

# Winning the War: A Historical Analysis of the FFA During World War II

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## Abstract

The United States' participation in World War II affected millions of men, women, and children, both at home and around the world. The war effort also affected the Future Farmers of America (FFA). FFA members, agriculture teachers, and national FFA officers all volunteered to serve their country during the war. Local FFA chapters and individual FFA members joined with other citizens to support the war effort. The national convention of the FFA and local FFA chapter operations were affected during the war years. Thousands of former FFA members left their homes and farms to enlist in the armed forces. Many gave the last full measure of sacrifice, their own lives, to the call of liberty. The gallantry of several FFA members was recognized with military honors, media features or commemorated in song following the war. This historical study researched the activities of local FFA chapters, the national FFA organization, and individual FFA members during World War II. Historical events were documented with primary and secondary sources including books, magazines, personal letters, personal communications, and reports available from the National FFA Archives.

## Introduction

No other period of American history was as tenuous as World War II (WWII). This war was a fight for freedom, ideals, and humanity. No conflict before or since has called for the mass uprising of all citizens to engage in war efforts. It became the responsibility of the nation to win the war by conserving resources, producing food, and buying war bonds to finance military efforts. The Future Farmers of America (FFA), as an organization, answered the call to assist in the war effort. Individual members served in the armed forces, chapters raised funds to support the troops, and these future agriculturists helped produce the food and fiber that was so essential to winning the war effort. As those individuals involved in the war effort advance in age, and younger generations' ideas of war and liberty are influenced by the media, it becomes ever more important to remember the contributions of those who lived and died to ensure freedom.

The number of American military casualties in WWII has been estimated at around 400,000 (United States Civil War Center, n.d.). The 1940s were a time of apprehension and fear, but also a time of patriotism and hope in which people rose up from the ashes and survived. Even those on the home front suffered and sacrificed. From growing victory gardens to rationing food and saving every scrap of tin, rubber, or paper, everyone was affected by WWII. In his book *The Greatest Generation*, Tom Brokaw (1998) praised this generation when he stated,

These men and women came of age in the Great Depression...They watched their parents lose their businesses, their farms, their jobs, their hopes. They learned to accept a future that played out one day at a time...They left their ranches in Sully County, South Dakota, their jobs on the main street of Americus, Georgia, they gave up their place on the assembly lines in Detroit and in the ranks of Wall Street, they quit school or went from cap and gown directly into uniform. (p. xix)

The FFA organization and its members heartily threw themselves into the war effort. "Patriotism, service, and citizenship are three of the most important 'stones' in the foundation upon which the FFA is built" (Ross, 1942, p. 196). The military service of FFA members, their

contributions to the war effort at home, and the effect that WWII had on the lives of FFA members and the organization itself needs to be documented. We must remember the sacrifices of those who helped ensure our freedom and recognize that it has led to the prosperity that we now enjoy.

### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to document the involvement of the FFA and its members in WWII. Specific objectives of the study were:

1. Identify the contributions that the FFA and local FFA chapters made to national defense programs during WWII.
2. Identify the effects that WWII had on the FFA and local FFA chapter operations.
3. Identify individual FFA members who made significant contributions while serving in the armed forces during WWII.

### Methods and Procedures

Historical research methods were used to accomplish the objectives of the study (Borg & Gall, 1983). Both primary and secondary sources were used to obtain the information desired. Whenever possible, the researchers used primary sources of information (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). Primary sources included proceedings of FFA conventions, correspondence from the National FFA Organization, National FFA publications, articles in the *Agricultural Education Magazine*, and personal communication with an eyewitness. Secondary sources included books and information from military Web sites on the Internet. Research was conducted at the National FFA Archives at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, at the Ohio State University and online by using electronic documents and Internet resources. All references were subjected to both internal and external criticism. The researchers externally criticized each document by reviewing it to determine its authorship and authenticity. The internal criticism allowed the researchers to evaluate the documents in relation to the objectives of the study. Multiple sources were used to triangulate the data and establish the credibility of the results.

### Findings

More than 1 million men and women were serving in the U.S. armed forces during WWII, but millions more were serving their country at home. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called on all Americans to sacrifice to support the war effort. In a fireside chat on April 28, 1942, President Roosevelt (1942) stated,

But there is one front and one battle where everyone in the United States – every man, woman, and child – is in action, and will be privileged to remain in action throughout this war. That front is right here at home, in our daily lives, in our daily tasks. Here at home everyone will have the privilege of making whatever self-denial is necessary, not only to supply our fighting men, but to keep the economic structure of our country fortified and secure during the war and after the war. (¶ 1)

From 1942-1945, the entire country was focused on assisting our troops. Citizens were encouraged to grow a victory garden, which allowed more commercial agricultural products to be sent to the troops while families ate foods produced in their own gardens (Kallen, 2000). Rationing of items abundant before the war was a standard practice during the war years. The average adult was encouraged to eat no more than 2.5 pounds of meat per week (Kallen). Posters and fliers were produced encouraging citizens to conserve, saving items like scrap metal, fats, and paper for military use. Posters displayed slogans that vividly illustrated the importance of the various war efforts: (a) *Do with less--so they'll [troops] have enough! : rationing gives you your fair share*, (b) *Farm scrap builds destroyers: 900 tons of scrap metal goes into a destroyer*, (c)

*He [a soldier] eats a ton a year: your farm can help, (d) Put your muscle on a war basis: sign up for a farm job, (e) Plant a victory garden: our food is fighting: a garden will make your rations go further* (World War II Poster Collection, n.d.).

One poster poignantly reminded Americans of the suffering of the oppressed in Europe. It showed a soldier holding an emaciated child in tattered clothing and a pan of food, with the child spooning food into her outstretched mouth. The slogan: *They Need Food: Plant more beans, help feed those freed from Axis Rule* (World War II Poster Collection, n.d.).

The FFA organization and its members were actively involved in a variety of programs designed to assist our armed forces overseas. They participated in the school-community canneries program, designed to preserve foods grown in victory gardens. Slaughterhouses were set up in schools to process livestock produced in the community and were often manned by boys of the local FFA chapter (West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, Gus Douglas, personal communication, November 28, 2006).

Through the war years, FFA members were active in assisting with various activities on the home front. The FFA (1942a) published a booklet titled *What the Future Farmers of America are Doing to Help Win the War*. On February 11, 1942, the national organization purchased a \$10,000 defense savings bond. This investment, combined with the war bonds and stamps purchased by members and state associations brought the total FFA contributions to \$394,255. States reported their members' involvement in growing victory gardens, which often fulfilled most of the food needs of their respective communities (FFA, 1942a). At the 1942 National FFA Convention, the committee on the National FFA Radio Program recommended that the national radio theme for 1942-1943 be "The Future Farmers and the War Effort" (FFA, 1942b, p. 47).

In 1943, A. W. Tenney reported on wartime activities that members were involved in. The National FFA (1943, p. 55) set a goal in 1942 of 100% member participation for the following war-related activities (actual reported participation in parentheses): (1) producing food for victory (82% member participation), (2) salvaging needed war materials (79% member participation, 70% chapter participation), (3) assisting with farm labor shortage (62% member participation), (4) repairing and reconditioning farm machinery (54% member participation, 72% chapter participation), and (5) buying war bonds and stamps, (61% members, 47% chapters, 77% associations).

Some of the miscellaneous activities that FFA members and chapters were involved in included: assisting the Red Cross through building cots, splints, and stretchers; collecting books to fulfill government demands; assisting with the farm labor shortage; and acting as volunteers for local fire and police departments (FFA, 1942a). Members of the Point Pleasant Chapter from West Virginia were granted exemptions from school to gather milkweed pods along highways and railways; the pods were used to make material for parachutes (West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, Gus Douglas, personal communication, November 28, 2006). Repairing farm machinery was a common activity in agriculture programs during this time (FFA, 1942a). Much of the repairs made were to machinery that had long been out of use and was needed because of the increased demands on farmers to produce more food and fiber for the armed forces and their allies.

The final report of the National FFA Executive Secretary in 1946 (FFA, 1946) illustrated the scope of assistance from the FFA and its members. The FFA activities and corresponding numbers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Final Report of FFA Activities Related to World War II*

FFA activity	Amount
Total maturity value of war and victory bonds and stamps purchased by state associations, chapters, and individual members	\$17,023,566
Total maturity value of war and victory bonds and stamps sold by chapters and individual members	\$18,415,126
Pounds of scrap metal collected by chapters	352,885,162
Pounds of paper collected by chapters	65,187,206
Pounds of rubber collected by chapters	6,394,766
Bushels of rags collected by chapters	5,884,630
Number of burlap bags collected by chapters	1,694,767
Number of victory gardens grown by FFA members and chapters (121,851 total acres)	236,465
Number of farm workers placed on farms through the aid of the FFA	50,218
Number of FFA members who helped victory farm volunteers to become acquainted with farm life	32,316
Number of victory farm volunteers helped by FFA members to become acquainted with farm life	41,804
Number of farm machines repaired by FFA members	621,900
Number of pieces of farm equipment constructed	292,369

Overall, the FFA contributed greatly to the war effort at home and abroad. The U.S. Treasury Department presented a special citation to the FFA in 1946 that read, "For the distinguished services rendered in behalf of the War Finance Program this citation is awarded to the Future Farmers of America" (FFA, 1946). The organization was also recognized by the War Production Board, who gave a certificate to the organization that read "In acknowledgment of meritorious service rendered in [sic] behalf of the National Scrap Harvest" (Future Farmers receive citation, 1946).

Aside from the personal sacrifices of FFA members, the operation of local FFA chapters and the national organization were significantly affected by WWII. During the war years, the activities of the National FFA were somewhat constrained. There were 245,830 FFA members in 7,542 chapters in 1942. Those numbers dropped to 195,253 members in 6,030 chapters in 1945. Agricultural teachers were leaving the classroom to serve in the armed forces or work in war industries. Many chapters were closed during the war years. FFA members were also entering

the service, many of them before their 18th birthday (FFA, 1956, 2001).

The National FFA Conventions during the war were very streamlined. No national judging contests were held from 1941-1946. With the war in the Pacific in full force and the American forces actively assisting the Allies in Europe, attendance at the National FFA Conventions was not a high priority for most people. National FFA Advisor William T. Spanton requested in a radio broadcast that no more than 200 members attend the 1942 National FFA Convention (FFA, 1956) 8,000 members had attended the 1941 convention.

The 217 registered convention attendees in 1942 had the war effort foremost in their minds. A delegate from West Virginia moved to go into committee of the whole for 15 minutes to discuss the possibilities of the national organization buying a bomber to assist in the war effort. The motion was later referred to a committee, who recommended the organization not purchase the bomber (FFA, 1942b).

National FFA President Irvin J. Schenk was not even in attendance at the 1942 convention because he was occupied with farm work at the time. During the 1942 convention, delegates altered the membership rules so that time spent in the armed forces would not count in determining a boy's eligibility for FFA awards following graduation from high school (FFA, 1942b). The war effort was central to the organization, "The Future Farmers Organization . . . has taken its place with other agencies interested in the upbuilding of agriculture, the improvement of country life, *and the winning of the war*" (FFA, 1943, p. III).

During the war, fuel was rationed and transportation regulated. Most FFA members traveled to Kansas City for the National FFA Convention by train. Gus Douglas, Former National FFA President and current Commissioner of Agriculture in West Virginia, recollected of his first National FFA Convention that, "There were military personnel on train, and it was full. We were sleeping on the floor, or standing up, all the way from West Virginia to St. Louis, then to Kansas City" (West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, Gus Douglas, personal communication, November 28, 2006). He described the attitude as questioning the future of the FFA as well as the future of the country. He described the convention as subdued, with most of the attention of members focused on the current crisis. Commissioner Douglas was granted an agricultural deferment from the Draft Board, ensuring that he would stay at home helping to produce the food and fiber vitally needed by the troops.

The 1944 convention saw limited attendance, with only delegates and award winners present. The members paid tribute to the 138,548 FFA members serving in the armed forces with a special ceremony. Because of the military intensity in the Pacific in 1944, the National FFA drastically cut their air time on the national farm and home hour radio show to one 4-minute broadcast on the second Saturday of each month (FFA, 1944, 1977).

The National FFA organization was also drawn into the issue of the Japanese internment camps established during the war. In one instance, the state of Colorado inquired about the possibility of establishing FFA chapters in internment camps. In a letter dated October 24, 1942, from L. R. Davies (personal letter, 1942), Colorado State Supervisor of Agricultural Education, to W. A. Ross, in the U.S. Office of Education, Davies wrote,

Mr. L. J. Burgett of the Granada Project of the War Relocation Authority of Lamar, visited the office today. He has two classes of students in vocational agriculture, the majority of whom are FFA members from California. Would it be possible for these boys to organize an FFA chapter on the W. R. A. project? They are enthusiastic FFA members and American citizens. (p. 1)

W. T. Spanton (personal letter, 1942), Chief of the Agricultural Education Service responded to

the letter by stating, “it will not be possible to organize local chapters of the Future Farmers of America in any school other than those that are recognized bona fide departments of vocational agriculture which are reimbursed from Federal funds...”

On September 2, 1945, the Empire of Japan officially surrendered onboard the battleship *USS Missouri*. The 1945 convention was held only a few months later. Because of the lack of time and the level of involvement in the war effort, only 251 boys attended. The planning of the “Victory Convention” in 1946 was a major part of the activities at this convention (FFA, 1945, 1956).

During the 1946 Victory Convention, the atmosphere was one of new beginnings. Gus Douglas was elected as National FFA President at the convention. He described the sense of relief and joy that filled the hearts and spirits of the members. “There was such an attitude of relief, we were all looking to the future. There were so many needs of the farm folks at that time, that’s where technology turned the corner” (West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, Gus Douglas, personal communication, November 28, 2006). The membership of the FFA surged to 206,104, with 12,500 members in attendance at the 1946 National FFA Convention. New award program areas were developed, new contests established, and the seed of thought for a National FFA Foundation were planted. The National FFA Alumni and the Supply Service were also a result of the post-war enthusiasm (West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, Gus Douglas, personal communication, November 28, 2006). President Douglas and his fellow National FFA Officers were the first to go on good-will tours, visiting agricultural businesses and industries (FFA, 1977). Former FFA members who served in the war returned to complete their college education on the G.I. Bill and entered agricultural occupations or become vocational agriculture teachers (West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, Gus Douglas, personal communication, November 28, 2006).

While FFA members were actively engaged in supporting the war effort at home, thousands more were serving in the armed forces. At the 1946 Victory Convention, the FFA honored the 260,450 active and associate members who had served in the armed forces during WWII. Of these, 7,188 lost their lives. National FFA Officers Harold Gum, Willard Visek, and Eugene Starkey all entered the armed forces while serving as national officers and had to be replaced (FFA, 1977).

Of the FFA members who served in the armed forces, Captain Travis Hoover, Captain Robert Gray, and Lieutenant Bert Jordan are perhaps the most renowned for their bravery and heroism. Hoover (then a lieutenant) piloted the second of 16 bombers that followed General Doolittle in the famous Doolittle Raid, the first attack on Japanese soil. This offensive was one of the crucial turning points in the War in the Pacific, its effect on moral for the troops and the country at large was immense. “They (The Doolittle Raiders), began the reverse of the tide of Japanese conquest and brought the first good news for America and her Allies in the beginning months of the most devastating war in history” (Glines, 1991, p. xi). Immediately behind Hoover in the third bomber was Lieutenant Robert Gray. Lt. Gray was killed in action in October of that year during a bombing run in the same area. Robert Gray Field in Fort Hood, TX, is named for the pilot. Another former FFA member, Lieutenant Bert Jordan, was a gunner on the third bomber (Glines, 2006).

In 1943, National FFA Advisor A. W. Tenney received a letter and a newspaper clipping from the state director of agricultural education in Utah. The newspaper clipping illustrated the accomplishments of a Utah FFA member named Gordon Peterson (Considine, n.d.). Lieutenant Colonel Chesley Gordon Peterson was lauded as one of the top fighter pilots in the European theater. Andrew King, an Oregon FFA member, was one of the first men to lose his life in the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. An American legion post in the Hawaiian Islands is named for him. Former Washington State FFA President, D. W. Hendrick received a silver star

while flying with Chenault's Flying Tigers in China. Captain Alpha Fowler, former Georgia FFA President was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his "extra-ordinary achievement in serial flight" (Distinguished Flying Cross, 1945, p. 177)

Harvey Natchees, a Ute Indian from the Toyock FFA Chapter in Utah was featured in many newspapers as one of the first Americans to enter Berlin. Natchees' valor was recognized by a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart (Utah History to Go, 2006a). Natchees was just 22 when he enlisted in the U.S. Army and had been married for 2 years. He returned home to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation a hero after his discharge in 1945. A liberty ship (a wartime cargo ship), the S. S. Edwin J. O' Hara, was named after a Lindsay, CA, FFA member (FFA, 1943).

Lieutenant William Gentry of Harrodsburg, KY, led Company C of the 71st Infantry division in the first tank battle on U.S. held soil in Baliuag, Bataan, Philippines. Eight former FFA members were reported as being with General Wainwright when Bataan fell. An estimated 75,000 American and Filipino POW's endured the Bataan Death March, which killed more than 10,000 Allied soldiers.

At the 1946 National FFA Convention, the organization honored those who served in the armed forces. National FFA Officer Marion Baumgardner conducted the ceremony unveiling the service flag, "We now come to one of the most important ceremonies of our National Victory Convention, one in which we shall honor those young men who served so gallantly and courageously in the armed forces of our nation (FFA, 1946, p. 22). The Borgstrom Family of Thatcher, UT, was honored in the name of all parents who had lost sons in the war. Four of their five sons, all FFA members, were killed within a 6-month time frame in 1944.

Applause filled the vast convention hall for several minutes after the introduction of the Utah couple, chosen by the FFA, [sic] world's largest farm boy organization, to represent the parents of all members and former members who served in the armed services of the nation in World War II. (Utah History to Go, 2006b, ¶ 1)

The Congressional Medal of Honor is the highest award for valor in action against an enemy force which can be bestowed upon an individual serving in the Armed Services of the United States. Of the 440 Congressional Medal of Honor recipients during WWII, three were known to have been FFA members.

Private Rodger Young was an infantryman in the U.S. Army, 148th Infantry, 37th Infantry Division from Tiffin, OH. Private Young was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for heroic actions in New Georgia, Solomon Islands, on July 31, 1943 (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006). He is immortalized in song: *The Ballad of Rodger Young* (FFA, 1946; *The Ballad of Rodger Young*, 1957).

Technical Sergeant Jacob Lindsey of the 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry division of the U.S. Army was awarded his Medal of Honor for heroism at Hamich, Germany, on November 16, 1944. The 23-year-old Sergeant from Isney, AK, risked his life above and beyond the call of duty to allow his unit to secure its position during heavy combat (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006).

Hospital Apprentice 1st Class Robert Eugene Bush from Tacoma, WA, risked his life to save other servicemen. Bush was a member of the U.S. Naval reserve serving as medical corpsman with a rifle company 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine division. His citation occurred in Okinawa Jima, Ryukyu Islands, on May 2, 1945, when Bush was just 19 years old (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006). His story is told by Tom Brokaw in his book, *The Greatest Generation* (1998). Bush stated, "Mom I'm going into the service to help people, not to kill them" (p. 105). His war experiences helped shape his philosophy: "Everyone should learn the meaning of that famous little four letter word - work" (p. 108).

The contributions of the FFA members can be summed up in a telegram received from Franklin D. Roosevelt; "Congratulations to Future Farmers of America. Your work on the farm front is vital to our success on the battlefronts of the world" (FFA, 1943, p. 16).

### Conclusions/Recommendations

Individual FFA members, local FFA chapters, and the FFA organization all worked together to support the efforts of the United States of America during WWII. FFA members and whole chapters rallied around President Franklin D. Roosevelt to sacrifice and work harder at home to support their fathers, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and neighbors serving in the armed forces in Europe and the Pacific. In the book, *The War at Home*, Kallen (2000) described the effort when he wrote,

The women and men who put on uniforms in World War II signified the largest call to war in U.S. history. Everyone who stayed behind knew someone who was fighting. But the war was not just being fought overseas - it was a war that would be won on the home front as well. (p. 27).

The activities of the FFA made significant contributions to WWII. Members fought on both the home front and overseas to preserve freedom. FFA members were a part of the liberation of the oppressed by their service at home. Members bought and helped to sell millions of dollars of war bonds to support the troops. They grew and processed their own products to allow for more food to be sent to the troops and those freed from oppression. The sacrifices of both those members in combat and members at home helped to defeat the Axis powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy.

The effort on the part of FFA members and chapters was so extensive that the national FFA organization produced reports that summarized what FFA members were doing to help win the war. The National FFA Executive Secretary made regular reports to the delegates at the national FFA convention of the previous year's activities that supported the war. The efforts of the FFA were officially recognized by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and by President Roosevelt himself. It can be concluded that when called upon during a time of war, FFA members, chapters, and the national organization all stepped forward to do whatever they could in their local communities to support the troops serving overseas.

The war effort affected the activities of local FFA chapters and the national organization. Local agriculture teachers left their teaching positions and enlisted in the armed forces, leaving many local FFA chapters without their vocational agriculture teachers. On the national level, the FFA discouraged FFA members from traveling to national FFA conventions during the war years by suspending judging contests and limiting the number of members and delegates who attended the conventions in Kansas City. This decision was based on the need for the railways to be used for the transportation of troops and materials to support the war. An effort was also made to start FFA chapters in Japanese internment camps. Many Japanese youth had been members of the FFA in their California schools prior to being relocated. Although vocational agriculture classes were taught and FFA activities held in the internment camps, no official FFA chapter was ever recognized by the FFA organization.

Officials of the FFA struggled to adapt FFA activities and the national FFA convention to the realities of a country at war. FFA activities were suspended or limited in scope to allow resources to be used toward the war effort. The national FFA organization joined the rest of the country during 1946 in celebrating the end of the conflict, recognizing the sacrifices made by FFA members and forging ahead with plans for post-war growth of the FFA.

Millions of men and women who served in WWII left their rural communities, farms, and ranches to answer the call of service in the armed forces. Many of the men who enlisted were

vocational agriculture teachers, FFA members, or alumni of the FFA. There were 260,450 FFA members and alumni who served during the war. Of these, 7,188 gave their lives in the pursuit of peace and liberty. Three known FFA members received the highest military award in the country, the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Doolittle raid, one of the most crucial and daring missions of WWII, included three former FFA members. One of the first men to enter Berlin was a former FFA member and was a nationally recognized figure for many Americans. National FFA officers resigned their offices and entered the armed forces to serve their country. These amazing sacrifices and contributions by FFA members should be appreciated and recognized by the generations who have benefited from their service.

The researchers recommend that the activities and programs that the organization was involved in during WWII be given a more prominent place in the organizations' history. The wartime activities of FFA members, chapters, and alumni should be emphasized in the FFA Hall of Achievement at the National FFA Center in Indianapolis. The history of the FFA organization during WWII should be included in historical lessons taught in high school agricultural education curriculums as well as included as part of a teacher education program in agricultural education.

The face of agricultural education and FFA was changed forever by WWII. Many members lost their lives, and all members sacrificed during the war years. Yet throughout the struggle, patriotism and optimism flourished. The National FFA alumni, National FFA Foundation, and the Supply Service were all a result of the post-war enthusiasm and hope for the future of the organization. Because of this renewed attitude of optimism, new contests were added, and membership soared. This would not have been possible if not for the amazing young men who chose to look to the future rather than be hindered by the past. Their sacrifice and contributions are worth documenting and commemorating.

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