

The First Pearl Harbor Day,
December 7, 1942,
Winchendon, Massachusetts

On Monday, December 7, 1942, communities throughout the United States paused to “Remember Pearl Harbor.” Exactly one year earlier, on a Sunday morning, Japanese warplanes had launched a surprise attack upon American military forces on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. The Pacific Fleet, based at Pearl Harbor, was the primary target. The enemy also hit nearby Army, Navy, and Marine installations. Some twenty-three hundred members of the United States armed forces were killed. The very next day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt personally stood before Congress and asked for a war declaration against Japan. The legislative branch, of course,



fulfilled its constitutional duty. On December 8, 1941, the United States formally was at war. Three days later, Germany and Italy (Japan’s allies) countered with their declarations of war against the United States. In response, Congress passed war declarations against those European countries. With no equivocation, the United States thus entered a two-front, world war. It would be fought for almost four years. Over the course of the next months, a national war mobilization brought the county together in an unprecedented display of patriotism and determination. Seventy-five years later, on December 7th Americans still “Remember Pearl Harbor” with a reverence reserved for the most hallowed moments in their history.

Winchendon, Massachusetts was just one community that observed the first Pearl Harbor Day. Incorporated in 1764, Winchendon dates its beginnings to the era of the American Revolution. Massachusetts then and throughout the next decade became the northern leader in the cause of independence from Great Britain. The colony’s Boston Tea Party and the Battle of Lexington and Concord became just two memorable events in the Revolutionary War. Over one hundred and fifty years later, descendants of those eighteenth century Winchendon families, as well as more recent residents, needed no lessons on what war would mean for their small town. It numbered just over sixty-six hundred people in the 1930s.¹

One family in particular had reason to be grateful a year after the enemy attack at Pearl Harbor. Joseph and Lucinne Duval’s son George had avoided being one of the six hundred Army casualties on December 7, 1941. He had enlisted in July 1940 when he was only seventeen years old. George turned nineteen just a week before the Japanese raid. As a private first class, he was assigned at that time to Fort Ruger, an Army base on Oahu. George was part of Battery F in the 55 Coastal Artillery unit. His battery is credited with shooting down two enemy planes during the attack.²

Exactly twelve months later, on the anniversary of that first Pearl Harbor Day, the *Winchendon Courier* published a newspaper article on its front page with the opening line “Pearl Harbor Day—Monday—December 7.” Readers needed no reminder of what had happened exactly twelve months earlier. Rather, the purpose of the article was to announce how the town would be observing the anniversary. On Sunday, December 13th, residents would gather at 2:00 p.m. for “a public meeting in recognition of Pearl Harbor Day. “ They would come together on Central Street where a large Service Flag would be unveiled.³

Red, white, and blue in color, Service Flags originated in World War I. Americans hung them in the windows of their homes to represent members of their family who served in the military. With a wide red border on all four sides of the banner, the middle of the flag’s white center held a blue star to represent the service member. (If more than one person in the family wore the uniform, more than one Blue Star was on the banner.) If the individual represented by the Blue Star died in the course of his or her military service, the Blue Star became a Gold Star. As of early December 1942, four hundred and seventy-one members of the Winchendon community served in the United States military.



Those men and women would be represented by the number “471” in the center of a Service Flag that would be hung high across Central Street. The banner measured eight feet in width and twelve feet in height. The plan called for the flag to be flown continuously throughout the war. From time to time, town leaders intended to change the number in the flag’s white center to symbolize what everyone knew would be an increasing number of Winchendon residents in uniform.

Throughout the week, the Winchendon Committee on Public Safety passed out flyers “all over town” with details of the Sunday gathering. Residents knew where to be on Sunday the 13th, and they showed up as requested. The weather proved less cooperating. A snowstorm brought “high winds” and a “wintry temperature” to Winchendon. Still, an estimated two to three hundred people stood on the steps in front of a designated community hall. Some, including Gold Star Mothers and town leaders, sat in parked cars. Veterans groups were present--the American Legion, the Legion Auxiliary, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the VFW Auxiliary, and the Sons of Veterans of Foreign Wars. The Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts represented the younger generation. The Winchendon School Band provided the music.

A loud speakers system enabled the crowd to hear the ceremony that took place. The chairman of the Committee of Public Safety presided over the event. A Congregational minister began the program with an invocation. (Before the gathering ended that Sunday, another clergyman and a Catholic priest shared

prayers with the crowd.) The Commanders of the American Legion and the VFW spoke before the main speaker, the District Attorney, went to the podium. All of the speakers preceded the main event for which the community had gathered that afternoon--the formal presentation to the town of the Service Flag. It was a gift to Winchendon from the air raid and post wardens. The resident chosen to unveil the Service Flag was Mrs. Alma M. Norcross.



Photo courtesy of *Winchendon Courier*

Alma and her husband, Kenneth L. Norcross, were longtime residents of the community. While Alma grew up in Maine, Kenneth had been born in Winchendon in 1893. Married in 1915, the couple came to call Winchendon their home. Their oldest child, Roger Merrill Norcross, was born there on December 20, 1916. Exactly twenty-five years later, Roger wore the uniform of a United States Marine, fighting the Japanese on the island of Luzon in the Philippines. On the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, its military forces also bombed the city of Manila, located on Luzon. Roger had enlisted in the Marine Corps in August 1938, a year before World War II broke out in Europe. Assigned to the Fourth Marine Division, Roger served as “a China Marine,” stationed in Shanghai, in the summer of 1939. By the fall of 1941, Corporal Norcross’ duty station was the Marine Barracks in the Navy Yard on the southern end of Manila Bay.⁴

In the months that followed the Japanese attacks at Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, and other United States territories in the western Pacific, the Norcross family knew little about Roger’s fate. They undoubtedly spent sleepless nights and worrisome days thinking about him. United States Army forces made their last stand on Luzon’s Bataan Peninsula, and Marines stood firm on the island of Corregidor off of Bataan. But greatly outnumbered by the invading enemy forces, and short of supplies, Bataan fell to the Japanese on April 9, 1942. Corregidor suffered the same fate on May 6th. Alma and Kenneth received little information, if any, about their son following the surrender. In December 1942, the *Winchendon Courier’s* article identifies him as “missing in action” (MIA). Seven months after the fall of Corregidor, Roger’s mother unveiled the Service Flag before Winchendon residents. One of those represented by the number “471” at the center of the flag was her son. In all probability, Roger’s father and siblings David and Patricia were in the crowd.

During the war, once the Japanese government gave the International Red Cross the names of prisoners of war (POWs) it held, the United States War Department notified the serviceman’s next-of-kin. Obviously, in December 1942 Alma and Kenneth had not yet received such a telegram. At one point over the course of the next three years, the Norcross family should have received news that Roger was alive. He ended up in a POW camp in Osaka, Japan where prisoners served as forced labor. The Japanese imposed strict limits on communications between their captives and POW families back in the States. Any letters or postcards his parents sent Roger, or received from him, would have been few in number, short in length, and restricted in subject matter. Even so, the family, especially Alma, would have held onto the hope that Roger would come home to them. In the fall of 1945, he did just that.

¹ Information on Winchendon’s history and population are taken from The Federal Writers’ Project Guide to 1930s Massachusetts, *The WPA Guide to Massachusetts* (New York, 1983 edition; originally published in 1937 under the title *Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People*), p. 540.

² The World War II Experience is indebted to Ms. Julia Cardinal of the Winchendon Historical Society and Ms. Coral Grout of the American Legion Women’s Auxiliary in Winchendon for providing background information on their town, especially in identifying George Duval as a Pearl

Harbor Survivor. Information on George is taken from records at Ancestry.com, specifically the 1940 United States Federal Census for Joseph Duval's family and the U.S. Veterans gravesites records for George (accessed May 3, 2016). Army casualties as well as the actions by George's battery on the morning of December 7, 1941 can be found at www.ibrary.org/pha/congress/joint_committee_exhibits/exhibit_005.pdf (accessed May 3, 2016).

³ Details of Winchendon's first Pearl Harbor Day are taken from two articles published in the town's newspaper, the *Winchendon Courier*--"Winchendon Will Dedicate Service Flag Sunday Afternoon At Ceremony On Central Street" (December 7, 1942) and "Service Flag Honors 471 From Winchendon" (probably published on December 14, 1942). The newspaper stories are pasted in a World War II album kept by a Winchendon resident. The album was sold on eBay. The photo of the service flag, printed in the *Winchendon Courier*, is used here courtesy of the newspaper and its current editor, Ms. Ruth Deamicis.

⁴ Information on the Norcross family and on Roger's military service is taken from records on the web site Ancestry.com, specifically the birth records for Kenneth Leon Norcross and Roger Merrill Norcross, the marriage record for Kenneth and Alma L. Merrill, the 1930 United States Federal Census for the Kenneth L. Norcross family, Department of Veterans Affairs records for Roger's death, WW II POW records on Roger, and United States Marine Corps Muster Rolls on Roger. (All of the Ancestry records were accessed on March 28, 2016.)