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CHILDREN AT WAR:  
UNDERAGE AMERICANS ILLEGALLY FIGHTING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

By

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B.A. History, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, Pennsylvania, 2003

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in History

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*Children at War: Underage Americans Illegally Fighting the Second World War*

Chairperson: Dr. Harry Fritz

For partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History, this thesis examines a heretofore unstudied aspect of American military history, underage Americans illegally fighting the Second World War. Nothing has been written specifically addressing this topic.

The bulk of the research is drawn from oral history interviews with the veterans themselves and primary source documents, intertwined with the minimal amount of secondary source material written on children in contemporary armed conflict, and secondary sources relevant to the period studied.

The thesis introduces the unintended legacy constructed of underage Americans fighting America's wars throughout its history leading up to the Second World War. The research then examines the experiences of America's underage war veterans who actively participated in World War Two, specifically addressing the difficulties they faced in enlisting illegally underage in the armed forces of the United States, how they succeeded in achieving their goal, their motivations for enlisting underage, and their experiences at war. The study concludes that through elaborate schemes, cleverly altered documents, and with assistance from military recruiters and parents, underage recruits managed to join underage. They volunteered for multiple factors and influences compounded that made them the exception to the 16 million American servicemen and women that served during the Second World War. Their experiences exemplify the distinction with which Americans served during the war, tying into the legacy of American children at war.

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On the morning of 21 July 1944, Carl Reddeck was in a landing craft en route to Guam. He was part of the third wave of United States Marines headed in for the invasion of the island. As the Marines looked out ahead, they could see the flat surface of the beach give way to steep verdant hills that rose to a near vertical ridge at the top. That ridge, cliffs to the invading Marines, was their stated objective for the day, a daunting task, and they knew it.

Reddeck grew up in North Carolina. Like so many young men, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, he was eager to join in the fight. He first attempted to enlist in the Navy, but was rejected. Undeterred, Reddeck went to the Marines and was accepted. He was sworn into the service on 28 May 1942. Five months later, he was in combat on Guadalcanal. He survived the campaign, but succumbed to tropical fever in July 1943. After recuperating in a hospital on New Caledonia that summer, he was assigned as a replacement to the 21st Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division. In this new unit Reddeck met and became close friends with fellow Marine, Robert Glenn, who had signed up in August of 1942.

Both of these young Marines were seasoned veterans by the time they were headed to Guam. Experience made the impending invasion no less intimidating. As they neared the beach, one of the Marines in the craft, ammunition carrier Lloyd Martin, pulled out some photographs and started looking at them. Glenn reprimanded him. The Marines were supposed to leave all personal effects in their sea bags aboard ship, to carry nothing that the Japanese could use to identify them or their families. Martin replied he wanted to have a last look at his family. As soon as Martin said that, Reddeck pulled out his own pictures and said, “I want a last look, too.”

Reddeck, Glenn, and the rest of the Marines in their landing craft took little enemy fire during the landing. The Marines were surprised. Some figured the ridge they were assigned to take proved such a formidable obstacle, even the Japanese did not bother to defend it. Met with scant resistance, the Marines started the ascent to their objective.

Just as they reached the top of the cliffs, the Japanese opened fire. The company divided as they went around a rise, advancing on the enemy; Glenn one way, Reddeck the other. Within moments somebody hollered to Glenn that his buddy Reddeck was hit. Under heavy fire, he crawled over to his comrade. Glenn tore open Reddeck's jacket to see where he was wounded. Blood poured from an opening in Reddeck's chest where a round had hit him at the base of the sternum. Glenn frantically fumbled for his first aid kit and pulled out a bandage as his best friend lay bleeding to death before him. All for naught. By the time he applied it, Reddeck was gone. Carl Reddeck, a two-year veteran of the Marine Corps, was sixteen years old. His best friend, Robert Glenn, also a two-year veteran, was seventeen. Both had joined underage.

Seaman Dudley Brown was at the front of a Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel (LCVP) on the morning of 6 June 1944, manning the controls to the ramp. When he dropped it, he would be as exposed as the troops he was unloading. His LCVP was in the third wave, headed for Omaha Beach, soon to be the deadliest invasion beach in American history. As they raced toward shore, the LCVP fifty yards directly in front of them was blown out of the water. The craft, crew, and all soldiers aboard disintegrated. Brown's LCVP hit the beach and he dropped the ramp. In the few minutes it took to

unload the troops, Brown saw some of the men he had just unloaded collapse as they charged ashore, wounded or worse. He hauled in the ramp and they pulled off the beach, headed back to their ship to load more soldiers for another run. Dudley Brown had been in the service just seven months. D-Day was his baptism by fire. He was sixteen.

At age fourteen, Alvin Snaper went to his local draft board and told them it was his eighteenth birthday. The draft board became instantly irate, and informed the young man that the law required him to register for the draft three months prior to his eighteenth birthday. As punishment, they ordered immediate induction into the Army and escorted him to the Army induction center.

Snaper arrived in France in late November 1944, as a replacement. Within weeks he was in combat at the frozen battleground of Bastogne. Due to soaring attrition rates within the ranks, Alvin Snaper was field commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army of the United States. He was fifteen.

Joseph Argenzio also appealed to his local draft board. His father served with distinction in the First World War in the Army's First Division, the Big Red One. Growing up in the shadow of his father's service, Argenzio wanted nothing more than to serve his country as his father had, with distinction and valor. Little did Argenzio know that at age sixteen he would be one of the youngest members of the United States armed forces to land on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944, serving as part of the same division his father had in the last war.

No records exist to confirm Argenzio as the youngest to land during the first waves of the invasion of Normandy. In fact, none of these men who served their country underage existed to the military. No one under the age of seventeen legally joined the armed forces of the United States during World War Two. There is no record of their underage service. Anyone who served under the United States flag was eighteen, seventeen with parental consent. Those who joined underage lied about their age, concocted stories about their birthdates and their true identities. They were child soldiers, citizens of the United States illegally fighting the Second World War.

## VUMS

Little has been written about underage soldiers in World War Two. This is due in large part to the fact that they did not exist. They could not. There were no legal enlistments under the age of seventeen. Those discovered underage were often accepted, their age ignored; thus, those in authority perpetuated their illegal enlistment. A few unfortunate ones were not as lucky. Caught serving underage, they were discharged for lying about their age, a fraudulent enlistment. Even these records are sparse. Calvin Graham joined at age 12, served with distinction in the Navy, was awarded the Bronze Star for valor and a Purple Heart. When an executive officer learned his true age, Graham was stripped of his medals, his military record, even his uniform. Not until thirty-two years after World War Two were his medals reinstated, with the exception of his Purple Heart. Forty years after the war, he received his disability benefits. Two years after his death, the Navy presented his widow with his Purple Heart. It is because the historical record is largely devoid of these stories that this project was undertaken. The stories of underage Americans illegally fighting the Second World War need to be told. This is only the beginning.

The bulk of the research for this work is drawn almost exclusively from the underage veterans of World War Two themselves, involving over forty selected for interviews. These veterans are only a small part of an unknown number of men and women who joined underage. They by no means represent the whole. The majority interviewed were chosen specifically for this project based upon one simple criterion, combat veterans. For approximately every six soldiers in World War Two, only one

directly participated in combat.<sup>1</sup> Underage veterans represent just a tiny fraction of the nearly sixteen million Americans who served during the war; consequently, underage combat veterans from that group are the few of the few.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say they were exceptional; but because they were a smaller group, it was a way to set parameters for the research for this study.

An invaluable source in conducting research for this project has been an extremely generous and helpful man, and underage veteran himself, Ray Jackson. Ray was sworn into the Marine Corps on 31 August 1946, at age sixteen, and served for three years. In 1950, he joined the Marine Reserves and was subsequently deployed to Korea. Following the formation of the national association of the Veterans of Underage Military Service (VUMS) in 1991, he served his fellow Americans in a different capacity; first as National Vice-Commander, and then National Commander, of this truly unique organization. Ray compiled three volumes publishing first-hand accounts of the Veterans of Underage Military Service. I am indebted to him not only for his unyielding assistance with this project, but also for his groundbreaking work regarding underage veterans. He has offered an invaluable wealth of information, and was generous enough to pave the way for these interviews after I contacted him with lists of VUMS members I wished to interview for this study. This work would not be possible without Ray Jackson and the amazing VUMS who let me into their past, who described and shared their underage experiences at war, many stories they have never told anyone, not even their children or

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<sup>1</sup> A study by S. L. A. Marshall speculates that only 15 percent of those who served in World War Two actually fired their weapons and directly participated in the act of combat. As cited in Michael D. Gambone, *The Greatest Generation Comes Home: the Veteran in American Society* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Only an estimated 100,000 served underage during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam combined. Ray Jackson, "Rushing the Cadence – Serving Underage," *Leatherneck*, December 1996, 52-53.

their wives. To this extent they are still serving their country. They are giving their history for the future.

## Children at War

To begin, the concept of the “child soldier” deserves definition. Under international law, all persons under the age of eighteen are classified as children. Contemporary humanitarian groups advocating an international ban on the employment of child soldiers use this simple delineation. This view, known as the “Straight 18” position, neglects the established recruitment standards of even the United States military, which, in 1948, standardized the enlistment age of recruits at seventeen. Prior to that, age requirements depended on the branch of service.<sup>3</sup>

In the years immediately preceding and leading into the Second World War, the United States Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard allowed enlistment at age seventeen with parental consent, age eighteen without.<sup>4</sup> The United States Army, in its third supplement to the *Military Laws of the United States* in 1944 – even at the height of World War Two – stipulated that enlistments in the army of the United States, “in time of war or other emergency declared by Congress” maintained that the “Eligibility for such enlistment shall be limited to persons not less than eighteen years of age.”<sup>5</sup> Further, under the Eighth Edition of the *Military Laws* published in 1939, if a parent or guardian applied for the discharge of a young soldier, the Secretary of War would discharge “any man enlisted after July 1, 1925, in the Army under twenty-one years of age who has

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2004), 2; David M. Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 3; Ray D. Jackson and Susan M. Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors: Stories about Young Men and Women who Served in the Armed Forces of the United States of America Before Attaining Legal Age*, vol. I (Tempe: Veterans of Underage Military Service, 1996), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. I, 2.

<sup>5</sup> United States War Office, *Supplement III to the Military Laws of the United States, Eighth Edition, 1939: Containing Legislation of the 76th, 77th AND 78th Congresses, 1939-1944* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), §2163a, pp. 560-561.

enlisted without the written consent of his parent or guardian.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, under Section 249, “Enlistment; persons barred,” the regulations plainly stated, “no minor under the age of sixteen years,” along with insane or intoxicated persons and felons, “shall be enlisted or mustered into the military service.”<sup>7</sup> Should any recruit fail to follow the stated parameters of military law, the enlistment of a minor under the age of sixteen was considered “absolutely void.”<sup>8</sup>

For the purposes of this research then, a child soldier in World War Two is one who served under the established legal recruitment age of 17. However, underage men serving their country fighting the Second World War were no phenomenon in American history. As early as the Revolutionary War, young Americans defended their fledgling country by offering their military service. In fact, at the time of the Revolution, there was no age requirement; it was not until after the war, with the formation of the War and Navy departments, that regulations were imposed.<sup>9</sup>

When hostilities between the colonies and the Crown erupted, the nascent nation needed all the manpower it could muster. Men left their shops and fields, often taking their sons with them. Inevitably, younger sons and brothers were eager to join the fight. Young men, even boys, signed up with their local militias – there were plenty of positions to fill.<sup>10</sup> The need for men resulted in the utilization of all available, regardless of age. Most often, the youngest were assigned the role of drummers and fifers, the

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<sup>6</sup> United States War Office, Office of the Judge Advocate General of the Army, *Military Laws of the United States, 1939*, 8th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), §231, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> United States War Office, *Military Laws of the United States, 1939*, 8th ed., §249, pp. 118-119.

<sup>8</sup> United States War Office, Office of the Judge Advocate General of the Army, *Military Laws of the United States, 1929*, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), §248, p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> Eleanor C. Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys: A History of Children in America's Armed Forces, 1776-1916* (Del Mar: The Bishop Press, 1982), xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, xiv.

tongues of the military, for it was upon their actions that men moved.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the officers made the decisions, but the drummers and fifers gave the commands to the troops, directing their movements on the battlefield. It has been recorded that the youngest drummer boy to serve in the Revolutionary War was Nathan Futrell, age seven.<sup>12</sup> Commanding the movements of troops in battle was no small responsibility for someone of such a young age.

Young soldiers served in other capacities as well. In December 1775, Daniel Granger, a farmer's son, joined the Continental Army at the age of thirteen. His first assignment was as a guard for wood, stores, and eventually British prisoners. He served a year and then headed home to help with the harvest. Granger returned to the military after the harvest, this time serving as a musician. During this term he witnessed the siege of Boston, which ended in March 1776, and the surrender of British General John Burgoyne following the Battles of Saratoga in October 1777. He left the military to help on the farm one last time before joining the military once more as a drummer in 1780, this time serving for the duration.<sup>13</sup>

President Andrew Jackson started his illustrious military career at the age of thirteen during the War for Independence. Although relatively safe from combat, he served as a mounted orderly and messenger, armed with a pistol and a “small fowling piece that my Uncle Crawford lent to me.”<sup>14</sup> He was not entirely removed from combat, however; following a skirmish Jackson was captured. In captivity, a British lieutenant

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<sup>11</sup> The term, ‘tongue of the camp’, was employed during the American Civil War in reference to drummer boys. Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 2, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 3.

attempted to force Jackson to clean his boots. Jackson's refusal was met with a saber slash to the arm.<sup>15</sup>

Following the war, the Continental Army was disbanded. In 1789, the new nation established the War Department, and with it came rules and order to the enlistment process. Army regulations of 1802 stated that "no person under the age of twenty-one should be enlisted without the consent of his parent, guardian or master"; however, the regulations did not specify a minimum age *with* consent. Regulations were further clarified in 1813, which allowed the enlistment of boys between the ages of fourteen and eighteen as musicians, with parental consent.<sup>16</sup>

The Navy also perpetuated the legal enlistment of youth in the service. America's first admiral, David Glasgow Farragut, was appointed a midshipman at the age of nine by President James Madison. The four-foot nine-inch Farragut boarded his assigned ship, the frigate *Essex*, for the first time in August 1811, in his full dress uniform – "blue coat with tails, white vest and breeches, buckled shoes and a gold-laced cocked hat. His standing collar was decorated with a gold lace diamond, the insignia of a midshipman and the youngster wore a dirk at his side."<sup>17</sup> What the crew thought of the nine-year-old is unknown, but the midshipman had charge of all boats that left the ship. It was young Farragut's duty to give orders regarding the boats, and the crew's duty to obey.<sup>18</sup>

At the outbreak of hostilities with Britain yet again, this time on 18 June 1812, the nine-year-old Farragut found himself sailing off to war. At age ten, he was engaged in his first naval battle. Victorious, the *Essex* took prisoners aboard. As Farragut recorded

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<sup>15</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 84-85.

in his journal, “[w]hile the ship was crowded with prisoners they planned a mutiny.”<sup>19</sup> Espying the situation, Farragut immediately reported to the ship’s captain who raised the alarm of fire, sending the mutineers into confusion and allowing the loyal crew to regain control of the ship. Even in his youthfulness, Farragut maintained a faithful attention to duty.<sup>20</sup>

He served with dedication throughout the war. Following a failed blockade run of a neutral port in February 1814, Farragut and the crew of the *Essex* were taken prisoner, and in April of that year sent to New York aboard an unarmed ship. Farragut’s active sea duty was over. He returned home from war at the age of twelve.<sup>21</sup>

Following the War of 1812, the Navy ended the practice of issuing warrants as midshipmen to those under age twelve. In 1824, the Navy and Congress worked together in an effort to establish an apprentice program for those aged thirteen to sixteen wishing to join with parental consent, to serve until age twenty-one. Coincidentally, however, it took thirteen years for the minimum age of thirteen to become reality; it was not until 1837 that the legislation passed. The Navy subsequently raised and lowered the minimum age – raised to fourteen in 1855, then lowered back to thirteen in 1865. Over the next fifteen years, the minimum age was raised and lowered three more times, to fourteen in 1870, fifteen in 1875, and back to fourteen in 1880, highlighting the difficulty, even 150 years ago, the military had with a minimum enlistment age and underage recruits.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 86-87.

<sup>21</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 87-90.

<sup>22</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 93, 108-110.

The Marine Corps utilized underage soldiers early in American history, having established a music apprentice program for recruits at the turn of the nineteenth century. In June 1800, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Major William Ward Burrows, wrote a request for boys not exceeding age twelve, and with their parents' consent, to be drummers and fifers in the Corps. These young musicians received their musical training at the Marine Barracks in Quantico, Virginia, before assignment to duty stations and ships, to serve until age twenty-one.<sup>23</sup>

The young Marine musicians actively served in war. When Marines landed, the fifers and drummers went to the field with them, attached as the field music section. William Graham enlisted as a drummer in 1801 at the age of twelve and served in the War with Tripoli. David Coleman served aboard the *John Adams* in the War of 1812 at age sixteen. Five Marine boys accompanied a detachment of Marines sent from the Marine Barracks at Quantico to intercept the approaching British at the Battle of Bladensburg in August 1814. Samuel Coridell served as a drummer in the War with Algiers in 1815, at age thirteen. Inadvertently, early America had constructed a legacy of children at war.<sup>24</sup>

The American Civil War could be considered the epitome of underage Americans at war. Although no concrete figures exist, conservative estimates place more than 200,000 soldiers of the Civil War at age sixteen and under – a full ten to twenty percent of the fighting force. One of the youngest was Avery Brown, aged 8 years, 11 months, and 13 days. Brown lied about his age to join the service, claiming he was a full twelve

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<sup>23</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 138-139.

<sup>24</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 139-140.

years old. Although young soldiers maintained the traditional role of musicians – as drummers and the more recent development of buglers – in the service, many underage volunteers engaged in combat and served with distinction during the war. At least six received the Medal of Honor, our nation’s highest award for valor. One fortunate aspect of the active participation of underage soldiers in combat during the Civil War for this study is that there is a much better record of their service.<sup>25</sup>

John Lincoln Clem is perhaps one of the most famous child soldiers of the Civil War. At the age of nine, his first two attempts to join the military were refused, first by the Army proper and then by the Third Ohio Volunteer Regiment. Finally accepted as an unofficial drummer boy for the 22nd Michigan, he was more of a camp follower than a soldier and appeared on no official muster rolls. His military career was off to an inauspicious start, but all that soon changed.<sup>26</sup>

At Pittsburg Landing, it is reputed that Clem had his drum smashed by a cannonball yet stood his ground as Confederate forces routed the men in blue. Spotted by General Ulysses Grant in the midst of the melee, the general reportedly cried out, “Johnny Shiloh won’t run! Don’t let a boy and his general stand here and fight alone!”<sup>27</sup> The Union held its position at Pittsburg Landing long enough for reinforcements to arrive the following morning to turn the tide of battle and emerge victorious at Shiloh. For his valiant stand that day, the “Drummer Boy of Shiloh,” as he was later called, was rewarded with a valid enlistment in the United States Army. He was ten years old.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, 5; Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. I, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, 5; Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 29-30.

<sup>27</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 29-30.

John Clem went on to fight in many of the most grueling campaigns of the war. He fought at Chickamauga, Perryville, Stone River, Kennesaw Mountain, Atlanta, and Nashville. At age twelve he was promoted to the rank of sergeant. For a time, he served as Grant's personal messenger, and after the war was nominated for West Point by the former general turned President. Refused admission for deficient education, Grant commissioned him a lieutenant in the United States Army. Major General John Clem retired from the military in 1915.<sup>29</sup>

Robert Henry Hendershot was another youth who had trouble joining the war, but after persistent efforts eventually succeeded. At the age of twelve, Hendershot persuaded the captain of troops stationed in his home town of Jackson, Michigan, to allow him to play drum rolls for recruits. When it came time for the soldiers to depart for battle, the temporary drummer was refused permanent assignment on account of his small stature. Undeterred, Hendershot hid in a tool box near the engine of the train transporting the troops. Discovered by the captain at a train stop in Michigan City, Indiana, Hendershot was spanked and given a train ticket home. Placed under the ward of a baggage handler, the youth escaped while the man tended to his duties. Hendershot hopped a train to Indianapolis and eventually caught up with his surrogate regiment. Yet again, the captain was infuriated and ordered the child home, but Hendershot appealed to the captain of another company in camp and finally obtained enlistment as a drummer.<sup>30</sup>

Hendershot served with an almost dangerous alacrity. At Murfreesboro, Tennessee, his regiment suffered a surprise attack and the boy was soon engaged in a desperate last stand at the town courthouse. Hendershot put down his drum and picked

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<sup>29</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 30-31; Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. I, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 31.

up a rifle. A Confederate colonel came too close to the building and Hendershot shot him dead, in full view of the enemy and the townsfolk. The Confederates soon set fire to the courthouse, forcing the beleaguered troops to surrender. The Union prisoners were marched out of town. Perhaps seeing an advantage in his youth, Hendershot feigned a case of diarrhea and pleaded with the enemy commander for a wagon to ride in. His ploy gained him charge of a mule team transporting sick Confederates. Hendershot directly drove the mule team and wagonload of enemy soldiers off a bridge and into a stream. Injured in his effort, conveniently alluding to the unintentional nature of the accident, he escaped further punishment. Hendershot fled captivity during a rainstorm that night.<sup>31</sup>

Hendershot's underage military career was full of youthful escapades and dangerous encounters. He often disobeyed orders, one time nearly getting himself killed. After torching and plundering houses near Fredricksburg, Maryland, Hendershot captured an enemy and marched him back to camp. General Ambrose Burnside, at the time commander of the Army of the Potomac, heard of Hendershot's actions and commended him for it. However, given the boy's young age, Burnside deemed it safer for Hendershot to stay in camp and ordered him to remain there. Shortly thereafter, the roar of combat across the Rappahannock lured the boy from camp, in direct disobedience of orders. Charging into battle, Hendershot took a ball in the leg, suffering a broken limb. Fortunately for the youth, he was evacuated back across the river.<sup>32</sup>

Hendershot spent his recovery at Burnside's home in Rhode Island. After a brief stint in civilian life, the irrepressible youth rejoined the service, this time the Navy. His antics resulted in a discharge after six months. He took a job as a news agent and soon

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<sup>31</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 32-33.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 33-36.

found himself back on the lines, this time as a noncombatant. Again, his eagerness for action got the better of him. He volunteered as a spy for the army. During an exploit across the lines, Hendershot was captured and imprisoned. Within three weeks he escaped and returned to friendly territory. Undaunted, he continued to spy for the army, venturing twice to the Southern capital of Richmond. He survived the war and, after a rejection from West Point for his wound received in action, served his country in a post office.<sup>33</sup>

At age eleven years and eleven months, Musician Willie Johnston is the youngest American to ever earn his nation's highest commendation, the Medal of Honor. Serving with Company D, 3rd Vermont Infantry, Johnston received the award for "Gallantry in the Seven Days' Fight and Peninsular Campaign, May-June 1862."<sup>34</sup> He endured days of intense combat, artillery bombardments, and all-night marches through mud. Through it all, Johnston carried and protected his drum, the only drummer boy of the campaign to do so. The significance of his achievement is exemplified by his award.<sup>35</sup>

One late-December evening in 1861, William Horsfall ran away from home with three other boys determined to join in the fight for the Union. At age thirteen, he left home "without money or a warning to my parents."<sup>36</sup> The boys boarded a steamer departing the border state of Kentucky, headed for Cincinnati. At the sound of the ship's bell announcing departure, Horsfall's companions, "having a change of heart, ran ashore before the plank was hauled aboard, and wanted me to do the same."<sup>37</sup> He did not. He

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<sup>33</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 36-37.

<sup>34</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> W. F. Beyer and O. F. Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor: How America's Civil War Heroes Won the Congressional Medal of Honor* (Detroit: Perrien-Keydel Co., 1903; reprint, Stamford, CT: Longmeadow Press, 1994), 35 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>37</sup> Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 35.

stayed in hiding aboard the ship until it was well under way, and then ventured out to the deck. Accosted by the captain as to his destination, Horsfall told him “the old orphan-boy story.” From then on he was treated kindly, fed, and allowed liberal privileges en route to the boat’s destination.<sup>38</sup>

After arriving in Cincinnati, Horsfall sought enlistment in the military. He successfully joined a regiment from his home state, the First Kentucky, which signed him on as a drummer. His prowess with a rifle, however, soon earned him the opportunity to fight as a sharpshooter. While he was serving in this capacity, acting as an independent sharpshooter to the right of his regiment in the fighting near Corinth, Mississippi, on 21 May 1862, his unit made a desperate charge across a ravine. Horsfall witnessed his captain, Williamson, fall wounded in the attack. The enemy repulsed the assault, sending the Union troops into retreat. Captain Williamson was left between the lines, wounded and pinned down by a deadly crossfire. A lieutenant approached the boy. “Horsfall, Captain Williamson is in a serious predicament; rescue him if possible.”<sup>39</sup> Horsfall leaned his rifle against a tree and, in a stooping run, braved the deadly hailstorm of bullets. Williamson was lucky that day. The child soldier reached his side, and, with his four-foot three-inch frame, dragged the full grown man back to stretcher bearers who evacuated the captain to the rear. Heralded as a hero and awarded the Medal of Honor, Horsfall replied he was “only obeying the lieutenant’s orders.”<sup>40</sup> William Horsfall was fourteen.

Nathaniel Gwynne attempted to enlist at the age of fifteen, but the recruiting officer, looking him over, shook his head and told him to go home. Determined to join,

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<sup>38</sup> Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> The request of the lieutenant as quoted by Horsfall. Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots and Powder Monkeys*, 40.

Gwynne went straight to officers about to take their men to the field, begging any of them for permission to join. One officer was so favorably impressed with the young man's desire to serve his country that he allowed Gwynne to accompany his command. From that point forward, Gwynne served unofficially as a private in the Thirteenth Ohio Cavalry.<sup>41</sup>

At Petersburg, 30 July 1864, Gwynne's regiment formed for a charge against a battery holding a commanding position over the battlefield. The captain of the regiment noticed Gwynne in line and reminded him that he was not officially mustered in; therefore, it would be best for him to stay behind. The young man replied, "But that's not what I'm here for!"<sup>42</sup> Immediately at the end of this exchange the bugler sounded the charge and the cavalry surged forward, Gwynne with them, headed straight for the enemy battery.

Reaching Confederate lines, hand-to-hand combat ensued. The Union color-bearer was shot down, the flag captured. The momentum of the charge rapidly diminished, reverting into a full-on retreat. Halfway back to their lines, a single horse veered off course and turned back toward the enemy, galloping at full speed. Those who witnessed the event thought the soldier had lost control of his horse; but then wondered whether the soldier himself had snapped, as they realized he held the reins tightly in his hands. Fifteen-year-old Nathaniel Gwynne executed a one-man charge directly into the mouths of the Confederate cannons and headed straight for the captured standard, bullets

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<sup>41</sup> Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 394.

<sup>42</sup> Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 394.

from the enemy infantry snapping past. Wrenching the colors from the hands of the rebels, Gwynne turned his horse and fled back to his lines.<sup>43</sup>

He did not make it far when the arm holding the flag was shot away, nearly torn from its socket. No sooner had the flag hit the ground than Gwynne halted his horse, took the reins in his teeth and reached down and picked up the flag, still under a murderous barrage of shot and shell. Again racing toward Union lines, Gwynne was shot in the leg, but rode on until he reached his comrades; “whereupon he turned the flag over to them and fell unconscious to the ground.”<sup>44</sup>

His devotion to his flag that day earned him the Medal of Honor. What is more, as a reward for his actions, Gwynne was placed on the muster-roll of the Thirteenth Ohio Cavalry.<sup>45</sup> He had more than deserved them both.

The underage soldiers of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were accepted under traditionally established roles for youths in the military. More often than not, not only was their enlistment valid, but there was already a place for them in the ranks. Although at times unquestionably young – pre-teens serving their country in combat – those on the record served their country unfailingly, often with distinction and valor. However, with the military evolution of the American Civil War, and the increasing modernization of warfare, the roles of soldiers in the military changed, along with laws and regulations regarding youth in the service. Boys with drums and fifes were no longer needed to be the tongues of the military. Men with grenades and high-powered rifles would fight the modern wars, not children with drumsticks. Sailors on massive

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<sup>43</sup> Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 394.

<sup>44</sup> Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 394-396.

<sup>45</sup> Beyer and Keydel, eds., *Deeds of Valor*, 396.

steel ships of war, on a scale never seen before, would sail the seas, command sixteen-inch rifled cannons and man quadruple-barreled forty-millimeter automatic weapons.

The day of the boy soldier was over. Or was it?

Simply because they could not serve legally does not mean they did not want to; nor does it mean they did not serve. Boys had been laying down their instruments of music and picking up instruments of war since the Revolution. The Civil War served to accentuate this fact. When America joined its first twentieth-century war, those under legal age continued to join the service. The United States military still needed men, and those under the legal age for enlistment still wanted to serve.<sup>46</sup>

With America's entry into the First World War on 6 April 1917, sixteen-year-old Frank Buckles determined to serve his country. He deferred his attempt to join until summer vacation from school, at which time, while attending the Kansas State Fair in Wichita, Kansas, he went to the Marine Corps recruiting office to enlist. Stating his age as eighteen, the recruiter explained to Buckles that he was still too young; he had to be twenty-one. After a second attempt with the Marines, this time giving his age as twenty-one, he made it as far as a physical examination but was denied for being underweight. An attempt to join the Navy resulted in a rejection for flat feet. He decided to try another locale, hopefully with better luck.<sup>47</sup>

Buckles headed to Oklahoma City. Again, he was rejected by the Navy and Marines. He tried the Army and was asked for a birth certificate. Claiming that his home

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<sup>46</sup> By 1915, the laws regarding enlistment in the Army stipulated recruits must be between the ages of 18 and 35 at time of enlistment, while "No person under the age of twenty-one years shall be enlisted or mustered into the service of the United States without the written consent of his parents or guardians." United States War Office, Office of the Judge Advocate General of the Army, *Military Laws of the United States, 1915*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), §1028, pp. 377-378.

<sup>47</sup> Jackson, Ray D., and Susan M. Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors: Stories about Young Men and Women who Served in the Armed Forces of the United States of America Before Attaining Legal Age*, vol. II (Tempe: Veterans of Underage Military Service, 2002), 14-15.

state of Missouri made no record of births at the time he was born, but that he could produce a birth record in the family Bible, the Army accepted his statement and enlisted him at the age of sixteen on 14 August 1917. Within four months he was on his way to Britain, eventually serving in France. Following the end of the war, Buckles escorted German prisoners-of-war to Germany, serving with the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe until his return to the States in 1920. He is currently the only surviving American veteran of overseas service during World War One.<sup>48</sup>

Distinguished Montana senator and United States statesman Mike Mansfield lied about his age in February 1918, to enlist in the Navy at the age of fourteen. He served for the duration of the First World War. Beyond his service in the Navy, in 1919, at age fifteen, he joined the United States Army for a year. A seasoned veteran of two branches of the United States Armed Forces, Mansfield nearly made the full circuit of the military when he joined the Marines at age seventeen in 1920, serving in three branches of the military before the age of eighteen.<sup>49</sup>

At least one young American was not as fortunate as his compatriots. Albert Cohen of Memphis, Tennessee, is reputed to be the youngest American soldier to see combat in World War One. His service did not last long. He enlisted at the age of thirteen and was dead by fifteen.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. II, 14-15; Richard Rubin, "Over There – and Gone Forever," 12 November 2007, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/12/opinion/12rubin.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=Over+There+%97+and+Gone+Forever&st=nyt&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/12/opinion/12rubin.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Over+There+%97+and+Gone+Forever&st=nyt&oref=slogin)> (22 May 2008).

<sup>49</sup> Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "MANSFIELD, Michael Joseph (Mike), (1903 – 2001)," n.d., <<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000113>> (22 May 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, 8.

In the years leading up to the Second World War, regulations regarding enlistment became much more structured. The laws not only made underage enlistment more difficult, they made it illegal. Despite this, young men flocked to the service of their country, inadvertently carrying on a long-established American tradition of youth in war. However, these men faced different battles and different hurdles in their attempts to join the United States military. They embarked upon the most immense war history has ever seen, and may ever see. Their methods for joining were often simple, sometimes elaborate, but at all times illegal. Their reasons varied, their experiences even more so. The effects of war left its impressions upon them all, some more than others. For many, having gone off to fight a war and experiencing the horrors of combat, they returned home to tasks as mundane as finishing high school. Others learned lessons during their formative years in the military that would shape and guide them the rest of their lives. One thing they shared in common. They were children at war.

## **Breaking the Rules. How it was done.**

They knew the rules. Joining the military underage was a daunting task. Although there was the obvious need for manpower, the military would not accept just anyone who walked in and asked where to sign. Enlistment required proof of age, a physical examination, and written consent of parents or guardians for those under eighteen. In a few instances, a recruiter would pretend to ignore youthful appearances and believe the kid standing in front of him was eighteen. Most times, however, they were sent home with parental consent forms and told to get signatures stating they had permission to enlist. Some tried with forged documents, and a few were actually successful, depending on how good of a job they did. Most were not. Sometimes they succeeded in joining underage through an elaborate scheme. For others the task necessitated relentless persuasion in front of their parents. Even so, many underage volunteers first attempted to join without even notifying their legal guardians.

John McManus, born 5 December 1927, was one of the few who joined with no questions asked. In April 1942, at the age of fifteen, McManus joined the California State Guard by lying about his birth date and telling them he was born 11 March 1924. “They took me right in.” No one asked for proof of age. “They shaved our hair and gave us uniforms,” and off McManus went to training.<sup>51</sup>

Jerome Gettler’s experience joining the New York National Guard at age fifteen “was very simple.” “They just asked us how old we were, we told them eighteen, gave a

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<sup>51</sup> John P. McManus, telephone interview by author, 30 June 2007. All telephone interviews conducted for this research were digitally recorded.

birth date, and they accepted that.” In Gettler’s experience, the Guard required neither documentation, nor proof of parental consent.<sup>52</sup>

Although perceivably simpler to join what amounted to state militia units, few were able to join the United States military with as much ease. Fifteen-year-old Mike Singer was one of them. Following the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Singer did not even consider that there might be regulations regarding enlistment. All he knew in the days following the attacks was that Hawaii had been bombed and he was imbued with an irrepressible sense of patriotism. Within a week, Singer was in the Marine Corps.<sup>53</sup>

Big for his age, Singer went to downtown Chicago with the intent of joining the Air Corps, but passed a Marine Corps recruiting station first. At that point he decided that was where he should go. He had no trouble joining. In fact, out of roughly 100 people waiting to get in the Marines, only a few passed. Young Singer was one of them.<sup>54</sup>

For most, however, the United States military proved more difficult to join. The majority of young recruits were sent home with consent forms for their parents or guardians to sign. Nevertheless, some of those forms never made it to the intended recipients.

In 1943, Robert Flores left his San Antonio home at the age of thirteen to join the Navy. The son of a single mother who worked long days to support her family, he went to the Navy recruiting office without her knowledge. He received the required enlistment papers and was told to get his mother’s consent. Forging a birth date and his mother’s signature, Flores proceeded to break into the home of a neighbor who was a notary public

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<sup>52</sup> Jerome A. Gettler, telephone interview by author, 15 June 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

and used the neighbor's stamp to certify his paperwork. His plan worked. His mother did not know where he was until he wrote her a letter from boot camp, in San Diego, California.<sup>55</sup>

Theodore Webb hailed from a legacy of underage soldiers. His grandfather served at the age of fourteen in the Civil War. His father joined the Army at age fourteen, and later fought in France during the First World War. Consequently, young Webb was interested in military service from the time he was "old enough to know what the words meant." While Webb was growing up in Mississippi, his father, raising his child as a single parent, took a job out of state and subsequently sent the boy to military school to keep him out of trouble while he was away.<sup>56</sup>

Webb excelled in his school, by the second year he was in charge of a platoon of his fellow classmates. In August 1943, just prior to returning for his third year of school, a friend of his came up with the idea to join the service. Webb agreed to try it on a lark. In order to avoid being recognized, they went to a recruiting station roughly thirty miles from their home town to sign up. After affirming his birth date as 8 August 1926, as opposed to the real date of 8 August 1930, he was sent home with papers for his father to sign. In order to get the required signature, he would have to mail the paperwork. The boys went back to their town and headed for the post office. There Webb signed his father's name and mailed the papers back to the Navy. He never spoke to his father about his decision. On 23 August 1943, two weeks after his thirteenth birthday, Webb was sworn into the service.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Robert S. Flores, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Theodore Webb, Jr., telephone interview by author, 14 June 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore Webb, Jr., telephone interview by author, 14 June 2007.

John Ferguson lied about his age to join the Marine Corps. At age sixteen, working as a welder at the Swan Island shipyards in Portland, Oregon, Ferguson spent his evenings boxing for extra cash. Even at that young age, he won the heavyweight boxing title for all four shipyards in the area, a testament to his developed physical stature. He exercised at a gym frequented by Marine recruiters, and his association with them influenced him to join the Corps. At age sixteen, and without any notice to his parents, he signed up. The documents he submitted to the Corps were signed by a drunken logger.<sup>58</sup>

A simple statement of legal age was not always sufficient. Often birth certificates were required along with parents' signatures. One youth, Darwin Platter, was able to utilize the birth certificate of his deceased older brother to join the Navy. He enlisted under his brother's name, Clell J. Platter, in March 1944, at age sixteen.<sup>59</sup> However, Platter, with a deceptive birth certificate readily available, served as an exception. Many underage recruits undertook the task of altering their documents, changing dates any way they could.

Robert Brandt changed his handwritten birth certificate to join the Marine Corps. He turned "a sloppy five" into a three by putting a curl at the top, in the process turning himself two years older than he was, "eighteen instead of sixteen." The recruiters never questioned it.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Jackson, Ray D., and Susan M. Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors: Stories about Young Men and Women who Served in the Armed Forces of the United States of America Before Attaining Legal Age*, vol. III (Tempe: Veterans of Underage Military Service, 2006), 161.

<sup>59</sup> Darwin Platter, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

Others employed more elaborate means to change their documents. Daniel Kriss used a doctored birth certificate to join the Navy at age fourteen. The only implement he had available was ink eradicator, which when applied, Kriss recalled, the “paper became like a blotter.” The process soon became more than a “simple alteration of changing an eight to a five.” Although Kriss was convinced that the change was obvious, the Navy surprisingly accepted the forgery.<sup>61</sup>

After deciding to join the military at age fifteen, Larry McCoy went to the county courthouse to obtain a typewritten copy of his birth certificate, signed by the county clerk. He subsequently took the form to his high school typing room, “did a lot of practice and put a lot of effort into it,” attempting to get it the best he could, “and it turned out good!” He changed his birth date from 1927 to 1925 and handed it to the Navy recruiter. Still only seventeen after the change of date – not wanting to make it look too suspicious of course – the recruiter asked no further questions and sent McCoy home with the required enlistment forms.<sup>62</sup>

Arthur Hinton employed the services of a friend of his, who happened to be a secretary, to change the last number in his birth year from 1928 to 1926. His friend “easily changed the ‘8’ to a ‘6’ with her typewriter.” Accepted as proof of age, at the actual age of fifteen he was sworn in to the United States Navy.<sup>63</sup>

Even employing elaborate forgeries did not always work. If some of these exceptionally young men were going to get into the military, they would need accomplices. The usual suspects, recruiters, by no means represented the most active

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel W. Kriss, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Larry J. McCoy, telephone interview by author, 11 June 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 263.

assistants to underage enlistments. Sometimes recruiters turned a blind eye, or even aided in the recruits' efforts. At age sixteen, John Collins, after coercing his father to sign for him, altered his older brother's birth certificate and used it to join the Marine Corps. His older brother had joined the Corps at age seventeen. Subsequently, Collins took the certificate his brother had used to join the Marines and started to work. Using bleach, a pen, and coffee for aging effect, he changed the name and birth year on the certificate and carried it around in his wallet for a time before going to the recruiting station. Even with the creative effort, upon submittal to the Marines, the recruiting sergeant detected Collins' forgery. Called on it, Collins "lied like hell and said that's the way it always was." Fortunately for his purposes, however, the recruiter noted the change, but, "as they were wont to do in those days, they had to meet their recruiting quota, and he walked away." Of course, Collins had his own certificate with his real age, but he "damn sure wasn't going to give it to the Marine Corps."<sup>64</sup>

Chuck Waters went to the Marines at age fourteen. In his words, he managed to join underage because he was "a spectacular liar."<sup>65</sup> His statement only hints at the truth. Although his initial intent was to join the paratroopers, the Army would not accept him without proof of age. A Marine recruiter, however, believed his lie. He told the sergeant he was sixteen, would be seventeen in a month, and wanted to get his papers ready so he could enlist on his seventeenth birthday – a legal enlistment. In turn, the recruiter inquired as to whether Waters' parents would sign if he rearranged Waters' birthday. Affirming they would, Waters added, "of course, I signed it myself." For the rest of his Marine enlistment he had to remember his new birthday. His family did not know about

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<sup>64</sup> John E. Collins, telephone interview by author, 21 June 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Chuck Waters, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

his enlistment until he was overseas, when he wrote his mother and told her that he had joined the Marines. His mother responded, offering to get Waters out of the service on a minority discharge. He replied, stating that was something he did not want.<sup>66</sup>

J. Armand Burgun had no intention of joining the military underage when he entered a United States Coast Guard recruiting center in 1942. He had been walking down the street with a friend, age eighteen, who, upon passing the recruiting office decided on the spur of the moment that he would rather join than get drafted.

Accompanying his friend, Burgun was also given a set of forms to fill out. “Being too shy to refuse,” Burgun complied.<sup>67</sup> After handing in the completed forms, the recruiter asked for a birth certificate, but being obviously unprepared, the recruiter accepted Burgun’s assurance that he would bring it to the physical examination the following week. When he returned and they asked him if he had proof of age, he told them he had forgotten to bring it. They sternly informed him, “Next week you are going to be sworn in, so you had better bring a birth certificate.” Burgun once more assured them he would. The following week when Burgun returned to be sworn into the Coast Guard at the age of sixteen, nobody even asked him for the document.<sup>68</sup>

Jack Lawson, at thirteen-years-old, five-foot-nine and 112 pounds, received some helpful advice from a sergeant upon induction at Fort McPherson. The sergeant in charge said ‘boy, you look like you would make a good soldier,’ to which Lawson replied “I don’t want to be a soldier, I want to be a sailor.” The sergeant told him to “go get two or

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<sup>66</sup> Chuck Waters, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 110.

<sup>68</sup> It was fortunate that the Coast Guard did not ask for the birth certificate the following week because Burgun did not bother to bring it. He did not want to prove he was ineligible for enlistment. Incidentally, his friend who initiated their trip to the recruiting office failed his physical; Burgun went in on his own. J. Armand Burgun, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

three pounds of bananas and a gallon of milk. Eat breakfast in the morning – be there at five-thirty – and before you come here at nine o’clock, pile in those bananas and drink all the milk you can drink. All we have to do is weigh you and have the dentist look at your teeth.” Lawson weighed in at 116 pounds, one pound over the 115 limit.<sup>69</sup>

James McCarson had a similar experience, albeit somewhat more unpleasant. Having successfully signed up for the Marine Corps at age fourteen, he was three pounds underweight prior to his induction into the service. His recruiting sergeant bought him five pounds of bananas to eat on his way to induction at Raleigh, North Carolina. McCarson passed, but “threw up from Raleigh to Parris Island, South Carolina.” He spent his first four days in the Corps in sick bay. After this experience, he “didn’t eat another banana for twenty years.”<sup>70</sup>

Parker Miller took a different view of the role of recruiters. A fifteen-year-old farm boy, weighing in at a little over 200 pounds and “built like Charlie Atlas,” Miller went to the Navy recruiting office with the consent of his father. Sporting a little beard and a fuzzy moustache over his upper lip, he supposed he could pass for seventeen. However, in his estimation he recalled, “in January 1943, they needed bodies, and they needed them bad. No matter how tall, how skinny, how fat you were, you were in.”<sup>71</sup>

Underage soldiers of World War Two received the most assistance in their efforts from the least likely source – their own parents. A child confronting its parents with the desire to join the service underage could seem an improbable proposition. Obviously difficult for all but the most distant from their children, parents often still acquiesced to

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<sup>69</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 67.

<sup>71</sup> Parker D. Miller, telephone interview by author, 11 June 2007.

their child's demands. The reasons for their decision to aid in their child's underage enlistment differed. They agreed to sign with varying degrees of willingness, some even unwittingly. A few fathers, themselves veterans of the last war, supported their child's spirit and enthusiasm for the military. Other parents, faced with a school dropout or lawless youth, decided it was the best course of action they could hope for. Others signed believing there was absolutely no way the service would accept their underage child.

Dudley Brown's parents believed that even if they signed the papers for their underage child there still remained no chance of their son gaining admittance to the military. They understood that the service would not accept anyone under the age of seventeen; it was the law, after all. This proved to be a misconception.

At age fifteen, Brown asked his parents if they would sign for him to join the Navy and they rebuffed his request. Determined, he took his original birth certificate to his cousin to see if together they could alter it to show that he was seventeen. Coming to the consensus that they would not know unless they tried, his cousin used ink eradicator to erase the birth date and typed in a new one. It was a perfect match, and Dudley Brown was instantly older. He went to the Navy recruiter and received the forms for his parents to sign. Brown gave the papers to his parents, but they still refused. Leaving the room, he overheard his father say to his mother, "go ahead and sign, he's not going to get in the Navy anyway." They signed, and they were wrong. Before he left to return the papers to the Navy, he asked for assurance from his father, "if I get in, you are going to let me stay?" His father consented. Much to his parents' surprise, Dudley Brown was sworn into the Navy on 2 November 1943.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

Parents were hesitant, for obvious reasons. Willie Manson, having made up his mind to join the Navy underage, begged his mother to let him join. His pleas were met with a firm, “No, you are too young.” He subsequently “cried so long that she relented.” Asked by a Navy recruiter whether he was sure he was seventeen, he answered “yes” and handed over a statement from his mother to that effect. Manson had turned thirteen just ten days earlier.<sup>73</sup>

In the weeks following the attacks on Pearl Harbor, fourteen-year-old Albert Jowdy determined to join the Navy. When he informed his father of his intentions, his father jokingly told the boy he would sign for him on his birthday. He soon learned how serious his son was. Jowdy pestered his father continuously until his birthday, 19 July 1942, over half a year later. Before leaving for work that day, Jowdy’s father told his son he would meet him at the post office in San Antonio, Texas, to sign the papers. As Jowdy departed, his mother just went to a different room, “she could not stand it anymore.” He took a city bus to meet his father. When he got there, his father had already signed the forms. The two parted without a word. His father went back to work, and Jowdy boarded a bus for Houston, Texas, to be sworn into the United States Navy on his fifteenth birthday.<sup>74</sup>

Getting parents’ signatures on enlistment papers often took a good deal of persuasion, but sometimes it also involved a bit of stretching the truth. Charles Hohl tried to enlist in the Navy at age sixteen, but was refused because of poor eyesight.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. I, 208; Willie C. Manson, Jr., email correspondence with author, June 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Albert A. Jowdy, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Hohl attempted the eye examination for the Navy twice. The first time he failed because of his poor eyesight. Disappointed, he did not leave the recruiting office immediately, but “hung around and watched and tried to remember the eye chart.” Deciding he knew it fairly well after some time, he headed home, repeating the sequence of letters in his head. First thing the next morning he returned to the Navy office

Sent out the door, he went across the street and joined the Army. Hohl told the recruiter he was eighteen and that he would get his parents' signatures. He took the papers home and explained to his mother that they made a mistake in his birth date, and he would take care of it in the morning. His parents believed him and signed the papers. Instead of correcting his birth date as he said he would, Hohl was sworn into the Army on 15 June 1942.<sup>76</sup>

John McManus, who had lied about his age to join the California State Guard, soon became disenchanted with his assignment guarding the Golden Gate Bridge. After inquiring whether his unit would be shipping out any time soon, he was told that it would not be going anywhere. Figuring the Japanese were not going to invade anytime soon, he went absent without leave from his unit to join the United States Navy. Young McManus related his predicament to his mother. He told her he was "in big time trouble," that he was going to go to prison for being away from the State Guard, and that if he went in the Navy "that would offset it because one was federal and the other state." His mother believed his story and signed. McManus began his second tour in the military still at the age of fifteen.<sup>77</sup>

Parents knew their sons, much to their chagrin at times. At age sixteen and a sophomore in high school, William Almquist turned in his books and decided to join the Navy. Determined to join with or without his mother's permission, he went home and told her as much. She complied.<sup>78</sup>

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and tried again. About halfway through the chart he forgot a few letters. "The chief knew what I was doing and told me to get the hell out of there." Consequently, Hohl figured he would "let the Navy suffer and join the Army." Charles Hohl, "Military Career of Charles R. Hohl: June 15, 1942 thru September 9, 1945," unpublished memoirs, 2004, p. 1; Charles Hohl, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Hohl, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

<sup>77</sup> John P. McManus, telephone interview by author, 30 June 2007.

<sup>78</sup> William E. Almquist, telephone interview by author, 12 June 2007.

Jack Lucas's mother instilled patriotism in him from as early as he could remember. Nevertheless, when he confronted her about joining the military at age fourteen, she "was aghast" at his request and "refused to sign the required consent forms." She told him, "I only have two children and I don't want to lose you."<sup>79</sup> She did, however, allude to the possibility of her consent when he turned sixteen. Unsatisfied with this response, Lucas persisted. The debate came to a head one day when Lucas informed his mother not to expect any further cooperation as far as school was concerned. He bluntly stated, "I will see, feel, hear, and do nothing until I am allowed to join the service. My education can be completed later. Might as well let me go." Knowing her son as she did, she did not underestimate the measure of his resolve, but still refused to lie for her child. Lucas forged her signature with her knowledge. As he departed, and "with tears in her eyes, she embraced me and wished me well."<sup>80</sup> On 6 August 1942, Lucas joined the Marines, at age fourteen after all.

Thomas Craig let his parents know that he intended to join the Navy underage and planned to alter his birth certificate. Quite possibly in an effort to dissuade her sixteen-year-old son, his mother tried to alter it herself, and, surprisingly, botched the job. "Looking back, her heart probably was not in it." Undeterred, Craig found his baptismal certificate and forged it himself. His mother consented after that.<sup>81</sup>

Billie Boyd faced a different challenge with his parents. Boyd skipped the first grade and graduated from high school at the age of sixteen. After graduation he was eager to join the service, specifically the Army Air Forces. His father, a Navy veteran of

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<sup>79</sup> Jack Lucas and D. K. Drum, *Indestructible: the Unforgettable Story of a Marine Hero at Iwo Jima* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2006), 12-13.

<sup>80</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas J. Craig, telephone interview by author, 15 June 2007.

the First World War, refused his son's request to sign consent forms, telling him to "take it easy for a while." Appealing to his mother, she agreed to talk to the recruiter, and with Boyd's high school principal acting in his father's stead, the three went to the Army recruiting office with the sole intent of collecting information on what the Army Air Forces had to offer. Asked by the recruiter what his birth date was, Boyd fired back 1 January 1924, despite his actual birth date of 6 June 1925. His mother turned pale, but affirmed that was his birthday. Boyd enlisted that day, 12 May 1942.<sup>82</sup>

Other veteran fathers supported their child's decision to join the military. Parker Miller's father served in the Army during the First World War and was gassed in France. When Miller intimated his intent to join underage, his father "kind of pushed [me] to go ahead and leave the farm work and protect our country."<sup>83</sup> In 1943, he joined the Navy at age fifteen.

Joseph Argenzio faced a similar situation, but did not tell his parents he was in the military until after the fact. His father served with the First Infantry Division in World War I, and was a "'God and Country' man." Although not altogether happy with his son's decision, his father managed to pacify his mother enough that "she didn't make a big stink about it."<sup>84</sup>

There were ulterior motives for some parents to accept the decision of their child. Robert Jenkins grew up under the care of his grandmother. When he went to join the Navy at age sixteen, he was given a telegram to send to his father, requesting Jenkins'

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<sup>82</sup> Boyd noted during the interview that the day after Pearl Harbor, "the principal called us five [senior] boys in and told us that if we wanted to enlist he would give us our diplomas now, and to let him know the next day. All five of us declined, all five graduated, and all five subsequently went into the service, I was the youngest." Billie Boyd, Jr., telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Parker D. Miller, telephone interview by author, 11 June 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

age and whether the boy had his father's permission to join the Navy. "Two telegrams went out that day. The second one asked my father to answer the chief's questions in the affirmative." Frantic phone calls ensued between his father and grandmother. Eventually, "they all voted me in and sent the required answers to the Navy." His grandmother always told him, "the service will either make a man or a bum out of a guy. I assume she was hoping for the best."<sup>85</sup>

Other parents hoped for the best as well. Fifteen-year-old Robert Glenn ran into trouble with law. Arrested and handcuffed, a police officer walked him home with pistol drawn. His mother answered the door. The officer stated bluntly, "Ms. Glenn, if you don't do something about this guy, we'll wind up shooting him one day." As Glenn recalled, "that scared my mother very bad. So when it came down to signing for the Marine Corps, she figured that may be the best way to solve the problem." He enlisted in the Marines on 17 August 1942.<sup>86</sup>

John Zei entered high school in 1942 and immediately knew it was not where he wanted to be. Leaving school, he unsuccessfully attempted to join the Navy twice. At age fourteen, he sprinkled water on a birth certificate to make it look damaged and then changed the birth date. The Navy did not even consider the forgery, it was so poor. The second time, Zei "did a little better job" and made it past the local recruiter, but was rejected when he went for a physical examination. Running out of options, he went to the courthouse to get a birth certificate, and "lo and behold," they gave him the birth date of an older sister who had died a few days after birth.<sup>87</sup> To this day, Zei does not know why, "whether the register of deeds felt sorry for [him] or what," but the new certificate

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 237.

<sup>86</sup> Robert F. Glenn, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>87</sup> John N. Zei, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

the court gave him automatically turned him seventeen. Zei's father accepted his decision, but his mother refused. Knowing he would not return to school, his father advised his mother, "the military is probably the best thing that could happen to him." His mother reluctantly agreed, and shortly after his fifteenth birthday, after all was said and done, John Zei entered the Navy.<sup>88</sup>

In 1942, at age thirteen, Bobby Pettit also determined to join the Navy. He went to the recruiting office and told them he was born in 1924. Although truthfully born in 1928, the recruiters accepted his story and sent him home with papers for his parents to sign. Pettit's father was deceased, leaving only his mother to persuade to sign the papers. In order to "put a little pressure on her to do that, I checked out of school." Pettit dropped out of the eighth grade. His mother was hesitant. She consulted two of Pettit's uncles, one a First World War Navy veteran. They noted young Pettit had quit school, and there was "no telling what in hell will happen to him."<sup>89</sup> They convinced her to sign. His mother never condoned her own decision to sign the enlistment papers for her son, to the extent that she never accepted the government allotment for her son's enlistment.<sup>90</sup>

Sixteen-year-old Robert Brandt, who had changed his birth certificate to enlist in the Marines, had one step remaining before induction into the Corps, permission from his parents. He cleverly, or possibly deviously, managed to reverse a refusal. Brandt served

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<sup>88</sup> John N. Zei, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Bobby L. Pettit, telephone interview by author, 11 June 2007.

<sup>90</sup> Pettit had added incentive to join and reason to believe he would be successful. His good friend Clifford "Dick" Jenke, at age fifteen, joined at the same recruiting station two weeks before Pettit. Pettit figured, "if Dick could join, I could join." Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. I, 213. Incidentally, Dick Jenke managed to get his mother's signature in a similar fashion. After constant refusals, he stated, "Momma, if you don't sign my papers, I'll walk out that door and you'll never see me again." With that, his mother "capitulated and agreed to sign." Dick Jenke, as quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. I, 210.

his parents with an ultimatum, or, as he termed it, he “resorted to a little extortion.” Prior to returning to his home town of Hibbing, Minnesota, to enlist in the Corps, he had been “bumming around the west for three months,” and his parents “really disapproved of that.” It was only after he returned from the recruiting office in June, 1942, that he notified his family he was joining the Marines. His parents were shocked and emphatically refused his request for permission. Informing them that if they did not sign he was gone anyway – off running around the west again, “they thought it over and thought ‘well, maybe you’d be better off in the Marines than bumming around the country.’” They reluctantly signed the forms. As Brandt recalled, after the ultimatum he had “no difficulty that way at all.”<sup>91</sup>

It was obvious that Brandt’s parents did not condone his decision, but left with little recourse regarding their independent minded son, they signed his papers hoping for the best, as did other parents signing consent papers for underage soldiers of the Second World War. Their decision to assist their child was not symptomatic of their disregard for their child’s welfare. In fact, it was quite the opposite. They hoped for structure and discipline in the lives of irrepressible youths. They understood the need to divert their children from the paths of life they were following. Call it foresight, call it love. They wanted a better life for their child.

The feelings of one mother could speak for many, even after her child went off to war. In a poignant poem, she wrote:

*It is for mothers of fighting men to weep,  
Alone when the day is done;  
Imploring the Great Pilot to keep  
You safe, to guide you back again, dear one.*

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<sup>91</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

The poem was enclosed in a letter addressed to her son serving in the south Pacific,  
Robert Brandt.<sup>92</sup>

Not everyone forged documents or enlisted the help of parents and friends to assist their efforts to join the military underage during World War Two. Some managed to manipulate the system. At least two underage soldiers of the Second World War got their fraudulent enlistments out of the way before the war when they enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal strategy to extricate the struggling nation from the throes of the Great Depression. The CCC had age requirements as well, but less stringent standards than joining the military.<sup>93</sup> Subsequently, when these young men went to enlist in the military for World War Two, they presented their discharges from the Conservation Corps. The military, having no reason to question their prior discharge documents from government service, welcomed them in.

Glenn Magner enrolled in the CCC in mid-October 1939, underage at fourteen. The company commander at Camp City Point, Wisconsin, where Magner joined, inquired of the youth how old he was. Although Magner claimed he was seventeen, the commander had definite doubts. When asked if there was someone who could take him home, Magner replied in the negative. He proceeded to tell the commander the truth: "No, sir. I walked 17 miles yesterday and slept under a piece of cardboard in a country

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<sup>92</sup> Robert W. Brandt, "Tour of Duty," unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 10.

<sup>93</sup> The original enlistment requirements for the CCC were simply unmarried, able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 25, although the minimum age was later lowered to seventeen. In addition, the CCC was authorized to recruit local experienced men, enrollees with some forestry experience, without age or marital restrictions. Division of Resource Review and Coordination, "Civilian Conservation Corps and Illinois State Parks," n.d., <<http://dnr.state.il.us/orep/nrrc/cultural/ccc/ccc.htm>> (22 May 2008); Joseph M. Speakman, "Into the Woods: the First Year of the Civilian Conservation Corps," Fall 2006, <<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html>> (22 May 2008).

church doorway last night, then walked the last seven miles this morning so that I would be here in time for my 8:00 a.m. enrollment.”<sup>94</sup> The commander shook his head and replied, “you may not have been anywhere near seventeen twenty-four hours ago, but what you did to get to this point has made you old enough to be a member of my company. Now, don’t ever make me regret what I have just said.” Magner never did, and two years later at age sixteen, “I just presented my CCC discharge to the Army recruiter and I was in.”<sup>95</sup>

Charles Owens employed a similar tactic. In the spring of 1942, at age fourteen he lied about his age to join the CCC. His mother signed his papers for him, and the CCC did not ask for a birth certificate or any further proof of age. Shortly after he joined, the CCC disbanded, and Owens received a discharge. Later that year he took his discharge to the United States Marine Corps and was sworn into service on 7 October 1942, still age fourteen.<sup>96</sup>

Others adopted a more ingenuous method of manipulating the system. What could be considered the most extreme means of joining the military underage, they managed to get themselves drafted. It proved surprisingly simple, as long as few questions were asked. Their reasoning for signing up for the draft was sometimes spontaneous, other times planned. Of course, uncertain as to whether their ploy would work, it was worth an attempt. The worse that could happen would be rejection, told to go home. Amazingly, this was not the case for at least a few of them.

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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 97.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 97.

<sup>96</sup> Owens was also the product of a parent who did not believe the military would enlist him at his young age. He told his mother that if she gave her permission, he could join the Marines. His mother “thought they were just kidding around with me, so she signed the papers. Next thing she knew I was writing her from Parris Island.” Charles H. Owens, telephone interview by author, 12 June 2007.

At age sixteen, Joseph Argenzio altered his birth certificate and attempted to join the Navy in 1943. He told the recruiter he was seventeen, showed the certificate, and found out he did a “pretty rotten job” of changing his certificate when the Navy turned him away. Undeterred, he went next door to the Marines and was rejected there as well. Determined to join, Argenzio went home and attempted to alter his baptismal certificate. A sudden realization came over him while in the process of changing the second document. He thought to himself, “wait a minute, there’s a draft board right across the street.” He went over to the board and told them he was eighteen. Without any questions they accepted him. “It was basic training from there!”<sup>97</sup>

William Foster quit his high school near Boston, Massachusetts, at age sixteen to join the Navy. He attempted to enlist three times with an altered birth certificate, and was refused each time. He resorted to a more elaborate scheme. He took a train to New York City and rented a room for the night. The next day he went to the local draft board and informed them it was his eighteenth birthday. They asked for a birth certificate and he said he did not have one. A woman on the board told him that in that case they would not register him. He answered, “then I won’t register,” and headed for the door. A man called him to come back. He said they would register Foster, and then they would write and get a birth certificate. They gave him a 1-A draft card, fit for service. He walked across the street to the Navy recruiting office, and the next morning “I was on my way to boot camp.” There was a caveat to his being drafted, “I had to remember a different day,

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<sup>97</sup> When asked if they were suspicious about his age, Argenzio replied, “Not at the draft board, only at the recruiting stations for the Navy and Marines. They caught me in a minute.” Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

month, and year of birth for the next two-and-a-half years;” 19 August 1925 instead of 10 May 1927.<sup>98</sup>

In April 1944, Alvin Snaper accomplished a similar feat, albeit with slightly less effort. He tried to enlist in all branches of the military, including the Merchant Marine, but failed because he did not take any documentation along to offer the recruiters. As he recalled jokingly, he was not “smart enough to forge anything,” so he “reasoned it out and went to the draft board.” He told them he had just turned eighteen and was there to register. They sternly informed him, “the law requires you to register three months before your eighteenth birthday and you have violated the law. As punishment, we are ordering immediate induction.” “I was in the Army that night.” It was only after he was at Fort Dix, New Jersey, that he phoned his mother and said “I’m not coming home tonight.” Snaper was drafted into the United States Army at age fourteen.<sup>99</sup>

At age fifteen, Jesse Hammett asked his father to sign the papers for his enlistment. His father refused to sign, but told Jesse that if he figured out a way to join underage, he would accept his son’s decision. That is precisely what Hammett did in July 1943. He invented a birth date, went to the draft board, and signed up “like I was ready to get drafted.” From the draft board he went to volunteer in the Navy, “and went right on in.” No one asked any questions.<sup>100</sup>

Jack Lawson was drafted into the military at age thirteen. However, Lawson had an inside connection. When he went to the draft board in an attempt to join the military underage, he found that the draft board secretary was his fifth-grade teacher. She was

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<sup>98</sup> William Foster, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>99</sup> When asked if the draft board required any proof of age, Snaper replied “no, they were so mad at me,” followed by laughter. Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Jesse W. Hammett, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

aware of unfortunate events in young Lawson's life. His father had recently been murdered, leaving Lawson's mother to provide for Jack and his three sisters. In his words, "I always thought she had been a very humanitarian type woman." She allowed him to register for the draft five years before he could legally do so. As he prepared for induction into the Navy in December 1943, aside from the incident of being underweight and told to eat a bunch of bananas before weighing in, there were no questions. As a draftee, "they presumed that the draft board knew you and had verified your age or your birth date." Indeed, his former teacher did know him, and she also knew he was thirteen. To the United States Navy, Jack Lawson was an eighteen-year-old draftee.<sup>101</sup>

Underage recruits of the Second World War faced difficult barriers to overcome in their attempt to gain admittance to the military illegally. Their methods varied greatly. Some told a simple lie about their age, others pleaded with their parents or outright lied to them, and there were those who concocted clever schemes to forge documents or manipulate the draft. It was a conscious decision, planned and implemented.

They were assisted in their efforts as well. Recruiters helped bend the rules for eager patriots, told them to fill up on bananas to gain weight and ignored poorly forged documents, or even aided in altering birth dates. A surprising number of parents consented to their child joining underage, although most did not condone it. They signed because they knew the determination of their children, allowed them to enlist because their child had quit school with no intent to return, or because they saw a better future for their son in the military than the situation they were currently in.

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<sup>101</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

Eventually they succeeded, some even after multiple rejections. Undaunted, they kept trying, determined to serve their country. After all the trouble to join the military underage, even at the risk of breaking the law, the question emerges as to motivation. Why break the law to enter a war, to go through all that trouble to put oneself in harm's way, and to leave a home one might never see again?

## **For God. For Country. For three square meals a day. Why.**

In the limited work that has been done on child soldiers in armed conflict, scholars acknowledge that ascribing reasons for voluntary involvement in war is difficult to categorize. Rachel Brett and Irma Specht specifically address why adolescents participate in contemporary conflicts in their study, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*. They posit, “Trying to analyze human behavior and identify the specific factors or incidents that lead to one course of action rather than another is inevitably a complex and somewhat unsatisfactory process. Few things in life are so clear-cut that there is one single explanation for them.”<sup>102</sup> However, common threads can be discerned in weaving together testimonies from those who participated in war underage. Broad categorizations emerge to explain why individuals chose to join.

Brett and Specht cite seven categories which they term “environmental factors,” conditions that are necessary, but not sufficient, reasons for involvement. They are war, poverty, education and employment, family and friends, politics and ideology, specific features of adolescence, and culture and tradition.<sup>103</sup> Some, but not all of these factors are applicable to this study, albeit with varying degrees.

It would first be beneficial to winnow out the least applicable. In citing education and employment, Brett and Specht argue the case in separate causes. They contend that education and employment provide structure in the lives of youths. In the absence of schools or employment, they affirm, youth are left with nothing else to fill the day.<sup>104</sup> While the environmental pressures of education and employment may be applicable in

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<sup>102</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 9.

<sup>103</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 9.

<sup>104</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 15-16.

comparing adult attitudes to adolescent ideals, it does not explain why most underage soldiers of the Second World War willingly left their enrollment in school to enlist in the military. The contention is better suited to identifying a parent's rationale in consenting to the underage enlistment of their child than the motives of underage volunteers themselves.

Slightly more relevant, Brett and Specht maintain that the environment of education has the potential to change attitudes and values. They assert that schools can be employed as tools of military and political forces to expose children to specific agendas.<sup>105</sup> There is merit to this argument, especially when considering Hitler's Germany or other authoritarian states in the period leading up to the Second World War, but it was not a primary catalyst for underage enlistment in the United States. In fact, only two underage veterans interviewed, Billie Boyd and Charles Owens, cited an influence from school. Billie Boyd's experience is only tangentially related in that on the day following the attacks on Pearl Harbor, his high school principal pursued an individual initiative. He called all the boys in the senior class to his office and offered them their diplomas should they wish to enlist. They declined, but the offer existed.<sup>106</sup>

Charles Owens had a more direct influence. He was in junior high school when Pearl Harbor was bombed. The next day the school principal called all the students to the school gym and "told us they declared war, gave us all a pep talk, and got us all excited." Complementing the excitement was Owens' woodshop teacher, a Marine Corps veteran of the First World War. As Owens recalled, the teacher was "always telling stories," effectively sparking Owens' interest in the Corps. This experience proved so influential

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<sup>105</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 15-16.

<sup>106</sup> Billie Boyd, Jr., telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

that Owens chose the Marines because of his teacher. At no time, however, did anyone within the environment of education advocate his underage enlistment.<sup>107</sup>

The categorization of the specific features of adolescence is easily conflated with other factors influencing underage involvement in war. Adolescence is a formative period of an individual's life. Therefore, events occurring around an adolescent take on increased importance or meaning. Whether it is political issues, the actions and reactions of close acquaintances – namely family and friends, or culture and tradition within an adolescent's immediate environment and society, all factors aid in shaping the attitudes of impressionable youths. Brett and Specht note that adolescents “will try to adopt behavior and/or appearance that conform to the ideal style of the moment.”<sup>108</sup> However, this does not stand alone without further delineation of what that moment entails.

The first among the factors is an obvious consideration that is often overlooked, the presence of a war. This reason is inherently significant because in peacetime underage enlistments are drastically fewer, although not altogether unknown. Even in pre-World War Two America, there were underage enlistments. Mike Ryan and Walter Ram were two who joined the peacetime military, but it was war that kept them there.

Mike Ryan enlisted in the Army at age sixteen on 19 February 1941. He quit school in the tenth grade to attempt gainful employment but could not find a job. Two other friends were in a similar situation, so the three decided to join the Army with hopes of assignment to Alaska. The recruiting sergeant informed them that there were no spots available in Alaska, but they could choose between Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and Fort Mills in the Philippines. Not wanting to go to Oklahoma, Ryan signed up for the Philippines. He

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<sup>107</sup> Charles H. Owens, telephone interview by author, 12 June 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 29.

arrived in April 1941, and was assigned to a twelve-inch mortar battery. Of the 100 men in the battery, “there were four of us that were not old enough to be there.”<sup>109</sup> Eight months later and just hours after the attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese launched offensives in the South Pacific. Ryan had recently returned to his unit following a twenty-four-hour liberty in Manila when the Japanese started bombing Caballo Island, where Ryan was stationed at Fort Hughes. On 6 May 1942, after nearly five months of continuous shelling, the island surrendered. Sixteen-year-old Mike Ryan spent the next three years, three months, and nine days of his youth as a prisoner of the Japanese.<sup>110</sup>

In 1940, sixteen-year-old Walter Ram dropped out of school to join the Army. Born in 1923, he submitted a baptismal certificate he altered to read a birth year of 1921. The reason he gave for joining was that he was “very adventurous.” He wanted “to go see more of the world than what we were seeing in our small town.”<sup>111</sup> Ram enlisted for a year and served in the infantry, but soon realized that twenty-mile marches with sixty pounds of gear were not what he had hoped for in joining the military underage. When his year was up, he accepted his discharge and left the military. However, in January 1942, just weeks after the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Ram volunteered for the Army once more, but this time he signed up for the Army Air Forces. The presence of war had brought him back.<sup>112</sup>

Enlistments underage during peacetime, however, were few in comparison with the numbers that joined following the attacks on Pearl Harbor. With the outbreak of war

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<sup>109</sup> Mike Ryan, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>110</sup> Mike Ryan, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>111</sup> Walter F. Ram, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

<sup>112</sup> On 13 June 1943, Ram’s B-17 was shot down over Germany. One of only four of his crew that survived, he was captured by the Germans and remained their prisoner for the duration of the war. Walter F. Ram, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

underage enlistments increased exponentially, as illustrated in the previous chapter, proving that the very presence of a war was a motivating factor. Directly linked to war, and specifically in relation to World War Two, are political and ideological considerations. The overwhelming majority of underage Americans who served during the war cited patriotism as their primary motive.

Political leaders identified the enemy. When the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor, American territory, it instantly became incumbent upon any patriotic American to rally around the flag. In the words of the President, “America was suddenly and deliberately attacked.” Roosevelt further emphasized the meaning of the attacks, “There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger.”<sup>113</sup> It became every citizen’s duty to defend their country, starting at home and extending overseas.

Ideological considerations are explained a bit more succinctly in a compilation of essays edited by Patrick Bracken and Cecilia Petty, entitled *Rethinking the Trauma of War*. They maintain that children volunteer for armed opposition “because they believe in what they are fighting for,” whether it is “religious freedom, ethnic or political liberty, or a general desire for social justice.”<sup>114</sup> President Roosevelt highlighted such ideals in a speech given to Congress, on 6 January 1941, where he detailed “four essential human freedoms.” His freedoms included speech and expression, freedom of every person to worship God in his own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear – “that no

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<sup>113</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address to Congress Requesting a Declaration of War with Japan, December 8, 1941,” *The American Presidency Project*, 2008, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16053&st=&st1=>> (22 May 2008).

<sup>114</sup> Patrick J. Bracken and Cecilia Petty, eds., *Rethinking the Trauma of War* (London: Free Association Books, Ltd., 1998), 66.

nation should be in a position to commit an act of aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.”<sup>115</sup>

Adolescents learning of the news that Sunday in December may not have fully understood the ramifications of the attack, but as they witnessed the mobilization of a country for war and saw other young men leave home to fight, their perception of events took on an ideological motivation. It became their fight as well, their duty to serve their country and defend their freedoms like those around them. Of course, not everyone joined the military in a flurry of patriotism. This is the fundamental difference that makes underage soldiers of World War Two exceptional. Their ideal of patriotism, of doing their part for their country, was such a strong ideological conviction that they were willing to risk their lives for the cause.

The ideal of patriotism was so firm a belief that for most it transcended description. Many underage veterans interviewed merely cited it as the reason to join, with little elaboration. They stated it succinctly and with conviction. Chuck Waters, explaining why he joined the Marine Corps at age fourteen, stated emphatically that he was “a very patriotic young man. My country was at war. I did not need any other motivation!”<sup>116</sup> Mike Singer stated plainly that patriotism was the primary factor in his decision to join the Marines at the age of fifteen just weeks after Pearl Harbor. Joseph Argenzio noted the ideals of patriotism that had been instilled in him from an early age. When he decided to join the service, his thought was “God and Country,” and that was

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<sup>115</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress, January 6, 1941,” Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, n.d., <<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/4free.html>> (22 May 2008).

<sup>116</sup> Chuck Waters, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

enough. Robert Brandt acknowledged he was very patriotic. He wanted to “get in there and help the fight.”<sup>117</sup>

William Almquist, at sixteen, affirmed he was very patriotic as well, yet described his motivation in a bit more detail. He looked at a map of Japan, “and it wasn’t very big, and I thought, well, it would [soon] be over with, so I better get in if I was going to help out. That’s the reason I joined.”<sup>118</sup> Others were of a similar sentiment. Leonard Anderson knew he “wanted to be a part of this war” and felt it was passing him by, so he joined in June 1944, at age fifteen. Alvin Snaper was also afraid the war would be over before he could get in and do his part. In April 1944, when he managed to get himself drafted, he referred to his enthusiasm as “a youngster’s patriotism.”<sup>119</sup>

John Collins recalled, “I was afraid the war would be over before I could even finish graduating.”<sup>120</sup> To quell his fear of missing the war, in January 1944, he quit school during his junior year and joined the Marines at age sixteen. The war certainly did not end before Collins could participate. He landed in the first wave on Iwo Jima, 19 February 1945, and survived seventeen days of intense combat before he was hit by shrapnel and evacuated. In remembering why he joined, his patriotic idealism echoed the sentiments of many: “Hell, it was the thing to do.”<sup>121</sup>

Patriotism emerges first and foremost among motivating factors for underage veterans joining the military during the Second World War, but it was often intertwined

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<sup>117</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007; Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007; Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

<sup>118</sup> William E. Almquist, telephone interview by author, 12 June 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Leonard E. Anderson, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007; Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>120</sup> John E. Collins, telephone interview by author, 21 June 2007.

<sup>121</sup> John E. Collins, telephone interview by author, 21 June 2007.

with other influences. America erupted in a fit of patriotism with the outbreak of war, much like the contemporary example of the United States following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001; but the young men who lied about their age to join still serve as the exception. Significantly, it was patriotism coupled with other factors that pushed these young men the extra distance to join in the service of their country while others did not.

In reference to culture and tradition, Brett and Specht state that these factors “provide the individual with a framework through which to observe and interpret what is happening.”<sup>122</sup> The place of an individual in society, determined in part by family and friends, is an important concept to consider when attempting to understand the motivations of young people to become combatants.<sup>123</sup> Culture and tradition then, are expanded to include the environmental factors of the influences of family and friends when considering enlistment underage. In addition, Bracken and Petty make more specific arguments, contending that “[p]articipation in military or warlike activities is often glorified.” Regarding their place in society, “some children may join as a result of peer pressure,” including beliefs that “they will have fun and adventure.”<sup>124</sup>

While not necessarily pressured by their peers, those who joined underage witnessed their peers going off to war. Men left their homes throughout America to join the military, whether through the draft or enlistment. Those underage saw many of their friends and classmates who were of legal age join the service. Close relatives also served as models for emulation. The mere fact that fathers had served or older brothers were

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<sup>122</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 32.

<sup>123</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 32.

<sup>124</sup> Bracken and Petty, eds., *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, 66.

currently serving proved a powerful stimulus. Family, friends, and the potential for adventure proved a distinct motivation for joining the service underage.

Joseph Argenzio, who cited “God and Country” as motivating factors, recalled active participation in military-related organizations throughout his youth. Both his mother and father were actively involved in the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He was a member of the Sons of the American Legion and participated in the drum and bugle corps. For Argenzio, the idea of the military “was just something you grew up with.”<sup>125</sup> Further, in January 1944, he was the youngest of his group of friends and the only one not in the military because he was underage. With his father a World War One veteran, a childhood that involved active engagement in military tradition, and friends who had gone off to war, Argenzio exemplified the significance of culture and tradition influencing underage enlistment.

John Collins was afraid the war would be over before he could join, but this was only part of his incentive. He had a brother already in the Marines, who came home on leave. While at home his brother, “with all the glory of walking around” in his Marine Corps uniform, proved a factor in Collins’s decision. He wanted to be a part of that “big adventure.” For Collins, “it was something to participate in, a notch in your belt.”<sup>126</sup>

When sixteen-year-old J. Armand Burgun went into the Coast Guard recruiting office with his eighteen-year-old friend, he unwittingly placed himself in a position for an offer of enlistment. However, an additional factor that played a part in his decision was

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<sup>125</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>126</sup> Collins’s military experience was a big adventure all through boot camp, running the obstacle course, training under live machine gun fire, “we were having a ball.” That is, until Collins was stationed in a rear echelon unit in Hawaii preparing for the arrival of Marines returning from the invasions of Saipan and Tinian. When they arrived, the combat veterans “were a different breed.” The experiences Collins heard the combat veterans speak of were humbling to the young Marine. After listening to some of their stories, Collins “really began to wonder.” He seriously considered talking to his company sergeant and telling him he was underage. However, he never did. John E. Collins, telephone interview by author, 21 June 2007.

that Burgun had two older brothers already in the service, one in the Navy, one drafted into the Army. When considering whether to join, he thought to himself “my brothers had gone, I ought to go.”<sup>127</sup> William Foster, at sixteen, cited similar reasoning. His older brother joined the Marine Corps at age seventeen, and Foster recalled that his primary impetus for joining was that he “wanted to go too.”<sup>128</sup> The same was true for Mike Singer. While patriotism played a large part, Singer also referred to his two older brothers drafted into the Army as incentive for joining the military.<sup>129</sup> Glenn Magner, a sixteen-year-old Army recruit, stated his influence succinctly. “My reason for enlisting was simple. My three older brothers had enlisted as soon as the war broke out. For me, it was a combination of pride and patriotism.”<sup>130</sup>

Willie Manson, who joined the Navy just days after his thirteenth birthday, stated his influence with sincere sentiment. He was raised by a great-uncle until the age of ten, at which time he moved in with his mother, step-father, and their children whom he did not know. Essentially, “they were all strangers to me.” One day an older brother he had never met came home from the Navy on furlough. This proved a highly influential meeting. His brother told young Willie all about the military, and the two bonded in the short time they were together. When his brother’s furlough ended, Manson remembered feeling “somewhat lonely when he left.” In recalling why he joined the military, Manson stated, “I joined the Navy because I only knew about the Navy, and he was in the Navy.”

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<sup>127</sup> J. Armand Burgun, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

<sup>128</sup> William Foster, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>129</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 97.

His older brother was not merely an influential factor. Manson asserted, “He was my motivator.”<sup>131</sup>

Friends served as influences and as examples. Bobby Pettit’s fifteen-year-old friend Dick Jenke joined the Navy just two weeks prior to Pettit. He figured if Jenke could do it, so could he, even though he was only thirteen. Theodore Webb, also thirteen, agreed to his friend’s proposal to try to enlist despite being four years too young. In other cases, it was the changing atmosphere of a group of home town friends that provided the stimulus to join.<sup>132</sup>

Thomas Craig, at sixteen, was one of the youngest of his group of friends; most were one or two years older than he was. He cited his reasons to join as “a combination of patriotism and wanting to be one of the guys.” During the course of the war, he saw most of them enlist or get drafted, and decided he “wanted to go along with them.” As more and more left, he found himself spending time at the local soda fountain, the Sugarbowl, listening to sentimental patriotic songs on the jukebox. Shortly after a neighbor enlisted in the Navy, Craig determined to do the same, regardless of his age.<sup>133</sup>

Daniel Kriss cited a more somber reason in regard to his friends when discussing his motives to join underage. He had two older buddies who were seventeen when they joined the Navy. “They were eighteen when they died aboard the cruiser USS *Juneau*, which was sunk off Guadalcanal in November 1942.” It proved a powerful stimulus. Kriss joined the Navy at age fourteen the following month.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Willie C. Manson, Jr., email correspondence with author, June 2007.

<sup>132</sup> Bobby L. Pettit, telephone interview by author, 11 June 2007; Theodore Webb, Jr., telephone interview by author, 14 June 2007.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas J. Craig, telephone interview by author, 15 June 2007.

<sup>134</sup> Daniel W. Kriss, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

In addition to the death of his friends, Daniel Kriss noted a separate factor that played a part in his decision to join the Navy underage – war films played in the theaters. He recalled that the films “were very inspiring.”<sup>135</sup> Kriss was not the only one to cite this influence. Falling within the category of culture, a surprising impetus that emerged in interviews with underage veterans of World War Two was the influence the media and the perception of the military had on these impressionable young men. Brett and Specht document this in their contemporary study, albeit in reference to the influence of modern radio and television. They state that the media both reflect and help to “create and perpetuate the cultural values, as well as often being the source of information (and interpretation) about the conflict.”<sup>136</sup> Unlike modern wars, World War Two gained front-page press coverage in the newspapers, newsreels of wartime events played in the movie theaters, and full-page photographs graced the covers of periodicals such as *Life* magazine. Patriotic images of the war were omnipresent throughout the nation and highly visible to those with thoughts of war and adventure foremost on their minds.

James McCarson maintained that one of his primary influences in joining the military were the images of Marines in full dress uniform that he had seen in a movie. It was “one of the main reasons” he the joined the Corps at age fourteen.<sup>137</sup> Billie Boyd recalled seeing a photograph of a gunner on a bomber on the cover of *Life*, and from then on that was what he wanted to do. Notably, that was the assignment he received in the Army Air Forces.<sup>138</sup> Some were not as lucky. Walter Lunt aspired to be a navigator in the Army Air Forces, but the experiences of a friend changed his mind. His friend joined

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<sup>135</sup> Daniel W. Kriss, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

<sup>136</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 33.

<sup>137</sup> James R. McCarson, telephone interview by author, 12 June 2007.

<sup>138</sup> Billie Boyd, Jr., telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

the Air Forces with hopes of becoming a pilot. He was shortly relegated to a ground crew, maintaining aircraft. Lunt wanted no part of that assignment. However, movies regarding the Navy piqued his interest. His decision to join came after viewing *The Fighting Sullivan Brothers*, and another about submarine service, *We Dive at Dawn*. Citing those films as a direct influence in his decision, Lunt joined the Navy in June 1944, at age sixteen.<sup>139</sup>

Robert Jenkins kept a close watch on events unfolding throughout the world during his youth. He read the newspaper daily, and followed the news of the Germans and Japanese “conquering the world on the radio and at the movie newsreels in the theatre.” In addition, he recalled, “many Sunday afternoons were spent at the Philadelphia Navy Yard visiting the ships.” Completely immersed in the news and seeing the implements of war firsthand, in October 1943, at age sixteen, Jenkins joined the Navy to be a part of the action.<sup>140</sup>

Images of the military itself were decisive factors, even without the aid of mass media. In a country mobilizing for war, all branches of the military launched a full scale assault on the home front in their efforts to recruit the manpower necessary to achieve victory. It proved effective even in recruiting those who were not allowed to join. In early spring 1942, sixteen-year-old Charles Hohl recalled being impressed “by a public relations outfit called the United States Army.” He learned of an exhibition planned for the citizens of Baltimore, Maryland, and decided to attend. The show was put on by the Army, during which they staged a mock tank battle. Hohl was so impressed that he

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<sup>139</sup> Lunt subsequently volunteered for submarine service with images of the movies in mind, but, in a manner similar to that of his friend in the Air Forces, he ended up a sonar operator on a surface vessel. Walter R. Lunt, telephone interview by author, 14 June 2007.

<sup>140</sup> Robert W. Jenkins, email correspondence with author, June 2007.

skipped school the following day to speak with the soldiers. However, the Army's exhibition did not immediately achieve intended results. Hohl first tried to join the Navy underage and was rejected. Nevertheless, since he could not join the Navy, Hohl enlisted in the Army underage. He subsequently volunteered for an armored unit, "still impressed from the stadium show."<sup>141</sup>

Dudley Brown and Bobby Pettit were also impressed with the sights of war at home. Fifteen-year-old Brown joined the Navy in 1943, in part because he found the "big ships and battlewagons just fascinating."<sup>142</sup> Bobby Pettit, growing up in the port city of Houston, Texas, had a unique experience that set his sights on joining the Navy. His Navy veteran uncle took him down to the pier one day in 1941, when the *USS Houston* was in port, and they were allowed aboard. He was fascinated with everything he saw. "They had the flags a'flying and the spit and polish, and the brass and so forth that just all really appealed to me." From then on, Pettit "never thought about joining anything else other than the Navy." Less than two years later, he did just that, at age thirteen.<sup>143</sup>

For others, a simple slogan said it all. Sixteen-year-old Robert Brandt chose the Marines because they advertised "First to Fight," which is what he volunteered to do.<sup>144</sup> Daniel Kriss, although his friends died in naval service early in the war, was still attracted by the motto "join the Navy, see the world."<sup>145</sup>

Ideological convictions and the influences of culture and tradition were ideals that enticed young men to join underage. Still others joined for pragmatic reasons, namely,

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<sup>141</sup> Charles Hohl, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

<sup>142</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>143</sup> Bobby L. Pettit, telephone interview by author, 11 June 2007.

<sup>144</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

<sup>145</sup> Daniel W. Kriss, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

poverty and broken homes. Brett and Specht attach great significance to poverty in claiming “it is a major environmental factor,” “perhaps the most obvious common feature of child soldiers.”<sup>146</sup>

America was in the throes of the Great Depression in the period leading up to the Second World War. Even at the onset of war, families struggled to make ends meet, to provide the basic essentials – food, clothing, and shelter – for their children. While Franklin Roosevelt’s administration instituted programs to turn the tide of destitution, it was not until after the war that America was finally able to stand firmly on its feet and take great strides toward an economic boom. Young children growing up during the Depression and coming of age at the outbreak of war were cognizant enough to recognize the hardships their families faced, yet realized they were too young to set out on their own and make a career, especially considering the bleak economic situation in the early years of the war. For those children with undesirable familial situations, the possibilities for a better life seemed even less hopeful.

The military, with its potential to provide the basic essentials and a steady income, seemed a promising prospect. America’s involvement in the war and the need for great numbers of young men to fight it proved a perfect storm of sorts for those desiring to join underage. They could serve their country and their families in their time of need.

Robert Brandt recalled overhearing his father speaking with his mother one day about their financial situation. His parents never spoke about such matters in front of their children, but that day young Brandt heard his father saying “I don’t know how I’m going to get money enough to buy those kids shoes for school.” It was autumn with

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<sup>146</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 14.

winter closing in. Brandt remembered thinking, “the poor guy, he worked any little job he could find, but jobs were really hard to find.” He made up his mind, “I wasn’t going to be a drag to them.” It became an obsession. When contemplating joining the military, Brandt stated, “that obsession was probably the biggest reason” for his joining at age sixteen. Although the appeal of the Marines’ “First to Fight” lured him to the Corps, thoughts of family came first for Brandt.<sup>147</sup>

Their families’ economic situations came first for many who joined underage during World War Two. Bracken and Petty postulate, “the family may in fact influence the child’s recruitment, because it needs the income.”<sup>148</sup> Robert Glenn serves to illustrate that point. He was one of four children growing up under the care of a single mother. His mother never said anything to her children about their financial circumstances, but Glenn knew, “we were in kind of bad shape.” His mother could not work because of health problems, and they lived in a low-income housing project in Miami, Florida. Glenn learned that if he joined the military he could get an allotment of \$37.00 to send home. After his run-in with the law, the potential for a better living situation and an offer of money to send to his family convinced both him and his mother that joining the military would be a beneficial course of action, even though he was only fifteen.<sup>149</sup>

William Almquist gave a comparable motive for joining the Navy at age sixteen. With three other brothers for his parents to raise, he placed priority on “the money I could make as an allotment for my family.”<sup>150</sup> Daniel Kriss, at age fourteen, recalled rationalizing his family’s economic situation. “For me to join the Navy was one less

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<sup>147</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

<sup>148</sup> Bracken and Petty, eds., *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, 66.

<sup>149</sup> Robert F. Glenn, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>150</sup> William E. Almquist, telephone interview by author, 12 June 2007.

mouth to feed at home, and clothe.” Further, he stated, “even on that meager pay,” he was able to save enough to give his mother “some money for the house bills.”<sup>151</sup> John Taylor, in discussing his motivations to join the Marine Corps at age sixteen, recalled that with three kids at home, his father was “a little bit hard pressed for money.” When Taylor broached the subject of joining the Marines underage, his family thought maybe “it would be better for everybody all the way around,” and consequently, he joined.<sup>152</sup>

Poverty played a part even in the most basic sense. Jesse Hammett’s mother died when he was four months old, leaving his share-cropping father to raise six boys. He recalled that his father was relatively poor, and as a growing young man, Hammett acknowledged “it seemed I couldn’t get enough to eat.” At age fifteen, Hammett decided the Navy could help solve that problem.<sup>153</sup> Dudley Brown cited a similar sentiment. He had heard people say “if you want three square meals, join the Navy. “So,” he stated simply, “I chose the Navy.”<sup>154</sup>

Larry McCoy’s combined family and economic circumstances caused him to consider joining the Navy underage. His parents divorced when he was ten. His mother left their home in Abilene, Texas, and moved to California; his father remarried and also moved away. McCoy ended up living with an older brother until his brother was drafted in June 1942. After his brother left, McCoy was on his own at age fifteen, the only member of his family remaining in his home town, living in a rented room. He accepted his situation in stating plainly, “I had a broken home.” Compounding the problem, McCoy recalled it was “very, very difficult economic times,” and soon realized his

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<sup>151</sup> Daniel W. Kriss, telephone interview by author, 13 June 2007.

<sup>152</sup> John W. Taylor, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>153</sup> Jesse W. Hammett, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>154</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

“choices were few during those tough times.” The military held the prospect of a home and an income. When contemplating joining the service, he noted “I was available and I was interested in doing it, and so I did it.” McCoy joined the Navy in November 1942, five months after his brother was drafted.<sup>155</sup>

A broken home or a difficult family life served to motivate those who, even though they were underage, saw the military as a promising opportunity. Robert Flores was an only child of a single mother who often worked from seven in the morning to seven at night. He recalled that he grew up “pretty much on my own,” his mother having to sacrifice their family life just so they could get by. With little parental direction, Flores dropped out of the seventh grade and soon became involved with gangs in his home town of San Antonio, Texas, at one time serving as a leader. With America at war, Flores seized the opportunity to change direction and serve his country. He joined the Navy in 1943, at age thirteen. He did not inform his mother that he was in the military until he wrote her a letter from boot camp, essentially stating “hey, I’m here.” To Flores, joining the military underage was a needed change in life; it put him on a path with purpose.<sup>156</sup>

Jack Lawson’s broken home and difficult adolescence led him to join the military underage. After his father was murdered, his mother wed a man whom Lawson neither liked nor got along with. Further, Lawson and his siblings were divided amongst relatives following his father’s death. Young Jack worked for a number of his family members in the Appalachian Mountain region of North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee, typically doing farm work. He recalled one uncle he worked for very well,

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<sup>155</sup> Larry J. McCoy, telephone interview by author, 11 June 2007.

<sup>156</sup> Robert S. Flores, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

who also happened to be the last uncle he worked for. His uncle owned a large dairy farm which required a daily routine of milking cows starting at 4:30 a.m., seven days a week. The work on the farm continued until sundown, with no chance for recreation. Lawson recalled his uncle, “being the Christian son-of-a-bitch that he was,” constantly admonished, “you’re lucky to have a roof over your head and somewhere to put your knees to eat.” After a time, Lawson could not deal with it any longer. He referred to farm work as being a “slave, that’s all you were,” and felt, “there had to be a better way.” The Navy became that ideal life, which is why he went to the draft board at age thirteen in 1943, and, after successfully registering, specifically requested to be called to service as soon as possible.<sup>157</sup>

While many underage veterans of World War Two referred to the family as a reason to join in order to help their parents in times of need, the family could also provide opposite motives. For John Zei and William Allen, their parents served as the reason to leave home and join the military, to get away from the unfortunate situations into which they had been born. John Zei’s father “drank pretty heavily,” which affected Zei to the extent that he just “wanted to get away from home.” His motivation was accentuated by patriotic fervor with the outbreak of war. Weeks after Pearl Harbor, Zei began his attempts to join the military underage with doctored baptismal certificates, but was repeatedly refused. Not until November of that year was he ultimately successful, when the Navy finally accepted him into the service at age fifteen.<sup>158</sup>

William Allen was “abused constantly” as a child, and recalled that he was “very unhappy at home.” However, Allen viewed America’s involvement in war not merely as

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<sup>157</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>158</sup> John N. Zei, telephone interview by author, 5 June 2007.

an opportunity for him to break free from the abuse. Following the Doolittle raid over Tokyo in April 1942, Jimmy Doolittle became Allen's hero. From that point on, he wrote, "I had to join the military," which he succeeded in doing underage, just ten days after his fourteenth birthday in September 1942.<sup>159</sup> The reasons children of poverty and broken homes joined the military underage are particularly telling. The military was a way out of their current situation and into what they believed to be a better one, even if it was a war.

Indeed, to categorize the reasons and influences for underage involvement in war is a difficult undertaking. The world was at war from 1939 to 1945, yet not every youth ran off to join in the fight. Those who did were exceptional, volunteering their lives in defense of their country. Many underage veterans of the Second World War fall into multiple categories, a testament to the complicated combination of factors necessary to motivate them to join underage, to leave their schools, their homes, and their families, to fight a war. The overwhelming majority of Americans who served underage during World War Two joined out of patriotism and for ideological considerations, including the influences of friends and family, the very people they were leaving behind. Others joined for pragmatic reasons, with thoughts of leaving the family in order to assist the family in time of need, to leave a broken home, or to have food to eat. A myriad of factors combined ultimately led these young men to war.

The fundamental consideration, however, is that they all volunteered. They chose to participate in war, serving despite the fact that it was illegal. They wanted to do their part, to experience the great adventure before it was over and had passed them by. They

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<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America's Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 117.

believed they could not delay their enlistment until legal age if they were to fulfill their duty, their obligation to their friends, their family, and their country. In the words of many, “it was the thing to do.” The underage soldiers of World War Two are the exception because, in fact, that is what they did.

## **War is Hell.**

Underage Americans illegally fighting the Second World War inadvertently perpetuated an American legacy of children at war. They carried with them the knowledge that they did not have to be there, that they were younger than their brothers-in-arms; but they had defied the odds and the law to join underage, and had succeeded in achieving their goal. Some felt they had to prove themselves because of their young age – although in retrospect they realized their concerns were unfounded. As soon as they entered combat, however, they quickly learned that only one thing mattered, staying alive.

Nothing is certain in war. As Barbara Tuchman once stated, “War is the unfolding of miscalculations.” Despite the most extensive and detailed planning, anything can happen. Any sequence of events can alter the course of action, and circumstances can change as immediately as the flash of an artillery round or the snap of a bullet. Those who joined underage found themselves in situations they never could have imagined in all their youthful dreams of joining the military and fighting a war. As they proved their worth in battle or rose through the ranks, some took on positions of great responsibility for such a young age, including positions where they were in charge of others, giving orders to men much older than themselves. While all the underage veterans interviewed for this work served overseas, and most of them in combat, just a few of their stories serve to highlight the experiences and heroic achievements of those who did not have to be there, who were not even supposed to be there, yet were. As in America’s earlier wars, these underage combatants served with distinction and valor. They were underage Americans illegally fighting the Second World War.

Robert Brandt, in the Marine Corps at age sixteen, recalled his first combat operation. On 3 November 1942, less than six months after he had joined the Corps, he was debarking from a troopship at Guadalcanal as part of a combat unit reinforcing troops already on the island. As he climbed down the cargo net to board an amphibious tractor an enemy shell burst close by. Brandt immediately thought, “maybe I should go back up.” It was the first time he was under enemy fire. “It scared the hell out of me, but I was ready to go,” to which he added, “gung-ho you know.”<sup>160</sup> As he neared the bottom of the net he was suddenly smashed from below. A wave had thrust the landing craft upward, knocking Brandt off the net. He crashed to the bottom of the craft, feeling as if he had been broken in half. As the pain subsided, he realized he was uninjured. It was an inauspicious introduction to war.<sup>161</sup>

The first day on the island, Brandt’s unit was taken to Henderson Field, a landing strip on the island and the primary objective of the initial invasion. Their assignment was to set up a line of defense around the airfield. That night they lost two men killed by small arms fire, which to the sixteen-year-old was “sobering.” “The bad one,” Brandt recalled, “was shot in the stomach.” The wounded Marine laid out there all night hollering for help, but the captain would not let anyone go out to get him. Brandt remembered the man pleading “God, somebody help me.” The calls for help faded and, eventually toward daybreak, ceased. The effects of that experience were instantaneous; “it was really demoralizing to hear that.” As they moved out the next morning, Brandt walked by the dead soldier, the first American casualty he had ever seen. Entering the

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<sup>160</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Robert W. Brandt, “Tour of Duty,” unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 13-14.

jungle just a few hundred feet from their foxholes, he came across several dead Japanese soldiers, also victims of that first night.<sup>162</sup>

Brandt's unit received orders to head back to shore for a second amphibious landing, the second in two days. They headed to the eastern end of Guadalcanal to "clean out the Japs that had recently landed there." Their second landing was unopposed, but they spent the next five days battling their way inland. Before they reached their mission objective, the unit was called back. "The guys did some bitching about it, because they figured we would have to do it all over again." It was a tactical retreat. Coast watchers had relayed the message that the Japanese were sending reinforcements toward the island. The commander had decided that it was necessary to reinforce the lines around the airfield once more.<sup>163</sup>

A rear guard was needed to cover the withdrawal. Brandt's machine-gun section was called upon to furnish four volunteers. Brandt volunteered, "because I thought I had to, I was younger and I had to prove myself – which was not true at all, but I thought that way." The departing Marines left ammunition, C-rations, and canteens of water for the four men facing an unknown number of Japanese. Brandt and his three comrades dug in on a river bank; the enemy held the other side, just flowing water between them. Their strategy: any time they detected movement on the opposite side they would "pepper them with all the firepower we had." They had a machine-gun, a Browning automatic rifle (BAR), and two rifles. For the next four days and four nights they held their side of the

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<sup>162</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007; The dead Marine was a member of Brandt's unit, Danny Landavazo. Robert W. Brandt, "Tour of Duty," unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 15.

<sup>163</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

river, fending off probing attacks and keeping a constant watch. As each dawn broke, they saw more Japanese bodies on the opposite shore.<sup>164</sup>

On the fourth day they spotted movement behind them. The four men opened up with a volley of lead. Instantly they heard a shout of ‘Hold your fire! We are Marine Raiders coming in to get you out!’<sup>165</sup> Unconvinced, and also unaware of any current password, one of the four asked ‘who won the World Series last year?’ The correct answer came back, but Brandt was still uncertain. He shouted for someone to sing the first verse of the *Star Spangled Banner*. “Some Marine with a real bad voice did it.” Satisfied, the groups met. On their way out, the balladeer asked who made him sing. Brandt confessed, to which the Raider replied, “What the hell did you make me sing for!” They received a hearty welcome upon their return to their unit. The others had heard that all four of the rear guard had been killed.<sup>166</sup>

Toward December, Brandt and his unit were pulled off the front lines for a brief rest period. They returned to the lines on 12 December, the day before Brandt’s birthday. The Marines established their position and dug in. Just before dark the following day their captain came through the lines inspecting positions, in part to bolster the morale of the troops for the oncoming night. When the captain got to Brandt he said to him, “Well Brandt, you are seventeen years old today, old enough to join the Marine Corps. Can I sign you up?” Brandt had no idea how the captain found out his true age; nevertheless, he pretended to scoff at the remark, “secretly pleased with the personal attention.” That night the lines were fairly quiet, which Brandt recalled was “indeed a fine birthday gift

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<sup>164</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

<sup>165</sup> Robert W. Brandt, “Tour of Duty,” unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 16.

<sup>166</sup> Robert W. Brandt, telephone interview by author, 17 June 2007.

for me.”<sup>167</sup> Before reaching legal age to be in the service, Brandt had indeed proven himself, sacrificing his welfare for the safety of the other men in his unit. Now a combat veteran, all he desired for his birthday was a quiet night at war.

Alvin Snaper, drafted into the Army at age fourteen, recalled that he “lucked out” at the very start of his military service. As he boarded a train headed to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training, an officer inquired whether anyone knew general orders. Snaper had served in the civil air patrol prior to his induction into the service and consequently raised his hand. He was appointed acting sergeant for the trip to basic. At Fort Knox, the commanding officer noticed the stripes on Snaper’s sleeve and asked if he could type. He replied in the affirmative and was subsequently assigned to the orderly room. Shortly thereafter, he was officially promoted to the rank of sergeant. Snaper had been in the Army for less than a month.<sup>168</sup>

Bored with his job filing paperwork, when Army Airborne recruiters came to camp seeking volunteers Snaper signed up, hoping to get away from a desk. He viewed the Airborne as “something different to do, more exciting.” It was not to be. Since he was the only recruit with rank, he was again designated as an orderly, but received a promotion to staff sergeant in the process.<sup>169</sup>

Snaper’s situation rapidly changed, however, when he received orders for overseas duty. A review of his records indicated that he had never made the five qualifying jumps for Airborne. As a result, he stated, “they sent me out to the airfield and

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<sup>167</sup> Robert W. Brandt, “Tour of Duty,” unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 20.

<sup>168</sup> Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007; Jackson and Jackson, eds., *America’s Youngest Warriors*, vol. III, 277.

<sup>169</sup> Snaper added that the Airborne also offered “fifty bucks more a month.” Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

I made five jumps in one day and qualified for my wings the night before we shipped out for Europe.” From England he was sent to a replacement depot in France in late-November 1944, and received an assignment to the 502nd Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. Just a couple of weeks after arriving at his new unit, the men loaded into trucks and headed to Bastogne, for what became the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>170</sup>

Snaper recalled his first impressions of Bastogne as “a mess; cold, dirty, smoky, foggy, and cold again.” There was mass confusion, men and vehicles coming and going. The paratroopers were sent into the line and took up positions in foxholes. For Snaper, the experience was exciting; that is, “until they started shooting.”<sup>171</sup> Snaper was no longer in the States stuck behind a desk, he was finally at war.

His unit remained on the line for a week, facing deadly sporadic attacks. He recalled the fog was so thick that “you could not see who you were shooting at.” Occasionally, a small unit would attack his sector and the enemy would get close enough that the troopers could discern figures through the fog to fire at. Casualties were heavy on both sides. After seven days on the line, those who remained were pulled back to rest and re-equip. Snaper was the only one left from his squad.<sup>172</sup>

Their rest was short. Snaper returned to the front line with a new squad around Christmas. During an attack by the enemy, he slumped down into his foxhole to reload. A German peered over the edge and fired point blank, hitting Snaper in both legs near his knees. He responded in kind, killing the man. Fortunately, the bullet that hit Snaper did

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<sup>170</sup> Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>171</sup> Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>172</sup> Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

not hit any bone. The medics at the aid station bandaged his wounds and sent him back to the lines with a limp.<sup>173</sup>

The paratroopers saw constant combat at Bastogne and attrition soared. Due to the high casualty rates, fifteen-year-old Snaper received a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant at Bastogne. The reason, he recalled, was that “I was probably the only non-com [non-commissioned officer] left in my outfit.” However, he did not savor the position for long, for he too was soon knocked out of the war. During one day of the continuous battle, his unit came under a barrage of German 88-millimeter shells. A round hit directly next to Snaper, blowing him into a tree. His buddies pulled him out of the tree and evacuated him to the rear. The next thing he remembered was waking up at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. At age fifteen, Lieutenant Alvin Snaper’s war in Europe was over, but he spent the next two years as a patient at Walter Reed.<sup>174</sup>

Although serving as a part of the massive war effort, at times individual actions by those serving underage in World War Two could immediately affect those around them. Jesse Hammett served aboard a destroyer-escort, the USS *Dempsey*, at age sixteen. While their main assignment in the south Pacific was as an escort, an important component of their job was to rescue downed pilots and survivors of sunken ships. Whenever there was a call for volunteers, Hammett was “always right there and ready,”

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<sup>173</sup> Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>174</sup> Snaper did not recall anything after being hit by the shell. Other troopers from his unit who were also evacuated to Walter Reed Hospital later informed him that, indeed, they had pulled him out of a tree. In recounting the experience he stated, “you don’t hear the one that hits you. Evidently I lucked out because it hit *so* close that I had very little shrapnel, and it was just the concussion. Had it hit ten feet farther away, then it would have been a lot worse.” To which he added, “so if you have got to be hit by a shell, make it as close as you can to avoid the shrapnel.” Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interviews by author, 7 and 29 June 2007.

in part to prove that even though underage, he could serve as well as any man aboard ship.<sup>175</sup>

Late in the night of 3 December 1944 one of the *Dempsey*'s own crew needed to be rescued. A distressed shipmate of Hammett's jumped overboard, bent on self-destruction. Hammett happened to be close by and saw the phosphorous glow in the water. He immediately called the bridge and announced "man overboard" before diving into the water himself. A fierce struggle between Hammett and the sailor broke out. "I thought I was going to die that night," he recalled. The sailor said he was going to take Hammett with him, drown them both. "He was quite a bit bigger than I was, and it looked like he was going to get the best of me." Hammett summarized the situation in stating, "it wound up all right," but for a few moments he was not certain about the outcome. For saving the sailor's life, Hammett received the Navy and Marine Corps medal.<sup>176</sup>

A subsequent occurrence ended less favorably. Hammett was once again in the water, swimming out to five men clinging to broken timbers from their destroyed troopship. He knew he was in shark-infested waters, but was determined to reach the men and tie a line onto the timbers to haul them to safety. He got within ten yards when "all of a sudden the people on that line started jerking me back." When they pulled him aboard ship they told Hammett that a shark had been circling him. The stranded men had to attempt to swim to safety themselves. He recalled, "when they started trying to swim they would just go under, they were all water logged. They just could not make it." All five drowned. Hammett was furious with his shipmates, "but of course, they might have

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<sup>175</sup> Jesse W. Hammett, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>176</sup> Jesse W. Hammett, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

been doing me a big favor too.” Hammett lived to fight another day, but he starkly remembers those five men who did not.<sup>177</sup>

Jack Lucas was eager to get into the war even before he joined the Marine Corps at age fourteen. This determination led him to inform his mother that she could expect absolutely no cooperation from her son until he was allowed to join the service. It was also this mindset that led to his early disappointment with the Marines. He excelled at boot camp, and after successful completion was frustrated to find that he had been detailed to training command at Camp Lejeune. Undeterred, he hopped the train that was transporting the rest of his unit to San Diego, California. Upon arrival, the Corps determined that it would be more of a hassle to send him back than keep him. He accompanied his unit to their next post, Camp Catlin, Oahu.<sup>178</sup>

Lucas recalled making a mistake at Oahu that nearly preempted his war plans. He sent a letter to a girl back home informing her of his true age of fifteen, forgetting that censors reviewed all outgoing mail. Shortly afterward, he received a summons to Pearl Harbor to speak with the colonel in command. The colonel informed Lucas that he was aware of his true age and threatened to discharge him from the service. In turn, Lucas informed the colonel that he had his mother’s consent, and further, that if the Marines discharged him, he “would join the Army and give them the benefit of all my excellent Marine training.” He was not sent home; however, he was not sent into combat either. Instead, he was detailed to drive a garbage truck for the Sixth Base Depot. Lucas

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<sup>177</sup> Jesse W. Hammett, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>178</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 31-32.

watched his unit depart for the invasion of Tarawa, his dreams of participating in battle literally fleeting over the horizon.<sup>179</sup>

Hawaii was a frustrating experience for the young Marine. He joined the Corps to fight a war, not transport garbage. He observed that Marines who caused trouble in rear areas were frequently transferred to combat units. Lucas decided that trouble might be his ticket. He subsequently got involved in many fights and spent a total of five months in the brig, to no avail. The Corps was not going to let the underage Marine into battle. Exasperated, Lucas had to find another way.<sup>180</sup>

One day he heard Tokyo Rose on the radio announcing that troopships in Pearl Harbor would soon be departing for an invasion. Lucas made up his mind to be a part of the action. With nothing but a set of fatigues and a pair of boots, Lucas made his way to the ships and “sauntered onboard like I knew where I was going.” As luck would have it, he boarded a ship carrying a cousin of his. With his cousin’s assistance, he hid in a landing craft on the deck of the ship for 29 days. Lucas knew that on the thirtieth day he would be listed as a deserter from his actual unit. That day he turned himself in to his cousin’s company commander, Captain Dunlap. Dunlap escorted the rogue Marine to the colonel in charge. Informed of the situation, the colonel said to Lucas, “Young fella’, you’re causing me a lot of administrative trouble, but I sure wish I had a whole boatload of men that wanted to fight as bad as you do.” He assigned Lucas to his cousin’s outfit, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. Their unit was headed for the invasion of Iwo Jima.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> In regard to his potential for seeing action in his latest assignment, Lucas added, not “unless I happened upon some crazy Japanese flier with a fetish for attacking trash trucks.” Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 51-53.

<sup>180</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 56-61.

<sup>181</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 65, 71.

On 14 February 1945, Jack Lucas turned seventeen. Five days later, the Marine Corps launched its assault on the volcanic island of Iwo Jima. The first waves hit the beach shortly after 0900. At first, resistance to the invasion was light. The Japanese had devised a strategy to allow the American assault forces to clutter the beach with men and equipment and then open up with everything they had. The plan worked. Murderous fire rained down on the beaches, creating chaos. Beach commanders closed the beaches to all incoming craft at 1300 to allow bulldozers to open paths for additional forces. Two hours later, Lucas and his division headed for shore. They landed at 1500 amid a mass of carnage.<sup>182</sup>

Fire continued to cover the landing beaches. Lucas saw bullets slam into the sand in front of his eyes, men disintegrated from mortars and artillery. Bodies and body parts lay strewn across the sand. They advanced inland the best they could, dodging explosions and taking cover at every shell hole. They did not see many Japanese that first day, but their casualties were high as they pushed forward, attempting to establish a beachhead. They halted their advance at 1845 hours as twilight descended over the island.<sup>183</sup>

The next day they resumed the attack. The intensity of combat increased as they closed on their first objective, Airfield Number One. Lucas maneuvered as part of a team of four, directed from the rear by Captain Dunlap. Toward noon they were ordered to cease fire while command contemplated a plan of attack. The four Marines took cover in a twenty-foot-long trench that ran parallel to a second trench four feet away. The team leader, Private First Class (Pfc.) Gilbert, decided to reconnoiter the second trench. He

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<sup>182</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 85-87.

<sup>183</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 88-93.

jumped over the edge and into the other line, landing on an enemy soldier. Gilbert immediately jumped back. The Japanese stood up and both sides opened fire at near point blank range. Lucas hit two of the enemy; the second he vividly remembered hitting above the left eye. He “watched the blood explode from his forehead in a gush of red.”<sup>184</sup>

In the next instant, Lucas’s rifle jammed. Both sides were engaged in a heated exchange of fire. Had he not been looking down at his rifle struggling to un-jam it, Lucas, and the others, would never have noticed the two grenades that landed in their trench. He immediately hollered “Grenade!” In one rapid movement he slammed one grenade into the volcanic ash with the butt of his rifle and covered it with his body, while grabbing the second grenade in his hand and pulling it under him. He felt a foot slam into his back as the others dove out of the trench.<sup>185</sup>

The blast blew Lucas into the air and flipped him over. He landed on his back, his right arm pinned beneath him, his body a mangled mess. The others left him for dead. Lucas never lost consciousness. Eventually another unit approached his position. He wiggled the fingers on his left hand, hoping someone would notice that there was a living, wounded Marine. Someone called for a corpsman.<sup>186</sup>

Lucas suffered over 250 entrance wounds. His right eye was blown out of its socket and lay against his cheek. The corpsman administered morphine and put the eye back in place. Suddenly a Japanese soldier appeared and prepared to toss a grenade at the two Marines, but the corpsman detected the movement and was able to swing his rifle

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<sup>184</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 97-99.

<sup>185</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 99.

<sup>186</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 99.

around in time to kill the enemy. Lucas recalled, “He had saved my life, twice. Unfortunately, I would learn later, the corpsman himself did not survive Iwo Jima.”<sup>187</sup>

Lucas was eventually evacuated to a hospital ship. He underwent twenty-two surgeries to repair his broken body. For his actions that day, Jack Lucas received the Medal of Honor. Iwo Jima was the deadliest battle in Marine Corps history. As Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz stated after the battle, “Among the Marines who fought on Iwo Jima, uncommon valor was a common virtue.” Lucas exemplified that statement. He was the youngest Medal of Honor recipient of the Second World War, and the youngest since the American Civil War.<sup>188</sup>

After his induction into the Navy at age thirteen, Jack Lawson was assigned to the Landing Craft, Infantry (LCI) 355. By far the youngest sailor aboard his ship – the next youngest enlisted man was twenty-four – Lawson proved his capabilities both during and after combat. He received training in the 4.2-inch mortars and 20-millimeter anti-aircraft weapons aboard the LCI. Lawson had abundant opportunity to employ both weapons in combat.<sup>189</sup>

During his first operation off Guam, his ship fired 250 to 300 mortar rounds a night at targets called in by the forces on the island. These numbers paled in comparison with their next action off Iwo Jima, where LCI-355 fired its entire 5,000 mortar round complement over the course of just a few days in support of the assault on Mt. Suribachi.

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<sup>187</sup> Lucas and Drum, *Indestructible*, 103-104.

<sup>188</sup> Edward F. Murphy, *Heroes of WW II* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 321.

<sup>189</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

For their action off Iwo, the commanding officer of Lawson's ship received the Silver Star.<sup>190</sup>

Following Iwo Jima, LCI-355 resupplied and conducted mortar drills in preparation for the invasion of Okinawa. On 1 April 1945, Lawson's ship supported the Marine invasion in the north before heading south to support the Army. While patrolling the coast of Okinawa for airplanes, LCI-355 came under kamikaze attack. An airplane closed on Lawson's ship. At his post on the 20-millimeter guns, Lawson "could very easily see the pilot." He aimed directly for the plane's engine and could see his tracers going straight into it. The kamikaze crashed not more than ten yards from his LCI and exploded, damaging the bottom of the ship. Lawson's LCI limped to a dock for repairs. Within two days it was back at sea patrolling.<sup>191</sup>

On 18 May 1945, LCI-355 received a call to assist a damaged destroyer, the USS *Long Shaw*. The *Long Shaw* had been providing close-in support when the ship ran aground and came under the fire of a six-inch shore battery. The ship was torn in half and burst into flames. LCI-355 pulled alongside and strung a line to the vessel. Lawson was one of the first to board the flaming wreckage. He entered the bowels of the ship and found numerous dead and wounded. He hefted them over his shoulder one at a time, carrying them up a ladder to the deck and passing the casualties on to his own shipmates who loaded both dead and injured onto the LCI. They managed to evacuate all bodies in the stern of the ship, but could not access the forward portion. The shore battery resumed fire, forcing the LCI to back out.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>191</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>192</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

Pulling out to sea en route to a hospital ship, the crew of LCI-355 began administering first aid to the wounded who covered the ship's deck and hold. Lawson had received extensive training in first aid as part of his advanced instruction; consequently, the doctor on board enlisted Lawson's help. Covered in blood from the bodies he had pulled from the burning destroyer, Lawson began tending to the wounded. The doctor told Lawson he needed more urgent aid. The doctor said to him, "your Dad showed you how to butcher, right?" Lawson replied he had. "You ever cut a leg off an animal?" Lawson answered yes, many times. The doctor informed him, "well that man's leg has *got* to come off, and that one's arm too, and here's the saw." Visions of the Civil War flashed through young Lawson's mind.<sup>193</sup>

Jack proceeded to cut off the man's leg and cauterize the wound. The doctor inspected the work, was impressed, and told Lawson to proceed with the other man's arm. He did. He cut the arm off below the elbow, "all the tendons and everything." "It didn't upset me because I just tranquilized myself in thinking this is a sheep." The fourteen-year-old did what he had to, and did it well. For his action on that 18 May, Lawson received the Bronze Star with a combat "V".<sup>194</sup>

His award was bittersweet. Along with the commendation, he received a promotion to boatswain's mate 2nd class. When the commanding officer informed Lawson of the promotion, he also stated, "I have some bad news for you." He showed Lawson a letter. Jack looked at it and recognized his mother's handwriting. The officer asked him if he wanted to read it, to which he replied "no, I have a feeling I know what it says." The letter informed the Navy that Lawson was underage. As a result, the officer

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<sup>193</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>194</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

was required to reduce Lawson in rank to seaman 1st class and put him on the first available transportation back to the United States. However, since the ship was headed to Honolulu for refitting and repairs, Lawson was allowed to stay on board for the journey.<sup>195</sup>

Law enforcement agents awaited Lawson's arrival in Hawaii in June 1945. They met him at the dock and arrested him immediately. Lawson remained locked up until late-July 1945, when his engineering officer was able to get him released. For his one-and-a-half years of wartime service in the United States Navy, including his heroic actions off Okinawa, Lawson received an unsuitability discharge. Infuriated, Lawson refused to accept the discharge; he tore up the order and threw it in the face of a Navy captain. In return, the Navy threw him in the brig for the next 25 days; subsequently, he remained a prisoner at large for six months. It was not until March 1946, after intervention by Senator Walter George of Georgia, that Jack Lawson finally received an honorable discharge from the Navy, at age fifteen.<sup>196</sup>

Dudley Brown's military service nearly ended at the very beginning. After seven weeks in the Navy, the chief petty officer came to him and said he wanted Brown at the disciplinary office at 1000. Brown was shocked, and asked "what for? I haven't done anything wrong." The chief answered he did not know why either, but handed Brown a slip of paper with the order. He headed to the disciplinary office.<sup>197</sup>

The disciplinary officer greeted young Brown and invited him to take a seat. The first thing the officer asked was "how old are you." Brown answered seventeen. They

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<sup>195</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>196</sup> Jack Lawson, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>197</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

talked for a bit and then the officer asked “how old are you.” Again Brown responded seventeen. After talking for another short while the officer said, “so how old are you?” Brown recalled, “It took me a little while, but I knew he must know.” He confessed to the officer that he was fifteen. Asked if he would like to stay in the Navy, Brown replied that he would. Asked if he would go back to school if discharged, Brown answered in the negative and explained his family’s poor financial situation, stating that staying in the Navy was the best way to help his parents. He subsequently made five trips to the disciplinary office as they worked out his situation. The evening before Brown was scheduled for a final interview, a sixteen-year-old was kicked out of the barracks below Brown’s for enlisting underage.<sup>198</sup>

The next day Brown went for his interview. The Navy arranged a three-way telephone conversation with Brown, his parents, and the disciplinary officer. At the end of the conversation, the officer informed Brown that the Navy had decided to keep him, and, holding up a finger, the officer stated on one condition: Brown would not be sent overseas until he was seventeen. He already had orders to leave the next day for amphibious training, and consequently he left. The training lasted two weeks, after which Brown was sent overseas to England. He figured “either the orders were a foot high or a foot deep in paperwork,” because they never caught up with him.<sup>199</sup>

In England, Brown was assigned to the Landing Ship, Tank (LST) 335, with additional training on an LCVP. He turned sixteen in March 1944, while preparing for the invasion of France. Three months later he was baptized by fire on his way into the Normandy beaches on 6 June 1944. He manned the controls to the ramp of an LCVP.

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<sup>198</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>199</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

His impression of the beaches that morning was that “it is something you do not want to do every day, but knew we had to do it.” They made two trips to the beach that morning in their LCVP. By the afternoon they were able to run the LST-335 onto shore and unload ammunition. While on the beach, a ship coming in next to them hit a mine and was blown out of the water.<sup>200</sup>

At age sixteen, Brown served in one of the most famous amphibious invasions of the entire war. He experienced the beaches of Normandy in the first minutes of the battle – the sights, the sounds, the horror. After sixty-four years, however, there is still one memory of that morning in June he is hesitant to speak of. As they neared the landing beaches the infantrymen “would get fidgety; they know the ramp is going down and knew when they hit the beach that is where the enemy had their guns pointed.”<sup>201</sup>

On this particular trip there was a soldier aboard who Brown knew well. When they were approximately thirty-five yards from shore the soldier jumped overboard. Brown went after him. He recalled, “I found him.” “I had my knife out to cut his pack off his back, and he was struggling and I was struggling, and he knocked my knife out of my hand. I lost him.” He added, “that doesn’t go down too good.” Brown narrowly escaped disciplinary action for his efforts. The captain scolded him and told him he was to never leave an LCVP ever again. The experience of losing that soldier in 1944 still keeps Brown awake at night.<sup>202</sup>

Although no records exist to confirm the fact, at age sixteen Joseph Argenzio may have been the youngest soldier to land in the first waves at Omaha Beach on 6 June 1944.

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<sup>200</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>201</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

<sup>202</sup> Dudley B. Brown, telephone interview by author, 6 June 2007.

Drafted into the Army underage, not only was he not supposed to be in the service, he was not supposed to be in the invasion. Argenzio arrived in England shortly before D-Day and was assigned to a replacement depot where he was informed that he would be a replacement for invasion casualties. His plans were changed just days before the Allies set sail for France.<sup>203</sup>

At the beginning of June a sergeant came to his tent and called out Argenzio's name. Identifying himself, the sergeant told him to get his gear together and get in the jeep waiting outside. He asked the driver where he was headed, and recalled that the "driver looked at me funny and said you're going to the big show." Admitting he was young and naïve, Argenzio got excited with thoughts of Bob Hope and Glenn Miller's band. The driver explained that was not exactly what he was talking about and told Argenzio he was headed on a "little ocean voyage across the English Channel." They drove to Weymouth, England, where Argenzio boarded a troopship.<sup>204</sup>

Not knowing where to proceed, a lieutenant approached him and asked who he was. He informed the officer that he was a replacement. The lieutenant took him to the commander of the 3rd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment. The lieutenant colonel in command asked "who the hell are you?" Argenzio reiterated that he was a replacement. The colonel informed him that he had not requested any replacements. Asking whether he should leave the ship, the colonel pointed out that, no, he should not, because the ship had just moved out into the harbor. Not certain what to do with the orphaned soldier, command gave him a carbine and ammunition cans to carry when they landed.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>204</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>205</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

Argenzio kept to himself. Not assigned to any unit, he slept in a jeep and stayed out of the way. He received no briefings and no extra gear. In the early morning hours of 6 June, Argenzio stood by and watched as the troops debarked for the invasion. Someone directing the troops headed over the side called out to him, “What are you waiting for, sonny? The war’s not going to wait for you – get going!” Over the side he went. Reaching the LCVP below, a sergeant looked at him and greeted him with the now familiar “who the hell are you.” Explaining that they had ordered him to go over the side, the sergeant told Argenzio to get in the back and stay out of trouble.<sup>206</sup>

The LCVPs started to form up for the invasion, circling until the minute to launch the attack. One man came up to Argenzio, put his arm around him and said, “don’t worry about it, kid, everything’s going to be all right.” The youth mentioned that at least he was going in with veterans, to which the man replied, “kid, they drop that ramp and you’re going to be a veteran too.” Argenzio learned he was headed for Fox Green sector of Omaha beach.<sup>207</sup>

The landing craft headed for shore. It struck a sandbar and the ramp dropped. The men in the front were hit instantly. Argenzio heard someone yell “go over the side.” He flipped himself over the side and went into water over his head. Weighted down with rifle, pack, and ammo cans, “I felt like an anvil going down; I lost everything.” Bullets slapped the water all around him, about which he later commented, “why they missed me, to this day I’ll never know.” He eventually reached a point where he could touch bottom and began leaping up and down toward shore until he could crouch down to go in. The water was red with blood. Argenzio recounted, “the one thing that saved me is there

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<sup>206</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>207</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

were dead bodies floating around all over the place. There were two of them right in front of me, so I pulled them together and pushed my way in. They took heavy machine gun fire that was meant for me.” He made his way onto the beach, “zigzagging, running like hell up the beach.” Reaching the seawall, Argenzio collapsed. “I could not believe what I was seeing, the chaos, the carnage, the smell of the cordite.”<sup>208</sup>

Another soldier landed beside him, stuck a cigarette in Argenzio’s mouth and lit it. “I almost choked to death”; it was his first cigarette. The two started to pull bodies in, uncertain whether they were alive or dead. They managed to get several of them up to the sea wall when a lieutenant came over and asked for their name, rank, and serial number. He looked at their dogtags and told them he was putting them in for an award. Argenzio watched the lieutenant head down the beach. “He got about a hundred some odd yards down the beach and a mortar took him out and that was the end of the citation.”<sup>209</sup>

Argenzio had no equipment. An officer came down the beach and told him to get a weapon. He crawled out under the withering fire, stripped a body of its rifle, cartridge belt, grenades, extra ammunition, and helmet, and crawled back. Back at the sea wall Argenzio had to clean the rifle of sand and debris. It was fortunate he grabbed the grenades. Soon after combat engineers blew a hole in the wire blocking a draw up the beach, the soldiers formed up and moved out. Men were killed by antipersonnel mines on the way up. Reaching the top of the draw, Argenzio lobbed grenades into two machine gun pits, knocking them both out. The soldiers at the top halted their rapid advance, catching their breaths. One of the troops pulled a small American flag out of his

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<sup>208</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>209</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

jacket and started waving it, saying “guys, thank God we made it!” “It wasn’t two minutes later everybody was getting popped by snipers.”<sup>210</sup>

Having reached the top, the soldiers split up and headed into a hamlet. Initially they succeeded in routing the enemy, but shortly thereafter the Germans mounted a counter assault and pushed the Americans out. The troops reassembled and headed back in, defeated the Germans, and held the town for the night. Argenzio’s first day at war ended as he guarded a road leading to the town. Only after he finally had a chance to rest did he noticed that the blood from the water that morning had stained his uniform purple. Of his experiences that day, Argenzio stated flatly, “it was crazy.”<sup>211</sup>

Joseph Argenzio fought his way across Europe with the American Army. He participated in battles at St. Lo, the Bulge, and Aachen. He crossed the Rhine, and headed into Czechoslovakia, liberating a death camp on the final day of the war. He survived close combat with the enemy. In Aachen, he rounded a corner of a building as two Germans rounded the other side. He recalled, “they came up with their rifles to shoot me and I was just a little quicker with my M-1. They had the bolt action and I took them down.” The Germans were no more than six feet away.<sup>212</sup>

By the Battle of the Bulge, Argenzio had risen to the rank of platoon sergeant. He remembered one time when a replacement came in looking for the sergeant. He asked Argenzio, “hey kid, where’s Sergeant Brooklyn?” Argenzio replied, “you’re looking at him. You have a shovel? Go dig a foxhole.” Argenzio did not think about his age. He was a soldier, and he had a job to do.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>211</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>212</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>213</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

Argenzio had his closest encounter with the enemy during the Battle of the Bulge. He had his bayonet on the end of his rifle, chopping away at the frozen ground, attempting to dig a foxhole. Unbeknownst to him, their outpost had been overrun. Suddenly, two figures emerged out of the fog. Argenzio emptied an eight round clip into the two of them. A third German appeared, charging at him with a bayonet. Argenzio parried the attack and struck the enemy in the chest with the butt of his rifle. The German doubled up and went down. Argenzio hit him in the face “and finished him off on the ground.” He added, “That’s a hell of an awful way to die, but it was me or him – that’s just the way it was. That was the only time I had to use the bayonet, thank God.”<sup>214</sup>

He was wounded in action “twice the same way, twice over the same damn thing.” The first instance occurred in September 1944 in France. He was setting up his machine gun sections when the Germans opened up with 88-millimeters. A blast peppered him with shrapnel and knocked him unconscious. Evacuated to England, he was patched up and asked if he wanted to go back. “Being young and stupid, I said ‘yeah, sure’.” The second happened in April 1945. As he recalled, “I was finally going to get some hot chow. I was on my way to the chow jeep and boom – no chow.” He was hit by shrapnel from another 88-millimeter. They picked out the shrapnel yet again and Argenzio returned to the lines. Regarding his wounds, Argenzio commented, “compared to the other guys, I was the luckiest guy in the world.”<sup>215</sup>

Argenzio survived the entire crusade of Europe, in combat from the beginning to the very end. He was seventeen at the end of the war in Europe. He received the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars, and two Purple Hearts. He did not talk about his experiences

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<sup>214</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

<sup>215</sup> Joseph L. Argenzio, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

much after the war. He had a job to do and he did it. Occasionally his buddies back home would josh with him about being a war hero and he would shrug it off. Fighting the war underage was not something he wanted to dwell upon. He had his entire life in front of him.

Mike Singer first experienced combat on Guadalcanal at age sixteen. He went in with the first waves on 7 August 1942. His Marine Corps training had taught him well; he knew how to use every weapon in the Corps and felt prepared for the rigors of war. He served on the island for what “seemed like forever, one battle after another.” His unit engaged in constant combat until relieved in late 1942. Although Guadalcanal was a difficult battle, it was the invasion of the island of Peleliu that Singer remembered most.<sup>216</sup>

On 15 September 1944, Singer was again in the first waves headed in for the invasion. He recalled being amazed at the devastation of the island inflicted by shells and bombs, but the enemy had dug in deep and was waiting for the invading Marines. He remembered amphibious tractors being hit all around them as they headed for shore. Within ten minutes of hitting the beach his company lost an estimated twenty-percent of its men.<sup>217</sup>

On Peleliu Singer received the most serious of his wounds at war. At approximately 0630 one morning he was in a group advancing on the enemy behind the cover of a Sherman tank, when an enemy machine gun opened up on the Marines. Singer was hit throughout his body. He suffered a broken leg and broken fingers, and was

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<sup>216</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>217</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

unable to move. He applied tourniquets to his legs and continued to fight. Singer lay in that spot the entire day as the battle raged around him. The hot sun blistered his face, but through it all he kept firing and “they kept shooting back at me.” Not until close to nightfall were stretcher-bearers able to move in and evacuate the wounded Marine. Of the men in his company, Singer knew of only three who survived the battle, himself and two others.<sup>218</sup>

Singer did not go into extensive detail about his underage experiences at war. He lost many good friends and had seen the horrors of combat. He served in three campaigns, was awarded the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and received three Purple Hearts for wounds received in action. In fact, his last combat operation was Peleliu because of the serious wounds he received on the island. After three invasions in his two and a half years with the Marines, he was a seasoned combat veteran at seventeen, the legal enlistment age. Singer summarized his experiences in that oft-quoted phrase of Civil War General William Sherman, “War is hell.” He spoke from personal experience. Although he still feels the effects of his wounds from war over sixty years later, Singer considers himself fortunate. During an interview he stated, “I got lucky, I’m here talking to you.”<sup>219</sup>

Many underage combat veterans of the Second World War concurred with that sentiment. They had experienced the horror of war and had survived. They served with distinction and valor, and had fulfilled their duty. They experienced joyful success and traumatic loss. Their young bodies were broken, some internally scarred. They were decorated for heroism, despite the fact that they served illegally. Some, after serving

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<sup>218</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>219</sup> Mike Singer, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

their country with dedication and faithfulness to the flag, had their service record jeopardized by the very government they sought to protect. Their histories serve to exemplify the experiences of underage Americans at war.

## **Veterans.**

World War Two ended on 2 September 1945. Millions of American service men and women began the long journey home. They were not the same people who had left their small towns, their friends, and their families. The war had touched them all, if nothing more than by being a part of the military. A generation of servicemen returned to the country they fought so long and hard to defend.

Those who served underage during World War Two underwent adjustments returning to civilian life similar to all veterans who returned from the war, albeit in a slightly skewed context because of their age. While many veterans utilized the GI Bill to go on to college, the majority of underage veterans of the war first returned to high school. A few had to go back a bit further; Theodore Webb completed middle and high school within three years of his return.<sup>220</sup> It was only after completing high school, or passing its equivalent, that they were able to move on to college, which many did. The military had imbued in underage veterans an appreciation for the importance of education.

They all concurred that serving in the military underage had changed their lives for the better. They learned discipline, responsibility, and respect for their fellow man. They gained purpose in their young lives. The majority literally left home to join the war. They had no experience outside of the environment of their families. They served during the formative years of their life and learned how to survive on their own. Robert Glenn, who joined the Marine Corps at fifteen, summarized the effects of the military in

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<sup>220</sup> Theodore Webb, Jr., telephone interview by author, 14 June 2007.

stating, “I grew up fast.”<sup>221</sup> They all did. Alvin Snaper’s comment on the military’s influence on him echoed the sentiment of the majority of underage veterans of World War Two. He stated, “I think that if I hadn’t gone into the military, I’d be digging ditches some place in New Jersey.”<sup>222</sup> Serving underage at war provided an impetus to make their lives meaningful.

A number of them stayed in the military after the war. Willie Manson, who joined at age thirteen, made a career out of the Navy. Billie Boyd stayed in the Air Force and participated in the Berlin Airlift from 1948 to 1949. William Foster served in the military for thirty years including his World War Two service. Some of them went on to become three-war veterans, serving in the Second World War, Korea, and Vietnam. Charles Owens saw heavy combat in all three wars, and was decorated for a desperate situation in Korea where he called in artillery fire on his own position. Robert Flores was also a three-war veteran. Over his thirty year career he was awarded four Bronze Stars, all with a combat “V”, and received the Silver Star for action in Vietnam. The underage veterans of World War Two served with distinction and continued that tradition throughout their careers.

The fact that they served their country underage during war sets them apart from the 16 million other American veterans returning home. They overcame obstacles just to join the military that no other person in the service had to even consider. These children made conscious decisions to break the law and enlist underage. They lied to recruiters, to the military, and to the United States government they were so eager to serve. A few of

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<sup>221</sup> Robert F. Glenn, telephone interview by author, 4 June 2007.

<sup>222</sup> Alvin A. Snaper, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

them even lied to their own parents so that they could go off and fight a war. They concocted creative schemes and elaborately altered documents in attempts to sneak their way into the service. Children confronted their parents about their desire to join the military, and pleaded with them to sign consent forms. Some parents acquiesced because their children had quit school and lacked direction in their lives, or because they knew their children and their relentless determination. Still, there were underage recruits who signed the forms themselves, or persuaded someone else to forge a signature. They bent the rules and manipulated the system. They managed to get drafted. They were persistent and ultimately successful.

Their reasons for joining underage varied as much as their methods. Ideals of patriotism were cited by nearly every veteran. Their country was at war, and they felt it was their duty to defend it. Impressionable youths were influenced by those around them. They witnessed the mobilization of America and determined to be a part of the action. Friends and family members joined the war; thus, many thought they should too, despite the fact that they were years younger than everyone else. Their interest in joining the military was enlivened by images of war on the streets at home, on screen, and in print. They wanted to get in before it was over.

Families provided an ulterior motive as well. The bleak economic situation in America and the promise of steady pay in the military motivated young men to join the service when there seemed to be no other reasonable recourse to assist a financially burdened home. The military offered food, clothing, and shelter that parents struggled to provide for their children. Those who joined out of poverty did the double duty of directly serving both their country and their families. It was a combination of highly

influential factors that provided the motivation to enlist underage. They left their schools, their friends, and their families, with ideals of adventure and excitement, to defend their nation and their homes. They soon learned the truth of war.

Their experiences were beyond anything they could have imagined in their youthful dreams of glory. For all of them, the realities of war rapidly distilled any romantic notions of what defending America truly meant. They lost close friends, saw horrors that would haunt them throughout their lives, and suffered the devastating effects of combat on the body. Through it all, they never wavered and never gave up. They could have. They could have confessed to their true age and appealed for discharge. They did not. While some received decorations for their actions, they all did their part, and did it well.

Underage Americans illegally fighting the Second World War were indeed an exception to the millions of others who served. However, throughout the history of America's wars, these exceptions had inadvertently proven to be the rule in America's military history. Underage combatants had served in all of America's wars from the time of the Revolution. The unknown number who served in the Second World War perpetuated that legacy. They served with distinction and valor, and indisputably demonstrated that, despite their age, they could serve as well as those around them.

The underage veterans of the Second World War are proud of their service and their decision to join underage. Their experiences at war changed their lives forever. Robert Flores stated the sentiment well. He joined the United States Navy in 1943 at age thirteen, participated in combat in three wars, and retired highly decorated. It was his service underage during the Second World War, however, that he is most proud of.

When asked why his underage service was the most memorable, Flores' voice began to quiver with emotion. He emphatically stated, "because that's where I became a man!"<sup>223</sup>

Indeed, they all had. They were children at war, but they returned as men.

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<sup>223</sup> Robert S. Flores, telephone interview by author, 7 June 2007.

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## Interviews

The following is a list of underage veterans of the Second World War interviewed for this project. They are listed alphabetically by last name, age at time of induction into the service, followed by branch of the military.

The following abbreviations are used:

USA – United States Army

USAAF – United States Army Air Forces

USCG – United States Coast Guard

USCGR – United States Coast Guard Reserve

USMC – United States Marine Corps

USN – United States Navy

NYNG – New York National Guard

William E. Almquist, 16, USN

Leonard E. Anderson, 15, USN

Joseph L. Argenzio, 16, USA

Billie Boyd, Jr., 16, USAAF

Robert W. Brandt, 16, USMC

Dudley B. Brown, 15, USN

J. Armand Burgun, 16, USCGR

John E. Collins, 16, USMC

Thomas J. Craig, 16, USN

Robert S. Flores, 13, USN

William Foster, 16, USN

Jerome A. Gettler, 15, NYNG, 16, USA

Robert F. Glenn, 15, USMC

Jesse W. Hammett, 15, USN

Charles Hohl, 16, USA

Robert W. Jenkins, 16, USN

Albert A. Jowdy, 15, USN

Daniel W. Kriss, 14, USN

Jack Lawson, 13, USN

James J. Leftwich, 14, USCG

Jack Lucas, 14, USMC

Walter R. Lunt, 16, USN

Willie C. Manson, Jr., 13, USN

James R. McCarson, 14, USMC

Larry J. McCoy, 15, USN

John P. McManus, 15, USN

Parker D. Miller, 15, USN

Charles H. Owens, 14, USMC

Leo Peltier, 14, USA

Bobby L. Pettit, 13, USN

Darwin Platter, 16, USN

Walter F. Ram, 16, USA

Mike Ryan, 16, USA

Mike Singer, 15, USMC

Alvin A. Snaper, 14, USA

John W. Taylor, 16, USMC

Chuck Waters, 14, USMC

Theodore Webb, 13, USN

Guy G. Wright, 15, USA

Kenneth L. Zabriskie, 16, USN

John N. Zei, 15, USN

