

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Remembering Ripon's first and last WWII casualties

Memorial Day, originally known as "Decoration Day" is celebrated in America on the last Monday of May.

This is a national holiday which originated in the years following the Civil War and honors people who died while serving in the U.S. military.

Memorial Day is a more solemn occasion than Veterans Day, which honors all those who have served in the military.

For Memorial Day 2025, the Ripon Historical Society looks back more than 80 years to World War II and will honor the first and last Ripon casualties from that conflict. The American involvement in World War II began on Dec. 7, 1941 and ended on Sept. 2, 1945. Over the course of the war, Ripon had a total of 15 casualties.

The first person from Ripon to die in service during World War II was Francis James Parfitt (1916-1942).

Parfitt grew up in his family's home at 203 Blackburn St. He was a 1936 graduate of Ripon High School and in 1939 he enlisted in the Navy working as a radio operator.

Parfitt's mother received a telegram from the Navy March 19, 1942 stating, "Your son Francis James Parfitt Radioman Second Class US Navy ... has been lost in action. Information received indicates there may be some survivors but no positive information regarding your son has been received."

The telegram is found in the Parfitt family file in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society.



FRANCIS PARFITT (1916-1942) was the first person from Ripon to die during World War II. His ship, the U.S.S. Pillsbury, was one of the two major American surface warships lost in World War II with no survivors. *submitted photo*

It was later discovered that on or around March 2, 1942, Parfitt's ship, the U.S.S. Pillsbury, was sunk by Japanese cruisers, approximately 200 miles east of Christmas Island, which is south of Singapore. The only reports about the sinking of the ship came later from interrogations of Japanese participants in the battle.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH OF Donald Zimdars (1919-1945) was taken when he returned to Ripon on furlough from the Army in October 1944. It was featured on the front page of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* after he was killed in action in Germany on March 6, 1945. This was just 10 months after he joined the military and just two months before the war ended in Europe on May 8, 1945. He was the last Ripon casualty in World War II. *RCP file photo*

The U.S.S. Pillsbury was one of the two major American surface warships lost in World War II with no survivors. America had just joined World War II in early December 1941, and Parfitt's ship was lost just three months later.

Although Ripon's first casualty in the war, Parfitt was not officially declared dead until Nov. 25, 1945, three years after he went missing.

The Ripon Chapter of the American Legion had been named after the first casualty of World War I, Frank H.

Brown (1892-1918). The name of the organization was officially changed to the Ripon Brown-Parfitt American Legion Post Number 43 to honor Parfitt as the first Ripon death from World War II.

The last Ripon casualty of World War II found in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* was Donald Zimdars (1919-1945). Zimdars was born in the township of Metomen. His family later moved to the township of Ripon to farm. After his father passed away in 1939, his mother moved into the city of Ripon. He was educated in a one-room country schoolhouse and before joining the military worked on a farm and as a truck driver.

In May 1944, Zimdars joined the Army and was a private in the 417th Infantry Regiment, 76th Infantry Division. After training, Zimdars returned home to Ripon on furlough in October 1944.

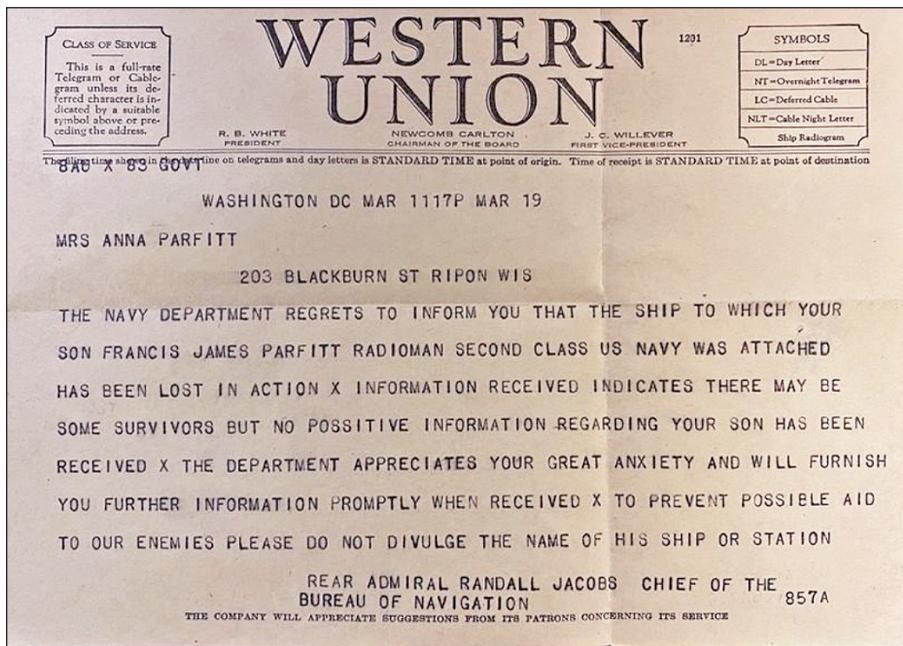
The *Ripon Commonwealth Press* from March 23, 1945 stated just a month after Zimdars visited Ripon his division "Went overseas to serve with the 3rd Army, leaving for France with an infantry unit shortly after arrival in England. The company took part in several major engagements in Belgium and Germany."

Zimdars was killed in action at age 25 in Germany on March 6, 1945. This was just 10 months after he joined the military and just two months before the war ended in Europe on May 8, 1945.

The March 22, 1945 *Ripon Weekly Press* reported that Zimdars' mother had received a telegraph telling her of the death of her son on Monday, March 19, 1945 and received his last letter to her the next day.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



THIS 1942 TELEGRAM was received by Anna Parfitt, mother of Francis Parfitt, to inform her that her son was missing in action. He was later confirmed dead and was the first Ripon resident to die in World War II. The telegram is found in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society. *submitted photo*

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