

The Distant Edge of War

*A Reminiscence of
the Second World War
from the Jersey Shore*

Margaret Thomas Buchholz



Margaret Thomas

One evening in 1943, while trying to concentrate on my homework, I overheard my father tell my mother that a Coast Guardsman had pulled a body out of the surf; when he grabbed one of the hands to haul it to shore, the skin peeled off like a formal evening glove. Suddenly I understood the significance of the gloves, sailor caps, and uniform fragments my brother and I had picked up at the high tide line. The conflict across the ocean had reached the beaches of Harvey Cedars, the small town on Long Beach Island, New Jersey, where I lived.

By June of 1942, just six months after our entry into the war, the Battle of the Atlantic was being fought within sight of the island. German submarines attacked shipping, and the white, sandy beach lay covered with a thick coat of black, gummy oil from torpedoed tankers. Forty U-boats prowled the Eastern Seaboard that month alone, sinking an average of three ships a day. Shipwrecked sailors were brought ashore, and even today the smell of kerosene recalls the time I went with my father to the Loveladies Coast Guard station barracks, and saw townswomen painstakingly scrape and wipe the oil-covered bodies of rescued seamen. (I can't imagine he would take a nine-year old with him.) My six-year-old brother, Michael, and I later used the same kerosene-and-soap technique on a stranded, oil-matted wild duck.

The beach was patrolled by soldiers on horseback with Doberman pinschers and German shepherds, which wore booties to protect their feet from the tar. That sand was my playground, and the threat of those ferocious, snarling animals left me with a fear of dogs I've never overcome. I had trouble understanding why we were using German dogs to capture German soldiers. My mother, whose father had emigrated from Prussia, explained that the Nazis were our enemies and not all Germans were Nazis. She cried as she tried to explain, but the political distinction was lost on me.

Dinner always ended at 6:45, when we listened to Lowell Thomas's news broadcast. My mother had worked for him in the 1920s, and this time was sacrosanct; when LT went on the air we were not allowed to interrupt. We followed the war's progress on a large world map tacked to the wall. My father, a Marine in World War I, had fought on some of the same

battlegrounds. He taught my brother and me to present arms using a stick for a rifle, and we sang the Marines Hymn and the Air Corps song, "Off we go into the wild blue yonder. . . ." (At first I thought a "yonder" was a type of plane.) I carved models of Spitfires, Zeroes, Messerschmidts, B-17 bombers, and my favorite, the twin-fuselage P-38. They hung on strings from my bedroom ceiling, and I fought many an air battle of the imagination.

As for all Americans, our food was rationed. My mother tore butter, sugar, coffee, and meat coupons from our ration books, and I planted my own Victory Garden. My poster of fat being poured from a frying pan into a coffee can won the third-grade competition. Slivers of soap melded together in a jar on the kitchen counter, and we used the slimy mass to wash dishes. All windows on the east side of the house were covered with black oilcloth blinds,

and car headlights were painted with black eyelids for those times when the gas ration was sufficient for night driving. Barnegat Lighthouse was blacked out on its seaward side.

That first wartime winter, our parents turned a serious concern into a game: what to do in case of an air raid. Blimps patrolled overhead, going back and forth to Lakehurst Naval Air Station (one crashed a few miles north of Barnegat Inlet). Navy planes flew just offshore, and once a plane ran out of gas and landed on the beach. The Civil Defense directed air raid drills. When the siren let out its terrifying screech, we were to set the radio dial to 650, close the curtains, and turn out all lights. We two children had cushions under the big dining room table and kept a picture book, flashlight, and Milky Way on the crossbar. Michael liked making a game of all this, but I wanted to know what to do if a bomb hit the house, or if paratroopers landed, or if a U-boat came up and shot at us. Would we really be safe under the table? Would the German soldiers kill us if my mother spoke to them in German?

When V-mail from my grown-up cousin George confirmed his part in the invasion of Italy, Michael and I created our own Anzio beachhead on the little bay beach next to our house. We looks turns being either George and the liberators landing in the rowboat, or the soon-



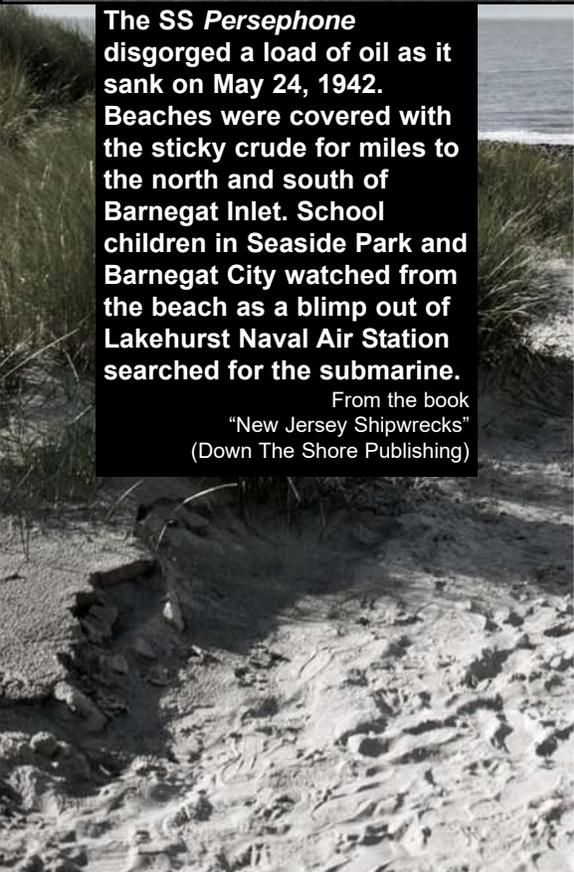
Margaret's father, Reynold Thomas (left) and neighbor Jim Helsingren, bringing back a black iron ship's ladder from the beach in 1942 at Harvey Cedars. It is now at the Barnegat Light Museum.





The SS *Persephone* disgorged a load of oil as it sank on May 24, 1942. Beaches were covered with the sticky crude for miles to the north and south of Barnegat Inlet. School children in Seaside Park and Barnegat City watched from the beach as a blimp out of Lakehurst Naval Air Station searched for the submarine.

From the book
"New Jersey Shipwrecks"
(Down The Shore Publishing)



to-be-defeated Italians and Germans entrenched on the beach behind the bayberry bushes. A photograph of my Navy cousin Bobby in front of his Guam foxhole sent us into the dunes, digging our own foxholes and attacking and counterattacking. We strafed and sprayed bullets with our fingers, screaming out the staccato *rat-a-tat* of a machine gun. I discovered my father's gas mask in the attic, but my mother forbade my wearing it; she said it would upset my father. After futile attempts to stop them she bore our war games, suffering their inevitability—but she allowed no gunplay in the house.

On the lighter side, I cut out cartoons from the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Colliers*, and *The New Yorker*, and wrote stories and jokes. I mailed everything to my cousins' APO and FPO addresses, barely believing my packages would ever reach such faraway destinations. Eventually George's march across North Africa and up the Italian boot was lined on the map in red, and Bobby's advance from one South Pacific island to another in blue. My awareness of global relationships intensified.



By the summer of 1944, the Allies had again gained control of my ocean and the beaches were unrestricted. That's when I became a first-rate scavenger. Beachcombing yielded an abundance of artifacts: a deflated rubber raft, life jackets stamped "USN," tins of pure water, C-rations, K-rations (biscuits and pithy, tasteless chocolate), and "yellow-bombs," the name we gave to the three-inch, tubular, sealed-glass vials containing a yellow powder that purified water. The vials made a small but satisfying explosion when thrown vigorously onto the street, leaving a white smear on the black macadam.

There were larger finds as well. When the newly installed radar on a blimp misread a whale for a submarine, depth charges were dropped and huge chunks of blubber washed onto the beach. We used the gelatinous flesh as trampolines; a lightweight child could bounce up and down without breaking through. The most exciting find, though, was a 12-foot rope ladder that my father trucked home in his 1939 Dodge pickup. It hung suspended from our friend Joey's bedroom window until after the war, long after we lost interest in climbing in and out of his room.

The war ended and I entered adolescence, leaving behind the tomboy who carved warplanes, reveled in loud war games, and threw mud bombs from the top of a tanker's tar-stained rope ladder. I went inland to school, and when I talked about these experiences my classmates gave me blank, almost disbelieving stares. But I know now that World War II sniping at my beach shaped my view of the world; it gave me a deeply understood awareness of how a global event could affect the lives of people everywhere—even on a sliver of island off the New Jersey coast.



This account first appeared in the book "Shore Stories: An Anthology of the Jersey Shore" (Down The Shore Publishing).