

*Lt. Col Harry Stewart recounts his experiences for the upcoming documentary, A Salute to Our WWII Generation – Let Us Not Forget, which will debut at the Penn Theater in November.*

# Never Forget

**Plymouth-Canton students share spotlight with veterans in WWII documentary**

By Scott Spielman

When Mark Salloum was visiting his mother at a rehabilitation center about six years ago, he met a man who served under General George Patton. He ended up talking with him for more than two hours. "He had some incredible stories," said the Plymouth Township resident. "It got me inspired, initially, to say I really want to share these stories—not just the war stories about the battles, but the people and what their experiences were like."

He soon heard more, when a small group of World War II veterans shared their personal stories during the Memorial Day ceremony in downtown Plymouth. Salloum, owner of Highway Media, was hooked. "I walked away and said: that's it. I'm committed to making this happen. I knew this would be my next project at that point," said Salloum.

That was the beginning of "A Salute to Our WWII Generation – Let Us Not Forget,"

a documentary about the lives of WWII servicemen and women that will debut at The Penn Theater in November. Salloum, who had previously produced "Plymouth, Michigan: A Rich History," collaborated again with Keith Famie, former Survivor contestant who ventured into filmmaking after a successful Food Network show on the film—and brought in students from the Plymouth-Canton Community School District to supply an educational component to it.

The film follows the lives of 26 veterans through interviews with family members, videos and more. Every branch of the military is represented, including Tuskegee Airmen, the Mont

Point Marines—the first African American Marines—and original Rosies.

"It's a movie that will look at the impact of the war on their lives and their service before, during and after," said Salloum. "It's not a war movie. We are certainly going to hear about some of their experiences in battle, but it'll be about the impact of the war on their lives. That's what separates this from other WWII documentaries that are out there."

Another aspect that will make it different is the inclusion of Plymouth-Canton students. Salloum reached out to the school district and was eventually connected to Chris

Belch, who was planning a veteran-related project with his Michigan History class.

"We hadn't started it yet, but I had this vague idea for a project, where students would do personal interviews with veterans—from Viet Nam, Korea or more recent wars," said Belch. "I didn't have the entire project put together, but I had this idea of what I wanted to do."

"I didn't have the lesson fully hashed out, and then along comes Mark, making the film," he added. "He wanted to how students remembered the greatest generation, how they remembered the contributions of the men and women who fought for our country."

It was a perfect match. Obviously, with a switch to a WWII focus, the likelihood of personal interviews dwindled. There are only about 50,000 WWII vets living today and every day there are fewer.

Belch and his students instead turned to the Plymouth Historical Museum, which has an archive of veterans' videos that were filmed more than 10 years ago, the Library of Congress, through its Veterans' History Project, and interviews with veterans' families. Students picked a veteran, researched them and did a presentation on them in front of the class. They

In addition to watching the videos, talking with families and other research, the students visited the Great Lakes National Cemetery in Holly and the Michigan Heroes Museum in Frankenmuth.

The entire project, from choosing subjects to the field trips and parade participation, was planned in about three weeks.

"I wasn't sure if it was going to work," Belch said. "Now that the project is over, it succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. It worked much better than I anticipated. It was remarkable to see the transformation in the students over the course of the last two months."

"You could really see the passion starting to develop between the students and these families," he added. "It was really a deeply moving experience. I think we were able to get a pretty good idea of what their lives were like."

The students agreed. "It is important for students to research local heroes because it humanizes the roboticized U.S. soldier, and it puts a story to a face and picture," said Issac Demetter, a Salem High School senior.

"This was a powerful experience because I got to hear personal stories about how things happened during the war, which makes you resonate with the person more. I also got to learn more about his life away from the war," added Jena Hadi, a junior at Plymouth High School. "[This project] is important because it gives students a chance to think about everything on a deeper level. It also helps them visualize the struggles that individuals faced that helped our country in the war, rather than looking at the bigger picture."

"I think it disproved the notion I had in my mind that people who fought in the war didn't really do anything besides solely fighting," said Anissa Camarena,



Ben Dziadzio, Alexia Reed, Jack Ha carried pictures of veterans during the Plymouth Memorial Day Parade, along with Chloe Fournier, Jonah Kibin (second row) and Maya Toth, Christopher Belch (third row).

who researched Benjamin Elisburg during her senior year at Canton High School. "Learning about personal experiences he had with the men in his station, as well as [hearing] stories, proved just how human they were. He had good and bad times and did silly things with the guys he got to know over the course of the years he fought in the war. It also was interesting to see what he was doing beforehand and what he had planned before knowing he was going to have to go to war."



Ethel "Cricket" Poland a U.S. Navy intelligence officer during WWII was sworn to secrecy for decades about her role in the conflict (also pictured at right on opposite page).

said Emilia Muncy, who graduated from Salem. "Those classes made the war feel almost fake in a way, but this project was completely humanized. Obviously, I knew that real people fought in the war, it just didn't feel real until this assignment."

Salloum talked about several veterans at the Memorial Day ceremony in downtown Plymouth. He said he's looking forward to fully sharing their stories when the film debuts at The Penn during the middle of November. It will then be broadcast on PBS in December or January.

## OPERATION HONOR

Although his passion project is nearly completed, Salloum said he is still looking for some additional funding. With a goal of \$100,000, he's launched Operation Honor, where he's looking for 100 people to donate \$1,000 in honor of a loved one who served. With the donation, the WWII veteran of choice will be honored by displaying his/her picture in the closing credits, along with their name, branch, and years of service.

"This will be a wonderful way to honor those who have served," Salloum said.

For more on the film, the process of putting it together, or to donate, visit [www.w2heroes.com](http://www.w2heroes.com).



Salem senior Freddie Dickelman places a flag at the Great Lakes National Cemetery in Holly.

also walked in the Memorial Day Parade, each carrying a 11x17 foamboard picture of "their" vet. Salloum suggested some veterans to research, but many students opted to do presentation on their own family members who served.

"We wanted them to be Plymouth-based, as much as possible and we also wanted them to be people we had researched," Salloum said. "We wanted to capture the emotions of the kids going through this experience."

