the Black Watch, a famous Scottish regiment of the Canadian army. He spent his eighteenth birthday marching on blistered feet, carrying a rifle and sixty-pound pack. To keep Kelly's spirits up during that march, the regimental piper played "Happy Birthday" on his bagpipes.

Some Vermonters, like the Reverend George Lansing of Gilman, enlisted, not to fight, but to help those who were fighting. When the *USS Dorchester* was torpedoed in the North Atlantic, Reverend Lansing was one of four chaplains who gave their life jackets to others and went down with the ship.

Many Vermonters saw service with the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division. They were elite troops, trained in skiing and mountaineering. In the early months of 1945, they led an attack across Italy. Fighting in the snowy Apennine Mountains, they pushed the Germans 112 miles to the Po River, forcing them to surrender.

By the end of the war, about 50,000 Vermonters had served in the armed services. 1,233 lost their lives and 2,637 were wounded. Today, on greens and parks, and in front of town halls and schools, monuments and plaques honor these men and women. There is a good chance that your town has a monument. There you can read the names of the men and women from your community who did their duty.