

WWII vet tells his story

By Diana Zimmerman

This year marks the 75th anniversary of Wahkiakum VFW Post No. 5297, whose charter was signed on January 7, 1946, after young servicemen, who had returned to the community from foreign locales after World War II decided to form a local branch of the VFW, or Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.

Cathlamet resident Tom Irving, who is 98, was one of the charter members.

"People wonder why there were so many of us," Irving said. "We had people that worked down at the lumber mill and at the box factory, where they made cheese boxes."

He remembers the boys from Puget Island who went in the Navy because they'd grown up working on fishing boats with their fathers and the young men who arrived in Wahkiakum County after the war, thanks to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps.

Irving doesn't remember exactly who it was, but the fellows of Wahkiakum decided a young ensign who had attended a reserve officer training program at the University of Washington would be responsible for the formation of their local chapter.

"In the evening we would get together to have the meetings. We would reminisce and have a tall glass," Irving said. "It was sociable. The guys in the Navy wanted to get the salt out of their mind, and the guys that served in the Army wanted to get the jungle out of theirs."

"We would sit and talk," Irving continued. "Some serviceman might have had an experience, but he'd be quiet. He wouldn't say nothing. But the next couple of months, boy, he'd tell a little bit. It was an out."

A bit of healing perhaps, surrounded by other men who knew and understood something that other friends and family could not.

While the meeting might be held once a month, there was always a chance members might run into a buddy at one of the local watering holes where they held their meetings in Cathlamet, like the Wiseway Tavern or Jim's Cafe, or even Silverman's in Skamokawa.

The Wiseway Tavern is where Maria's is today, according to Irving. Jim's Cafe was in what is now referred to as the Saloon.

"We always talked about it, but we didn't have the funds to build a hall," Irving said.

Irving graduated from Wahkiakum High School in 1941. He was drafted, but his work on his father's dairy farm was deemed necessary, and an uncle, who was on the draft board, was able to secure him two deferments.

One day, his uncle showed up at the farm and said, "I can't defer Tom any more. He's got to go."

For awhile, Irving worked in a logging camp in Alaska, harvesting spruce.

"That kind of went out the window," Irving said. "My brother had been at Washington State College, and he had three semesters in. They put him in 1A, and he decided it was time to get out of here. He didn't want to go into the service. He went to Alaska and went to work for the U.S. Navy. They were building a big Naval Base in Kodiak at the time. He went up there and got a job as a timekeeper."

Irving followed him there, and worked with a crew collecting garbage.

In 1943, he joined the Army's Sixth Infantry Division.

"I was inducted in Fort Lewis, and they sent me to Fort Riley in Kansas, which was a horse cavalry at the time," Irving said. "They thought I was a farm boy, so I'd make a good stable boy. While I was there, they abandoned the horses and went to mechanization."

So Irving learned to drive all manner of vehicles, like jeeps, armored cars, trucks, and half-tracks. He learned everything about them, but not how to fix them. They had mechanics for that.

Irving had always assumed that this part of the midwest was flat, but he'll never forget doing night maneuvers in the hills of Kansas.

"They always put the jeeps behind and the big trucks up ahead," Irving said. "You didn't have any lights except for the small single ones on the back of each vehicle. You had to keep those in

your sights or you'd get lost. Those trucks would come to a hill and they could hardly move, but boy when they got to the top of the hill in that wheat country, down the other side they'd go, and the poor guys in those jeeps would get lost some of the time."



Cathlamet resident Tom Irving is the last WWII veteran in local Veterans of Foreign Post 5297. File photo.

After training, he went home for a couple weeks before reporting to Ford Ord, California. He and the other troops were sent to Angel Island, in the San Francisco Bay, where they were given a series of vaccinations.

"We got on the ferry and headed back to San Francisco," Irving said. "The troop ship was on one side of the dock and the trains were on the other side. One guy said, 'Oh we're going to be stationed in the states!' The USO was there playing patriotic music, and we got off that ferry boat, and walked across the dock onto that troop transport."

About 5,000 troops were loaded onto that old passenger liner. It took them 31 days to travel from San Francisco to Australia.

From there, they went to New Guinea to try and take back the high positions established by the Japanese.

After that he went to Luzon as part of General Douglas MacArthur's return to the Philippines.

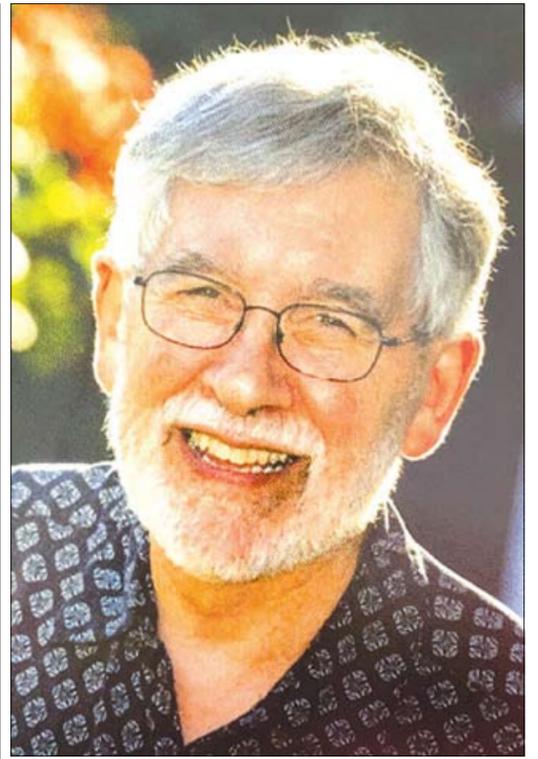
"We had six men in an armored car, and a jeep in front with two men and a jeep behind with two men," Irving said. "We had a 37 millimeter cannon. We were the reconnaissance for three infantry divisions on the march to Manila. The Japanese had destroyed the highway and we had to go out through the rice paddies, and reconnect to the highway. We had to make a new path."

They traveled all the way from Lingayen Gulf to Manila.

The next big jump, Irving said, was supposed to be Tokyo, but instead they went to Korea. To this day, he wonders why.

When he came home, it was back to work on his father's farm. Eventually, he and his wife, Cora, who were married for 72 years, purchased their own dairy farm on Puget Island, where they raised three children.

Irving is still active with the VFW. Recently he shared his wartime experience with students at Wahkiakum High School during their Veteran's Day Assembly. While the VFW has become less of a social experience for him, he's grateful to the VFW and the access to information about a myriad of issues, including veteran's benefits.



Tsuga Gallery is honoring member Mike Rees, who passed away on December 13 in Seattle after a fall. The Cathlamet gallery is hosting a display of his photographs in their windows until the end of February.

Rees was born in 1933, and grew up in London, England. He began his journey as an artist when he and a friend turned a shed behind their house into a dark room to process the black and white photos they had taken. In the early 1950's, an image that Rees had taken was accepted for a national photographic exhibition.

To learn more about Rees, and to see his work, stop by Tsuga Gallery on Main Street in Cathlamet. Courtesy photo.

Year-round school may come to Washington

By Joseph Claypoole, Washington State Journal

Summer months come to an end; children head back to school, but they've experienced summer learning loss and now require remedial education.

Every year, teachers across the US say the first month of school after summer break usually is spent discovering what students have retained and reviewing what they've forgotten.

This learning loss disproportionately affects students from lower income backgrounds, according to a 2016 American Education Research Association study.

Substitute SB 5147 proposes a pilot program for four consecutive years at the start of the 2022 academic calendar to combat this issue.

The program would keep the 180-day instructional calendar, but would spread it over at least 11 months of the year, replacing the traditional summer break for shorter, more consistent breaks throughout.

School districts, up to 30 in total, could apply for the program on a first come, first served basis through the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

For districts to be eligible, during the 2019-20 school year they must have had between 500 and 10,000 enrolled students and at least half of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.



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