

The '47/7

Why did seven young men, all in their 20's, return to Okemos High School after World War II?

What was so important about the completion and obtaining of a high school diploma? Could it have been that boys went to war and returned as men from war possessing courage and discipline but still without a diploma attesting their educational skills? Or was the diploma a means to better jobs, a veteran's badge of satisfactory academic worthiness?

The era of World War II was a time like no other, "despair hovered over the land like a plague. They had watched their parents lose their businesses, their farms, their jobs, their hopes. They had learned to accept a future that played out one day."

— **Tom Brokaw, The Greatest Generation**

The United States began to immerse from the devastating economic depression to roll every bit of muscle and reserve into fighting in a worldwide conflict. Many a young American man felt it was their duty, a personal responsibility, to enlist in the military and fight the ideological enemy, The Axis. And it was from every background, every belief, every state that the youth poured their lives into military discipline and combat training. Seven of those same youth were from the Okemos, Meridian Township area; **Martin M. Wunkel, Jr.**, **Joseph Ray Griffith**, **Russell**

Robert "Bud" Leach, **William Peter Leverett**, **Ronald Harry "Ron" Sweetland**, **Clarence Barss Robinson** and **Gerald Wendall "Jerry" Thiel**.



AVP-36
SEAPLANE - PORT
LACE WASHINGTON
USS Cook Inlet, Nov 1944, Camouflage Seaplane Tender, Duty off North Africa, one battle star

While girl friends were studying algebra in a classroom these seven were spread out in units within the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps. Wunkel, Leverett, Thiel and



Navy Hospital Apprentice – Picture from "Corpsman Up"

Sweetland joined the US Navy. William Leverett was a Hospital Apprentice assigned to duty in North Africa while

Jerry Thiel was a Fireman 1st Class aboard the USS Cook Inlet. Ron Sweetland saw duty aboard the USS Cumberland Sound.



USS Cumberland Sound, Dec 1944, Seaplane Tender, Asiatic-Pacific

Joseph Griffith and Bud Leach joined the USMC. Clarence Robinson, after USMC basic training, shipped off to the South Pacific and was thrown into action on Iwo Jima. His horrific combat initiation lasted 5 days, 19



Iwo Jima, Mt. Suribachi 2-23-1945

February to 24 February, everyone in his company either wounded or dead. Clarence was wounded thrice.

All seven men were honorably discharged from active duty by 1946 and returned to Ingham County to begin life once again.

“When the war ended, more than twelve million men and women put their uniforms aside and returned to civilian life. They went back to work at their old jobs or started small businesses; they became big-city cops and firemen; they finished their degrees or enrolled in college for the first time; they became schoolteachers,”

— **Tom Brokaw, The Greatest Generation**

After discharge and individually, the seven men decided to obtain their high school diplomas. Four were already married. Joseph Griffith had married April 1945 while in service, the same year William Leverett married. Bud Leach and Clarence Robinson wed in 1946. Somehow, married and with probably full time jobs, these men returned to the classroom, studied and completed the required course work for high school graduation. Ron Sweetland married in April 1947 just before graduation while Martin Wunkel married in June 1947, right after graduation. Only Jerry Theil remained a bachelor, finally marrying in September 1948.

On Thursday May 29th, 1947 the seven veterans received their well-earned diplomas. And they would go on to have stable careers, raise families and be responsible citizens. They would be part of the Greatest Generation...and the OHS Class of 1947.

1947 Okemos Yearbook *Tomahawk*

VETERAN GRADUATES

The following veterans, who for various reasons had not completed their high school work before entering the armed service, have now satisfied all requirements for graduation. They shall be considered members of the class of 1947 and will receive their high school diplomas with the other members of the class at Commencement time.

		<u>Service</u>	<u>Lifetime</u>
Joseph Griffith	United States Marines	1943-46	1925-2013
Russell R. Leach	United States Marines	1941-46	1925-2015
William Leverett	United States Army	1942-46	1918-1983
Clarence Robinson	United States Marines	1943-46	1925-alive
Ronald Sweetland	United States Navy	1943-46	1926-2012
Gerald Thiel	United States Navy	1945-46	1927-2017
Martin Wunkel	United States Navy	1945-46	1927-1981

Below is an interview that sums up the thoughts, attitudes and experiences of a generation of veterans. The article was taken from a 2015 write up in a newspaper about World War II veterans.

World War II interviewer: 'Every day is Memorial Day'

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(A partial copied interview with Bob Abate of South Bronx, NY. Abate, a USN veteran, interviewed Mr. Hyman and came away in great admiration.)

Ray Hyman of Mahopac, the former frogman whose swimming fins he helped retrieve. Hyman fought at Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and other Pacific islands and opened up to Abate during his interview.

"We were all young kids," Hyman told Abate. "We were more afraid of showing our fear. I was glad we swam in the ocean because nobody could see my wet pants."

He also shared a diary with Abate. Entries about making reconnaissance swims in February 1945 vividly describe the feelings of a 19-year-old fighting a war, far from home.

- "Today I died a million times. We hit Iwo Jima. The lieutenant was killed. It was a nightmare. I never saw so much machine gun fire... It was the most horrible day I ever saw."
- "It was a living hell. Dead men were spread all over the beach. In the water. Everywhere you looked. Dead Marines... This slaughter made Tarawa look like a Sunday picnic."
- "I was swimming close to a sunken freighter blocking the beach when the ocean erupted. I rolled over a few times and woke up on the beach. Someone pulled me out. A mortar almost got me. Not hurt bad. Call me lucky."

Abate said that Hyman, who died in 2001, had something in common with all of the veterans he's interviewed: modesty.

"They all insist that they're not heroes, that they didn't do anything special, that they just did their jobs," Abate said. "They all say that the only true heroes are those who were killed and never made it home. Obviously, I disagree."

On Memorial Day, and every day, he said, "we should thank our veterans. Shake their hands. Buy them lunch. Ask them about their experiences. You'll be glad you did. Show them that we appreciate what they did for us. That we care. And that we'll remember."

"there on the beaches of Normandy I began to reflect on the wonders of these ordinary people whose lives were laced with the markings of greatness."

— Tom Brokaw, The Greatest Generation

--Sherrie Paty Barber '66