

World War II Vets

Walter Holy

An astounding number of American teenagers, both male and female, altered their birth dates in order to serve their country during World War II. The practice reached its peak in 1943. Over time, nearly 50,000 were detected and sent home. Among the many who eventually managed to enlist, a handful was discovered - court martialled - and then stripped of any valor awards they might have earned. But the great majority - some 200,000 -- went unnoticed and served honorably for the duration. Among those sworn in was Walter Holy (rhymes with 'moly' as in 'holy moly'). Walter and his wife Frances reside in Vancouver, Washington, just over the Columbia River from Portland. There's a possibility that Walt's combat boots are still stashed in the hall closet, just in case. What might Walter be thinking? If you're never too young, then you're also never too old...?

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"I had a close boyhood friend named Robert Palmer," Walt begins. "We lived in the same town. Bob was 14 and wanted to get in the Navy. He talked to me about it, and we decided to try it together. I was two years older than Bob. My parents were divorced and I lived at home with my mother and stepfather.

"So we both went in for a physical exam. Bob passed with flying colors, but I failed. I was underweight, color-blind and had 20/30 vision. And because we were buddies, and determined to stick together no matter what, we had to figure out a way to beat the system.

"So we went down and registered for the draft, which by law you had to do on your eighteenth birthday - on the very day you turned 18. I went in first and asked the lady: 'Is this where you register for the draft?' And she said yes. And maybe ten minutes went by, and then Bob came in. No eye contact, nothing. And he asked the lady the same question. So we both registered. The date was April 11, 1944 - the day we both turned eighteen. That is...kind of. On paper, anyway. Neither of us was asked a single question.

"So when we were done, I said to the gal: "What can I do to go right now?" And she said: "Go down to the end of the counter and fill out the blank form titled 'Request for Immediate Induction.' And then Bob did the same thing. Again, no questions asked.

"So while we're waiting to get called up, Bob and I went to work in the Portland shipyards. I believe the job description was called marine electrician helpers - lots to do with wiring and

insulating a ship's interior. I quit high school in my sophomore year, and Bob quit even earlier. My mother never interfered. I told her of my intentions, and she was okay with that.

"In May we got orders to report to the induction center. More physicals. By pure chance, my older brother Arnie showed up - he was going into the Marine Corps. Arnie didn't know I was going, and I didn't know he was going. He didn't have much to say - but whatever it was suddenly caught Bob's ear. Bob Palmer and Walt Holy - the glue that always stuck together - suddenly began to fall apart. So Bob passed the physical with flying colors, got sworn in as a Marine, and left me stranded because I flunked my second physical. But the Army wasn't quite so fussy. It had lower standards. So that's where I ended up.

"Seven of us inductees got shipped north to Fort Lewis, Washington. Here I was, 16 years old, and I was put in charge on the train. Then in mid-May a bunch of us were shipped out to Camp Roberts in California, for basic training.



Walter Holy at age 16, a certified paratrooper and now home on leave for a well deserved rest. Looking back through time and also at home is Walt's alter ego - now age 84

"Not long after D-day, I noticed these big posters being plastered around the base -- 'Jump Into The Fight!' So I decided to do a little recruiting of my own, so to speak. I rounded up ten other guys who were like-minded - lots of esprit de corps, gung ho. Deep down I was really rooting for them, because I knew I couldn't pass the paratroop physical. The test for color-blindness was going to stop me again.

"So during the exam a nurse walks up to me and she's got this open box full of cotton balls, all different colors. If you've ever taken a colorblind test, you'll recall that numbers are hidden in a crazy-quilt kind of background. If your eyesight is normal, you can distinguish the numbers apart from the confusing maze pattern. The nurse said to me: 'Pick out a green ball.' Luckily, I could make out the very faintest haze of green on some of the balls, but none of the numbers were visible. So I said to her: 'Which shade of green do you want me to pick?' And she said: 'OK - you pass.'

"There was close to a hundred who qualified, and off we went in freight cars to Fort Benning and jump school. Have you ever peeled potatoes in a rocking freight car for four days straight? That was my introduction to the paratroopers.



Walt (second from left) and four buddies entrain for Fort Benning, Georgia and jump school.  
Walt says he put the four-day rail journey to good use -- peeling spuds.

"Two months of training and five jumps later, I was in. There's lots of stories floating around about how tough it was to make the grade. For example, if a trainee decided to quit - or failed to meet the standard early on - he was returned to the regular Army for infantry combat training. But if a wannabe made it past his first jump and then threw in the towel, he was treated like a convict and sent to the guardhouse under lock and key. And after a while off he went to a repple depple as an infantry replacement. In my own case, I took pretty much everything in stride. Hard physical work came natural to me. Even before I was a teenager, I bucked hay bales that weighed eighty to a hundred pounds, stacking them five layers high. And I worked on a tug boat assembling log rafts that we chained together and then towed down the Willamette River from Oregon City to Portland. Had to learn how to keep my feet under me. I got dumped once by a rolling log and came this close to buying the farm. And I was heavy into running. Sometimes I'd run seven or eight miles, for no reason at all.

"So I think it's fair to say I had a certain level of self-confidence based on what I'd accomplished as a youngster. I made it a point to volunteer for anything and everything. Since the airborne was a strictly volunteer outfit to begin with, they expected to see that same spirit displayed each and every time a challenge arose. After awhile it became just plain habit.

"That's not to say I didn't step in it - but good. One day I came out of my tent and walked past a second Louie. I made some casual remark he didn't like. Now, a second lieutenant - the lowest of the low among the commissioned ranks, and comparatively speaking equivalent to the pecking order of a lowly private in the enlisted ranks - is not only the dumbest animal in the military, but also the most dangerous. The next thing I knew, I was charged with insubordination, disrespect to an officer, and for good measure -- drinking on duty. I was arrested and confined to quarters - with an armed guard, to boot.

"I took a big chance and asked to see my commanding officer. I told him I was under-age, hoping that the charges would be dropped. He had virtually no reaction to my confession, and replied that he was going to let the charges go forward. I can't be sure, of course, but I believe he was thinking - okay Holy, you wanna play with the big boys, then go do it.

"The guard assigned to watch over my confinement was a former preacher turned paratrooper, and apparently very sensitive to what he viewed as an injustice. At the pre-trial hearing, he testified that he was witness to my encounter with the officer and that none of the charges were true. The second lieutenant was nowhere to be seen that day. The court prepared a letter for the guard to sign - which contained a number of falsehoods. He refused to sign it. By the next day, all charges were dropped. So back to my commanding officer I went. He informed me that even though I was underage, my parents would have to request my release in writing. And what did I think of that? I said: 'Sir - ship me overseas.' And he said: 'That's what I want to hear.' And that's when it became apparent to me that the airborne lived in a snug little world of its own, guided by its own set of rules and regulations. None of which was anybody else's business.



The 8,000-ton J. W. McAndrew, an army troop transport on loan from the U.S. Navy. The ship was struck bow-on at night by another vessel in the convoy, slicing away half the forecastle and taking with it more than a hundred sleeping paratroopers.

"Meantime, my outfit was long gone overseas - 1,250 out of 1,500 having graduated. I left New York harbor in March aboard the J.W. McAndrew, an 8,000-ton army transport jam-packed

with 1,900 military aboard. A bunch of ships in the convoy. Halfway to our destination, at around four in the morning, a beat-up French aircraft carrier lost its steering and plowed almost head-on into the McAndrew. The carrier cut through the starboard side of our bow at about a 20 degree angle, then continued on for another 75 feet until it exited on the McAndrew's port side. I was fast asleep on the sixth tier of bunks. If the collision had occurred no more than a couple seconds later than it did, the incoming bow would have smashed right through my compartment. So I missed getting it by about ten feet. A bunch of paratroopers were berthed in the severed forward section of the ship. Seventy-one of them were crushed to death or drowned and many more wounded. We all thought we'd been torpedoed, and there was a mad scramble in the dark trying to sort things out.

"So here we were, missing half our bow with the big ocean swells breaking against the exposed compartments on the port side. The captain finally got his vessel turned stern-end to the waves, to reduce the flooding. It took four days under tow to reach the Azores. And from there we hitched a taxi ride aboard an escort destroyer that unloaded us aboard a British transport enroute from New Zealand to Liverpool, England. Then onto another transport at Southampton headed to France. But wait - there's more. Talk about jinxed! In the middle of the English Channel, the engine blew up. Then back again to Southampton under tow. From there we boarded a Polish vessel - our fifth boat ride - which somehow managed to make it to LeHavre. And from there by train to northern France, where I was assigned to the 101st Airborne, 506th Regiment, I Company, Third Battalion.

"By this time what was left of the German army was pretty much on the run. Mostly we acted as clean-up squads behind the various infantry battalions. Okay -- the things that stick in my mind, big and little - that never go away. One day I was chatting with a medic, who was tending to a former concentration camp inmate still wearing his striped prison garb. Another German strolled up, nicely fitted in civilian clothes. Out of nowhere, the medic tells the ex-prisoner to take off his prison rags. He then turns to the German and tells him to undress as well. The German loudly refuses. The medic then draws his Colt .45 - which sidearm field medics were forbidden to wear. Where upon the German strips down to his underwear in record time. So they swap clothes. The prisoner looked real sharp in his new wardrobe, despite being not much more than skin and bones. The German - not at all happy. The medic was all smiles - his good deed for the day. Little things...

"Another time I was ordered to bring a wounded paratrooper to a distant aid station for treatment. The regiment had acquired a German made Opel sedan. Half the car was a storage bin, stuffed with company records and documents. So away we went and I let the soldier off at his destination. But then I got lost - most of the road signs were destroyed and somehow I got turned around. I went up and down the autobahn, around and around the clover-leaves. Every now and then I'd hear cannon fire. This went on for three days. I was sleeping nights in the car. Finally, I decided it was safer to restrict my driving to the country roads. Why? Because one night I was parked on the autobahn half asleep. I heard a noise, and it kept getting louder and louder. I started the car and pulled way over past the shoulder. It wasn't but a few moments later that a column of Shermans came roaring by - a bunch of crazy French tank drivers going like mad in the dark. Too much wine! That made the second time the French almost got me.

"So anyway -- I'm driving along a country road the next day and up ahead is this column of marching soldiers. They hear me coming from behind and move over to let me pass. I slow down to a walking pace. Only then do I realize they're Germans, and fully armed. As I pull alongside, I notice one of the soldiers is carrying a backpack and there's two bottles of booze sticking out the top. Now mind you, I'm not wearing my helmet. And I'm driving a German vehicle. Just another civilian, right? I stick my arm out the window and point at the bottles and ask the soldier if I can have one. He gets my meaning somehow and reaches over his shoulder, grabs a bottle, and hands it to me. He's as up-tight as I am, maybe more. From the tone of his voice and gestures and facial expressions, I realize that I'm pushing my luck - and then some. So I gently step on the gas and gradually move ahead, hoping nobody takes a close look. I happen to take a sideways glance, and across the valley I spot a M20 armored reconnaissance vehicle. Just at that moment a German artillery round strikes the M20 and there's a cloud of smoke and fire and lots of noise. A perfect diversion, and one more reason to get out of there and find my way back. Which I eventually did.

"There's no denying Bavaria's a beautiful country, that's for sure. Even in wartime. We finally made it to Berchtesgaden, where Hitler had his mountain retreat. Sorry to say, I never made it up there. We were bivouacked in the town below, arriving almost on the same day Germany surrendered. I was walking across the city hall courtyard with another guy when I happened to look ahead and noticed a DUKW driving along. DUKWs were a large amphibious bathtub-like vehicle used to transport men and cargo over land and water. Think of a big open boat with wheels. There was a series of large stone archways bordering the courtyard. The amphib suddenly turned and headed straight for one of the arches with the obvious intent of driving through. I shouted out: 'Look Al - they're not going to make it!' Which wouldn't have been a big deal, except for the bunch of German prisoners who were aboard -- all of them packed together like sardines and standing upright.

"Al remained riveted to the spot - absolutely refusing to move. The war was over, and he wanted nothing more to do with the dead and dying. I ran over to the archway - and then wished I hadn't. Some of the prisoners had their faces literally ripped off. Around 25 had serious injuries, and at least a half-dozen died from the impact right before my eyes. The DUKW driver jumped out and took off at a run and disappeared. All I could do was stand there and think of the irony of it all. To go through the war and survive, and then die like this. That really hit home - the sadness of it has never left me to this day. It made me think of the couple accidental encounters I'd been through, and barely escaped.

"The 506th occupied a number of other towns before going back to France for more training. Then Harry dropped the bomb, and not long after that the division was disbanded and we shifted over to the 508th. So in January, 1946 I decided to re-enlist, still a PFC. Went home on ninety days leave, then returned to Germany. The regiment was redeployed to the states and disbanded. Most of us were reassigned to the 504th Regiment at Fort Bragg, N.C. I requested assignment to Germany but was sent to Italy and became a military policeman. Then followed up as a truck driver in Trieste, on the Adriatic. Discharged December 20th, 1948 after four years, seven months and one day. Three weeks later I turned 21.



PFC Holy in his spit-shine Sunday best. At war's end, Walt served in General Eisenhower's honor guard at SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force), Frankfurt, Germany. At right: only 10 and already jumpy, this lad models a junior paratroop camo outfit "...just like my grand-dad's." There's no parachute inside the pack - just bubble gum and M&Ms.

"I went to work for Crown Zellerbach and stayed with them until 1956. I was tinkering with the math one day and realized that if I went back on active duty, I could retire in another 15 years. Whereas if I stayed with Crown Zellerbach, it would take 37-1/2 years to retire. I got to discussing this with some of the older guys at the mill and more than one said he was kicking his own butt for not staying in - now that they were too old to reenlist.

"So that's what I did. Joined the air force. But I didn't quit at twenty. I stayed on for a total of 32-1/2 years, including my earlier service during the war. The last twenty-four months were special extensions, and I was welcome to more of the same if I wanted it. Beside stateside duty in Texas, I was stationed in England, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Norway, Holland, Taiwan and Vietnam. Missed Korea somehow. My specialty was aircraft and engine maintenance, plus a good chunk of time as a technical instructor. Retired as an E-9. In plain English - that's a senior master sergeant.

"Say...you want another cuppa coffee?"

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EPILOGUE

Going back to antiquity, boy soldiers were commonly recruited in virtually every country of the world. Gradually the practice came to be frowned upon, and ultimately prohibited. Personal accounts - such as the one you've just read - reveal the depth of guile that determined youngsters were capable of - no matter what nationality. In England

Old Habits Die Hard

Britain's military said a soldier was mistakenly sent to fight on the front line in Afghanistan while he was 17 years old. The Ministry of Defense said Thursday that the incident was regrettable and violated military policy. Sixteen and 17-year-olds can join the British Army but are not allowed to participate in combat. The military blamed human error for what it said was an "extremely rare situation."

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during WWI, underage volunteers would often slip a piece of paper inside a shoe before entering a recruiting office. When the sergeant asked the lad if he was "over 18" - the legal age to enlist - the applicant could then honestly reply in the affirmative (thanks to the number 18 written on the slip of paper he was standing on). In Germany, entire classrooms of male students would march to the nearest enlistment center - often led by their much-older teacher to set an example. Numerous cases are documented where patriotic-driven British fathers were turned away because of their advanced age. An underage son would then apply in place of his father, who in turn was perfectly happy to forge any necessary paperwork. The family could now proudly proclaim it had done its part - for king and country.

America's monarch - Uncle Sam - can't make any claim to royalty, but he's sure got his hooks into loyalty. Sam has no friends more devoted than the Veterans of Underage Military Service - VUMS for short. Founded in 1991 by Allan Stover, a coast guardsman who joined the military at age 14, VUMS has chapters in numerous states. Stover petitioned the various branches of the armed services, seeking assurance that no legal action would be taken against those who fraudulently entered the military below the legal age limit. Eventually, his perseverance prevailed. Previously, many thousands kept their secret carefully tucked away. Exposure carried the real threat of lost retirement pay, VA health care and other benefits. Yet there's still a scattered few who refuse to step forward, convinced that it's all a sham.

Don't ask -- don't tell? VUMS members held the patent rights to that battle cry long before it was resurrected for an altogether different purpose.



The word "proactive" best describes the engine that propels VUMS members wherever they gather. This supportive group, from the greater Portland area, meets monthly. Note the age of enlistment combined with current age. Front row, from left: John "Corky" Apilado, Oregon state VUMS chaplain, USN, 15/69; Robert Hanna, USAF, 16/81; Willie Paradise, Oregon State VUMS commander, USA-USN, 16/73. Back row: Walter Holy, USA-USAF; 16/84; John Sweeny, USA, 16/72; Dale Halm, USN, 16/84.



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