

Provincetown remembers role in World War II rescue

By CRAIG LITTLE
Special Writer

PROVINCETOWN — Forty-one years ago, in the early summer of 1942, Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz's fleet of *Unterseeboote* lurked off the coast of America.

The Allies' position was still tenuous — American soldiers had yet to be bloodied at the Kasserine Pass, the victory at Stalingrad was still months away, the Germans controlled most of Europe and the U-boats of the *Kriegsmarine* stalked supply ships headed through the North Atlantic to Britain.

Spies were reported to have landed from submarines in Maine and on Long Island; submarines were sighted 300 miles east of Nantucket on Jan. 12, 1942; on Feb. 4, the Chatham radio station operator's conversation with a torpedoed tanker off the Jersey shore was cut off when the ship went down.

Cape Cod's greatest scare in World War II occurred June 16, 1942, when the survivors of a torpedoed American freighter were brought into Provincetown. The incident confirmed the fears that most Americans had in the early months of the war, when they saw submarines and saboteurs everywhere.

Lloyd's Registry lists the *SS Cherokee* as a freighter-passenger ship steamship powered by two steam turbines with a tonnage of 5,896. It was built in 1925 in Newport News, Va., but found its final resting place in a watery grave dozens of miles east of Provincetown on a warm evening in 1942.

According to official Navy records, the *Cherokee* was struck by two torpedoes at 11 p.m. about 62 miles east of Provincetown while en route from England to New York. The ship sank within three or four minutes, taking 86 of the 169 passengers and crew to the bottom with it. Forty-two survi-

vors and two bodies were brought to Provincetown by nearby freighters, while another 41 survivors were taken directly to Boston. Four Russian naval officers who chose to remain behind with the *Cherokee* died, as did most of a contingent of American soldiers being brought back from Iceland for further training.

Navy records differ a little from a published account of the incident by Edwin P. Hoyt, a former Nantucket resident who included a chapter about the sinking of the *Cherokee* and its aftermath in his book, "U-Boats Offshore." Hoyt, who no longer lives on Nantucket, has been a news reporter and editor, and the author of a number of books on naval affairs, including "The Cruise of the Raider Wolf," "Kreuzerkrieg," "The Last Cruise of the Emden," and "The Battle of Leyte Gulf."

Hoyt says that the incident took place 46 miles east of Provincetown, not 62. His account centers on disagreements between the roles played in the treatment of survivors by the Red Cross and the Office of Civilian Defense — the latter received most of the glory in the weeks that followed, although the Red Cross was very much on the scene with assistance.

"But Hoyt does indicate in his book that there was a great deal of confusion in the matter of the *Cherokee*," said Vajda.

The head of the Provincetown branch of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety, the state organization of the Office of Civilian Defense, was John Rosenthal. His grandfather had come to Provincetown during the Civil War to organize the batteries of cannon on the sand mound forts constructed on Long Point. The elder Rosenthal stayed on in Provincetown after the end of the Civil War — but it was his grandson who was to be involved in Provincetown's greatest contribution to defense during wartime, some 77

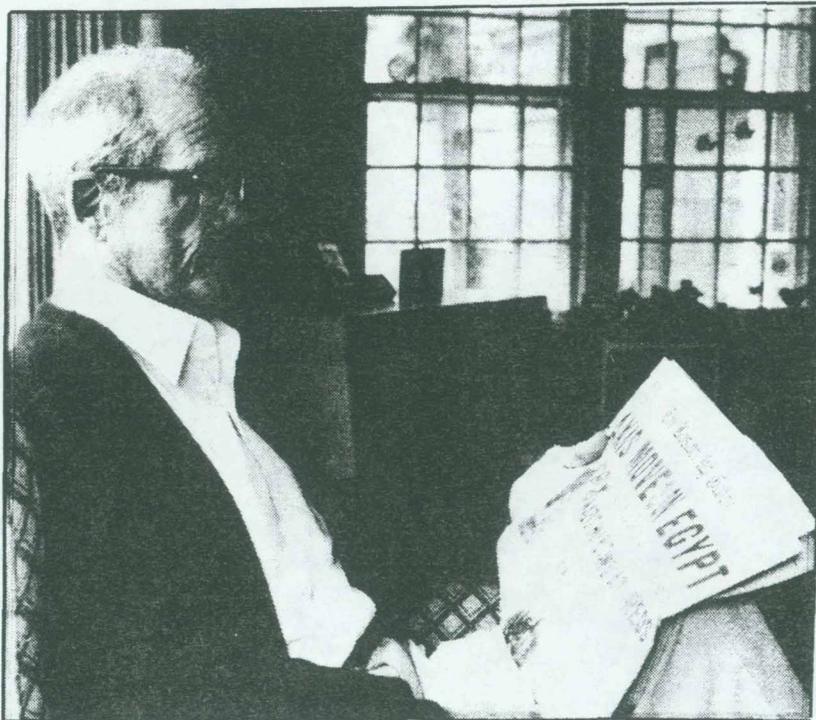
years later.

Rosenthal's brother-in-law A. Standish Pigeon, now 74, was the deputy chief air raid warden for Provincetown. At the time of the torpedoing he was working for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., but left Provincetown in the fall of that year to go into war work for Bethlehem Steel. After the war he went into the wooden spar business with his father, bought a house in South Yarmouth in 1966 and retired there a year later.

"It was in the morning when we got the alarm — we got the notice from

the telephone," he said, thinking back over four decades. "It was to be the Central House, and they took 'em at town wharf. These seamen from the boat had life preservers on, and they were wet.

"We got them clothes to fit, and something to eat. We got them a bus, and shipped them on up to Boston. John Rosenthal was the chairman of civilian defense, and directed us civilian defense workers when we gave aid. I've forgotten a lot of the details — oh, let's see, I don't know who went out to get the people on the boat — it



RECALLS RESCUE — A. Standish Pigeon, deputy chief air raid warden for Provincetown during World War II, holds a copy of the *Boston Daily Globe* that tells the story of Provincetown's emergency rescue efforts during the June 16, 1942, sinking of the *SS Cherokee*. (Staff Photo by Andrew Linebaugh)

was such a long time ago."

Coffee was served to survivors, who were brought toward shore by two other ships that had been near the scene. Some of the crewmen were Puerto Rican and spoke only Spanish. More than a dozen were suffering from shock, while others had less serious injuries.

By the early afternoon, officers from Naval and Army Intelligence arrived to question the survivors. Information that reached the press about the incident was limited — a week later a newspaper account of the sinking in the *Standard Times* did not reveal the name of the ship and referred to it only as a "medium-sized vessel."

Eventually the survivors were moved out, even as bodies of those who hadn't survived were being brought into shore. Most of the survivors claimed that more than one submarine was involved in the attack, prompting renewed fears of German "wolf packs" operating just off the coast.

"There were some dead but I don't know if they were drowned or killed in the explosions," he said. "They (some of the survivors) were foreign. I had a life preserver from the boat, but that went a long time ago. That's the only time anything like it happened in World War II — there's that time in World War I when a U-boat fired some shells at Chatham or some place, but they were off quite a bit."

Memories of the incident remain with Provincetown residents, but details are fading and often obscure. Dr. Daniel Hiebert, the longtime Provincetown doctor who also served as the town's public health officer during the war years, was summoned via telephone by Rosenthal, along with several other area doctors, to lend assistance in treating the survivors as they were brought ashore in Provincetown.

His widow, now 89 and still living at the West End home they maintained, recalled the incident. "Yes, I remember it well. They got him up in the night and he was taken over to help. He stayed until all the survivors were brought into what was then the Central House, and is now the Town House. I think the last one came in that same day in the afternoon," she said. "That night, at 11 or 12, two more survivors from a life raft were brought in, and he took care of them and got them put away. I was home during that time — I was supposed to be at home to relay telephone messages to him."

Another Provincetown woman said she was "very young" when the survivors were brought in, but she recalled distinctly, "My mother sent us up with blankets for the survivors. She was one of the ones who helped out."

On July 13, Dean James M. Landis, national director of the Office of Civilian Defense, flew to Hyannis, then drove to Provincetown to present a special illuminated scroll and victory pennant before a full house at Town Hall to the Provincetown Committee on Public Safety in recognition of its work in caring for the torpedoed seamen nearly a month earlier.

"Provincetown has discovered the meaning of total war. Not all of us are privileged to put in our effort close to the enemy," Landis told the assembly. "...The United States is proud of Provincetown. You, the people of this village, symbolized what civilians, organized and banded together and willing to work, can do."

The final tally for people called into action that day in Provincetown in June 1942, was four doctors, five registered nurses, 45 first aid workers, 35 home nurses, 27 canteen workers, seven telephone operators, four Boy Scout messengers, seven ambulance drivers, 50 auxiliary police, 25 air raid wardens and about 20 others.