

We Gave All That We Could

Friday Harbor commemorates the 100th anniversary of the nation's entry into World War I with a look back at our island's contribution to the war effort

Art Installation Fall/Winter 2017
Breezeway Park, Spring and Second Streets
Friday Harbor, WA

Enlistment

On April 6, 1917, the U.S. joined allies Britain, France, and Russia to fight in World War I. Tiny San Juan County, with only 3,600 residents on its small scattered islands, had 124 servicemen enlisted. These brave country boys served in almost all branches of the military: The Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Merchant Marine, and fledgling Air Service. Some did duty in the United States, others in places as diverse as France, Cuba, the West Indies, and Alaskan waters.



Servicemen meet at San Juan County Courthouse before leaving for duty.

On the Homefront

Here at home it seemed everyone was involved: Yards became liberty gardens, idle land was farmed, and social events became opportunities to raise money for purchasing supplies, creating wartime infrastructure, and arming the troops.

In a nation unprepared for war, islanders found themselves seeking ways to express their patriotism through flag waving and volunteering.



"For months a number of public-spirited citizens had been soliciting funds for the purchase and erection of a community flagpole and for a large flag.... On May thirtieth [2017]...the flag was raised.... The flagstaff was as tall and straight a spar as I had ever seen, painted white and slimmer at the base than one would have expected for the great height. Large and jagged fragments of igneous rock had been chipped off some island buttress and placed a fitting guard around the pole's base." (Underpinning, by Caroline Reed)

"Only two pounds of sugar were allowed per person each month. Even with the special allowances, canning plans were altered. Already we had forgotten how white bread looked." (Underpinning, by Caroline Reed)

Bandages, Socks, and War Bonds

In May 1917, even before the United States entered the war, the American Red Cross began coordinating procurement of medical and other supplies for treating the projected numbers of wounded servicemen. The local Red Cross, an auxiliary unit of the Seattle chapter, hit the ground running. Every call for supplies and fundraising goal set by the Seattle chapter or national Red Cross was surpassed by the San Juan Chapter's volunteers which included farmers, fishermen, trades people, laborers, shop owners, housewives, and children.



"Some classroom hours were spent knitting small yarn squares for Red Cross workers to make into warm shawls for Belgian refugees. I unraveled so many old socks, rolled the crinkled good yarn into balls, and re-knit them, that it was a delight after the war was over to knit again on fresh new yarn. The boys whittled and sanded knitting needles from pieces of bamboo and learned to knit, too. On sunny afternoons the class sat on the mossy bluff overlooking the harbor and knitted."
(Underpinning, by Caroline Reed)

Old linens and cotton were washed, boiled, and hemmed for handkerchiefs, table napkins, and tray covers for hospitals. By autumn there was a call for knitted sweaters, socks, fingerless gloves, and covers for amputated limbs. Laundered outworn cotton undergarments were cut into small rectangles and strung over thread for gun wipers. Volunteers spent time in the sanitary Red Cross room rolling bandages. Children hunted the woods for sphagnum moss to pad absorbent dressings. Everyone helped however they could.

Letters

As welcome as letters from home were to the county's enlisted boys and men, so too were the letters written back to those left waiting at home. These letters told of the conditions of soldiers at training and staging camps, on the battleground, and at sea. Many of the letters from island servicemen were shared with the community as weekly installments in the local newspaper.



"I have now been two days in my little 'dug-out' taking and sending messages as fast as they come. The bullets are flying thick and fast overhead." (Fred Ellery Hackett, telegrapher in the Signal Corps and first local casualty of the war)

"We had no place we could even sit, which meant no place to sleep, for everything was out in the open and I don't think there was six feet square without a shell hole, and it simply meant living in mud up to the knees." (Tom Silcox, injured three times—twice by mortars two days apart)

"I haven't minded the cooties much nor begrudged the rats to share my home with me but along about four o'clock in the morning when I am listening for the wire, they get out along the line and start to fight. Of course the first few squeaks sound like the wire, and I am undecided whether or shoot or heave a bomb." (From a letter reprinted in the *Friday Harbor Journal*, May 16, 1918)

Homeward Bound

On November 11, 1918, the announcement of the armistice was front page news. Though it would take as long as two years before the troops were fully demobilized, ships carrying war-weary soldiers soon began crossing the Atlantic and most were home within a few months.



The USS Virginian was commissioned from February 1 to August 19, 1919, for troop transport. After four voyages between France and the U.S., she was decommissioned and converted back into a civilian cargo ship.

The Price of War

Of the 124 men from San Juan County who served in WWI, nine died in the war effort including two brothers from Orcas killed just one month apart on the Argonne Forest battlefield during the bloodiest battle of that war. While the nation lost 2.5% of its servicemen and the state of Washington lost 2.75%, San Juan County lost 7.3%. On scarcely populated islands where the close-knit community was related directly by blood or marriage or through work, business, common geography, or childhood friendships, the loss of each man was sorely felt by everyone.



"Mother looked out a front window over the village one early May morning and noticed with a start that all flags hung at half-mast. She hastened to the telephone to make inquiries. Fred Hackett was dead, she was told, killed in action near Mont Didier, France, on May first. Friday Harbor's first war casualty plunged the community into grief. Hardly a year before, the slim youngster had delivered our milk each evening. After five months in France as expert telegrapher, a private in the signal corps, he had been blown up when his dugout was shelled. His parents knew only that he was dead. Detailed news did not arrive until the captain of his company wrote his parents a letter received in December [1918]."
(Underpinning, by Caroline Reed)

A monument to these soldiers was unveiled on Armistice Day 1921 in what is now known as Memorial Park at the base of Spring Street. It is believed to be the first WWI monument erected in the state of Washington.

Special recognition

Our appreciation goes out to those volunteers who made this installation possible. This narrative borrows heavily from the research and writing of Lynn Weber-Roochvarg and the book Underpinning by Caroline Reed. Chris Minney of Tif & Gif Creative produced five of the art pieces for this installation. Peggy Sue McRae produced the piece titled "Letters". Both artists are from San Juan Island. All of the photographs used were taken by island residents between 1917 and 1919. These images are from the local archives of the San Juan Historical Museum and Hackett-Larson Post 163 of the American Legion, which was formed in the days immediately following the armistice. This installation is the result of a collaboration between the Town of Friday Harbor's Historic Preservation program and the Friday Harbor Arts Commission. Sincere thanks go to Jeffrey and Alicia Carnevali for allowing this project to be displayed on their building.

For More Information on how World War I was experienced by San Juan County islanders, please visit www.historylink.org and read the extraordinary essay "World War I: The San Juan County Experience" by Lynn Weber/Roochvarg, published April 6, 2017.