

“DARKNESS OVER VERONA”

Sunday, afternoon, December 7, 1941, Verona, I was six years old. That day I had been to Mass at St. Joseph Church, just a block from my home. It was a cloudy day, but not too cold. That afternoon the news broadcaster announced over the radio that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. My parents were very excited and animated. I had no idea what was going on. What is a Pearl Harbor? Many telephone calls were the order of the day. My family kept listening intently to the news broadcasts on the radio. The explanation given to me was that we, the United States, was going to war. I was not sure what that meant. I thought that the, we meant me, my family, but going to war was going where?

Roasted chicken Sunday meal was in the oven and I loved the smell of the chicken and sliced potatoes in the light chicken juice, the telephone did not stop ringing until dark, but on Sundays the phone always rang a lot. But this day was different, no Italian music over the radio. December days were dark and by 5:00 PM it was totally dark. News broadcasts all day. We had an upright radio in the living room and a small radio in the kitchen. The initial disturbing news was heard on the little Emerson kitchen radio while we eating some fried food.

Nothing really changed for me in this early 1942. It was my first year in school, first grade. That summer came with a lot of grief. Many young boys were leaving Verona to go to war. My family, my mother mostly, cried when some of the young boys were drafted into the Army. The summer of 1942 and the following summers produced strange aerial scenes. One particular warm day I remember seeing a fleet of grey dirigibles in the southern sky of Verona. Very slow moving crafts with no audible motor noise. I did not associate this aerial show with the war effort. At six, seven and eight years old, the war was just a distant word to me. Many planes flew daily over Verona. Most of the planes had the same features, but one day a strange looking plane flew over. It had two fuselages connected with a middle body that had the cockpit with the pilot. Later we found out this was a P-38, the fastest plane the United States Army Air Force had at the time. The next summer we saw many more similar planes.

One Sunday morning a fighter plane flew over Verona, very close to the homes. It tipped its wings as it roared up Parker Street over my home on Second Street. It was very low and caused a furor in town. There was just one pass. What it was doing in Verona remained a mystery for a good while. Years later, we were told that the pilot was a Verona boy. His family was living in Verona. Lt. Bill Saxman was buzzing his family who lived on Parker Street. He died in a plane crash in 1945 in Texas. Now the strange part of this event is, had he lived he would have been my brother-in-law. He was buzzing the home of Mollie Saxman, a nine year old sister. I married Mollie in 1958.

Life changed for all Americans, but for the young people there was no change because what was happening was the norm for the young. Rationing of most of life's necessities was instituted - meat, sugar, butter, gasoline, shoes, tires and other things were added to the list. Each family had a ration book and the stamps were dated on the date that the item could be bought. Gasoline was pumped by women as the men were away at war. The government encouraged families to have gardens, known as Victory Gardens. It was somewhat strange that people made such a big deal of this. My family always had a large garden, tomatoes, cabbage, peppers, corn, onions, garlic, lettuce and zucchini.

Because of the attack at Pearl Harbor, a more active Civil Defense Program was enhanced. One of the duties of the men in this group was to patrol the streets during the blackouts that were designed to thwart enemy air raids. These drills started with fire alarm whistles sounding off. At night we were to turn off all lights in the house and cover the windows, close all doors. These would last about a half hour. The all clear was short bursts of the fire whistles. During the blackout period the street lights were turned off by the government. Mr. Nicklas, our cross the street neighbor was our air raid warden. He wore a military style helmet with the letters CD on the side. He also wore an armband with the same initials. He carried a flashlight and a short billy club. He would walk up and down Second Street making sure all visible lights were out. At times during some of the blackouts, planes would fly over, but these were the American planes.

As the war progressed more troops were needed, the pool of young men was depleted. A law set up in the later years of the war allowing high school boys 18 years old to be eligible to be drafted into the service. Verona High School was no exception – two Verona boys were drafted in the first semester of their senior year 1945, Rich G and Gino S who were discharged after serving 18 months. When they returned, the Acting Principal at Verona high school Mr. D refused to admit them as it was felt it would be too disruptive to have them at Verona High school with the younger students. They finished their senior year at Taylor Alderdice high School in Squirrel Hill.

In the four years of the war, school continued for me and the other students. A program of war savings stamps was initiated for the students. We would buy stamps for ten cents each and paste them in our Victory Books, this was a weekly occurrence. Sometimes we would spend twenty cents for two stamps.

This process continued for all the war years. School continued, Christmas came and went, the plants still grew, everything seemed normal for a six, seven, eight year old, but as I grew older I realized what a dramatic change had occurred in the lives of the older citizens of Verona.

Frank W. Santucci, September 23, 2014