

THE JERSEY SHORE WAR STORY THAT WASN'T

As the 1930s came to a close, Americans eyed the world around them with increasing unease. Aggressive, totalitarian regimes had emerged in Europe and Asia, bringing with them the threat—and impending actuality—of war. Such concerns added to the worries they already had at home about the Great Depression and the dust storms that were consuming the Midwest.

With conflict on the horizon, New Jersey, like the rest of America, began to assume a war footing even before the United States was actively involved. On September 16, 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered

the National Guard into federal service and signed a law introducing peacetime military conscription for the first time in American history.

New Jersey's Governor, A. Harry Moore, responded by calling up the state's National Guard, including the Forty-fourth Division, which included the Headquarters Detachment and Company G of the 114th Infantry Regiment, based at the Asbury Park Armory. They began to mobilize for an obligatory one year term of service for training. That one year was to turn into almost five before the Guardsmen returned home again.

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(Above) Asbury Park State Guards on duty at the Route 9 Bridge over the Raritan River in December 1941.

(Left) Governor Charles Edison New Jersey State Archives



To take their place, New Jersey raised a “State Guard” militia, based at existing National Guard Armories—many of them built a few years before with federal money as WPA projects. Asbury Park’s armory became headquarters for Company B of the Guard’s Eighth Battalion. In December 1941, within a week of the Pearl Harbor attack, Company B left the city to assume temporary guard duty on the Route 9 Victory Bridge across the Raritan River.¹

By the spring of 1942, as its draftees and volunteers followed the Guardsmen into service, the war came home dramatically to the New Jersey Shore. In June, a seven mile stretch of beach south of Asbury Park, from Belmar to Manasquan, was covered with “oil and tar residue” and debris from sunken ships. The Nazis had launched Operation Drumbeat, an all-out attack on American shipping. German submarines came so close to the coast that the crewmen listened to local radio stations.²

In response to this threat, the army’s Second Corps military command, which included New Jersey, advised the state then-Governor, Charles Edison, that it “desired all lights along the New Jersey sea-coast be dimmed or eliminated as the present lights silhouetted a ship



(Above) Soldiers from the 113th Infantry, NJ National Guard, drilling in Newark's Branch Brook Park in September 1940, after being called to active duty. NGMMNJ

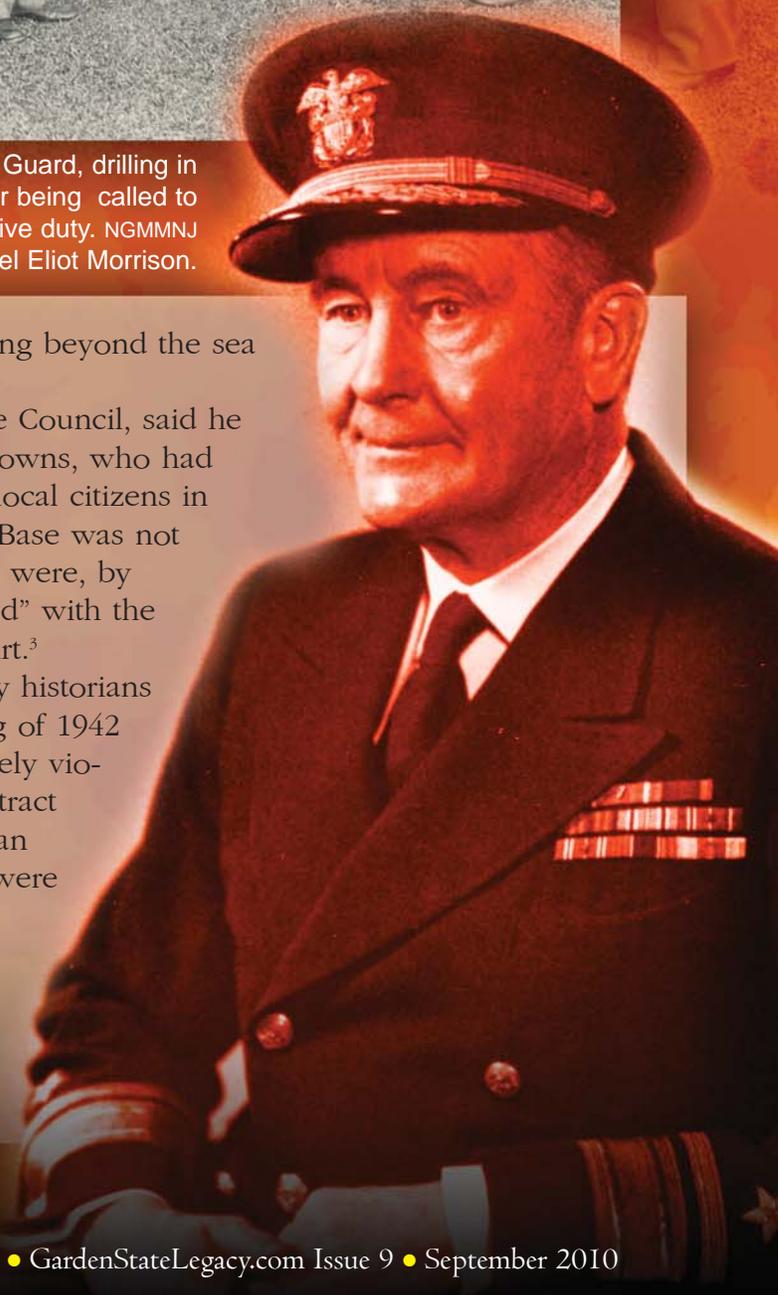
(Right) Samuel Eliot Morrison.

at sea making it an easy target for submarines lurking beyond the sea lanes where ships travel.”

Leonard Dreyfuss, director of the state's Defense Council, said he would contact the municipal officials of the shore towns, who had already expressed a desire to cooperate. Although local citizens in Cape May were annoyed that the Cape May Naval Base was not subjected to the same dim-out regulations that they were, by March 24 the navy expressed itself as “quite satisfied” with the dim-out between the Atlantic Highlands and Sea Girt.³

A bit of conventional wisdom accepted by many historians that disparages the Jersey shore is that in the spring of 1942 merchants in Atlantic coastal communities deliberately violated government dim-out in order to continue to attract tourists—an act which led to the sinking of American ships. One has even asserted that “ships and lives were held hostage to tourist dollars.”

This view apparently has its origins in the work of highly respected Harvard scholar Samuel Eliot Morison, who wrote the navy's official history of





Asbury Park Armory (1908)

the war, and called this alleged defiance “most reprehensible.” The problem with Morison’s account is that, at least in the case of New Jersey, it was completely untrue, as a reading of the state’s Governor’s War Cabinet Minutes readily reveals.⁴

On April 9th Director Dreyfuss reported to Governor Edison that he had personally visited Asbury Park at night and that “the town was in almost total darkness.” Far from being concerned that merchants were defying the regulations, Dreyfuss felt that “it was not necessary that the dim out be so complete.” Two weeks later the navy reported that although some Cape May lights could be seen thirty miles at sea, they were “not objectionable,” and that “generally all of the [coastal] dim out was acceptable. By May, state officials thought the dim-out along the whole coast “most effective,” although some Atlantic City lights were still too visible. An assessment two weeks later, howev-

er, showed the deficiencies had been fixed and pronounced New Jersey’s efforts as “about as perfect as could be expected.”⁵

In late May federal regulations on coastal lighting were tightened to include traffic lights and all exterior advertising, as well as automobile headlights. Drivers in coastal towns were only allowed to use their parking lights, which caused an increase in automobile accidents almost immediately. An end of the year assessment concluded that dim-out programs increased vehicular accident rates by one hundred percent. Although some navy officers were not completely satisfied that the new regulations were being effectively enforced, a team of state officials and an army general conducted a thorough inspection from the sea on June 1 and concluded that “New Jersey was effectively dimmed out” with the ironic exception of the Navy installation at Cape May. Photos taken from the ocean afterwards

revealed that “navigation lights from the naval station definitely made a glare or glow, whereas normal lighting in cities such as Asbury Park and Long Branch showed up black in the photographs.”⁶

Navy complaints continued, however, and at the end of July the Governor’s War Cabinet received a letter and a series of time lapse photos allegedly revealing incomplete dim-out compliance in some shore communities, including automobile headlights in Mantoloking pointing seaward. Dreyfuss thought the evidence invalid, but Edison agreed to look into it. A subsequent

state police investigation revealed that the photographs were overexposed and that dim-out regulations were reasonably well obeyed and enforced and that the dim-out in Asbury Park in particular was “quite effective.”

There is absolutely no evidence to sustain Morison’s allegations that New Jersey shore merchants deliberately disobeyed dim-out regulations to bolster their tourist trade during the deadly summer of 1942.

It’s time to refute this war story that wasn’t and restore the good name of the people along the Jersey Shore.⁷



1. John K. Mahon, *History of the Militia and National Guard* (New York: Macmillan, 1983) pp. 179—180; *Asbury Park Evening Press*, December 16, 1941.
2. Robert Kurson, *Shadow Divers* (New York, Random house, 2004), p. 235.
3. Governor’s War Cabinet Minutes, March 2, 24, 1942, NJ State Archives, <http://www.njarchives.org/links/guides/szwaa001.html>
4. Mark Edward Lender, *One State in Arms: A Short Military History of New Jersey* (Trenton: NJ Historical Commission, 1991), pp 88—89.
5. Governor’s War Cabinet Minutes, April 9, 24, May 4, 19, 1942.
6. *Ibid*, June 9, 16, November 10, 1942.
7. *Ibid*, July 28, August 11, 1942; *Asbury Park Press*, September 22, 2002.