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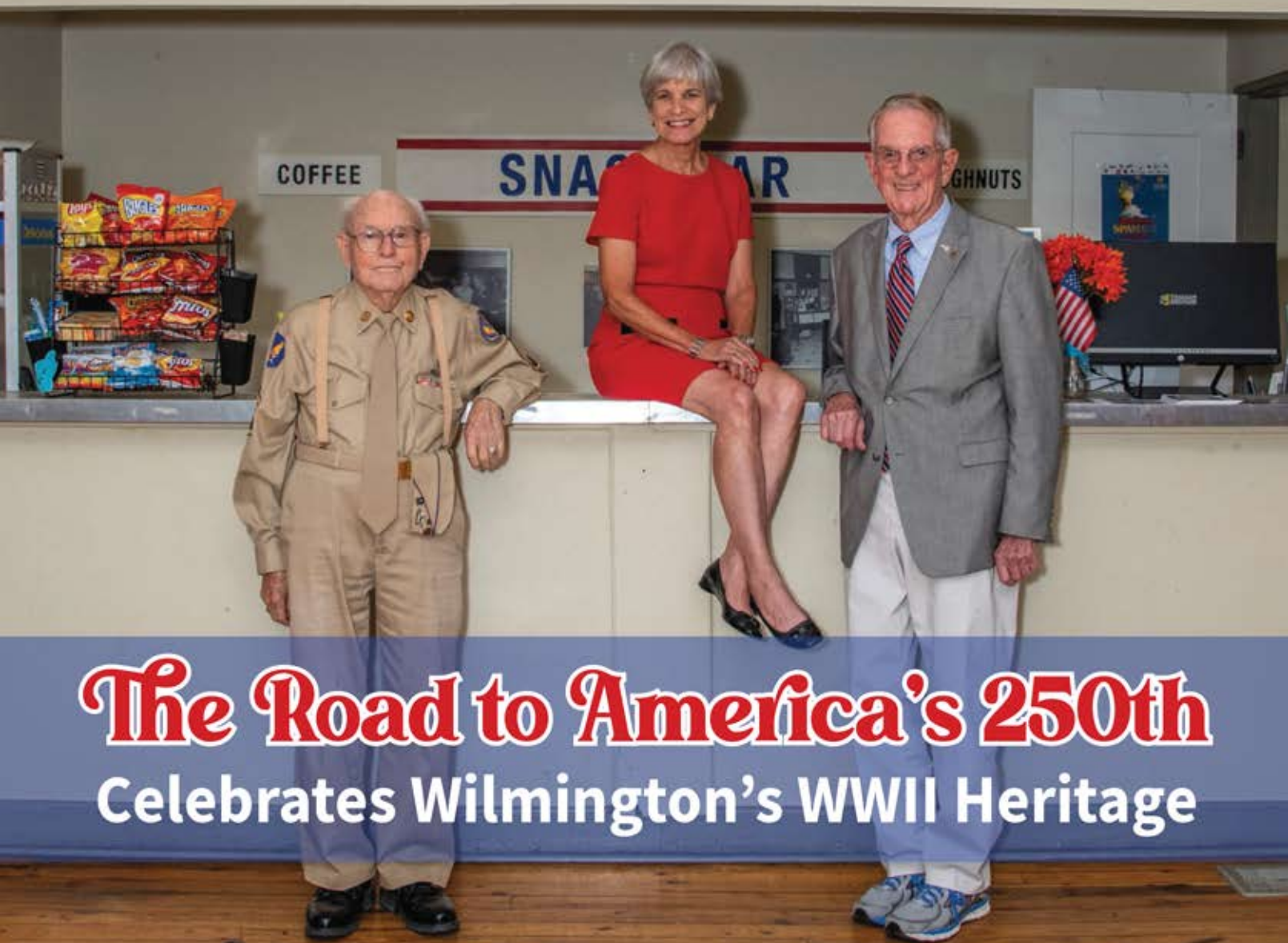
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The Road to America's 250th
Celebrates Wilmington's WWII Heritage

PHOTO BY DARIA AMATO PHOTOGRAPHER

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All content is due no later than the 1st of each month for the next month's edition (Example: January 1 for the February issue).
Due to very tight production schedules, we are not able to accept late content. Thank you for your understanding.

COVER PHOTO CAPTION:

During the Second World War, thousands of U.S. military personnel enjoyed refreshments, music and dancing at the USO in Wilmington. Pictured inside the Hannah Block Historic USO Community Arts Center are WWII Veteran Justin Kornegay, author Rona Simmons, and military historian Wilbur Jones Jr.

Dear Community Friends,

On a rainy August evening at Wilmington's historic Hannah Block USO Community Arts Center, something extraordinary happened. Eleven World War II Veterans—most wearing their original uniforms—took their seats of honor as our community gathered to celebrate the 80th anniversary of V-J Day. Among them sat 101-year-old Staff Sergeant Justin Kornegay and 92-year-old Navy WAVE Ida Levesque, living reminders of the courage and sacrifice that defined an entire generation.



These aren't just Veterans—they're living history. They're the teacher who spent decades in Cape Fear classrooms, the shipyard worker who helped launch Liberty ships right here on our river, and the Marine who survived some of the Pacific's bloodiest battles only to return and help build the vibrant coastal communities. As we approach Veterans Day on Nov. 11, their stories take on special significance. But there's an even bigger milestone ahead: America's 250th birthday celebrations in 2026. Thanks to the tireless work of local military historian Wilbur Jones Jr., our region holds the proud distinction of being America's first World War II Heritage City—a recognition that connects our wartime legacy directly to the

founding principles our nation will celebrate.

From the beaches of Iwo Jima to the classrooms of New Hanover High School, from convoy duty in the Atlantic to decades of service in our postal system, these eleven Veterans represent every branch of service and every corner of the Cape Fear region. This month's cover stories, "The Road to America's 250th Celebrates Wilmington's WWII Heritage" written by Larry Sackett and "The GI Generation: Cape Fear's WWII Veterans" authored by Rona Simmons, remind us that the greatest generation didn't just win a war. They fought to protect our freedoms; then came home and built the America we inherited. Want to know what happened to the ships that were built here? Wilbur Jones vividly describes life in the Port City in "A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs of a Wartime Boomtown" and "The Journey Continues: The World War II Homefront"—two of eight books he's written on the great war.

Join me in welcoming new sponsor, Pie's On Pizzeria and Grill, conveniently located at 4407 Oleander Drive. If you've not yet tried their 5-star rated pizzas, home-style recipes and southern Italian cuisine, you're in for a real treat. We thank Pie's On owner Brad Heaton and all of *Intracoastal Living's* sponsors who help us bring neighbors together. Whether you're planning beach walks with our Tide Chart or curious to learn about the return of the Pink Ribbon Luncheon, you'll find these stories with other family-friendly features listed in the Table of Contents on page five.

Happy October, Neighbors!

George Clarke

PUBLISHER, *Intracoastal Living*



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The Road to America's 250th Celebrates Wilmington's WWII Heritage

BY LARRY SACKETT, PHOTOS BY DARIA AMATO PHOTOGRAPHER, BILL RITNEOUR, PATRICIA ROSEMAN PHOTOGRAPHY AND COURTESY OF WILBUR JONES JR.

Commemorating the 250th anniversary of our country, part of America 250's mission is to reflect on our nation's past and showcase the rich tapestry of American stories. Seated with his daughter Ann Hunderhill (left), WWII Veteran SSGT Justin Kornegay recalls his wartime service to author Rona Simmons (right.) Standing behind them are Thalian Association Community Theatre executive director, and manager of the Hannah Block Historic USO Community Arts Center, Susan Habas, and military historian Wilbur Jones Jr.

On a rainy but warm evening, August 14, the Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center once again came alive with World War II voices, music, and memories.

Despite the weather, the energy inside never faltered as 11 Veterans of World War II—most in their original uniforms—arrived and were seated in the lobby before the ceremony began. Among them was 92-year-old Navy WAVE Ida Levesque, a former Navy medical assistant who attended with her daughter, embodying the living history the night was meant to honor.

Approximately 300 people filled the building for the standing-room-only commemoration, a testament to Wilmington's deep connection to its wartime past.



After enlisting in the US Navy WAVES, Ida Levesque was assigned to a Navy Hospital.

Music from the WWII era filled the room, with classics like "It Had to Be You" and "You'll Never Know" setting the atmosphere. The melodies transported attendees back to the 1940s, when the USO building at the corner of 2nd and Orange Streets pulsed with the rhythm of dances, departures and reunions.



Veterans of the Second World War, several in their 100s, are seated in the front row for the 80th Anniversary of V-J Day ceremony on August 14, 2025.

For retired Navy Captain Wilbur D. Jones, Jr., the evening was more than a commemoration—it was deeply personal. Two decades earlier, he had led the fight to save this historic building from demolition, a fact highlighted by Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo, who thanked Jones for "leading the effort to save this historic building."

This time, the occasion was the 80th anniversary of V-J Day, the night in 1945 when news of Japan's surrender brought an end to



A mural of the WWII Wilmington Home Front on the wall of the Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center

World War II. The event, hosted by the World War II Wilmington Home Front Heritage Coalition and its chairman, Wilbur Jones, was free to the public and open to Veterans, their families and anyone interested in the wartime era.



US Navy Captain (Retired) Wilbur Jones was the V-J Day 80th celebration emcee.

The V-J Day Commemoration

WWII Veterans, now in their early 100s, took seats of honor at the front. Students from local schools clustered nearby, listening intently as stories flowed—of basic training, convoy duty, ration books, and the jubilant celebrations that broke out.

The USO's walls were lined with wartime photographs and memorabilia, many drawn from local collections. Period music played softly between speeches, and the scent of coffee and baked goods drifted from the refreshment tables.

"Besides our Veterans, we invited all area folks who served on the home front or remembered living through the war," Jones told the audience. "We asked them to join in the festivities and relive the memories. We're also glad to see so many students participating."



New Hanover High School Senior Fitz David presenting SIC Oliver A. Boykin (US Navy/WWII)

A Native Son's Mission to Preserve History

Jones, now 91, was born in Wilmington in 1934, a boyhood framed by the transformations of war. He remembers the Cape Fear River shipyards launching Liberty ships at a rapid pace, the influx of servicemen filling downtown streets, and the collective sense of urgency that bound the community together.

After graduating from New Hanover High School and earning a history degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Jones entered the U.S. Navy through Officer Candidate School. His career spanned 41 years of military and federal service, with 4 years of naval and civilian service to the Department of Defense, including command with specializations in amphibious warfare and defense acquisition, a post as a professor and associate dean at the Defense Acquisition University and an appointment in the

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RESIDENT FEATURE

White House as assistant and advance representative to President Gerald Ford.

Those experiences honed his skills in leadership, organization and public events—skills he would later put to work rallying support for preserving Wilmington's history.

Saving a Wartime Landmark

When Jones returned to Wilmington in 1997, he learned that the City of Wilmington planned to demolish the Community Arts Center—the same building that had served as the Hannah Block USO building during World War II. Recognizing its historic value, he joined with local advocates, helped form what would become the World War II Wilmington Home Front Heritage Coalition and led the campaign to save the structure.



Hannah Block, namesake of the WWII 2nd and Orange Streets USO, with Jones in 2009

For three years, Jones and his allies worked to convince city officials that the USO should be restored, not removed. Their efforts succeeded in 2000 when the Wilmington City Council voted unanimously to preserve and renovate the building. Over the next several years, the USO was brought back to its wartime appearance, complete with original features and interpretive displays. It was formally rededicated in 2008. The 80th anniversary V-J Day event wasn't just another date on the calendar for Jones—it was a celebration held in a building that might not exist had he not stepped in decades earlier.



Each month during the war about 63,000 soldiers visited the USO building at 120 S 2nd Street. Pictured on the steps: "Mrs. Wilmington."

One of Jones's proudest achievements, however, came when he secured Wilmington's designation as the nation's first World War II Heritage City, a goal he pursued with determination and pride.

On Sept. 2, 2020, the President of the United States and Secretary of the Interior traveled to Wilmington to make the announcement in front of the Battleship North Carolina, the historic vessel permanently anchored in the Cape Fear River since 1961. The event coincided with the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II.

President Trump praised Jones by name for his leadership in conceiving and guiding the effort, noting that the recognition was the result of a 12½-year campaign that moved from the halls of Congress to the White House.



Jones served as chairman of the USS North Carolina Battleship Commission. He's standing on the ship's stern overlooking the Cape Fear River and downtown Wilmington.

Honoring a Medal of Honor Recipient

In May 2025, Jones demonstrated that his preservation efforts extend beyond buildings. He organized a ceremony at Halyburton Park to dedicate a memorial plaque to William D. Halyburton Jr., the park's namesake. Halyburton, a U.S. Navy corpsman was killed in action while assigned to a Marine Corps rifle company during the Battle of Okinawa. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military decoration for valor. "It's important that future generations not only see the name but

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understand the story behind it," Jones said at the ceremony. In 2004, Jones had urged the city to name the park for Halyburton, a 1943 graduate of New Hanover High School.

Looking Ahead to 2026

Jones is clear-eyed about the connection between these gatherings and plans for 2026 when our nation will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The World War II Wilmington Home Front Heritage Coalition is organizing local America 250 celebration activities. The theme is to recognize and promote Wilmington's designation as America's first WWII Heritage City. Planned events will tie Wilmington's WWII legacy to the larger story of America's founding and survival.

State initiatives include:

- WWII re-enactments and memorabilia exhibit
- Program highlighting the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad
- Wartime music presentations
- WWII warbirds fly ins to ILM
- Coast Guard cutter appearance
- Programs honoring all American Veterans
- Installation of a sign in Kure Beach noting the 1943 German U-boat attack
- Staging by the N.C. National Guard 30th Armored Brigade Combat Team

Jones envisions these events as both a commemoration and an investment in the city's future. "The unity, sacrifice and determination that defined Wilmington in the 1940s are the same qualities that carried us through 1776," he says. "That's the message we want to share in 2026."



Susan Habas, executive director of the Thalian Association Community Theatre and Manager of the Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center, with Wilbur Jones

A Legacy in Motion

Over the years, Jones has been recognized with North Carolina's Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the Wilmington Star-News Media Lifetime Achievement Award (2012), and the University of North Carolina Wilmington's Distinguished Citizen of the Year award. His work has been honored by the Daughters of the American Revolution, local historical societies and Veteran organizations, and his achievements have been recorded in the Congressional Record. Yet he measures success less in plaques and proclamations than in the sight of people engaging with history—whether it's a student interviewing a Veteran, a family touring the USO, or a visitor walking away with a new understanding of Wilmington's role in the war.

As the V-J Day evening drew to a close, attendees stood for a moment of silence. Applause followed—not only for the 11 Veterans present, but for the man who had spent decades ensuring their stories endure.

Next year, Wilmington will once again take the national stage, not just as America's first WW II Heritage City, but as a model for how local history can illuminate the nation's journey. "This isn't just about the past. It's about passing the torch," says Jones.

In places like Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center, that torch burns bright.

Publisher's Note: For information about America 250 plans and 2026 events in the Cape Fear Region, go online to wwiheritagecitycoalition.org and america250.nc.gov. Additional activities under discussion include:

- Recognition of Black participation in WWII (military and home front)
- On-demand tours of Wilmington-area WWII sites
- UNC Wilmington library programs
- Additional WWII-era music concerts
- Involvement of 3rd Infantry Division (Wilmington's Charles Murray, Medal of Honor recipient, was part of 3rd ID)
- WWII-themed programming in the North Carolina Azalea Festival

To learn more about the Hannah Block Historic USO Community Arts Center visit wilmingtoncommunityarts.org.

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THE GI GENERATION

Cape Fear's WW II Veterans

BY RONA SIMMONS, PHOTOS BY DARIA AMATO PHOTOGRAPHER, BILL RITENOUR, AND COURTESY OF THE BLY FAMILY, BOYKIN FAMILY, ROBERT BOEKE, LEAH CHAPPELLE, CHARLES CLAPPER, HARVEY KNOWLES, GALE LEVESQUE, NEW HANOVER HIGH SCHOOL, CHARLES OGLE, RIPPY FAMILY, RONA SIMMONS, AND THE VANVEKOVEN FAMILY



Justin Kornegay, Susan Habas, and Wilbur Jones stand in front of the Hannah Block Historic USO Community Arts Center.

Hundreds of Wilmington residents attended the Aug. 14 event celebrating the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II and honoring 11 Veterans who sat side by side in the front row of the Hannah Block Historic USO's auditorium.

One of the 11 was 101-year-old Staff Sergeant Justin Kornegay.

After graduating from B. F. Grady High School in Duplin County in 1941, Kornegay did not just while away his summer. Instead, together with his brothers, Cecil and Jack, and his cousins, Alanzo and William Outlaw, he took a class in metal working. The boys learned welding, pipe cutting, soldering and carpentry, all useful skills for working on their family's farm.

Kornegay made the most of what he learned, not on the farm but in service to his country. He went to work with the Norfolk Naval Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia, where he had been granted a four-year apprenticeship in wood working. A year later with the war raging, Kornegay decided to enlist in the military. Although he had been working with the Navy, he says, "I didn't want to go to sea," and so he enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

By the time he completed training as a P-51 fighter pilot, the Air Corps had more pilots than they needed. They re-assigned Kornegay, now a corporal, to a bomber crew—a B-24 Liberator with the 759th Squadron, 459th Bomb Group—and sent him to Italy.



SSGT JUSTIN KORNEGAY (US Army Air Corps/WWII)

Kornegay's position on board as a nose-turret gunner was one of the deadliest. "They'd come at us from the side, at point blank range," he remembers, describing an attack of German fighters. Kornegay however, brushed off the danger, saying, "You didn't have time to worry about it. You just put your trust in God."

Over the course of a year, from April 1944 to April 1945, Kornegay flew on missions to Austria, Romania, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Greece, and Poland. His squadron's primary targets were oil refineries, including Nazi Germany's strategic oil fields in Ploesti, Romania, but also munitions and aircraft factories, airfields, and communications centers. He received an Air Medal, and his unit received a Distinguished Unit Citation.



Kornegay with his daughter, Ann Hunderhill

Kornegay came home, expecting to be redeployed to the Pacific. Fortunately, while he was in Norfolk, Virginia, he heard the news that the Japanese had surrendered. He remembers, "The town went wild, and everyone flocked into the streets. "With the war over, Kornegay picked up where he had left off. He took what he learned that summer long ago and borrowed from the patience and discipline of his wartime experience to teach wood working skills to the next generation. He taught "shop" at B.Grady High School, then Chestnut Street School, New Hanover High School, and Cape Fear Tech in Wilmington in a career that spanned decades.



A New Hanover High School yearbook photo of Kornegay who taught at the school for many years.

For his 100th birthday in May 2024, a former student posted a note on Facebook, "I was in your carpentry class . . . thank you for the kindness you showed me. I wasn't a carpentry person, but you tried your best to help me." Another wrote, "Learned a lot in shop about paying attention to detail, safety." Another former student who happened to attend the V-J Day event enthusiastically greeted Kornegay after the ceremony, fondly recalling the shop class he taught at New Hanover High School.

Wood working is one of Kornegay's fondest memories of his long life. Today, a complete set of wood working tools occupies the shop he built near his home in Rocky Point. The chisels, clamps, planes, and files are oiled and waiting for the next Kornegay family member to follow in his footsteps.

The other World War II Veterans attending Wilmington's VJ-Day event were:



TECH SERGEANT HAROLD BLY

Harold Bly falsified his enlistment papers, concealing the fact he was 16, to join the Navy. He served aboard the destroyer USS *Haynsworth* from its commissioning in June 1944 and was aboard when the ship was attacked in a kamikaze strike in April 1945. When World War II ended, he re-enlisted, joining the Air Force where he served for 11 years.



SERGEANT ROBERT BOEKE

As an infantryman with the Army's 86th Division, Robert Boeke crossed the Atlantic in 1943 suffering but surviving multiple submarine attacks. When the war in Europe ended, he was called back to prepare for the invasion of Japan. By the time he arrived in the Philippines, the Japanese had surrendered. Nevertheless, the 86th had more fighting to do—ridding the mountains of Luzon of Japanese holdouts.

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CORPORAL LOUIS BOURGAULT

Louis Bourgault joined the Marine Corps with his parents' consent at 17. He was assigned to the 21st Regiment, 3rd Marine Division and deployed to the Pacific. He came ashore on Guadalcanal, continued on to Bougainville, Guam and Iwo Jima. Injured by mortar fire in Guam and again on Iwo Jima, Bourgault was evacuated from Iwo Jima to recover and serve out his duty stateside.



SEAMAN FIRST CLASS OLIVER BOYKIN

Oliver Boykin worked at the Wilmington Shipyards before joining the US Navy in 1943. He became a seaman first class aboard the troop transport USS *General Meigs* and later served in Tunisia and Trinidad. After the war, he earned a degree in biology and worked with the Navy, the National Institute of Health and the U.S. Post Office before retiring.



SERGEANT MAJOR CHARLES CLAPPER

Charles Clapper joined the Marine Corps at 18. He deployed to the Pacific where he served as a flame thrower, a particularly hazardous assignment. Clapper was one of only eight men in his company of 200 to survive five weeks of combat on Iwo Jima. After the war, he transferred to the Army and served for 30 more years.



MAJOR HARVEY KNOWLES

Harvey Knowles joined the Army at 15. He deployed to occupied Japan and was discharged at 17. He re-enlisted with the 82nd Airborne and served as a paratrooper, attaining the rank of master sergeant. After the war, he opted for Officer Candidate School and was commissioned a second lieutenant and served with the Green Berets in the Vietnam War.



HOSPITAL APPRENTICE FIRST CLASS IDA LEVESQUE

After graduating from high school in 1942, Ida Levesque enlisted in the U.S. Navy's women's branch—the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES.) She was assigned to the Charleston Navy Shipyard Hospital. She remained connected with her military associates over the years with the American Legion Post 129 in Jacksonville, Florida.



CHIEF CHARLES OGLE

Charles Ogle joined the Army at 13. By the time he arrived in Europe the Germans had surrendered, but Ogle served out his duty as a cook and baker behind the lines. Later, he served with the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. After his discharge, he joined the Navy, became a signalman and eventually chief signalman. Later he served in Korea.



MASTER SERGEANT GEORGE VANVEKOVEN

George VanVekoven trained in military intelligence and deployed to England during World War II. There, using photographs, maps, and other intelligence, he advised bomber crews on their targets. Later, in Korea, he served with the 136th Fighter-Bomber Group, and earned a Bronze Star, one of 14 medals he received during his 30-year career. He also served in Vietnam.



LIEUTENANT (J.G.) WILLIAM RIPPY

When William Rippy joined the Navy, he trained in electrical and diesel engineering but soon deployed aboard a landing craft leaving from Texas for the Pacific. There he helped transport troops to islands where they were needed for combat. Rippy became the commander of a landing craft group and served with the forces accepting the Japanese surrender in 1945.

About the Author:



Rona Simmons is an award-winning author of historical fiction and nonfiction. Her focus is on untold and often overlooked stories from World War II. "The war had a momentous impact on our lives," Simmons says. And, she adds, "It is a period we can still almost touch with our fingertips," as she has demonstrated successfully in her writing. Her motivation to write about the war stems from her connections with the military. She is the daughter of a World War II Army

Air Forces P-38 fighter pilot, the daughter-in-law of a bomber pilot with the Eighth Air Force's 100th Bomb Group and the wife of a Vietnam-era US Navy pilot. Simmons has written for literary journals and online and print magazines and newspapers. She is also active in military history and veteran communities in the Wilmington area and across the country.

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