

57 Blawenburg Spotters in World War II

By David Cochran

The year was 1941, just after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Tensions were running high as the country engaged in World War II. It was a time of uncertainty, but a time of patriotic unity.

As the US became involved in WWII, it quickly became apparent that enemy aircraft posed a threat to our country. Since World War I, aircraft had advanced, so they had greater capability and could fly longer distances. Heavy bombers of the German Luftwaffe could fly from Europe and wreak havoc on our country because there would be little advanced knowledge of their arrival. The military did not yet have the equipment to detect incoming aircraft. It used mechanical sound detectors to "hear" incoming aircraft, but this was inadequate. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, radar was invented in 1935, but it wasn't used for military operations until 1944.

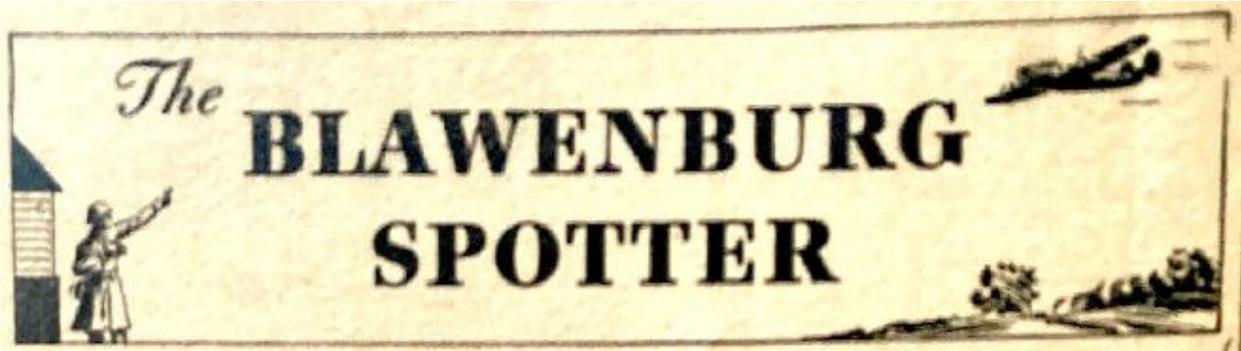
The US military noticed that the British had developed a system to locate incoming German aircraft that relied on humans rather than technology. The volunteer observers were called spotters, and they were trained to not only spot the aircraft but also to identify the type of plane that was coming in. The US military liked this idea and adopted it. Initially, the military was used to spot incoming aircraft on the east and west coasts, but this proved inadequate. All branches of the military had important jobs to do—it was busy fighting a war on two fronts, Europe and Japan. It turned to the American Legion and the U.S. Army to set up a citizen volunteer service to look for incoming aircraft.

Groups of spotters were formed all over the country. There were thousands of spotting posts along the East Coast and inland to the Appalachian Mountains. Other posts were set up from Washington State to California.



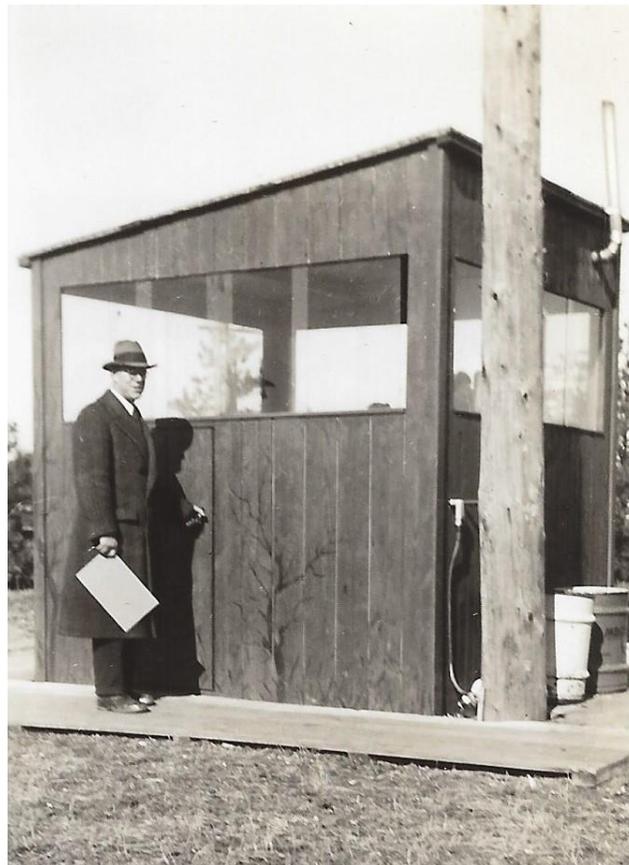
AWS button

The national organization that ran this operation was known as the AWS, the Aircraft Warning System. It was very popular because it gave Americans who were not in the military a way to serve their country. Over 750,000 people volunteered to spot aircraft.



One such group of aircraft spotters was in Blawenburg. In this blog, we will share some events and thoughts that were recounted in a newspaper column called *The Blawenburg Spotter*, which appeared in the *Hopewell Herald* from 1941 to 1943.

The Blawenburg Post, A Quick, Rough Start



Chief Observer Albert Van Zandt stands outside the Blawenburg Post on February 13, 1942.

On December 8, 1941, a post, as the sites where spotting took place were called, was set up quickly in the front yard of Hadley and Mavis Cantril near the corner of Bedens Brook Road and Great Road. It was just a day after the day of infamy at Pearl Harbor. Local builders erected the small building right next to a telephone pole so they would have electricity and phone access. The Cantrils reported in an early column in *The Blawenburg Spotter* that all went well with the setup of the post except for the installation of the telephone. Spotters had to run into the Cantril's house to use their telephone to report each aircraft sighting. Since this was a 24/7, year-round operation, it was pretty inconvenient.

To complicate matters, the Cantrils were having an addition put on their house, so building materials were in unexpected places. Jake the Doberman also added to the adventure. People tripped over bricks or Jake, especially those on the graveyard shift in the middle of the night. One doctor from the State Village (now Skillman Park) "was tripped by the bricks, chased by the dog, and when he finally reached the phone, he fell down the basement stairs." It wasn't easy to be a spotter!



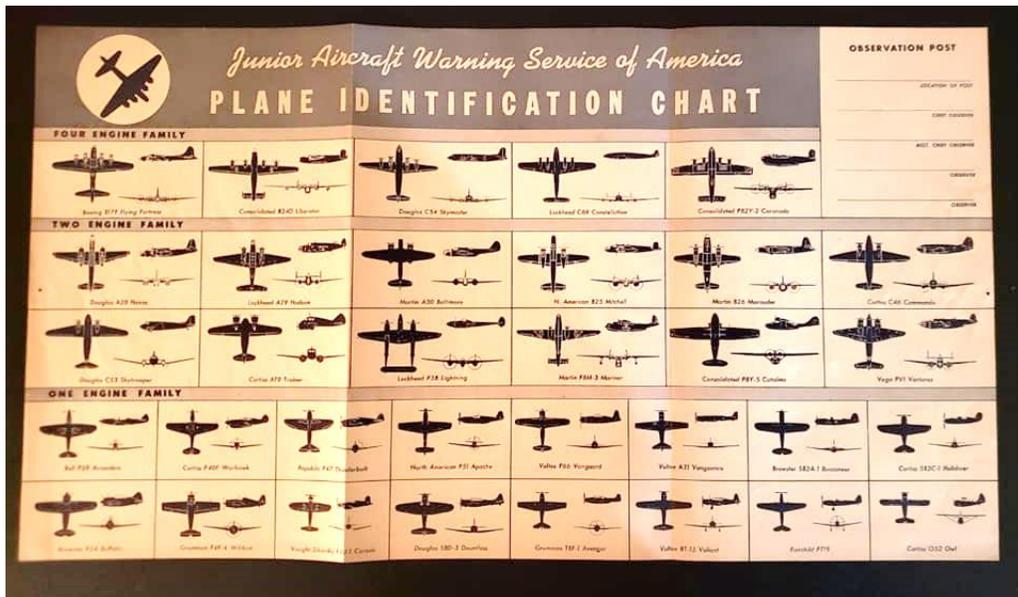
Cartoons like this were used to explain the job of spotters to the public.

The Spotters

Spotters were the volunteers who worked two-hour shifts once a week at the Post. They were officially called observers, but most people called the volunteers spotters. This operation required 84 people each week. Regular life still went on. Volunteers worked, got sick, went on vacation, and otherwise couldn't serve their time as a spotter on any given week. For this reason, Albert Van Zandt, the Chief Observer and Regional

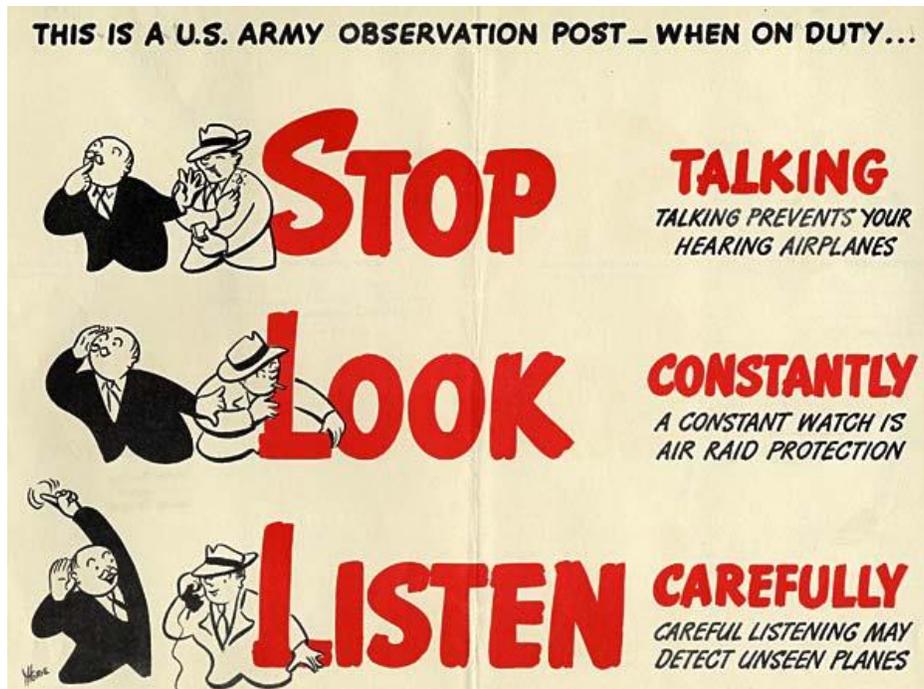
Supervisor, kept a list of about 145 volunteers who he could schedule as needed. Since many of the younger men were in the military, the remaining residents pitched in to do the spotting. Older men, women, and high school students took their turns spotting. Some of the people who volunteered to spot were Percy Van Zandt, Sadie Stryker, Dr. George Gallup, Wilber Drake, Ed Williams, Louise Weeks, and many, many more. Not everyone lived in Blawenburg. Some came from the State Village that was just north of Blawenburg, while others came from Hopewell, Montgomery Township, and Princeton.

The national AWS provided training materials. These included charts with diagrams of aircraft from several angles.



A plane identification chart used by members of the Junior AWS

Because this program was under the auspices of the U.S. Army, training also included proper conduct while on the duty as illustrated in this poster:



Posters were used to remind spotters of their responsibilities.

Spotters served their two-hour shifts on the same day and time each week. They were identified by their name and time, and the volunteers were often listed with the title Observer. For example, Observer William P. Haight (8 to 10 am, Thursdays).

When a plane was spotted, identified, and logged in, the spotter called a report to the regional Information Center. Personnel in these centers would coordinate the locations for each plane and place pins on boards to note where the planes were. The great majority of planes were from the US.

The Leader

Albert Van Zandt, a local farmer and businessman, commandeered the operation, which meant that he recruited volunteers, trained them, prepared schedules, and made sure that the data collected was phoned to the regional information centers. Mr. Van Zandt held the titles of Chief Observer and Area Supervisor. He apparently did his job well, because at the end of the spotting time in 1943, Charles L. Whittier in *The Blawenburg Spotter* column in the *Hopewell Herald* said of the Post and Mr. Van Zandt's leadership, "It is doubtful if there was a better post on the Atlantic seaboard. Individually and as a community we have achieved almost a perfect record. As in business or government, however, outstanding success in any war effort is dependent upon able leadership. We were fortunate to have such leadership. I believe every observer will join me in an expression of appreciation for our Chief Observer and Area Supervisor Albert Van Zandt for his superb guidance, his tireless efforts, and his unselfish contribution to the aircraft warning service. To him let us award the largest orchid of them all."

(The orchid was one of many accolades extended by Charles Whittier to recognize volunteers for doing outstanding work. He awarded them “an orchid, a salute, a large bouquet, a round of applause, or a deep bow.”)

The Blawenburg Spotter

The Blawenburg Spotter was a weekly column in the *Hopewell Herald* that ran from 1941, when the Post opened until it closed in 1943. Charles L. Whittier, who has been described in the *Hopewell Herald* as a "genial gentleman, able advertising administrator, omniscient observer, and capable columnist," wrote the column.

His often-humorous columns had a specific format that included the pictures of spotters with nice comments about them and their work, general comments about events and local news, and a thought for the week.

Here are some examples of each section of the column using the words of Charles L. Whittier. His words are bulleted below.

Picture and Affirmation

day, March 31, 1943. THE HOPEW

The **BLAWENBURG SPOTTER**

BY CHARLES L. WHITTIER



Observer Felix Schweizer (1 to 3 p. m. Sundays) writes, "We are very sorry to announce the death of one of our most ardent spotters, who served 24 hours every day during his short span of life. Though he never lifted the receiver or spoke a single word to his companions on watch, his fellow observers became quite fond of him. He was a rugged fellow, apparently in the best of health, but because he was made of snow, he succumbed to spring fever, which caused his body temperature to become abnormal. Poor chap, he just wasted away."

Thank the Reverend Marion Penning for the following joke, which is a welcome contribution.

A man walked into a restaurant and ordered a cup of coffee without cream. The waiter, who was

RED CROSS SPOTTER—Mrs. Esther B. Terhune (12 to 2 p. m.)

On March 31, 1943, the column honored Mrs. Esther B. Terhune.

- Red Cross Spotter – Mrs. Esther B. Terhune (12 to 2 pm, Wednesdays) is a faithful and ardent observer who takes on extra war work in her stride. Doubling her efforts recently, she has been devoting her evenings to collecting contributions for the Red Cross. An orchid to this energetic and patriotic lady.

March 10, 1943

- The Post has no more zealous spotter than the Reverend M. Pennings, pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church at Blawenburg. Starting the week Pearl Harbor was attacked, he has stood his own weekly watch and substituted for others for a total of more than 140 hours.

Events/News/Comments

This section of the column highlighted births/deaths, special events, and other general news of interest.

- Speaking of movies, the new Spencer Tracy-Katharine Hepburn opus, “Keeper of the Flame” is dramatized from a book by Observer A. R. Wylie (4 to 6 pm, Tuesdays). Now she is off on a lecture tour that will keep her away from the Post for three weeks.
- Don’t forget the meeting tomorrow night, February 18, at Smalley Hall, State Village, for all observers.
- Edgar Van Zandt says, “Some people think that planes never come over the Post. Last Saturday I sat down and did a little addition.” (He goes on to list the monthly count, which averaged 1,593 per month for a yearly count of 19,118 planes.)

Not all comments were serious.

- Bill Kirk (8 to 10pm, Fridays) says eating carrots to improve eyesight is all hooey. Bill has been eating them for weeks and practicing walking around in a dark room. You ought to see the fine shiner he has from walking into a door.
- Mrs. Johnson Moore says her husband’s snore is a great help to her in identifying single or bi-motor planes. If a plane sounds like his intake snore, it is a single motor; if it sounds like his exhaust snore, it is a bi-motor. Mrs. Bob Moore says the snore system doesn’t work with her husband. His intake is silent, while the exhaust snore sounds like a four-motor plane in trouble.
- The Reverend M. Pennings predicts that we are going to have war casualties in our radio stations. He claims that radio announcers can’t go on pronouncing the names of Russian villages day after day without getting their tongues tied in knots.

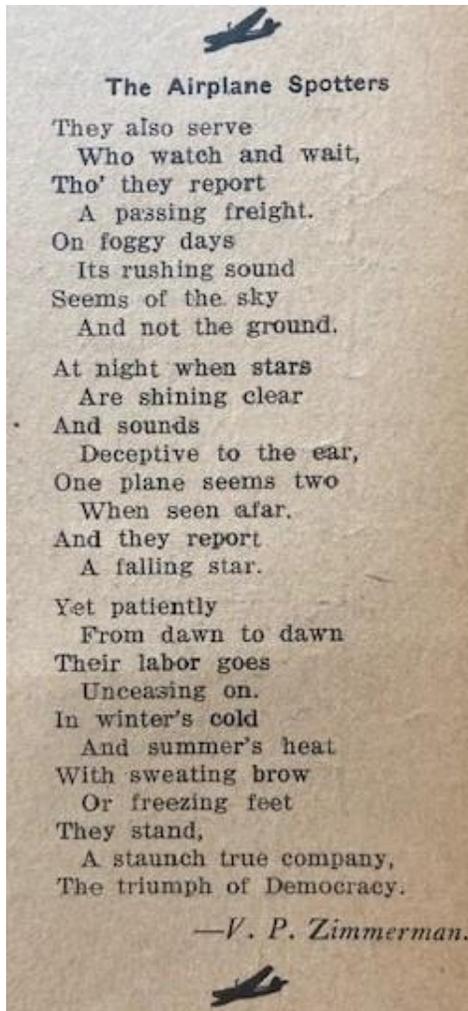
Thought for the Week

This final section of the column sought to remind the community of the importance of the war effort

- When the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAACs) was started, a lot of high-ranking army officers resented the idea of having women around. Today those same officers are wiring Washington, "send more WAAACS immediately."
- Sacrifice is the war time rent we pay for the privilege of living in a democracy. And if we are not to be dispossessed, there cannot be a ceiling on that rent.
- History tells us that in World War I, it was not the German armies that lost the war, but the clamor of the war-weary civilian population for peace.

Charles Whittier's writing was the way he contributed to the war effort. His column was very popular because it provided weekly updates to residents who were eager to know what was going on with the war. His blend of volunteer recognition, serious news mixed with humorous stories, and thought-provoking narratives made his writing enjoyable and informative.

From our perspective, more than 75 years later, the columns provide a window into the lives of ordinary people in the Blawenburg area during a time of great struggle. We owe Charles Whittier a large orchid, several bows, and a salute for his good work.



This poem appeared in The Blawenburg Spotter on December 16, 1942.

Interesting Facts

1. In a recent note, Larry May remembers his father, Everett May, who was the local chair of the USO campaign drive, talking about other special sacrifices people had to make for the war effort. Larry said, "Auto headlights had to be blacked out except for a narrow slit allowing minimal light to drive with. Also, window shades had to be pulled down to cover windows so as not to allow light to escape. I think that I remember being told that Ed Terhune was the local civil defense warden who would walk the neighborhood at night to make sure everybody was in compliance."
2. Observers received Certificates of Honorable Service from the Army Air Forces Fighter Command for their voluntary efforts. The certificates below were awarded to Chief Observer Albert Van Zandt and his wife, Observer Nancy Van Zandt.



3. The Post was located near the original farmsteads of John, Frederick, and Michael Blaw.

Credits



A large orchid, a salute, and several bows should go to Bill and Jane Van Zandt. They gave me access to the columns of Charles L. Whittier that Bill's father, Albert, had saved. This blog would not have been possible without this local treasure trove of World War II history.

Information Sources

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aircraft_Warning_Service

<https://www.britannica.com/technology/radar/History-of-radar>

"Observation Post Has Perfect Record," newspaper clipping, source unknown, September 30, 1942

Whittier, Charles L. "The Blawenburg Spotter", *Hopewell Herald*, Hopewell, NJ, 1941-1943.

Photos and Graphics

AWS button – <https://amcmuseum.org/collections/aircraft-warning-service-volunteer-observer-pin/>

The Blawenburg Spotter column graphic – from Hopewell Herald – D. Cochran

The Post – from the collection of Albert Van Zandt – Bill Van Zandt

Observer Post cartoon - <https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/exhibits/ww2/Pages/protect-aircraft.aspx>

AWS chart - <https://www.facebook.com/AWSGOC/photos/440357340208684>

Stop, Look, Listen poster -
<https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/exhibits/ww2/Pages/protect-aircraft.aspx>

The Blawenburg Spotter with picture of Esther Terhune – D. Cochran

Certificates of Honorable Service – collection of Albert Van Zandt – Bill Van Zandt/D. Cochran

Orchid – Google images/Sandra Wagner-Wright

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