

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

My Father the Air Raid Warden

The advent of World War II in December of 1941 soon impacted directly on the town in the form of several new boards and committees that the town was required to set up to deal with all the war related activities that it would have to perform. Most would require the involvement of regular town departments (police, fire, highway, etc.) plus the appointment of many citizen volunteers to carry out many of these responsibilities. My father served in one of these citizen volunteer roles as the Air Raid Warden for Burley Street, responsible for seeing that the various requirements for dealing with potential air raids were carried out during practice alerts (and in any real raids, should they occur) by all three families on the street, hence my choice of title for this essay.

Before I elaborate on our Civilian Defense Activities as one aspect of our wartime roles (to serve as one example in detail of what sort of duties and regulations were involved), here is a short listing of the major boards and committees and their responsibilities, taken from Mrs. Adeline P. Cole's *Wenham in World War II*:

War Finance Board, running War Bond Drives to pay for the war.

Selective Service Board (otherwise known as the Draft Board), selecting those young men who would go off to fight the war. Sending the sons and husbands of one's neighbors and friends off to war at major risk of life and limb was an uncomfortable responsibility to carry out.

Control of Food & Commodities (the Rationing Board), issuing the various ration coupons that the citizenry would need to buy the scarce necessities of everyday life. The Rationing Board was the least popular place to serve, as the inevitable denial (or limiting) of the necessary coupons needed to buy perceived necessities to friends and neighbors was not well received.

Accredited Agent of Relief (in this case the American Red Cross), administering any emergency relief needed in the event of any war related community disasters (air raids!)

Spotting for Aircraft, keeping an eye on the sky for enemy bombers. This would have fit into the Civil-

ian Defense area except that it took place in a US Army managed installation under the direction of the American Legion. The tower at the Hamilton High School was chosen as a joint Hamilton/Wenham effort. The aircraft to be spotted were, of course, those German bombers (Japan didn't figure on the east coast, they were the west coast's problem.) Ten volunteer spotters served over 200 hours each and twenty-six put in over 100 hours each scanning those empty skies. In all 154 Wenham citizens participated in this tedious and often uncomfortable duty. Did I say "uncomfortable"? Again from Mrs. Cole: "The spotter on the tower in an exposed position was the object of much solicitude, fur coats, heavy sweaters were made available; hot coffee was supplied by the Wenham Village Improvement Society; stoves were set up for a bit of warmth."

State Guard, a town raised unpaid militia charged with protecting our town in any way needed in the absence of the National Guard off fighting in the war. Twenty-one citizens volunteered for this task.

Civilian Defense Activities, directing the involvement of citizen volunteers in protecting the town in the event of enemy attack. The police and fire departments headed up this program. This is where most civilian volunteers ended up helping out. The heart of the matter was fear of air raids, brought on no doubt by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that killed over 2,000 servicemen, and the then ongoing German bombings of London and other British cities killing thousands of civilians.

In retrospect it's hard to see how anyone in the know could conceive of our being bombed, as neither Germany nor Japan had bombers that could fly anywhere near the continental USA. Even in the war's final years we couldn't reach Japan with our huge B29 bombers until we captured the island of Tinian (near Guam) 1,200 miles from Japan, in order to begin major bombings. But, the fear was there and so we prepared.

To their credit, our town officials felt that "the enemy would not waste its efforts on bombing a non-industrial town," and that we would more likely become a refuge for those bombed out of the cities.

The volunteer Air Raid Wardens came under the police jurisdiction, 86 of them (including my father) covered the town. When surprise practice air raid alerts took place, blackout rules were enforced, with no lights allowed or only those behind light-tight blackout curtains in windows of rooms using lights at night. On these occasions my father was out patrolling Burley Street to assure our compliance during those alerts.

In *Wenham in World War II*, Mrs. Cole stated, "There was a great deal of zeal in carrying out the letter of the law. In July, 1942 a surprise blackout drill involved 80 or more of the wardens at the time when a working shift was returning home. Many workers were halted. At Wenham Neck, a load of navy workers, complying with orders to halt, slept on nearby lawns until the blackout was over." These drills were carried out in great detail with mock incidents, fires and accidents from bombing.

One citizen reported that, as a girl, when an air raid alarm sounded, she and her siblings were sent off to bed. While peering out the bedroom window she saw to her horror, her mother being carried out of the house on a stretcher to an ambulance that had arrived on the scene to pick up a reported bombing victim. Practice, of course, but nobody told her.

Civilian Defense was taken very seriously, as stated often with great zeal indeed. Not to be outdone, to again quote from Mrs. Cole's book, "It was the responsibility of the fire department to reduce to a minimum all fire hazards from possible bombing; such a cleaning of attics Wenham had never known! The accumulation of generations in old houses were ruthlessly sacrificed, to be mourned later."

Coming up next, a look at some of the other wartime circumstances that made our lives quite different from the peacetime lifestyle to which we were accustomed. Like rationing...