

PROLOGUE

While 7 December 1941 is the date officially associated with the entry of the United States into World War II, there was involvement for certain service members even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Among those who would definitely consider themselves part of the war effort, pre-Pearl Harbor, were the crew of the old four-stacker destroyer, the USS *Dickerson*, patrolling the Caribbean and Atlantic for German subs by mid-1941; members of the Electronics Training Group working with the British on radar in England by September 1941; Coast Guardsmen aboard the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Northland*, which captured the German-controlled Norwegian sealer *Buskoe* in Mackenzie Bay, north of Yukon Territory, 12 September 1941, in what is designated the first naval capture of World War II; and the crew of the USS *Reuben James*, which was torpedoed by a German U-boat in the North Atlantic, 31 October 1941, and is considered the first U.S. warship sunk in World War II.

Four servicemen describe their involvement in these prewar scenarios, with stories that exemplify the courage and fortitude typifying all of the accounts in *Voices of My Comrades*.

Mid-1941–December 1944 Caribbean, Atlantic, Philippine Sea

Chief Warrant Officer Clifford A. Roberts describes his experience on board the USS Dickerson (DD-157).

“Prior to WWII, approximately six months before we entered the war, we were on assignment in the Caribbean, hunting and tracking German submarines,” Mr. Roberts writes. “We were not allowed to attack them, but we reported them to the English navy. When we entered the war, we were allowed to attack and were sent to find a fleet of subs headed for U.S. waters. We found them and went to General Quarters thirteen times during the night and dropped depth charges twelve times. We were given credit for sinking four that night, with an unknown number damaged.

“I was a second-class fire controlman, the only one on the destroyer with a striker [a person in apprenticeship to his mentor’s job]. Later, we went to the North Atlantic run, then to escort the first convoy to Casablanca, Morocco, during the invasion of North Africa [8 November 1942].”

Mr. Roberts was transferred to the USS *Hobby* (DD-610) and then to the USS *Luce* (DD-522). He was aboard the *Luce*, on the other side of the island from Manila when his brother Hugh was killed 15 December 1944 by U.S. bombs that struck an unmarked Japanese ship transporting POWs to Japan. Lieutenant Roberts' one comprehensive letter to his family is reprinted in this volume, divided chronologically into the appropriate monthly chapters.

September 1941–1943 England

Colonel Louis P. Goetz was with the Electronics Training Group (ETG), which worked with the British on RADAR (Radio detecting and ranging).

In his preface to *Electronics Training Group World War II*, a history of ETG through recollections of former members, Colonel Goetz explains that members “were mostly company grade officers throughout Word War II, trained by the British army and the Royal Air Force (RAF) in England, many serving as commanding officers of British units, and all working on radar. Eight members were killed during training while flying with the RAF and probably represent the first American soldiers killed in the European Theater of Operations.” This should dispel any doubts “that we were truly neutral prior to 7 December 1941 with respect to the European war and, further, that our Army was prepared technically to successfully employ radar operationally in 1941,” he writes.

Quoting from Terret, Tompson, and Harris's *United States Army in World War II: The Technical Service*, Colonel Goetz describes ETG as “an application of the principle of lend-lease,” with men rather than property or materiel as the resources. The idea for its formation was proposed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1941 after a return from England by Dr. James B. Conant, president of Harvard University and member of the National Defense Research Committee.

Recruitment began 30 June 1941 via newspaper, magazine, and radio announcements. This was followed by tours of cities and Army camps by the Military Personnel Division, Office of the Chief Signal Officer. From an initial 2,000 applications, 400 were considered for this select group of technical volunteers. Colonel Goetz notes that his recruitment to ETG came from the National Roster of Scientific Personnel.

“Though not generally known, nearly all graduates with degrees in science or engineering in the United States were listed with this government group . . . ; Big Brother had started making lists before WWII. Many of us were commissioned directly from civilian life and had very little military training. I arrived at

Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, 8 August 1941, and was in England in mid-September.”

After three weeks of basic training, Second Lieutenant Goetz and thirty-four other ETG second lieutenants left for Montreal on 12 September and sailed for England three days later aboard the transformed Canadian Pacific ship *Empress of Asia*. The new officers docked in Liverpool where they were divided into two groups, seventeen to be trained by the RAF and eighteen by the British army, with Lieutenant Goetz in the latter group.

On 1 October 1941 he started school at Bury Lancashire at the British Military College of Science. For three months, six days a week, the men were taught by instructors from the British Broadcasting Company and British colleges. Four-hour morning sessions were followed by a tea break and then lab work in the afternoons—“first, working problems, learning about English test equipment; then learning about the Anti-aircraft (AA) Radar and the Search Light Radar (ELSIE). . . .

“The operations of this group were one of the best-kept secrets of WWII,” Colonel Goetz says. “The atom bomb project cost the United States an estimated \$2 billion. Three billion dollars was spent on radar, yet this entire operation was maintained in a high state of secrecy until after WWII.”

Terret, Tompson, and Harris report that ETG, from its inception until its close in December 1943, brought the Signal Corps 2,200 electrical engineers, 900 of whom were trained in England. Of this latter group, there were eighteen separate units of about fifty members each. The first four groups were in England on 7 December 1941; the fifth group was en route and learned upon arrival of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

“On 31 December 1941, the Bury ETG 1 was sent to London to be assigned to its British units,” Colonel Goetz recalls. He was assigned to Royal Army Ordnance Corps outside of Sittingbourne, Kent, about forty miles from London. The unit—consisting of five officers, including him, and about 100 enlisted men—was part of an anti-aircraft division positioned north and south of the Thames River, which the Germans used as a compass to get to London for night-time bombings.

Colonel Goetz describes their duties: “We were responsible in American terms for the third and fourth echelon maintenance of anti-aircraft and searchlight radar. . . . The part of the unit I was with tried to keep slightly over 100 radars in operation, mostly searchlight radars and about a dozen anti-aircraft radars. The unit also repaired the guns and the mechanical computer, which provided firing information to the guns. . . .

“The ELSIE radars provided guidance for the RAF interceptor aircraft. The ELSIE was a simple radar; when the eight-man unit was alerted by radio-telephone to turn on its radar, and general coordinate data was given, the men found a target and turned on their searchlight, which tracked the target and blinded the pilot. Intelligence reports state that the German pilots were much disturbed to suddenly be blinded by the searchlights.”

According to a joint report from the War and Navy Departments: “America’s entry into the war accelerated the return of some of the ETG officers, and by March 1942 a total of fifty-eight had been brought back for reassignment to aircraft warning duties with the RAF fighter commands along the coast of the Continental United States and at overseas bases. Many of those remaining in England took over active positions in the British aircraft warning service as well as on airborne radar patrols against German submarines.”

**September 1941–August 1942
Mackenzie Bay to Greenland**

Chief Warrant Officer Second Class Albert F. Courter served aboard the Coast Guard cutter Northland (WPG-49) 1940–1943, patrolling off northeastern Greenland.

When he enlisted in 1939, Mr. Courter says his goal was to become a radio-man, but “that all changed as soon as I saw the main engine-room on the *Northland* and immediately fell in love with all types of engines.”

As flagship of the Greenland Patrol, the icebreaker *Northland* served with the *North Star* and the *Bear*. Commander Edward H. (Iceberg) Smith, who later became rear admiral, commanded the patrol; Captain Carl Christian von Paulsen commanded the *Northland*.

“Our main job was to keep the Germans from establishing radio weather stations in Greenland,” Mr. Courter writes. “This was an ongoing effort from September 1941 until the end of the war. Many stations were destroyed and enemy ships were captured or destroyed. Also during WWII, the *Northland* engaged enemy U-boats, did convoy duty and weather patrol, carried out search-and-rescue missions, and rescued a frozen-in U.S. Army base, a mission that took nine weeks of continuous icebreaking.

“My job in all this was to help keep the engines running and to make fresh water out of salt water. We were able to make about 200 gallons per four-hour watch, not much by today’s standards,” he admits. Some of his other duties included “being a qualified small-boat engineer, first-loader on a three-inch .50

gun if necessary, pulling starboard stroke oar in the lifeboat, and being ready to go ashore with a landing party when called upon.”

On 12 September 1941 the *Northland* was sent to investigate a suspicious “fishing vessel,” the German-controlled Norwegian sealer *Buskoe*, which had reportedly landed a party in a fjord. The *Northland* followed the *Buskoe* into Mackenzie Bay (north of Yukon Territory and northwest of the mainland portion of the Northwest Territories, Canada), boarded it and, according to the *Northland*’s fiftieth-anniversary brochure, “discovered personnel and equipment to establish a German radio station on the Greenland coast. A night raiding party from the *Northland* surprised and seized the station [on 14 September], taking prisoner three Nazis, as well as German plans for other radio stations in the far north.”

Serving on board the *Northland* with Mr. Courter was Chief Warrant Officer Ira A. Beal, gunner’s mate second class. “We deposited him and a companion in Greenland with six months’ stockpile of food and supplies and didn’t get back to pick them up until about eleven months later!” Mr. Courter exclaims.

After his *Northland* duty, Mr. Courter served on the *Planetree*, FS-199, F-74, and the *General Greene*. He credits the 8,000 Coast Guard members of 1939 and 1940 with being “the trainers” of those who came in during the war. For example, when assigned to the FS-199, he says, “I was the only man aboard who had any military experience. Of the twenty-five men in the crew, only two others had even been to sea. . . . The process took a lot of training and drills but in the end we had a real good crew, and so we headed out to the Asiatic Pacific area.” The *Northland* performed weather patrols until it was decommissioned 27 March 1946.

31 October 1941

USS *Reuben James*, North Atlantic

George F. Giehrl was a fireman second class aboard the USS Reuben James (DD-245), sunk 31 October 1941 by German U-boat 552.

The *Reuben James* was commissioned 24 September 1920 and served a variety of assignments before joining the Neutrality Patrol in January 1939, guarding Atlantic and Caribbean approaches to the American coast at the outbreak of war in Europe, Mr. Giehrl writes. “In March 1941, the *Reuben James* joined convoy escort forces to promote the safe arrival of supplies to Britain. In June, she provided support in setting up the first weather station by American forces in Greenland.”

Commenting that “the summer of 1941 was the beginning of undeclared warfare between American warships and German U-boats,” he adds: “Our escort

force guarded convoys as far as Iceland, after which the British navy took on that duty.”

The *Reuben James* was on “her second assignment to convoy escort duty when she sailed from Argentia, Newfoundland, on 23 October. With four other destroyers, she joined in . . . an immense convoy of ships, and its size must have alerted the German U-boats. Not too many days later, contact was being made with the U-boats, and depth charges were being dropped.”

Mr. Giehrl records the torpedoing as follows: “On 31 October 1941, sailing in harm’s way, the destroyer USS *Reuben James* engaged in escort duty to protect convoy HX-156 carrying supplies to Great Britain. At approximately 0525, two torpedoes fired by the German submarine U-552 found their mark. The ship’s magazine exploded, blowing away three-quarters of the forward and midship section. Within fifteen minutes, the stern section sank into the North Atlantic Ocean. Of the crew of 147 men, 102 perished, including the captain and all commissioned officers and all chief petty officers but one. Upon abandoning ship, 45 of the crew were saved.

“In all of these years, those of us who survived have never forgotten the emotional experience of this tragedy,” Mr. Giehrl acknowledges, as he continues his saga: “Leaderless, without the guidance of officers, the men cut loose the life rafts and jumped into the frigid sea. There were a few who were able to climb aboard the three rafts but most had to cling to the sides . . . [or to] empty ammunition cases and other pieces of wreckage. Covered with fuel oil and tossed about by the waves, we found ourselves alone in the vastness of the ocean. With the ship gone, we realized our great loss and the fear of what the future would hold.”

Nothing, however, could have prepared them for what happened next! With subs in the area the previous day, Mr. Giehrl explains, the *Reuben James* had prepared for attack by setting two depth charges, one to explode at fifty and the other at seventy-five feet. “Somehow, after General Quarters were secured, the depth charges were not reset at the safe position and still remained armed.”

As the sinking *Reuben James* reached the fifty-foot level, “a tremendous under-sea explosion took place. The first charge had detonated and, as that tremendous force pushed upward, sending a geyser of water cascading into the air, the men and rafts beneath the geyser were picked up and flung about. As the water began to fall back to the sea, it struck the rafts and men with such force that their life jackets were torn from their bodies.

“Momentarily, there was a calm,” he recalls, “and as we gasped for breath, suddenly the second depth charge let loose and again we went through the same

terrifying ordeal. By now, most of us were in a state of shock. The cries of the injured could be heard and prayers for rescue were said out loud.”

Suddenly, out of the shadowy darkness, the destroyer *Niblack* appeared on the scene. It rescued twenty-eight men, one of whom died. Later, the destroyer HP *Jones* rescued another seventeen men.

And just as composer and folk-singer Woody Guthrie memorialized the men and their ship with his 1941 ballad, “The Sinking of the *Reuben James*,” so, too, tribute was again paid fifty years later, at a reunion of the eighteen remaining survivors, by President George H. W. Bush, by representatives of the British Embassy and the U.S. Department of Navy, by a former captain of the guided-missile frigate USS *Reuben James*, and by crewmen from the two ships that rescued survivors.

