

Over the last two years, The Breeze has run many stories about the local men who fought in World War II. While this newspaper serves both Bridgewater and Raritan, the large majority of these articles have been about Raritan. Readers have given much critical acclaim to these stories, but there has often been the question “What about Bridgewater?” Why does Raritan, which today is just 1/7 th the population of Bridgewater, get most of the World War II stories? In this article we will explain the reason for this. Then we will list information about the “Bridgewater” soldiers from World War II that we have just recently compiled. In closing, we will ask our readers to help us obtain photos, articles, and family contact information about the men from Bridgewater who fought and died for our country.

While Bridgewater and Raritan have many similarities, there is an amazing difference between towns in the information that was compiled and saved from World War II. There are several reasons why Raritan’s World War II stories have survived.

One – Town Structure/Population - During the World War II era, 1941 – 1945, Raritan had the same population as Bridgewater. Raritan was technically part of Bridgewater, but Raritan was actually the core of Bridgewater. The total population of Bridgewater including Raritan was 10,000 – of this half were in the densely populated Raritan. The other half were scattered among various sections of Bridgewater- Martinsville, Bradley Gardens, Finderne, and Greenknoll. The people of Raritan knew each other intimately. When a Raritan boy in World War II was killed, most everyone knew him or a family member of his. (In fact, Raritan even had an informal chain of communication that went around town immediately when one was killed in action.) And in the subsequent years the close community of Raritan was not likely to forget that soldier. In Bridgewater, a death of a Martinsville’s soldier may not even be known in Bradley Gardens.

Two - Raritan had its own weekly newspaper *The Raritan Valley News* was very well read during the war years reporting the heroics and tragedies of the local men. The war news of the Bridgewater soldiers was reported, but Raritan news was its main focus.

Three - Raritan tavern owner Tony Orlando collected hundreds of photos of “Our Boys Overseas” which he displayed on the walls of his tavern. He also sent these Raritan soldiers hundreds of packages. The boys, in turn, wrote him over 500 letters. These photos and letters survive to this day – they can be found in the Raritan library and on the Internet. They offer a wealth of information on Raritan soldiers which has been used in many articles. No similar Bridgewater source exists.

Four – Many people have chosen to live in Raritan for their entire life. Thus, when sources are needed for information about the Raritan soldiers from World War II, quite often a relative (with a nice scrapbook) can be easily found.

Five – John Basilone’s heroics during World War II and the subsequent annual parade in his honor has defined the town. Each year a Raritan veteran of World War II is appointed The Grand Marshall of this parade and his story is then told in detail.

This author has now turned to the more difficult task of finding out World War II information about the “Bridgewater” men who fought for our country. After paging through the old newspapers from the war years, a list of the Bridgewater men who were killed during World War II has now been compiled. Surprisingly, it may be the first complete list ever compiled of Bridgewater men killed during World War II. The closest list we found is on a board at Chimney Rock Park in Martinsville that lists the men in Martinsville who served in the war. A star is placed next to the four men from Martinsville that were killed.

There were 20- 22 Bridgewater men killed in World War II. (The fate of two men who were listed as “Missing in Action” could not be determined from the newspapers we had.) Sadly, only a handful of these Bridgewater heroes seemed to be remembered around town in some way. Gerald Abrego, a Bradley Gardens man who was killed in action, has the American Legion Post on Old York Road named after him. His photo is found in the lobby of the building. Joe Mancino, from Leghorn Avenue of Bradley Gardens, who was killed aboard the USS Intrepid was featured (along with his six brothers who served) in two feature articles in The Breeze last year. The board at Chimney Rock Park lists four killed in action - Morton Levine, John Mills, Edward Allen, and Leonard Ruediger.

Below are the names, along with what little information we have, about the Bridgewater men killed in action. (Note - nearly all the newspaper articles did not list the house #, only the street name. It is very possible that most houses were not yet assigned numbers in Bridgewater in the early 1940s.)

Gerald Abrego (Pfc.) Braham Ave. Bradley Gardens- Killed in Leyte Philippines Nov. 12th, 1944.

Joe Mancini (Fireman) Leghorn Ave. Bradley Gardens- Killed Nov 25th, 1944 when a kamikaze hit the USS Intrepid. (We have plenty of information on Joe Mancini)

Frederic Heyer Jr.(Petty Officer) Leghorn Ave. Bradley Gardens- Killed by downing at sea Feb 3rd 1945

Morton Levine (Sgt.) Martinsville- Killed in a raid over Munster, Germany October 10th 1943

Edward Allen (Pfc.) Martinsville – Killed in action in France June 25th, 1944

John Mills (Seaman 1st Class) Martinsville - Killed in a plane crash at an Air Force base South Carolina June 2nd, 1944

Leonard Ruediger (Seaman) Martinsville – Killed June 1943 with the Merchant Marines

Aubrey Kemper (Lt.) Finderne – Killed in Luxembourg Oct 9th, 1944.

Emil Malesky Finderne – Killed Dec 16th in Belgium at The Battle of the Bulge.

George Bergan (Staff Sgt) Finderne- Killed March 23rd, 1944 of wounds suffered Sept 8th, 1943 at Salerno Italy.

Francis Martwinski (Pfc.) Pearl St. Finderne - Killed May 17th, 1945 at Okinawa with 77th Infantry

Sgt. John Nevinsky (Sgt.) - Killed in action Jan 25th, 1944 in the Mediterranean area

Joseph Poliacik Route 206 – Killed in action, Merchant Marine who was serving aboard a liberty ship.

Richard Vester (Pfc.) - Route 28 – Killed In a ship sinking Dec 25th, 1944.

Robert David Apgar (Seaman) Greenknoll – Killed in the South Pacific aboard the USS Juneau

Frank Bell Route 28 –Killed Dec 1st 1944 in Germany

Chester Erbe (Pfc.) Route 28 Finderne– Killed In Germany Nov. 23rd, 1944

Liborio Gargano (Pvt.) Union Ave. – Killed Jan 7th 1945 in Belgium.

Stephan Hill (Pvt.) – Killed Leyte Oct 26th 1944

Jacob Kopf - Foothill Road – Killed when the his sub USS Bullhead was sunk in Aug 45

MIA James Hurley (Lt.) Route 31 – Missing in action flying over Belgium Dec 27th 1944

MIA Earl Reise (Country Club Road - Missing in action in Italy 1944

Hopefully, Bridgewater can honor these men who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country by putting a plaque with their names on it (similar to what many other towns do) in front of the municipal building.

If any of our readers have any photos, articles, or family contact information for these men, please contact Bruce Doorly at bdoorly@verizon.net.