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CIVIL AIR PATROL NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

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Civil Air Patrol approaches 70th anniversary, looks to honor World War II's 'unsung heroes'

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, Ala. – On Dec. 1, Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, observes 70 years of vigilant service. But the celebration won't be complete until CAP's earliest members – now in their eighties and nineties – are "rightly honored" with the Congressional Gold Medal.

CAP, an all-volunteer service of more than 61,000 members, was founded 70 years ago on Dec. 1, 1941, less than a week before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor led to America's involvement in World War II. Known at the time as the Coastal Patrol, members soon proved their worth by conducting aerial missions at the request of the Office of Civilian Defense, displaying heroism that discouraged and eventually stopped deadly German U-boat attacks on supply ships leaving American ports headed to support the Allied war effort.

The "subchasers" flew at great personal risk. In all, 90 CAP planes were forced to ditch at sea. Of the 59 CAP pilots killed during World War II, 26 were lost while on Coastal Patrol duty and seven others were seriously injured while carrying out the missions. Their wartime service was highly unusual because they were civilian volunteers flying combat missions in their own aircraft at a time when the military could not adequately respond the U-boat threat. The military decided to arm their aircraft soon after the patrols began and, all told, they sank or damaged two or more submarines and attacked 57.

Legislation has been introduced and is pending in both houses of the U.S. Congress, H.R. 719 and S. 418, that would award CAP a Congressional Gold Medal for its World War II service. It will be a diminished victory, however, if none of the World War II-era CAP members are alive to see this law's passage.

"These members from our earliest days as an organization helped save lives and preserve our nation's freedom," said Maj. Gen. Chuck Carr, CAP's national commander. "They were truly unsung heroes of the war, using their small private aircraft to search for enemy submarines close to America's shores, towing targets for military practice, transporting critical supplies within the country and conducting general airborne reconnaissance. They provided selfless service, without fanfare, in defense of their homeland."

Time, instead of a German submarine, is now the enemy of the roughly 60,000 CAP volunteers from World War II. Only a few hundred of them are still alive today.

"Each week, each month, others are lost," said Carr. "We want to make sure those who remain, and those who have passed, are rightly honored for their great service to America."

These early CAP heroes included men like 94-year-old Charles Compton, the father of ABC News Radio White House correspondent Ann Compton. He was in his early 20s when he left dual jobs in Chicago — one as an advertising salesman for the *Daily News*, the other working in a plant that manufactured aircraft parts — to go to the East Coast as a CAP citizen volunteer based on “a desire to be more actively engaged in the war effort.” There he was part of the flight staff of Coastal Patrol Base 1 in Atlantic City, N.J., flying missions to search for enemy submarines or to provide an escort for American convoys as they sailed along the Eastern Seaboard.

During the war, CAP operated 21 such units up and down the Eastern Seaboard and into the Gulf of Mexico. The duty was dangerous, Charles Compton recalled. “There was nothing like GPS,” he said, as he told about using partially sunken American merchant ships, which were plentiful, as a navigational tool.

Wylie Apte Sr., who died in 1970, was a seasoned pilot, having flown with the Army Air Corps during World War I and later owning and operating White Mountain Airport in North Conway, N.H. As a CAP member, Apte was assigned to a unit of the Coastal Patrol based in Portland, Maine, to search for enemy subs off the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

Flying his own Waco YKS-7 biplane, Apte trailed an antenna, longer than 100 yards, for communication back to his land base, which would in turn be used to notify the military to dispatch fighters and bombers in the event a sub was spotted.

Propelled by duty and love of country, Joseph W. Leonard joined CAP the day it was established, six days before Pearl Harbor. Leonard, who remained a CAP member until his death in March of this year, was a member of the Pennsylvania Wing’s Chester Squadron. He flew out of Coastal Patrol Base 2 at Rehoboth Beach, Del. Base 2 was populated by such CAP heroes as Eddie Edwards, who received the first Air Medal of World War II from President Franklin D. Roosevelt for his daring all-night rescue of a downed CAP pilot from the Atlantic waters.

In a journal he left behind, Leonard wrote: “On my day off I was in the habit of going surfing. There I had a close encounter with a torpedo that was fired at a convoy a few miles offshore and missed. I was about a half mile beyond the breakers, watching a convoy heading north. I was focusing on the ships and didn’t notice the bubble trail approaching me until it was pretty close. I rolled the surfboard to one side, and the German torpedo slid by me.”

To support CAP’s Congressional Gold Medal legislation, contact federal legislators, both senators and representatives, and ask them to cosponsor H.R. 719 and S. 418. In both houses, two-thirds of the membership must sponsor a bill before it can be brought up for a vote. Sample letters and other details, including a list of current cosponsors, are available at www.capmembers.com/goldmedal.

Meanwhile, anyone with information on adult CAP members who served the organization during World War II is encouraged to upload their information into the World War II Congressional Gold Medal database at www.capmembers.com/goldmedal.

Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, is a nonprofit organization with more than 61,000 members nationwide. CAP, in its Air Force auxiliary role, performs 90 percent of continental U.S. inland search and rescue missions as tasked by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center and was credited by the AFRCC with saving 54 lives in fiscal year 2011. Its unpaid professionals also perform homeland security, disaster relief and drug interdiction missions at the request of federal, state and local agencies. The members play a leading role in aerospace education and serve as mentors to nearly 27,000 young people currently participating in CAP cadet programs. CAP has been performing missions for America for 70 years. It is a major partner of Wreaths Across America, an initiative to remember, honor and teach about the sacrifices of U.S. military veterans. Visit www.gocivilairpatrol.com or www.capvolunteernow.com for more information on CAP.