

THE

HISTORIAN

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

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Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

October 2021

Election of Directors

The following individuals have been recommended by the nominating committee to serve for a period of two years. The general membership will vote on these nominees at the November membership luncheon meeting.

The nominees are:

President—Chris Roth
Publicity Chair—Jim Keating
Historian—Jim Codling

There is a vacancy on the Board. If you would like to serve, please contact Chris Roth at 228-467-4090.



ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

Join us for the 26th Annual Cemetery Tour on Saturday, October 30, 2021, at Cedar Rest Cemetery in Bay Saint Louis. The fun begins at 5:00 P.M. and continues until 7:00 P.M. Admission to the tour is free, but donations are graciously accepted.

After the tour everyone is invited to the Lobrano House around the corner from the cemetery at 108 Cue St. for punch, hot dogs, cookies, and other treats.



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(photo and text from an old post card)

WORLD WAR II: THE EUROPEAN THEATER

By
James Keating, M.D

Edited by
Virginia Olander

During most of the European theater of World War II (WWII), Germany was confronted by the Allies (England, Russia, and the United States) on three fronts: the Eastern, Italian, and later in the war, the Western front.

Many men and women of Hancock County served their country during this conflict. Love and marriage among these young patriots was a challenge, but doable. This article will describe some of their wartime experiences that occurred about eighty years ago.

Love and romance during WWII was a challenge for young couples along the Gulf Coast during the period of 1941-1945. Most of the young men and many of the young women enlisted in the armed services and were assigned to military training facilities like Camp Shelby, a few miles south of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. It was a time of intense emotions that often witnessed

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“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

whirlwind romances of servicemen or women away from home, marrying spouses that did not come from their hometowns. Marriages were scheduled around military leaves or passes, often preceding the deployment of soldiers to a distant battlefield. Unlike texts, phone calls, and emails today, letters and photographs sustained these marriages while soldiers were serving combat duty in Europe and elsewhere.

David McDonald (1922-2009) met Luceil Smith (1922-2006) at Mississippi State College (now University). This college romance flourished, consummating with marriage at an army military base in Anniston, Alabama, in 1943. Luceil moved to Anniston, and the couple rented an apartment there. She followed him to several military bases before Dave was deployed to Europe. Luceil then went to live with her family in Wiggins,



David and Luceil McDonald

MS, until Dave returned after the war ended.

A popular meeting place for singles on the Gulf Coast during the war was the grand dame of large, historic, luxury resorts, the Edgewater Gulf Hotel (1927-1971) in Biloxi, MS. This four hundred room hotel was filled every weekend with officers and single ladies who came in groups to enjoy elegant dining in the Marine Room, a huge Olympic size pool, and tennis courts. On most Saturday nights there was a big band party with dancing and cocktails. Ladies arrived on Saturday afternoon by car or train from as far as New Orleans or Mobile. The railroad had a special stop at the hotel called Edgewater Park Station.

On one weekend in July of 1942, Lieutenant James “Jim” William Keating, Sr., (1918-1998) and three fellow army officers from Camp Shelby drove down to the Edgewater Gulf Hotel and crammed into one room. That very weekend Bernice “Bunny” Marion Ross (1917-1995), accompanied by several Newcomb College classmates/graduates, boarded a train in New Orleans for the same hotel. A chance meeting on Sunday morning on the tennis courts began a wartime romance and courtship that resulted in marriage on July 5,

President’s Corner

I hope this message finds you well, and I am pleased to announce that we will restart our monthly luncheons beginning Thursday, November 18. Remember to reserve your seat in advance.

The exciting and entertaining Halloween Cemetery Tour will take place on Saturday, October 30. Please make plans to attend.

An important initiative is for us to scan and upload archived items to our website. If you would like to volunteer to assist with document scanning, we would certainly appreciate your help. *No experience required.*

“There is history in all men’s lives”
William Shakespeare

Take care of yourself and others,

Chris Roth
President



Lieutenant James (Jim) and Bunny Keating

1943. Bunny and Jim enjoyed a few months of marriage before Jim was sent to North Africa in the fall of 1943.

The Second World War lasted from 1939-1945. The war started on September 1, 1939, when Nazi Germany, under Adolph Hitler (1889-1945), invaded Poland. The Axis powers included Italy and Japan. Germany later took France and the Netherlands in two weeks. However, Germany was prevented from invading England because it could not achieve command of the air or the sea. Consequently, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. The United States entered the war on December 7, 1941, when Japanese planes attacked the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In March 1941, the German Afrika Korps under General Erwin Rommel, "The Desert Fox" (1891-1944), was sent to North Africa to support a faltering Italian Army. It took two years for the Allies to clear the German and Italian forces from North Africa. The Allies captured Sicily in August 1943.

The Italian Campaign lasted from July 1943 to April 1945. Marshal Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) wanted the Allies to produce a second front in western Europe to reduce Hitler's power on the eastern

front. Nevertheless, the Allies committed only thirty divisions in 1943 to take Italy, the "soft underbelly" of the German Third Reich. This unfortunate decision gave General Albert Kesselring (1885-1960) eleven months of skillful rear guard tactics over Italy's mountainous terrain to delay the Allied advance. Nevertheless, after D Day on June 6, 1944, the Allies created a large western front with approximately seventy-five divisions facing sixty German divisions. (A division usually contains ten thousand soldiers.) It is of interest that Germany had approximately 100 divisions on the eastern front facing 120 Russian divisions.

Lt. James Keating and his Rifle Company E in the Second Battalion was removed from reserve status in Morocco to be inserted in the front line in Italy in March of 1944. His unit participated in the Fourth Battle of Cassino which successfully broke through the Gustave Line, captured the town of Cassino, and destroyed the abbey at Monte Cassino. Keating was awarded the Bronze Star for bravery in that battle which was pinned to his uniform by General Mark W. Clark (1896-1984), Commander of the Fifth Army. Later, the Allies took Rome the day before General Dwight D. Eisenhower

er (1890-1969) lead his army on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944.

The Allied Forces moved through France and Belgium, but were stopped at the Siegfried Line at the Rhine River. Lt. Dave McDonald commanded a rifle company unit that cleared out antitank mines by the soldiers crawling at night on their bellies, feeling and disabling the trip wires that were designed to detonate the explosion. He is credited with overtaking a pillbox issuing deadly machine gun fire on his men. A well-placed smoke bomb obscured the German line of sight so that McDonald and his men could rush the pillbox and drop a hand grenade down an air vent. The explosion ripped off the back of one German soldier. Subsequently, six other German soldiers came out of the pillbox, willing to surrender.

David McDonald was fighting in the Battle of the Bulge in January 1945. One morning about 3:00 am, McDonald and his team infiltrated the advancing German line and accidentally bumped into a German dugout. A German sentry confronted McDonald, who raised his rifle to shoot the sentry. The sentry panicked and jumped behind a tree in the snow and pleaded "nicht



A pillbox is a type of blockhouse, or concrete dug-in guard post normally equipped with loopholes through which to fire weapons.



Sergeant Frank Trapani

schutze” (Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!) The sentry was persuaded to gather the other soldiers in the dugout, and McDonald took sixty prisoners back across the line. Lt. David McDonald was awarded the Bronze Star for bravery.

Another soldier from Hancock County was Frank “Bud” Trapani, who was also engaged in the Battle of the Bulge. He had trained at Camp Shelby. Shortly before this battle, Trapani encountered Lt. Dave McDonald in the dark just outside their military camp. As the story goes, Trapani shouted out in the dark night, “Halt, who goes there?” Dave answered, “Lt. David McDonald.” Frank then queried, “Is that a New Orleans accent I hear? Where are you from?” Dave responded, “Bay St. Louis, Mississippi!” According to this often told tale, Trapani came out of the shadows and exclaimed, “Dave, my boy, I thought that was you!” Then he gave the man a big bear hug.

During the Battle of the Bulge, Sgt. Frank Trapani was captured by the Germans and sent to a prisoner of war camp for the duration of the war. The prisoners were given one rotten potato a day to eat. On one occasion, one of the prisoners in Trapani’s cubicle died, but the other prisoners did not tell the guards immediately so they could

eat his ration of potato. In his prayers Trapani vowed to give up Coke if he survived this ordeal. He did survive, returned to Bay St. Louis, gave up Coke, reared a family, and owned and operated the popular Knock Knock Bar on Beach Boulevard.

The Baxter Family lost Lieutenant Hermann Myrtille Baxter (1921-1944) when he was killed in action at Frelenberg, Germany. A mortar shell landed at his feet while he was trying to rescue a wounded comrade. He was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

Sgt. John William (Jack) Baxter (1922-2015) served with the 99th Infantry Division in Belgium, receiving the Combat Infantry Badge and the Bronze Star. Unfortunately, he developed trench foot while on the front lines just before the Battle of the Bulge and was removed to a U.S. hospital in England. However, days later his unit was hit badly and suffered many casualties.

Sgt. Leo William Seal, Jr., (1924-2009) served in the United States Army which included twenty months in the European theater of this conflict. He entered the army at age seventeen and achieved the rank of sergeant, stationed in Reims, France. He was assigned to an engineering unit, responsible for repair



Sergeant Leo Seal

and maintenance of tanks, jeeps, and trucks. As President of the Hancock Bank in 2004, he sponsored the placement of a World War II Memorial to honor the approximately fifteen hundred men and women in Hancock County who served their country. Approximately sixty of those patriots died during this conflict.

In conclusion, World War II was a transformative event for our country and the citizens of Hancock County. Love and marriage proved somewhat difficult in this period. Nonetheless, the Edgewater Gulf Hotel was a popular venue for servicemen and women to relax and socialize. Soldiers like Lt. Keating, Lt. McDonald, Lt. Baxter, Sgt. Seal, and Sgt. Trapani saw action on the Italian and Western fronts. A WWII Memorial in front of the Hancock County Courthouse commemorates the sacrifices of those brave patriots.

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WW II MEMORIAL

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