

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### A Bay Rat Neighborhood Etiology: *D-Day, Alcohol, Tobacco, PTSD*

By David Frew  
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*The Bloody Bucket Brigade shoulder patch was a common symbol in my neighborhood.*

This essay was sparked by the recent 80th anniversary of D-Day, which has rattled lots of memories loose. I remember the war(s). My own father was gone for several years, walking in wet, muddy boots from Normandy to the Battle of the Bulge, where he lived in a frozen trench for more than 40 days. He was ancient by Normandy invasion and Bulge standards, 26 years old on D-Day. The recent 80-

year celebration, which featured frail 100-year-old survivors (many in wheelchairs), made for emotional television viewing, especially for me since it reminded me of the father, who went missing when I was a young boy.

Friends and family said that he was never the same after the war. He was a Normandy (second wave) veteran and if he were still with us, he would be 126 years old. This year's D-Day television coverage also caused me to think about the place where I grew up, an entire neighborhood, which I now realize was suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). It was suffering and in pain long before anyone knew what PTSD was, or the disorder had earned a place in the 1980 American Psychological Association DSM-III manual.

War was an everyday reality in my bayfront neighborhood. From 1939 (before I was born) until 1953 the United States was almost constantly engaged in active combat. There was a five-year pause (1945 to 1950) between World War II and Korea, and then it started all over again. After that, the cold war with its air-raid sirens, nuclear bomb drills in grade schools, and nighttime backouts continued for another decade.

Working-class neighborhoods have always been places where a disproportionate number of young men are pressed into active military duty, and mine was no different. Lots of neighborhood men were World War II veterans and many of them quietly wore the "bloody bucket brigade" red keystone on hats and jackets. They were obviously proud to wear the symbol but reluctant to talk about it. Not asking about the war was an unspoken rule. There was a second patch worn proudly by neighborhood veterans, a tri-colored, circular one, indicating that they were graduates of the United States Army "Replacement School."



*The U.S. Army Replacement School patch*

The trend in my neighborhood, both before and after World War II officially began, was joining the local National Guard unit, which trained at the Armory on East Sixth Street. Getting involved as a guardsman was a hybrid strategy: “partially patriotic with a twist of avoiding the worst possible battlefield outcomes.” In 1945, the reality of that strategy proved to be dramatically different from its theoretical origins, however. Erie’s reserve unit, nicknamed the Bloody Bucket Brigade, was activated and sent to Alabama’s Fort McClelland and its Army Replacement School for advanced training. As WWII began it became apparent to Army officials that preliminary plans for combat unit sizes had not taken battle losses into account.

The role of the replacement schools (there were several) was to train the men who would be needed to replace soldiers who had been killed – just in time to make the second wave at Normandy, which was still quite dangerous. After the Allied Forces had successfully won the beaches at Normandy and driven the Germans away, the Erie unit (along with others that composed the 128th), marched across France, liberating Paris without a struggle and then continued into Belgium and the thickly forested hill region called the Ardennes. The plan for the Allied forces was to rest and recuperate in Belgium while waiting for German forces to retreat and give up.

Unbeknownst to the Allies, including Erie’s 112th reserve unit, the Germans were luring them into a trap. Rumor was that the Germans had given up but unfortunately that was far from the truth. The Germans were planning a desperate last offensive in Belgium and the Allied forces walked right into their ambush. Early on, Germany had hoped that the United States would refuse to become involved in the European war, and when they did, that they would lack resolve. But the performance of American troops at Normandy and word that the United States had ceased peacetime production of many consumer products, including automobiles, and was relentlessly producing tanks, war ships and other materials, and at an astonishing pace had convinced the Germans that if they were going to win the war, they had to do something dramatic and do it soon. The conflict in Belgium was the last hope, and Germany decided to throw everything it had into this one final battle.

As the Allies were arriving, the weather deteriorated badly with temperatures falling to below freezing. More than a foot of snow fell in just a few days. The exhausted American troops from Erie who had been expecting a needed rest, quickly found themselves in a desperate situation. Their primary issue was a broken supply chain. Allied forces had inadvertently committed the classic military error of outmarching their supplies. Since there were no deep-water landing docks near Normandy, marching troops had walked away from vital supply lines, and in particular, ammunition. Thinking that the Germans had disappeared to the west and that they would be able to stop and regroup in Belgium, they had been lulled into a sense of complacency. As they were digging

in at the Ardennes, the weather continued to deteriorate and a cloud bank that lasted for more than two weeks made air reconnaissance or resupply missions impossible. And then, quite suddenly, all hell broke loose.



*In Belgium, a planned R&R unexpectedly turned into the bloodiest battle of World War II.*

Instead of retreating to Germany, the Axis troops sprung a trap, launching a massive artillery attack at the vulnerable and unprepared Allied troops on Dec. 16, 1945. The Allied soldiers were sitting ducks. The Battle of the Bulge had begun. The trauma began with the reality that the Germans were poised and waiting for the Allies to arrive. They had time to properly map the area and to establish deadly sniper locations. The overwhelming presence of snipers changed everything for the allied soldiers whose only defense was to dig deeper trenches and then to stay in them, especially during the day. There were hundreds of occasions when Americans emerged from their trenches or simply stood up to look out of fox holes only to be shot by German snipers.

The most logical response to this horrific circumstance was that American troops began to relieve themselves in the trenches where they were dug in. That led to typhoid and other sicknesses that were added to the continuing issues of frostbite and trench foot that many of the American troops were already experiencing, not to mention the general psychological misery.

Another perplexing problem was that the Germans had recruited almost 100 soldiers who had spent significant time in the United States, many attending American universities, and spoke perfect English without detectable accents. These troops were sent walking into Allied strongholds, wearing American uniforms, to create confusion by telling incorrect stories about where the German troops were and to do other mischief such as changing road signs.

Eventually the Americans caught on to this initiative and began detaining any suspicious “American soldiers” to quiz them. In one notable exchange, Army MPs detained an American general who was wearing ordinary enlisted soldier clothing (to avoid being shot by a sniper) and asked the two secret questions meant to trip up German imposters. 1. What is the name of Micky Mouse’s girlfriend: Answer Minnie Mouse, and 2. What is the capital of Illinois: Answer Springfield. The general answered both correctly but the MP who was asking incorrectly thought that the capitol of Illinois was Chicago. He handcuffed the general and led him away to be executed (German spies in U.S. uniforms were to be shot on the spot.). Fortunately, the general talked his way out of being shot.

The desperate lack of ammunition forced American troops to conserve their few bullets. Instead of launching sprays of bullets toward the sounds of snipers, soldiers remained low in trenches and fox holes, giving German snipers freedom to move closer and become more effective. Eventually the Germans deduced that the Allies had no ammunition and on at least two occasions surrounded large trenches filled with Americans and made them surrender. Hapless American soldiers were forced to leave their weapons in the trenches and march to fields where they were told to stand and wait. And then, astonishingly, German mobile machine gun units were summoned and slaughtered the surrendered Americans. A few soldiers survived these executions (some by playing dead) and made their way back to the Allied side of the battle line to warn colleagues never to surrender. The order of the day, if surrounded, was to have one bullet in the chamber plus a fixed bayonet and fight to the death.

Sniping and artillery fire as well as tank attacks continued for 40 days while Allied generals struggled to resupply their pinned-down troops who were starving to death, sick, and out of ammunition. Eventually the sky cleared, American air support arrived, and supplies found their way to the front lines. As that happened, the Germans, who were outnumbered and sensing the inevitability of defeat, began to retreat. There seemed to be no end to the newly arriving American soldiers who were coming to reinforce the forward troops, which included Erie’s reserve unit. Finally, on Jan. 25, 1945, it was over. It was over on the field but not, as we now realize, in the souls of the men who had endured the unimaginable horrors of the Battle of the Bulge. And those were the men who returned to my bayfront neighborhood to try to create civilian lives.

On the surface it now seems that the Allied forces had a statistical and strategic advantage. They had 700,000 soldiers as compared to Germany’s 410,000. But raw numbers do not convey the realities of the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans were there waiting with accurate topographical maps, 1,400 tanks, almost 3,000 artillery pieces, and 1,000 aircraft. For almost all of the 40-day battle the Germans had the upper hand. There are various estimates of the total losses. In retrospect it has been estimated that the Americans suffered 105,000 casualties. British and

Canadian forces lost another 2,500. Winston Churchill later characterized the Battle of the Bulge as the bloodiest battle of World War II, and the turning point.

Eventually the war ended and the men returned to my neighborhood, but they were permanently changed. Many were quiet, withdrawn, and surly if asked any questions about the war. They were suffering but they did not know why. And while we now know that they should have been receiving counseling for “battle fatigue,” as it was known then, they did not. They were left alone to work things out for themselves while they tried to rebuild broken lives. One of the now-known PTSD adaption mechanisms for the broken veterans was alcohol – not the social drinking that contemporary people are familiar with, but seriously drinking. A companion addiction delivered to GIs in ration packets was cigarettes: “Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em and field strip the butts.” Before the deadly health risks were known, GIs were encouraged to smoke, and many nonsmokers came home from the war with two-pack-a-day habits.



*24-7 life in the frozen trenches of Belgium*

### **The Neighborhood Drinking Scene**

The bayfront neighborhood was a nearly perfect location for socially withdrawn World War II veterans, seeking places to anesthetize themselves and escape terrible memories. It was easily walkable, which was handy because many of the neighborhood vets did not own cars. During the few years just after the war ended it was almost impossible to find a car. They were in short supply since automobile production had stopped during the conflict. There was plenty of work on the West 12th Street industrial corridor, however, and lots of neighborhood men walked to

work, carrying lunch buckets every morning at 6:30, clocked out at 3 p.m., and came back home for dinner at 6:30. During the interim, they gathered at favorite “watering holes” to drink. Quietly. It is now estimated that 50 to 60 percent of people suffering from PTSD become addicted to alcohol.

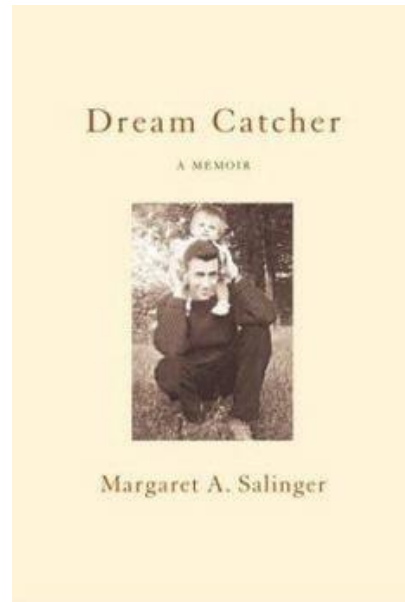
Defining the old neighborhood boundaries as the east-west blocks between Cherry Street and Weschler Avenue and the north-south streets from Second to 12th streets, there were an astonishing 10 public taverns, three social clubs (Cascade, Gem, and Modica’s), and four ethnic clubs (Danish, Italian, Portuguese, and Finnish). On West Fourth Street, alone, there were bars at Cascade, Plum, and Liberty streets, as well as three social clubs: Penn Club (Italian), Modica’s and the Gem Club. The primary appeal of the clubs was that drinks were less expensive. More drinking for less cash. For serious DIY drinkers, there was a large neighborhood beer distributor at Sixth and Cascade. And if the drinking wasn’t bad enough, the cloud of smoke in any of those establishments was enough to shut down any pair of lungs. Drinking and chain smoking seemed connected.



*J.D. Salinger*

Like most of my contemporaries I read “Catcher in The Rye” and loved it. It seemed to speak to so many of us as we were growing into our teens, and it had the added allure of being “evil.” The book had been banned for its “offensive language” in several places. I vaguely understood that the author was a man named J.D. Salinger and that he had written several short stories, as well, but beyond those details I knew nothing about the author or that he had connections both to my own father and to the hard drinking in my neighborhood. Then in

2000, long after I had forgotten or blocked the crazy drinking behavior that had plagued my childhood neighborhood, a stunning new book was published by Salinger's daughter.



*Salinger's daughter, Margaret, published this book about her famous father in 2000.*

Margaret Salinger's book helped me to make several connections that I had not previously understood about my neighborhood, the hard drinking, and my own father. Her father was born in 1919, one year after my father. They were age contemporaries. Salinger had experienced the second wave at Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge, exactly like my father and his colleagues from Erie's 112th. Margaret Salinger explained that her father's quirky ways, which seemed to get progressively crazier as he aged, were the result of undiagnosed and untreated PTSD from World War II. I wondered why I had not seen that earlier. Horrors of combat had rewired his brain. He was hospitalized for a "nervous breakdown" just after the Battle of the Bulge and while still in the Army, and he later became an alcoholic.

Salinger's writing success and subsequent wealth helped him to insulate himself against the everyday stresses and strains of earning a living, but as he sequestered himself in a rural corner of New Hampshire and slowly aged, the crazy stuff began to overwhelm everything else. He was divorced several times, became estranged from his two children, and began to behave in very odd ways. He continued to write until his eventual death but instead of publishing anything he filed each of his new stories in his study, using a complicated system of codes suggesting that it could be published immediately after he had died, or a decade after his death, or never. They were strange categories that his literary agent could not



understand, though she remained his agent and hopeful until after his death. Salinger grew thin, took up Buddhism, Scientology, and several other religions, developed romantic relationships with very young girls that he met as “pen pals,” built a wall around his home for “privacy,” and drank his own urine. By most standards he was insane, but he continued to be protected by his wealth, a luxury that had not been afforded the veterans in my neighborhood.

A contemporary understanding of PTSD would suggest that 40 days of living in a frozen fox hole as snipers relentlessly tried to kill you, watching friends as they were wounded and killed, suffering from frostbite, cholera and other illnesses as they ate away at your body, and listening to relentless artillery fire, might push anyone over the “edge.” How does a person move those memories out of his or her consciousness and become a happy, well-adjusted citizen?

Erie’s World War II vets were celebrated when they first came home. There were parades, parties, and welcoming events. But after a few years, the celebrations ebbed away and were replaced by the drudgery of regular life. A hard job on West 12th Street, demands of supporting a family, and the core activities of daily life consumed them. Little wonder that they retreated to bars and clubs after work where they could “be by themselves with others.” And drink.

J.D. Salinger died in 2010 at age 91. His alter-ego, Holden Caulfield, the misunderstood character from “Catcher in the Rye,” lives on. Perhaps forever.

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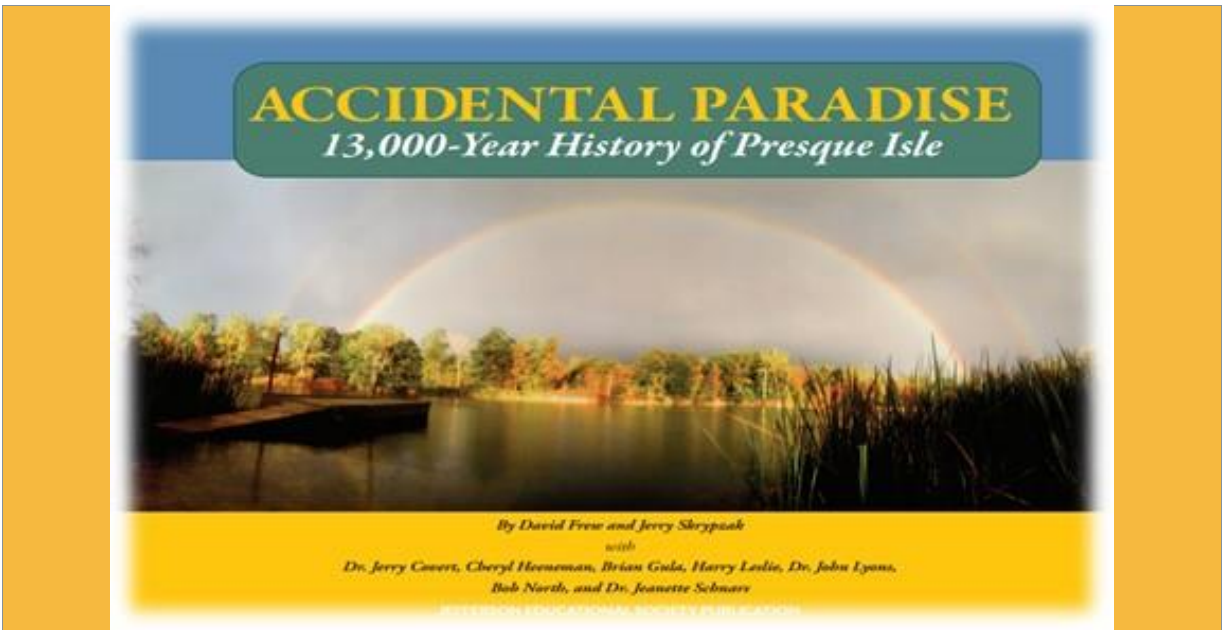
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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto:aperino@TREC.org).

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*



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