

A School Teacher Minds the Home Front



HELEN OSLEY

Story by Aileen Keenan

As she eagerly describes the active life she led during World War II, Helen Osley's laugh lines are visible. Her excited manner reveals her story as an elementary school teacher, intimately and cheerfully involved in the war efforts.

I graduated from Rhode Island College of Education in 1941, the year the war started. I remember Pearl Harbor very plainly. I had gone somewhere that afternoon with a friend of mine. We were coming back from Wakefield, at the intersection just past the bicycle shop. The car radio was on and the announcement came on. We were just plain excited. That's all anybody talked about.

I didn't know much about the war in Europe and Asia. We would discuss it in college in our history courses. I read the papers and magazines. But it still seemed very remote and very removed. Because we were right on the water, everyone did have a feeling that if anything happened, we would probably be one of the first to know, especially when they started building Fort Greene. That was a big fortification down at Point Judith. We were in a bad situation. We had Newport across the bay and Quonset right up the bay.

I knew my husband would be going. He probably wouldn't have had to, except he wanted to. Everybody felt it was their duty. The work he was doing at Fort Greene was deemed important enough not to be called. He had a couple of deferments, but he refused the last, and he went in. We were married two months before he went to Officers Training School and soon after he went to Scotland.

I taught at Narragansett Elementary School. I hate to tell you what we were paid, \$17 a week. So, that's your big pay for teachers in those days. I truly think it was awfully hard for the teachers who boarded in town. By the time they paid board, they didn't have much left.

When I first went to teach, that was in the fall of 1941, I had a list of my students, and there were probably about 25. Soon there were over 40 students. This was because of Fort Greene and Quonset. Quonset was booming. Construction was going on everywhere. Many, many people moved into town. These were children of transient workers, really. I had children from all over the country. Their parents were either in the service, or they were working at Quonset. I think that that was good for the children, too, to meet somebody from outside the community.

Because of supplies, food was rationed. You had stamps for everything, clothing, shoes, things like that. It was sort of a job, juggling all this. Also, gasoline was rationed. You had these little books for everything, good for a certain length of time. If you ran out before that, too bad. So it was kind of fun figuring out what you were going to do.

Sometimes the store would get a bunch of stuff in, but you were only allowed to take so much. There was a lot of hoarding, and a lot of black market stuff going on. People made some kind of deal under the table and would all of a sudden come up with a few steaks. We never went without. We never starved or anything like that. My mother was a very smart shopper.

When rationing was first announced, I worked on the Rationing Board. All the teachers were asked to do this. People had to come and give their names, occupations and addresses to pick up these books.

How did people show their patriotism?

Mostly by going along with civilian defense protocol, obeying all the different rules and regulations. You had to take some kind of course for any of the civilian defense work. I worked as an air raid warden for quite a while and that was kind of fun. You could go out and stop cars. Order people off the street. It's silly when you think about it. We had a good time.

They had air raid drills, like fire drills at school, except this was a total town thing. The siren would go off. We wore helmets and had these belts and a billy club and a flashlight. People were ordered off the streets, to go to a safe place if they possibly could. Cars had to come to a halt. I had to patrol on Narragansett Avenue. Whenever we heard the siren go off, I strapped on my helmet, belt, and billy club and took off.

At the old town hall, there was a huge switchboard connected to Newport Civilian Defense, that had to be manned all the time. I put in a couple of hours a week. Every once in a while, a light would flash there and you had to say, "Narragansett Headquarters," and they would say, "Just checking." And then every once in a while they would pull a fake alarm. When this buzzer fell or whatever would go off, I had to get in contact with every person on the Civilian Defense Board to notify them that there was an attack imminent. They

would say an attack was within ten minutes and I had to get everything coordinated in that time. I was scared to death!

Blackouts were another thing I did during the war. I would go out one night a week with this woman who lived a couple houses down. We had a certain area that we had to walk to make sure that there were no lights shining on the east and on the south - towards the water.

How did you spend your leisure time?

I would go back and forth to friend's houses. There was a good bit of that during the war. Somebody would call up and say, "We're going to have a pot luck dinner. Bring something." And all of us would meet over there and everybody would bring something. It was fun.

I wasn't particularly happy when my husband went overseas, especially when I found out I was pregnant. He didn't see his first child until she was almost two. I was able to send pictures. He didn't get all of them. We used the V-mail. It was an envelope and the writing paper at the same time. It was very, very thin, and you had to write quite small. Then you could fold it up and down again, and mail that. That was, I think, because there was so much mail going it helped on the weight. Our mail was censored. You had to be careful about what you said, and they had to be extremely careful about what they wrote back.

Every other day, we went to pick up mail and to mail our letters to our husbands. At the same time, we would go across the street to the market and say to Bill, "Are there any cigarettes?" He would say, "I saved a pack of these for each one of you." We never knew what it was going to be. There were some pretty weird brands.

Stockings were awfully hard to get. Of course, most everybody wore silk stockings. Nylon was just beginning to come out, and you couldn't get them. So, during the spring and fall, I used to paint my legs with leg make-up.

We planted a victory garden. I shouldn't really call it a victory garden because my father always had a garden. My father worked for the electric light company, but he was really a farmer at heart.

We saved paper and cans, all your cans. After you used them, you rinsed them out, took the label off, took the top and bottom off them, and then flattened them. You could save quite a stack.

Looking back on it now, I was fairly young, and the war was exciting. There's no getting away from it. It was an exciting time. But it was a scary time, too. You had so many people that you knew and loved and all of a sudden they weren't there anymore. I had good friends who were living in the same way that I was. We comforted one another. We saw a lot of one another. We shared letters that we got and other things. But when it was over, it was sort of, well, the war is over. Let's get on with our lives. Our real lives now.