



Crowds fill Salina Street in Syracuse Sept. 4, 1945, to celebrate the end of World War II. A Syracuse Herald-Journal article the next day said the city was honoring "all who served" as a "heart-stirring tribute to Onondaga servicemen and homefront workers who helped bring peace to a warring world." (Images courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association)

## A FINAL SALUTE FOR OUR FINEST

**T**he place where you can sense it, almost as much as at any monument, is at the Time Warner Cable building on Erie Boulevard in Syracuse. Today, customers stop by to pay their bills or to pick up a new remote, but the building still retains the impressive detail of what it was built to be: the old New York Central railroad station.

The next time you go there and you're waiting in line, contemplate the goodbyes that used to happen in that building, every day, just a little more than 70 years ago.

In the early 1940s, thousands upon thousands of young people from Central New York shouldered their duffels and left from that train station to serve in World War II. Often, they turned and walked away from all they knew while those who loved them — mothers, fathers, sweethearts, little brothers or sisters — stood watching. These young soldiers, sailors or Marines headed

toward basic training, and eventually toward the bloodshed in Europe, North Africa or the Pacific.

More than 400,000 Americans were among the millions killed in the war. From this region alone, about 2,700 did not come back. It is as if we lost an entire village of young men. It is a loss compounded today by the lives they never led, the children they never had ... cascading absence that becomes the hardest memorial.

Yet thousands of Central New Yorkers survived the fighting. Once the war ended, they crossed the sea and returned to America, where they boarded trains that brought them to Syracuse, back to the railroad station. ...

Where they were not the same. Young men who'd left this town as little more than children returned with a very different knowledge of the world. They accepted the tearful embrace of those who thanked God



Families cheer the end of the war and celebrate the return of service members.

at seeing them again — all those mothers who'd feared a telegram, in the middle of the night — and they set out to build their lives as best they could.

The youngest veterans of World War II are now in their late 80s. For their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the war that shaped and defined a generation — once embodied by the fathers many of us saw each night, at our kitchen tables — is shifting into the pages of history. We are down to the last of those who came to a hard understanding, in the 1940s, about which truths endure when all you love is put at risk.

To quote the late Tommy Niland Jr., of Syracuse — veteran of the 101st Airborne Division, a guy who was wounded and almost killed in combat, a guy who came home to build a basketball program at Le Moyne College:

"What I learned," Tommy said of

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war, "is that a new car doesn't matter."

If you knew that generation, you know what he meant. A lot of these soldiers came home to spend quiet lives in factories, and their lives made evident what they saw as important: A cup of coffee, in the morning, with your wife. The sound of your children breathing quietly, before you slept at night. The everyday reality that any moment of beauty, on any routine day — a sunset, a toddler's laughter, a robin in the yard — is

ONE, PAGE E-4



# One more salute on Salina Street

ONE, FROM PAGE E-1

something guys you loved, the guys who didn't make it home, would never see.

Plenty of men and women built their world upon these truths.

Only a precious few are here, for the 70th anniversary of the war's end. But we still have elders who lived out the story, elders who were little more than kids when the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor; whether they were drafted or enlisted, they went downtown with those little more than kids when they said their goodbyes, then climbed onto those trains.

Many, but not all of them, returned. Most, but not all of them, now are gone.

That speaks to one great chance.

One more parade.

If we wait another five years, for the 75th anniversary, it will be too late: The youngest veterans will be well into their 90s. For all of us in Syracuse, the impending remembrance of the end of the war offers a last public opportunity to remind our children and grandchildren of all that was in danger, of all that a generation sacrificed.

In 1945, when the fighting stopped, there were two separate downtown celebrations: The city erupted with utter madness on

Aug. 14, at the announcement of the Japanese surrender. A flood of people overwhelmed the heart of Syracuse, where men and women — often strangers — screamed, laughed, kissed and danced.

Newspapers of the time reported on how several mothers who'd lost their sons during the war came downtown to witness the euphoria, living out a truth of such pain it was almost beyond words: In each case, the only possible solace was in believing the sacrifice made this future possible, for someone else.

For us.

A month later, on Sept. 4, 1945, Central New York gathered for a formal celebration: There was a Victory Parade led by Forrest Vosler, an Upstate man who'd earned the Medal of Honor. More than 100,000 spectators jammed South Salina Street. Onlookers threw confetti from tall buildings. The great crowd assembled at Clinton Square, then went home to begin the first steps of moving past the war.

Many Central New Yorkers in uniform could not be there, that day. Countless thousands remained on duty in September 1945. Their great homecoming would continue, in a quieter way, over the following months. Young veterans returned, sought out jobs and began raising their families.

As the decades went by, their numbers dwindled year by year, although some are still with us, in their 80s and 90s.

They are here to tell their stories, to serve as witnesses. ...

Still here, if we ask them, to take part in a parade.

And why not? Why not pick a Sunday in mid-August and bring as many of those veterans downtown as possible? Why not give them one more ride along South Salina Street, through the heart of this city that's been theirs since childhood, one last civic thank you for everything they gave to us?

We find ways in this town to argue about almost everything, yet every now and then some question should transcend debate. In August, we'll mark 70 years since the end of World War II, and we still have these men and women who put everything at risk, and we have a chance — this precious chance — to gather as a community and tell them, one more time:

We know how much you did for us, when you got on that train.

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Young people gather in downtown Syracuse to celebrate the end of World War II. (Photo courtesy of OHA)