

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

The US Navy Lands in Wenham

There's a photo in my mother's photo album of our small farm on Burley Street taken in December, 1942 entitled, "Surveyors all over the place because of airport expansion. Took this photo because we didn't know what was going to happen!"

What was going to happen was that World War II was about to descend upon us in this far corner of town as the U.S. Navy took title by eminent domain of properties surrounding the tiny grass airfield of the Beverly Aero Club over next to Hoods Cherry Hill Farm in Beverly. The tiny airfield was to grow into a large training field on which aspiring naval aviators would learn how to fly their warplanes before attempting to do so from aircraft carriers.

The field would have three paved runways, two of them each almost a mile in length. One pointed right at our farm (and still does today) but fortunately for our family it fell short of taking away my parents' dream farm on which they had already lavished much effort.

Not so fortunate were George and Lottie Perkins up the street nearer to the proposed airfield, who lost their ancestral farmhouse and much of their land to the needs of war. They were our street's "seniors", living out their retirement years after their farm buildings (and herd of cows) burned several years before. They were evicted and were relocated closer to us on Burley Street in a small cottage built for them from lumber salvaged from the old farmhouse by their son Porter.

This sudden development ushered in three years of noise, dust, noise, traffic, and more noise to our once quiet street, much of it offering this now teen age boy a lot of exciting action right in the neighborhood. When construction began and a need for gravel fill arose, the gravel bank that then existed on Maple Street (opposite where Burnett's Garage is now) was taken over from its proprietors, McCarthy Brothers Construction of Peabody who had been digging away at it for several years.

Burley Street was just around the corner, a direct route to the airport construction site and so it became a haul road for much of a year. The unending parade of giant noisy, smoky, Sterling gravel trucks of John Iafolla & Co. destroyed the peacefulness of our remote street as well as the street itself. Iafolla had to do constant maintenance on the roadbed. There was nothing to be done about it for it was war time.

For me the sights and sounds of the steam shovels (no longer steam driven but the name stuck) at work in the McCarthy

pit provided free time entertainment and when the gravel bank was gone my attention moved to the airport construction itself up the street. My buddies (four of us) could roam freely anywhere over the vast area on our bicycles, watching not only steam shovels but graders, bulldozers, and eventually asphalt plants at work as the new airfield slowly took shape. There were no barriers to our access nor did anyone we encountered seem to mind our being there.

But all this was but a prelude to the main attraction (to me but not to my parents), the arrival of the "war birds". These were the Grumman TBF Avenger torpedo bombers, WWII's heaviest single engine warplane powered by a 1,900hp air-cooled Wright Cyclone 18 cylinder radial engine. Big, heavy and relatively slow, it carried a full size torpedo or a 2,000 bomb inside and had a three-man crew.

Their first arrival in early 1944 was unannounced (it was wartime) when a flight of eight arrived from the Squantum Naval Air Station in Quincy to begin practicing aircraft carrier landings. The procedure was to land within a marked out area on the runway the length of an aircraft carrier deck. For this training the entire crew of each was made up of student pilots who alternated flying the plane with an instructor initially. The eight planes formed a parade around a rectangular "flight pattern" several miles around the airfield so a non-stop procession of "touch and go" could be achieved.

On any day with a northwest wind (fair weather hereabouts) the din was unending as each plane flew over our home 1,100' from the end of the runway at about 150' altitude with full 1,900hp and maximum (noisiest) propellor pitch. Only when the weather was unsuitable for flying were we spared this intrusion into our daily lives (it was wartime remember, and was to go on well into 1945 before the training program was reduced as the war's end neared).

After a specified number of "landings" had been made the planes would pull up to the gathered students awaiting their turns. It was then that my buddies and I were in our glory, for we could stand right up there with these flyboys, most of them barely four years older than us, with that huge plane front and center, engine idling while the student swap was made and then growling into full cry with flames jetting several feet

from the huge exhaust pipe. To a 14 year old boy the thrill was unimaginable. What never dawned upon us then was that some of those "boys" hardly older than us would never come back from their ultimate missions far away in the South Pacific attempting to torpedo Japanese warships.

Then came the day I'll always remember when a Grumman Hellcat fighter, which had been hotdogging around the field, took off. As we (several of my buddies were in our backyard) looked up, it suddenly became silent, its engine had cut out. It was a moment frozen in time as I saw the pilot open his canopy but he was too low to parachute and in an instant the plane was gone down behind the trees and the noise of its impact down around Maple Street reached our ears.

We jumped on our bikes and pedaled furiously to the scene. The pilot had made a perfect belly landing in two truck garden fields then on the north side of Maple Street, skimming the tree tops lining the street, sliding across one field and blowing through the intervening stone wall, shearing off its wings and tossing boulders everywhere, finally coming to rest in the further field.

By the time we got there the pilot had already climbed out and had been helped to the nearby home of the Speliotis family, owners of the fields. A small crowd was gathering when U.S. Navy jeeps escorting a large 10 wheeler crane arrived from the airport. Arrangements were soon made to pick up the plane (remaining fuselage) with the crane and take it to the airport. But a small problem arose and with it came a moment in which we adolescent boys shared briefly in the war effort.

There was a slight upgrade across the fields back to Maple Street and as the crane truck began this ascent its front wheels lifted slightly from the ground due to the weight of the plane behind. We, along with several nearby Putnamville boys, lined the path the crane was to follow. The truck driver saw us and yelled out, "Hey, you boys, get up on the front of my truck to get the wheels back on the ground."

Hardly believing our ears, we made a mad scramble to clamber up on the broad hood and fenders of the truck and along the wide front bumper. The wheels came down and we triumphantly rode it to the road, where the driver, grinning from ear to ear, waved us off with a hearty, "well done lads". For just a few brief moments we had shared in our nation's war effort, moments never to be forgotten.