

LI heroes of WWI recalled

Glen Cove exhibit tells story of locals who served with Harlem Hellfighters

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A century ago, Long Island's villages and towns stoically watched their finest young men fight Germany in the first world war.

Glen Cove sent more than 500 soldiers. Nearly three dozen served as "Harlem Hellfighters," the storied African-American 369th Infantry Regiment, according to histories of the unit. And a single family, the Fowlers, saw seven sons head overseas.

The story of the Harlem Hellfighters in World War I is told in an exhibit at the North Shore Historical Museum in Glen Cove. Museum board member Richard Harris is the force behind the exhibit, which ends Jan. 12.

"I've been interested in World War I for decades," Harris said in an interview at the museum, surrounded by early 20th century artifacts that include photographs, posters and clothing. "It became a passion for me to get their story told."

Deb Willett, 58, heard the stories of her grandfather, Leander Willett, when she was growing up in Oyster Bay. She never knew him, but she learned that he was considered a hero.

Willett has ties to many others who served in the 369th, too.

"So many of the men who fought in the Harlem Hellfighters were relatives of my family — the Seamans, the Fowlers — that if a bomb had hit their unit, I wouldn't be here," she said.

Volunteers for the war came from across Long Island's social spectrum.

Among the first to answer the call were the elite, who joined the British, French or Canadian

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forces in the early years of the war, before the United States joined the Allied powers in 1917. Tommy Hitchcock, whose father owned the Meadowbrook Polo Club, signed up to fly with the French air force.

Sea Cliff native Dennis Dowd sailed for the continent just days after the fighting broke out in late July 1914, and became one of the first Americans to go into combat when he joined the French Foreign Legion.

The observant Columbia Law School graduate that he was, Dowd described the monotonous brutality of trench warfare that kept soldiers locked in yards apart.

"I have never seen the kind of bayonet charge I read about," Dowd told war correspondent Herbert Corey. "It is usually the slow amble of a lot of brutally tired men, over ground that has been torn to pieces by big guns . . ."

"Men of both sides have a real distaste for that yard of cold steel, and they just poke dully and rather carefully at one another, until one side or the other runs."

After serving in the Legion's 170th Line Infantry Regiment, Dowd transferred to the Lafayette Escadrille and served with Hitchcock. He was training as a pilot on Aug. 12, 1916, when his Nieuport II biplane nose-dived into the sod just outside Versailles.

Mary Kane, of Southampton,



Deb Willett with photo that includes her grandfather, Leander Willett, in second row, fourth from right.

heard stories about her Uncle Dowd from Dowd's sister Katherine, who died in 1980.

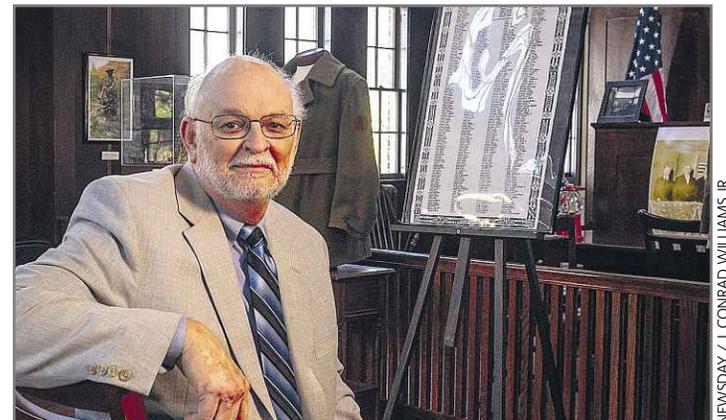
"Aunt Kit had a wonderful watercolor of him in her bedroom all her life," Kane, 75, said.

And the war itself played a key role in shaping the Island's culture, said Richard Welch, who curated an exhibit on World War I that was produced by the Suffolk Historical Society that closed in the spring.

Long Island financiers, including Gold Coast residents Henry Davison and J.P. Morgan Jr., arranged billions of dollars in loans, credits and supply contracts for England and France.

In 1915, a two-day symposium brought scores of anti-war activists to the Garden City Hotel, where they signed a declaration opposing America's involvement in the war.

The federal government created military training centers in Nassau and Suffolk that brought troops from as far away as rural Alabama. Hazelhurst Field, on



North Shore Historical Museum board member Richard Harris was the force behind the exhibit on the Harlem Hellfighters.

the Hempstead Plains, came first, in 1915. Camp Mills, also in Nassau, and Camp Upton, on what is now Brookhaven National Laboratory, followed two years later. Irving Berlin wrote the music for "God Bless America" while stationed at Upton.

On the homefront, a greater number of women on Long Is-

land started working outside the home, and villagers who had gone to war returned wiser about the world, having seen Paris and London firsthand.

"The First World War doesn't get the respect," Welch said, "but the truth is it laid the foundation for the 20th century and beyond."