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A member of the 'Greatest Generation'



Mary Ann Haapala, seen in these photos past and present, served her country as a member of the Women's Army Corps.

■ Haapala served with pride

Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of articles that will be published in November honoring World War II veterans. The stories were written by HDT summer student intern Matt Nelson.

Mary Ann Haapala once faced death while driving down a hill.

It's a tale that nearly every Minnesotan has in common. A winter day, moving along, and then the telltale shudder — and the gut-wrenching realization that the car is no longer under your control.

These words are meant to convey the horror that Haapala felt one day in 1944 when she thought to herself, "This is it!"

But before Haapala's life was nearly ended, before she drove the elite around Manhattan, and before she ferried the wounded to the hospitals — she waited tables in a cafe on the Iron Range.

Haapala vividly remembers the months preceding the United States' involvement in World War II.

"Roosevelt stressed very strongly that we were going to be very neutral," she recalls. "We were not going to get involved in European problems."

These words were a comfort to the young Haapala. After all, it was nearly the Christmas of 1941, and she had just hit it off with a man named Walter. Haapala's future seemed free of the savage forces wreaking havoc in Europe. The war was happening thousands of miles away.

Why care about it when there was so much at home to be interested in?

"People didn't pay too much attention to what was going on," Haapala said. "Me, I know I was just a young girl going along. I wasn't paying much attention to what was going on in the world. Most people knew there was a war going on over there, not over here. Just let them

have their squabbles and settle them."

Innumerable comments have been made about Pearl Harbor on a grand scale — how it forced the most powerful country on the planet into a full-scale war and how it ultimately unleashed the power of the nuclear bomb.

But when looking on the small scale — the scale of daily living and bright futures — Pearl Harbor was equally devastating.

"Roosevelt got on board; he had many chats on the radio," said Haapala. "When I think of him now, I remember him speaking to us. He never talked real fast, which is good, because then you listen. [When he went], people swayed the other way; everything started to gear towards war."

Walter, the man Haapala met in the few days preceding Pearl Harbor, worked in construction and was drafted by May of 1942. He served within the United States until after August of 1942, when they were married. The few months between his service and their marriage were not easy.

"You don't know what's going to happen," Haapala said.

Walter was sent to Fort Hancock, N.J., where they were married on Aug. 8, 1942. After following her husband to Camp Pickett, Haapala went to stay in Newark with some friends. Walter and Mary saw each other only a few times before he was sent overseas that October.

"I had always wanted to be a nurse," Haapala said thoughtfully.

An opportunity came up in the year before she joined the Women's Army Corps (WAC) when the Red Cross offered an eight week program for whoever was interested in nursing due to a shortage of nurses.

"I went into that," she said. "Another

girl and I tied for the highest score."

As proof of their completing the training, each nurse was issued a small plastic pin in the shape of a red cross. Because Haapala and the other girl had done so well, they received small tin crosses.

"[Here's a story] to get an idea of how patriotic it was," she explained. "After I joined the WAC, I couldn't work in the hospitals like I did before. I got a letter from the Red Cross asking for me to return my little tin pin because there was a shortage of metals! It was all going to war equipment. I wrote back and told them I earned it. I've still got that pin."

Haapala liked the work in the hospital, but when a coworker suggested joining up with WAC, Haapala decided to enlist, to the opposition of her husband.

"He didn't want me to go in," she said. "[When I did go in] he said not to go overseas. I had no plans on going, and the Army had no plans on sending me there."

Haapala received her six weeks of basic training, and then it was time to choose a specialized branch.

"There were very few women those days who could drive or were interested," she said. "I was interested, but cars were expensive, and I didn't have a job where I could buy one or anything. Anyhow, I put in for the motorpool. Well, they just chose a few of us, and I was one of them."

"We had six more weeks of training. We learned how a car operates. Cars were much simpler back then. Some didn't pass, but I passed. I thought the classes were kind of tough, but I'd never had anything like that before."

After asking Haapala where she wanted to go, she responded, "California. Where

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CRIME Death ruled a 'homicide'

■ Police seek public's help

by Kelly Grinsteiner
Assistant Editor

HIBBING — The death of the 45-year-old Hibbing man found in a downtown apartment Friday night has been ruled a homicide.

Brent Arnold Ward died due to exsanguination, or loss of blood, according to the St. Louis County Medical Examiner's office. An autopsy was preformed Sunday.

Investigators spent the day processing the scene of the crime, interviewing persons of interest and collecting evidence.

As of late Sunday night, no one was being held in connection with the case. Investigator Gail Klarich confirmed no arrests had been made as of press time.

Investigators have refrained from describing the manner in which Ward died, what led to the exsanguination or how long he may have been dead.

The incident "seems to be isolated," according to investigators.

A 911 call was received at 9:36 p.m.

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HONORING OUR VETERANS

Band of brothers

■ Luukonen boys serve in WWII and Korea

by Linda Tyssen
Mesabi Daily News

VIRGINIA — One by one, the sons of Finnish immigrants Albert and Helmi Luukkonen went off to serve their country.

Everett, Victor, Jalmer, Roy and Werner, Raymond and Jack — seven of eight brothers — would come home proud veterans of military service.

It's a quiet pride carried on by Raymond Luukkonen, commander of Crellin-Tini Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1113 of Virginia.

It is displayed at the Iron Range Veterans Memorial, where a paving block tells the Luukkonen story — five boys in World War II and two during the Korean War.

And back home on the farm in Zim all those many years ago, "they had a lot of stars in the window," Luukkonen said in an interview at the Servicemen's Club. The blue star banners hung proudly for each son in the

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Packers smoke the Vikings in 34-0 loss

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FROM PAGE ONE

Greatest: Haapala served as driver

From Page 1A

did they send me? Staten Island Area Station Hospital. Right by Newark, where I'd started from."

Haapala often took the ferry to and from Staten Island.

"We would go to the pier and pick up the wounded from the docks and bring them back to the hospital," she explained.

She drove a 1943 Chevy ambulance. It had two stretchers in back. The ambulance was always supervised by an orderly.

"He sat right up next to me, and if the patients needed anything, he could help them," explained Haapala. "This wasn't like paramedics or anything. The only thing the orderly could do was make the patients comfortable. There was nothing else, just the two litters to put them in."

She also drove a 3/4 ton truck.

"They were very strict about the care of the cars," she said. "We couldn't have even a spot of oil on those engines!"

She often drove from Staten Island Area Station Hospital to the St. George Ferry, a distance of between 15 and 20 miles. She assisted in picking up supplies as well as wounded.

"We started when the ships came in, no matter what time. While they were unloading the guys into our ambulances, they were loading the ships to bring stuff over there. It was very busy," she said.

"The Red Cross and The Salvation Army were giving out coffee all time. It was all very organized though. You have to say that about the Army. Many times we'd be so tired."

The entire convoy would usually go to the piers to pick up patients. There were about 10 or 11 trucks in each convoy.

"We went through red lights and everything," said Haapala. "We just tooted our horns and people gave us the right of way and everything."

Despite the often grueling work, Haapala said that the Army treated her well.

"We got taken care of," she said. "When we got back we could go to the mess hall and they would give us a real good dinner — anything we wanted. If we wanted a steak they'd fry up a steak for us! It was really nice."

The WAC also provided entertainment in the forms of dances and Broadway shows.

"I saw many stage plays," said Haapala. "We were able to get free tickets for that. We didn't have to pay anything. They even knitted mittens for our hands."

Haapala confided that even though none of them were supposed to have cameras, let alone take pictures, she snuck a photograph of a ship called the Gripson.

"When they developed it, they bleeped out the name," she said. "They censored photographs."

Practically everything going out overseas or coming back was carefully gone over and checked by the Army to make sure confidential information was not given away.

"The letters my husband sent to me had pieces cut out of them," Haapala said. "They censored all the let-

▼

'They call us the Greatest Generation because we went through a lot of different things that so many generations haven't gone through.'

Mary Haapala

ters, and the V-mails too."

The V-mails are now symbols of the extreme wartime policies in effect during World War II. Letters that soldiers wrote were sent overseas on ships.

In order to decrease the bulk that these letters contained, the Army created "V-mail." In V-mail, the soldier was issued a white piece of paper with a red frame around it.

Instructions read as follows, "Use typewriter, dark ink, or dark pencil. Faint or small writing is not suitable for photography."

Photography? "You wrote the letter, and they would photograph the letter and shrink it down so it fit in a tiny envelope. It was done to decrease bulk in the ships. We wrote a lot to each other," Haapala said, smiling.

She held a box filled with letters, hundreds of letters, dozens of them as V-mail.

Because of her expertise as a driver, Haapala was often asked to drive officers around in a staff car. One day she was asked to pick up an officer from Grand Central Station in Manhattan. She never made it.

"One of the staff cars had been donated to our post," she said. "Nobody liked it because it was a hard-shifting car for some reason. I was all by myself."

"Going into the St. George Ferry there were a lot of hills. There was one place where you had to go down a hill, and you had to go right or you had to go left. I had to go left. I started going down this steep hill, and the brakes wouldn't work."

"My goodness I'll never forget that because that's the closest I ever got to killing myself."

To this day, Haapala doesn't know what went wrong with the brakes.

"I thought of shifting down, but when you're going downhill moving that fast, well you can't shift down. I just kept pumping and pumping on the brakes, somehow they caught and I was able to make it around the bend," she said.

"I went right back to the post. I never picked up the officer. That was the closest call I ever had. It wasn't easy being a new driver in that New York traffic."

Once Haapala had to drive an officer back after an ice storm had completely covered the roads with ice.

"It was so hilly and curvy," she recalled. "I was squeamish about driving. We got a little ways and it was really hard with all the icy ruts. The roads weren't wide and if a car was com-

ing toward you it got really interesting.

"I asked the officer if he would drive because I was so nervous, but he wouldn't drive. We made it to where we were going all right, but when we had to come back, there were more hills going down. I stopped the car then and told the officer that if he didn't drive we weren't moving, because I just didn't have the confidence to go down those hills. He only drove until we were through the worst of it, though."

When asked what was the hardest thing she endured while in the WAC, Haapala responded, "Well, it wasn't my work. I didn't mind my work at all. The one thing though, my grandfather died in 1944 not too terribly long after I started."

"I wanted so badly to come home for his funeral. We were a very close family. But my lieutenant absolutely refused to let me go. That bothered me at that time, but now it doesn't seem like it was too bad. We would just get real tired sometimes from all the long hours."

Haapala's husband, Walter, spent over three years with the Combat Engineers, traveling through North Africa and eventually through Italy.

Due to unexpected circumstances, he missed the trip stateside and was delayed for several months. When he finally did get back, he was delayed again a month.

Finally, in October of 1945, the Haapala's married life began, and lasted for nearly six decades.

"They call us the Greatest Generation because we went through a lot of different things that so many generations haven't gone through," Haapala said in a calm and set voice.

"I was born in 1919. I went through the Depression. I didn't realize how bad everything was because my family wasn't as worse off as most people were."

She took the time to comment on the cultural richness of her community growing up.

"When I grew up everyone had cows or chickens," she said. "There were Italian immigrants and Finnish, two Russian families, Slovenians, Croatians and Serbians — all in the one block. A lot of the mothers couldn't speak English, but the fathers had to learn it for work. It was a very interesting time to live."

Haapala made another comment of interest that related to the "Greatest Generation" term.

"We went through a lot of things, but I imagine that when young adults today look around themselves and see all that's going on, they feel the same way we did," she said. "Maybe when they're old they'll be saying the same things we are."

Haapala went from waiting tables on the Range to driving trucks down roads in Manhattan in a few short years. She knew her marriage could be ended simply by a bullet or a slick of ice.

She had to do as she did. She acted as she had to act, and she did it with her head held high.

Band: Brothers were proud to serve their country

From Page 1A

service. Luukkonen, 78, of Cherry, relived the family's military history as he looked at an old picture of the brothers.

Everett, the only one not pictured, served in the Army's 26th Infantry in the South Pacific, seeing duty "chasing the Japs" at Guadalcanal, Australia and New Zealand.

Victor was a truck driver in General Patton's Third Army, serving in North Africa, Italy, France, Corsica and with the occupation forces in Germany. He saw active duty for 49 months.

Jalmer was in the Army Air Corps in Egypt, fueling airplanes.

Roy was in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division.

"He was supposed to land on Normandy, but had appendicitis. He then went into amphibious tanks that landed the troops. He was ready to get shipped to Japan, but the war ended," said Luukkonen.

Werner was with General Patton's Third Army motor pool.

Then came the Korean War. Raymond served in the Army and was stationed in Alaska as an electrician. Jack served in the infantry in Korea.

Brother Edwin, the only other surviving brother, was drafted but exempted for medical reasons. He later developed tuberculosis in an ankle bone and lost his leg.

There were two other boys in the family, but they died in infancy.

The Luukkonsens also had five girls — Sister Ingrid of International Falls, Esther Koivunen of Zim and Lorraine Aho of Virginia, and Marian Koski and Sigrid Olson, both deceased.

Their father was crippled at a young age at the Spruce Mine in Eveleth, and in spite of walking with canes and crutches, he was



Photo by Mark Sauer/Mesabi Daily News
Raymond Luukkonen of Cherry is seen here at the Iron Range Veterans Memorial with a paver honoring the seven Luukkonen brothers who served in the military.

able to farm and log to make a living.

Raymond Luukkonen was drafted in 1951. He married Nancy Anderson of Cherry at Camp Chafee in Arkansas. They raised a daughter and two sons, both of whom served in the Air Force. Nancy Luukkonen is treasurer of the VFW Auxiliary.

"I'm glad I served," Luukkonen said, and he is pleased to be involved in Veterans Day observances as a member of the Virginia honor guard.

He reflects on the wars over the years and the present war in Iraq and wonders what the outcome will be.

Luukkonen looks back and figures the family was pretty lucky. Except for Everett, who had malaria during the war, the family fared well, he said.

Everett came home to work in the mines; Victor joined the Operating Engineers. Jalmer drove truck for Ulland Brothers and he and his wife, Impie,

owned the Northside Cafe. Roy was a mechanic for Ulland Brothers; Werner a backhoe operator for Hoover Construction. Raymond worked as a mechanic for Ulland and Hoover, and Jack was a superintendent for Hoover. Edwin was a mechanic for Hoover.

"I think it's pretty nice, all of them in the service," Luukkonen said.

He's proud to serve now as a veteran, working at every meal at the Servicemen's Club. He also belongs to the 40/8 and the American Legion.

"The other week I was here all week," he said of the Servicemen's Club, where the VFW made 2,700 pasties. Next week it will be ham and scalloped potatoes.

And for Sunday, it was the traditional mulligan stew, about 50 or 60 gallons of it, as Luukkonen and others who served get together to observe Veterans Day.

Death: Investigation continues

From Page 1A

Friday of a man down and request for medical help at in an apartment located at 509 E. Howard St. Officers responded and found Ward deceased.

The victim was said to have lived alone, and was known to have resided in Hibbing since December

2006.

According to investigators, he does not have an extensive criminal history. Past violations include minor traffic violations and an out-of-state drug conviction.

The Hibbing Police Department was assisted by the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension and

the St. Louis County Sheriff's Department.

The incident remains under investigation.

Anyone who had contact with Ward on the evening of Thursday, Nov. 8 or early Friday, Nov. 9, is asked to call the Hibbing Police Department at 263-3601.



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