



BRAINTREE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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JULY 2018

Welcome to the first installment of the Lantern-online. We as a Society are very proud of our towns' history and welcome every opportunity to share it with our valued members. We are forever grateful to Board Member Ruth Powell for her many years of involvement in sharing her expertise as editor of the Lantern. And we honor those who invested their time and talent by writing about our town. Our long-standing and well established members will recognize some of the stories and will no doubt be pleased to revisit them. We welcome the opportunity to share those stories and take advantage of the opportunity to introduce our newer members to those wonderful and interesting tales of our town. It is our hope that this site will prove intriguing and will set in motion a curiosity and love of our towns' wonderful history.

Rose Barrett, Editor



A Hero Among Us

Here we have a personal story of heroism as told by 92 year old Braintree resident Bill Varroso. This story was previously published in the November 2017 online version of the Patriot Ledger in honor of Veterans Day.

After serving his time, Bill returned home, married his lifelong love Edith and raised their five children in Braintree. His time serving in the Navy and as a Braintree Police Officer has set in motion many friendships that still exist today.

By: Rose Barrett

It was July of 1945 and a US destroyer escort, The USS Underhill DE682, had just been sunk in the Pacific Ocean. Of the 236 men aboard the Underhill only 122 survived.

One of those survivors was Navy Veteran and Braintree resident 92-year-old Bill Varroso.



This story cannot be told without an official introduction to Bill Varroso, himself. Bill credits the love of family, as well as his awareness of family circumstances, for the drive that was instilled in him at a young age. Born in 1925, Bill was the oldest of four boys. He had watched as his father succumbed to the long grasp of alcoholism eventually bringing about his parents' divorce. The disease tore apart the marriage and, as the oldest son, Bill felt the responsibility to step up and do what needed to be done. Alcoholism had ruined the marriage but he was determined that it would not ruin his family.

Bill was 16 when he left school and started working at the Fore River Shipyard in Quincy. With the possible entry of the U.S. into WW II, there was great focus on shipbuilding. At the time, Bethlehem Steel was America's second largest steel producer and the Fore River Shipyard was the largest shipbuilder.

Shortly before the entry of the United States into the war United States Navy had begun designs on destroyer escorts and commissioned Fore River to be the major contractor. Destroyer escorts (since renamed frigates) were the US Navy's mid- 20th century classification for a warship designed with endurance to escort mid-ocean convoys of merchant marine ships. Destroyer escorts were mass-produced for WWII as a less expensive anti-submarine warfare alternative to previously used fleet destroyers. They proved very successful in spotting enemy submarines, distracting and destroying them. Unfortunately, along the way the Japanese had developed their own strategies in spotting and destroying and we'll delve into that at a later time in this story.

During his two years working at the Fore River Shipyard, Bill was trained in skills that would benefit him throughout his life. Not the least was the skills he learned during his electrician training. He was very appreciative of the opportunity to learn the trade, but foremost on his mind at the time was the opportunity to help out with family finances back home. He worked alongside men willing to share their experiences and thoughts on the ongoing war. When the time came and Bill was drafted, he was more than ready to serve his country. By the age of 18 he had helped build the ships, he had listened to the stories of others and he was ready to serve and fight for his country. When given a choice of which branch of the service to join, Bill chose the Navy.

Ironically his time at sea during the war was to be spent on the very ship he had helped build during his time at the shipyard, the USS Underhill DE682.

The USS Underhill was known as a well- run and "happy ship". The 48 year old Captain had the respect of his crew and it showed. Those aboard were regarded as confident and capable. They had a good sense of duty resulting in a great rapport onboard the ship. Bill was assigned to the forward part of the ship and was responsible for the onboard shop. He took great pride in his position and to say everything in that shop was "shipshape" might prove an understatement.

The USS Underhill had spent her first year serving as a member of Escort Division 56 with escort duties in the



Atlantic, Caribbean and Mediterranean. In January, 1945, the Underhill was transferred to the Pacific and assigned to the Seventh Fleet (also known as 'MacArthur's Navy').

It was shortly thereafter that Bill was transferred from his shop (located in the bow of the ship) to new duties located in the aft. And though he would miss the camaraderie of running the onboard shop, he was ready for the challenges of his new assignment.

He had no way of knowing then the challenges that lay ahead.

It was July 24, 1945, and the USS Underhill was the lead ship in a convoy from Okinawa to the Philippines. It was a convoy of LSTs (Landing Ship, Tanks) loaded with troops of the Army's 96th Infantry Division. The soldiers on board the LST's had seen heavy combat in Okinawa and were on their way to a rest area in the Philippines for some well deserved and much needed R&R. The USS Underhill was the lead ship and responsible for the practice drills. These included zigzagging and other maneuvers that ensured the ship was ready for any evasive action that might be necessary. These drills continued on a regular basis throughout the sailing.

After a week at sea the Underhill radioed patrol there was an unidentified aircraft on her radar. The aircraft did not approach and soon disappeared, leaving some disappointed that their hours of practice were not put to use. They continued on their way with those outside enjoying the great weather and those on duty watching closely for a possible floating mine or, worse yet, a Japanese sub.

The Japanese were well known for their suicide aircraft missions, known as the kamikazes; they now had implemented that tactic and a new weapon system called the kaiten. The first prototype was completed in July of 1944. After much hit and miss training, and much loss of Japanese life resulting from the suicide training missions the kaiten was introduced in combat in November 1944.

Meaning "Turning of the Heavens", the kaiten was a suicide submarine. It was built as a small submarine but proved to be more effective as a manned torpedo. It had room for one occupant and the nose assembly was packed with more than 3000 pounds of high explosives. The kaitens could be detached from submarines in quick fashion and were capable of inflicting devastation on an unsuspecting ship. Needless to say those onboard the Underhill that day were diligent in their search for any foreign object in the water threatening the ship's safe passage. And though the officers and crew on board the Underhill were aware of the submarines in their area, they had no way of knowing if any of those subs had manned kaitens aimed in their direction. They soon found out.



Test launch of Kaiten from cruiser Kitakami

A sub was spotted in the immediate area of the USS Underhill; depth charges were dropped and were successful. The resulting debris that floated up was a sure sign that they had hit their target. As the crew set about repairing some damage on the Underhill caused by the depth charges, word came that there was another submarine sighted nearby and approaching at a fast pace. The order was given to "Prepare to Ram" and that is the last thing Bill remembers hearing before the ungodly loud BOOM that shook his world and his life.

It was 3:15 pm when the USS Underhill was struck; when time stood still. It is believed that the ship was struck by not one but two kaitens. These suicide crafts had rammed into the starboard bow just forward of Engine Room #1 and had split the ship in two. Bill recalls that along with the loud noise, people were thrown about the room and struggled to right themselves. He remembers running forward to mid ship and seeing only sky and ocean where the

bow of the ship had been. He recalls seeing a large hunk of metal sinking and yelling **"At least we got that son of a bitch!"**

Then reality settled in. The hunk of metal he watched sink beneath the water was not an enemy ship but the bow of the USS Underhill. Slowly his hearing returned and it was then he heard the banging coming from the sinking bow.

And as if in slow motion, he realized that the banging and noises he heard was coming from within the bow of his own ship as it sank into the depths of the ocean. The cries for help from within the sinking would not be heard that day but Bill could hear and feel them in his heart. These were the young men he had served alongside when stationed in the ship. He had come to know and love them like brothers and he felt helpless.

In recounting the story of that fateful day in 1945, Bill's eyes water and he slips into momentary silence. Clearly he not only recounts the facts as they happened but he relives those events-the sights, the sounds and the brief delay in comprehending what was happening, and what it all meant. The tears that were not shed that day have been spread out over a lifetime.

The 306- foot escort ship weighing in at 1,400 tons had been struck by two kaitens and was now split in two with the bow sinking and the aft still afloat.

Calls from the stern to the bridge went unanswered. There were no orders or response coming from the Captain and ever so slowly the remaining crew onboard the Underhill came to understand their new reality. There would be no guidance from the bridge, they were on their own. They would eventually learn that 112 of the crew had perished in the explosion and 10 of those were the officers in charge. Without training, orders or guidance, they set about saving the lives of their shipmates blown into the water from the explosion.

The previously calm waters of the Pacific were now filled with debris, oil and fires and now, fellow sailors. Quickly 19-year-old Bill and other brave young men set about doing all they could to rescue as many of their shipmates as possible. The call went out to lower the motor whale boats. Bill grabbed his helmet and jumped in the craft to help with the rescue. Many, without fear for their own safety and resulting injuries jumped into the steaming hot water and set about saving others. They were able to follow the cries for help and a number of young lives were saved.

Bill and other young men that jumped into the 'scalding' water that day have carried the scars of their efforts these many years. And, Bill states they do so with no regrets. They were able to rescue shipmates who would eventually return home to family and friends. Their personal sacrifice and effort was not in vain.

Sadly some rescued that day died as a result of their injuries and were later buried at sea. There was a quiet burial with their brethren standing by saluting them for their sacrifice and praying for their souls.

The nearby PCs (patrol crafts) attempting to help with the rescue efforts were hindered by the heightened activity of subs and kaitens in the area. They were forced to alternate between assisting survivors and attacking the remaining subs. The injured were transferred to one of the accompanying LSTs with the more seriously injured brought to the one LST having a medical doctor onboard. The Convoy continued its course and proceeded to its destination of Leyte. It was determined that the plane spotted earlier on that fateful day was not as harmless as was believed. It succeeded in its mission and radioed their position and direction back to the Japanese Army.

Many hours later, in the dark of night, the aft of the USS Underhill sank to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. By Mid-August of 1945, all Japanese subs were ordered home. The sinking of the USS Underhill was the only 'successful' sinking by a kaiten.

(photo below: "Officer Bill (right) assisting with the rescue operation")

It was only 6 days later on July 30, 1945, that the USS Indianapolis sank in the same waters. Her demise was not brought about by a kaiten but two torpedoes. Some of the Underhill survivors feel that the radio silence regarding their situation should not have been in place. Had this been so then it's possible many lives could have been saved. It was too late for the Underhill but not the USS Indianapolis. After delivering the final components of the atomic



Shipmate rescuing shipmate. View from deck.

bomb, and nearing their destination, the Philippines, the Indianapolis was hit by two torpedoes and sank in just 12 minutes with disastrous results. The first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and the war officially ended just weeks later.

And while all the survivors of the USS Underhill received the Purple Heart, it was not until early 2001 that they received the much deserved Navy Unit Commendation for their "outstanding heroism in action against the enemy."

Upon his return home shortly thereafter, Bill joined the Braintree Police Force. He was the first Safety Patrol Officer for the town of Braintree. He takes great pride in the program he set up and deservedly so.

"Officer" Bill (as he is fondly referred to these days) remains very active. At 92 years of age, he enjoys his volunteer work at 2 local nursing homes and his time spent helping and supporting his beloved Parish of St. Clare. He is actively involved in, and has held many official positions at the American Legion Post #86, Veterans of Foreign Wars as well as the Braintree DAV.

He treasures his family, his only daughter and his four sons, their children and grandchildren. He cherishes time spent with them as well as his surviving brother, and he is quick to note that he has been blessed with great friends and neighbors. And all would agree wholeheartedly that the feelings are mutual.

Braintree's First Ice Cream Parlor

By: Sophie Thayer Blunt

Editor's note: Here we have an undated memoir by the founder of the Braintree Historical Society Sophie Thayer Blunt (1875-1962). This story was previously used in the June 2006 print issue of the Lantern. We at the Lantern-online thought a retelling of this particular story would be appropriate for the month of July. It is shared as written by Sophie those many years ago. We hope you enjoy it and we wish everyone an ice cream filled Happy 4th of July!



When our town was small, everybody knew everybody and also people weren't ashamed to work; not that the wolf was at the door but the New England pocketbook was never too full. It might run over a bit but one could always jam in a little more. Private enterprise flourished.

Mrs. Henry Hayward made yeast from potatoes for the community and we would go with our little tin cans and two cents on Friday nights for the wherewithal for the Saturday's baking.

Mrs. Joseph Landers knit the stockings, cotton or woolen (depending on the season) for the townspeople.

Mike Sullivan and _____ Gollivan cobbled the shoes and put on the copper toes. A vast number of nice ladies sewed shoes at home for the little shoe shops that were in the neighborhood.

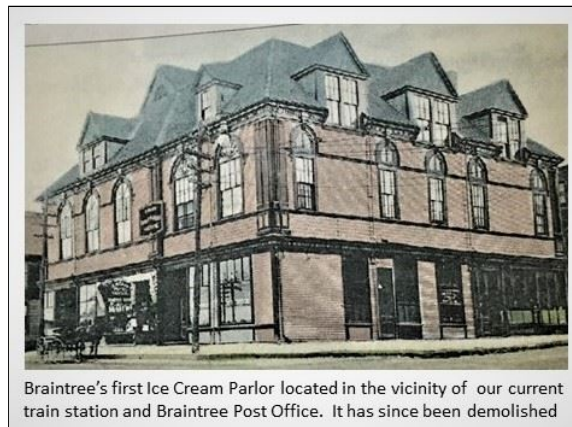
The village dressmaker was busy all the year long- the milliners did their work only between seasons.

Nehemiah Proctor, although he had plenty of this world's goods, kept the Post Office and a general store in a building right beside the railroad tracks where the mail came in. Across the front of this building was a piazza, up three steps, and at each end a rail connected the corner piazza part of the house. It was a nice heavy rail on which one could sit or sewing one's red or white-stockinged legs while waiting for the mail. The stocking was red in winter and white in summer.

Inside the store, on the right-hand side was the Post Office. First, there was an open window in which was a bucket-shaped wheel on which were the postcards and the letters for the people who were too poor to have a private box. These were stuck with wire hooks. One could step up and turn the wheel and see who got letters. If you were real quick, you would pull off a postcard, read it, and stick it back. Then you had some news. The private boxes came next and one had to ask for the mail in those for there was a glass over the end.

Then there was the candy counter with the boxes of chocolates – one cent each; peppermint sticks, red and white – one cent each; and, oh boy, pickled limes – one cent each.

At the back of the store was a corner all boarded up. That was the ICE CREAM PARLOR! Of course they only had ice cream in the Summer – in the Winter, you'd freeze if you did! In this parlor were three square home-made tables and chairs around each. The windows looked out on the gravelly railroad track – nothing else – but it was heaven to be escorted into this ice cream parlor; especially at mail time when all the crowd was outside waiting for their mail and they could see you sail along with your head in the air and your heart thumping for joy because _____ was taking you into the parlor to have ice cream with him!



Braintree's first Ice Cream Parlor located in the vicinity of our current train station and Braintree Post Office. It has since been demolished

And the ice cream – my but it was good. You see, Mr. Proctor's wife "Mary Lamb," as everyone called her, made it out of eggs, real cream, and strawberries or raspberries. Mrs. Proctor was such a pretty woman and so sweet. Both of them were the nicest people who laughed a lot. That was something. You forgot the dirty old railroad tracks and the horrid view – you were in Proctor's Ice Cream Parlor! You were having ice cream with the boy who had picked you out of all the crowd on the front piazza. You just felt grand and that you never had known joy until then.

One of the joys of life – PROCTOR'S ICE CREAM PARLOR!

Then and Now

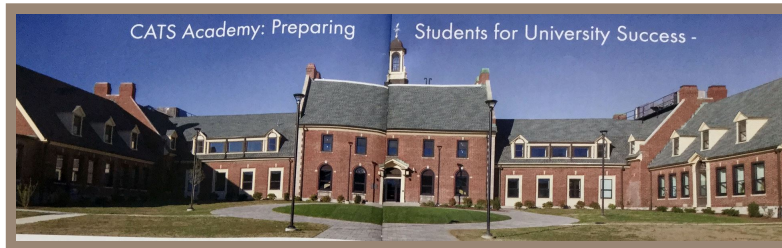
In order that the reader can compare photos and appreciate the architecture, both photos below of the property at 2001 Washington St. Braintree are taken of the back of the buildings.

THEN



Here we have a photo of the **Norfolk County Hospital**, built in the early 1920's to care for those suffering with the outbreak of tuberculosis shortly after WW1. It would eventually be known as **Massachusetts Respiratory Hospital** and more recently **Kindred Hospital Northeast** which closed in 2008.

NOW



The buildings currently house the UK based **Cambridge Education Group. CATS Academy** (an acronym for **Cambridge Arts and Technical and Sciences**) opened in 2016. This is their first permanent U.S. location and they house students from 31 nations. They are eager to increase their local student population.