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Article Title: “Reflection,” part of ‘What Did You Do During the War?’, a special issue devoted to first-person accounts by Nebraskans. For more information, [see the index to full text articles currently available.](#)

Full Citation: “Reflection,” *Nebraska History* 72 (1991): 242-250

Notes: Reflections on how the war changed individual Nebraskan’s attitudes and perspectives.

URL of Article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/1991_War_08_Reflection.pdf

Photos: North Platte Canteen

REFLECTION

"It really was a time in my life that I have never wanted to forget."

Patricia Black Walgreen

[A]s for the civilian life . . . mom's food tasted pretty good . . . I took it easy, just kind of loafed around for about a month. Then, as I remember, dad didn't say anything but mom began to get ideas about me going to work. The general store out there had been in my dad's father's hands for many, many years until he died in '37 and my dad took it over. Well, I thought the world of my father, always did. He was a very fine man and all this and that, but don't kid yourself, working for your parents is something else. They've got their own ideas . . . I decided to go up to Sioux Falls [South Dakota] and I got in the V. A. regional office up there.

Don Weber, Arlington
U.S. Army battery clerk,
European Theater

We were given all kinds of promises — if you do this for the country, then you're always guaranteed certain veterans' rights and so forth, which are not there anymore. Personally, we've never needed them, but it makes me angry that they reneged. Just the same, I certainly don't regret what I did. As I said, I think we owe our community something. We owe our country something, and I just felt fortunate to be able to do what I did. I don't feel particularly noble about it.

Helen Winter Stauffer

In 1940 I bought a new automobile for \$820. I left it at my folks' for four years . . . The first time I drove it downtown [after I got back], a guy stopped me and he said, "I'll give you \$1,200 for that car right now."

Willard McShane

I came back and I went to work as a motion picture projectionist, doing the same old grind that I had done before. I wasn't so terribly old either, so I didn't really think I needed to settle down anyway. I met that gal in the theater, and she changed my mind, so we settled down. I think maybe I'm a lot biased and in favor of no wars, but in favor of doing your duty when there is a war.

Jack Jackson

What Did You Do in the War?

I don't think anyone could be engaged in that kind of activity for that period of time on both fronts without having some reaction. Ultimately, you put those things behind you and either pick up where you left off or you change your course of action, depending on existing conditions. I don't know that it's necessarily changed my life as far as my outlook let's say, or my philosophies, or what I think about America, or my feelings towards America and the so-called freedoms we enjoy . . . I think our society has become a rather decadent society, and it distresses me because that's not the thing that I fought for or that millions of others did.

Ray Kubie, Herman

U.S. Army infantryman,
European and Pacific Theaters

[The war changed my life] quite a bit. I probably would have been farming today. I'm sure I would. See, I was working in a grain elevator, but with my dad being ill . . . I started working there part-time trying to help him farm. I suppose, actually, if I had really tried, I think maybe I could have gotten a deferment and not gone into the service. I guess I didn't want to go that route. I would have been a farmer, no question about it.

Gerald Reed

We definitely learned that material things are not the most important . . . I don't think you can appease someone who is trying to take over the world. Eventually you are going to have to stand up for what you believe. I think if . . . we had stood up to Hitler much earlier, or if the German people had stood up to Hitler much earlier, or if the German people had stood up to him and Mussolini, that this wouldn't have gone on to that extent. I don't know how we would have stopped Japan from attacking us. I suppose there was some way. Our people out there in the Pacific could have been a little more alert.

Helen Green

I come from a large family, and I was the runt of the family, and I was told that. I had a little inferiority complex and I think being in the cadets and becoming a pilot was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me. I mean, I was as good a pilot as most of them, and better than an awful lot of them. I was a good pilot. And I think that gave me an awful lot of confidence . . . At that time, we truly believed that we had a dedicated mission, that we were saving the world, that we were doing our part. We were going to die for this. The young are going to die. I think we really felt that way. We were doing something that was necessary, and if we were going to get killed, why so be it. I know when my brother got killed, it really upset me naturally. But hell, this was for a cause, a good cause, that we died for others.

Floyd Marian

Families lived through a lot of things that they never thought they could, but they did. We all survived — almost everybody. The young men went all over the world, where they wouldn't have gone before. It really was a time in my life that I have never wanted to forget. I was glad I lived through it and always will be glad.

Patricia Black Walgreen, Fullerton
High school student

I'm very glad that I fought in a war where we thought we were doing something to get rid of a totalitarian power [like] Nazi Germany . . . At the time we were in there fighting, we felt we were fighting for a cause, and we were all very much united in that cause.

Paul Thompson

I came back in uniform. I was proud of my ribbons. I had my ribbons on and I went to my hometown of Havelock . . . At that time we had several pool halls . . . I went out there, and, sure enough, there were some of my buddies there. I don't know if they were 4-F or if they were working in defense industry or what it was, but anyway they weren't in the service, and I walked in, and they came over and greeted me and shook my hand . . . And I talked to them

What Did You Do in the War?

for about two minutes, and then the conversation turned to how tough it was in the States at that time. Everything was rationed. They had no gasoline to go on dates with. This and that and the other thing. Then one of them got into a big, long, melodramatic talk about the air raid they had had over Lincoln, in which planes, I don't know what the planes were, but they were dropping bags of flour to simulate bombing, and how exciting that was. And I had been through three invasions. I had been through numerous air raids. It is laughable now, but at that time, I was a little ticked off.

Keith Vail

I was born and raised on a farm, and I went through the Depression and I said, "I don't ever want to be on a farm." It seemed like a bad place to be. But after going through the war and everything, I was very anxious to go back to the farm. I felt that if I survived everything I survived over there, I could do most anything. Even if it wasn't the best in the world, I was satisfied. With all the danger that we went through on the ship, I think a year after that I still had nightmares — seeing ships blow up, seeing people killed. I don't like to even think about it.

Dallmont Erickson

There were plenty of people who grew up in Nebraska prior to the war who had never been out of the state. They might not even have been out of their towns . . . [The war] had to broaden the horizons of everybody . . . The GI Bill was letting all the men go to college . . . And then they didn't all come back to the towns. All kinds of people had college degrees whose parents had not. It was really a great change. And we had passed out of the Depression . . .

The kind of ironic thing is that for me these are happy years. These are years of flowering. I was still protected as a child, and living in the center of the country, [we] were all protected. So the war was a grand and noble cause. We had a great leader, and we were going to win. All the propaganda that was good could be believed. The world was kind of simple really. All of my family were committed people and we were doing our best for the war effort, so for me they're almost nice years to remember.

Virginia Koehler Knoll



Workers at the North Platte Canteen provided food, magazines, and entertainment for as many as 5,000 service personnel every day. (NSHS-U59-52)

THE NORTH PLATTE CANTEEN

Many communities organized canteens at their railroad depots to serve the troop trains that regularly passed through the state. The North Platte Canteen was the most famous in Nebraska and perhaps in the United States.

The North Platte Canteen began because of a mixup. Ten days after Pearl Harbor, North Platte residents learned that their own Company D of the Nebraska National Guard would be passing through on its way to the west coast. The townspeople gathered cookies, cakes, gum, and cigarettes and waited for their boys to arrive. Company D finally did roll into the Union Pacific station, but it was a Company D from Kansas! Rae Wilson, whose brother was the commander of the Nebraska Company D,

thought it would be a good idea to meet all the troop trains, and on Christmas Day 1941 the North Platte Canteen officially opened for business.

Every day throughout the war 3,000 to 5,000 service personnel were provided with food, magazines, and entertainment during their brief stops at the canteen. The canteen was operated entirely by volunteers from some 125 communities in and around the state. Funds were raised from every conceivable source: scrap drives, dances, concerts, movie benefits, and cash donations.

The North Platte Canteen finally closed in April 1946. With the demise of passenger train service, the Union Pacific station in North Platte was demolished in 1973.

What Did You Do in the War?

Had we not won, the life that everyone in America now enjoys would be far different. You can only speculate how different. Germany under Hitler and Italy under Mussolini and Japan under Hirohito and Tojo were extremely totalitarian. It's not too far off base to suggest that we would be told where we could live now, what we could do, where we could go, what kind of a job we could have. This is something that I don't think Americans of a younger generation than mine really appreciate and realize.

Clarence Mitchell, Jr.

When we got home [to Omaha] there must have been a thousand people [waiting] but they left a parking place for us to park in front of the house. You're bewildered by all of this because you did what you were supposed to do People say, "Why did you do what you did?" And the answer is because they told you to.

Edward Sellz

Ninety percent of it [war] is just boredom and the other ten percent is sheer terror. On the other hand, if I could go through it and knew I'd come out, I'd like to do it again, but I wouldn't take a million dollars for the experience I had. Otherwise, I wouldn't want to do it again, unless they could guarantee me that I'd come out safe and sound. It was an experience you'll never forget. A guy said one time, you're never so alive as if you think you're going to die the next minute or two. It's sort of that way. You're just up on a high because you're so happy to still be alive There were quite a few times when we were in situations where we didn't figure we were going to make it till morning and when you do, why you're just so ecstatic about it.

Tom Sherman

It's very difficult for me to comprehend the fact that we have to employ war to achieve results. I'm not a peace-addict, but by the same token, I believe that if we can settle it over a conference table, it's a hell of a lot better than sacrificing so many men or women for a so-called just cause. When you review history, you find out the just causes, both teams, both countries are employing God to help them do this and do that. The sight of a dead soldier

— American, German, Italian, Japanese, Chinese — whoever they are, I have a lot of sympathy with the mother that brought them into the world and [with] the father that had great ideas and plans for that son or that daughter. It's horrible. I wish we could stamp war out of our way of . . . doing things.

Thomas McGrath

[The war] did not change what I ended up doing and what I wanted to do. I always wanted to be a farmer. I think it probably changed my outlook on people. I saw how people that are downtrodden are so hurt by war and what it can do . . . I really didn't see any action, but I saw so much suffering.

Vernon Lostroh

I think the war was kind of a melting pot for everybody, like they say, because of the fact that so many fellows, myself included, had never been away from home. When I was growing up, we didn't travel around like we do now. People today are mobilized, as we say. You can get in a car and in a couple of hours you can be a couple hundred miles down the road. Back then, we didn't have the roads, we didn't have the cars. So you more or less grew up in your own little cell — your own little town — wherever you were born and raised, why that's where you grew up and that's all you knew. Of course, the war came along and fellows that were from New York were shipped to California and vice-versa and from the north to the south and halfway in between. And after the war . . . there were a lot of fellows around the country, just like myself, that [ended up] 500-600 miles away from home, 1,000 miles away from home, [who] married somebody else and they came back and settled down there; they didn't go back home.

Grant Hazlett

What Did You Do in the War?

Before I was in the service, I had no desire to farm. I didn't. And when I was over there, it got to looking pretty good. So I thought, "Maybe I'll farm." But a lot of them went back and got their degrees. I thought: I'd been in college [prior to the war], and then taking training in the air force, I was just so tired of school, so I didn't go back to school. I wish I had sometimes. On the other hand I was going with a girl that didn't want to live on a farm and she said, "If you're going to farm, it's going to be without me." She was smarter than I was. But anyway, I probably would have never met my wife . . . I would have probably done everything different, so maybe everything works out for the best.

Dean McClymont

[I]t taught me how to rely on myself as much as anything else, and how to survive. The longer I was a prisoner, the more determined I was to get out. I wanted something better.

Charles Slagle

Of course, they refer to it now as "the good war" because most people believed we were just in going to war. I have a lot of memories — good and bad. Probably those three years, nine months, and twenty-eight days I spent in service were probably the most memorable in my life. But then combat tends to etch stuff in your memory that you never forget. A lot of the memories of combat and things that happened on the ship, to me, are like they happened yesterday.

Robert Mathewson

Before the service . . . I was a pretty nice kid. I was just a farmboy with lots of friends. I was still pretty much that way 'til the time I went to midshipman's school. When I left midshipman's school, I was a different person. And as the time went on, I became still different. A lot was expected of me. I gave a lot. I expected a lot of others. We were in [a] position all the time at sea where any one decision that I might make, might make the difference of whether we lived or died. In order to make that decision, I had to

have information from other people. So I expected them to be correct.

I came back after service saying, "I never made a mistake. I'm here. I never made a mistake." I've really never gotten over that. I can be very demanding and very hard. I have been, and I've regretted it later lots of times. I still give a lot and expect a lot. Slowly that's dissipating, but it's taken too long. I was not the kind of person who came back that I was when I left.

F. Lowell DeVasure

Like all young kids, I had the world by the tail, I thought, and I got in there, and I began to realize what this world was all about more or less. We began to see death. For five years after I came home, when I went to funerals I didn't view the bodies, which was a common practice in Dalton, because I would show no emotion. And it embarrassed me. Everybody showed considerable emotion, and I'd seen so much worse. We had a half ton truck that we found, one boy that they hadn't found for four or five days, and he completely filled that truck, he'd been out that long. When you see things like that, I just showed no emotion at all at that, because you just got hardened

Every generation forgets anything of this type because they haven't been there. You can in no way convey what happened, what it did to you and all the rest of them You just can't convey it, because you've got to be there. Then, if you're there, the worst you don't want to talk about. So the young ones, like even when they went to Vietnam, they can't convey really what it's all about. When we had our celebration for the Legion, I was talking with one [individual] that I'd known a long time, and I said, "It's too bad that we can't in some way bring to these people what that was." This celebration was cheering war, cheering the armed forces, all this type of thing. It was a big deal I said, "It's too bad we can't really tell them what it's all about, and they'd have different thoughts." That's the worst of the whole thing. You just can't convey how it was. You can tell a story, but that's not like being there.

John Heizer