

# Remembering Those Who Served

## *A Wolverley local creates a memorial to the 52nd General Hospital.*

In 1940, before the United States entered World War II, the U.S. Department of War authorized American medical schools to create hospital units to serve medical and surgical needs overseas. The Syracuse University College of Medicine (predecessor to the Upstate Medical University) began recruiting for the U.S. Army 52nd General Hospital in 1941 and in January 1943 the unit sailed for Great Britain.

Last June 29, 63 years to the day that the 52nd closed at Wolverley, a memorial to the 52nd General Hospital was dedicated in the Wolverley village church.

The memorial, intended to serve as testimony to the skill and dedication of the men and women who came here from Syracuse during the Second World War, was the result of efforts by lifelong Wolverley resident Mike Webster.

In 2001, a heart condition forced Webster into early retirement. With little to occupy his time, Webster began researching a great uncle who had been killed during World War I. In the course of his research, he read about American medical camps established during the second world war. One book chapter told of the 52nd General Hospital at Wolverley. Coincidentally, Webster and

his wife's home overlooks the site of the former hospital.

Although built for the 52nd General Hospital, the site went on to have an interesting history of tenants. At the end of the war, when the Syracuse-trained physicians returned to their families back in the states, units from the British army and German POW's took over their former camp at Wolverley.

Later, local families moved into empty huts in one corner of the camp, becoming "squatters." For the next decade, families would occupy these huts, many of them living in overcrowded conditions with no running water, while waiting to be rehoused by the local councils. One of these families was Webster's own. His mother and father, Aunt Joan, and Uncle Eric, moved into the huts and became "squatters" at the former American hospital. His brother Raymond was born on July 17, 1947, and Webster was born on March 4, 1949. "For the first few weeks of my life, I lived in a hut once occupied by GI's at the former hospital," he says.



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Betty Sowerby, a former volunteer for the American Red Cross at the hospital, wearing her original hospital coat.



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people, found hundreds of newspaper clippings, and amassed a photograph collection in excess of 1,200 images, all-relating to the history of the Wolverley camp. Added to this collection are dozens of tape recordings of people recalling their memories, and other miscellaneous items of memorabilia.

A key contact made was Barbara "Bobbi" Harris, a former Syracuse nurse and Syracuse University professor of nursing, who responded to an advertisement Webster placed in an American medical journal. Harris had been trained by doctors and nurses who served in the 52nd and her research assistance in Syracuse was instrumental.

Through his years of research, Webster became dismayed that there was no mention of the American Hospital anywhere in Wolverley and set out to correct the oversight. "I wanted to ensure that those who came to our village all those years ago would not be forgotten," he says.

In June, his many efforts came to fruition with the dedication of a memorial at the parish church. The festivities were attended by U.S. Army representatives, British governmental officials, local civilians who had worked in the hospital, and Barbara Harris.

"My dream has now become reality with the dedication of this lasting memorial in our village church to the 52nd General Hospital," says Webster. "A little late perhaps, but I hope it will become testimony to the skill and dedication of the men and women who came here from Syracuse during the Second World War." ■

A four-man Honour Guard representing personnel from the United States Air Force stationed at RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk, England, stands at attention outside the Wolverley village church.

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When the Regimental Pay Office at Wolverley eventually closed, the military authorities retained ownership of the camp for a number of years to house the families of soldiers serving at other military camps in the area. Eventually, the remaining quarters were closed and the site was sold to the county council. A small number of buildings were used for a short while for emergency accommodation, while others were used for storage purposes. Eventually, most of the buildings were demolished, creating a park with numerous football and cricket fields, facilities for horse riding events, and a separate area for camping and caravans.

One morning a few years ago, Webster looked out from his window and decided that he wanted to research the history of the camp and write a book about it.

In the process, he has contacted dozens of



The Dodge ambulance on display was built in 1943 and appeared in the Clint Eastwood Movie, "Flags of my Fathers." She is wearing the colors of the former 93rd General Hospital, which was based at Blackmore Park, Malvern. The ambulance is owned by a friend of Webster.

A few months after the "squatters" began their illegal occupation, the Royal Army Pay Corps established a Regimental Pay Office at the camp, the second largest in the UK, and the site became home to numerous soldiers, their wives, and families. Some of Webster's school friends lived at the camp.



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Col. Ray Watters, US Army and personal representative of the American Ambassador, Barbara Harris, and Mike Webster in the church after the dedication ceremony.

The 52nd headquarters was in Wolverley, near Kidderminster in Worcestershire. Facilities were built for 600 staff and 1,100 patients. Between 1943 and 1945, the unit treated more than 21,000 patients, both surgical and medical, and received one of the few top ratings awarded to U. S. Army-affiliated hospitals in the European theatre.



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The church on dedication day.