Tom Brokaw recounts in his superb book, The Greatest Generation, a story his mother told him of the day Gordon Larsen came into the post office where she worked. Larsen was usually a genial and popular member of their community, but that day he had stopped in to complain about the rowdiness of the teenagers on Halloween the night before.

Brokaw’s mother was surprised at his tone and asked him in good humor, “Oh Gordon, what were you doing when you were 17?”

Gordon had looked at her squarely in the eye and replied, “I was landing at Guadalcanal.” He then turned and left the post office.

How many men and women, who walk among us, now in their eighties and nineties, can say “I was at Normandy” or “I was in the first wave at Iwo Jima”? Brokaw’s book has helped us to recognize the valor and sacrifice of these veterans of a war unlike any previous war or any since.

It was a generation united by a common purpose and also by common values – duty, honor, economy, courage, service, love of family and country, and, above all, responsibility for oneself.

In this issue we salute all of these valiant warriors with the abbreviated recollection of a few.
A recent letter from France to Derwood Copeland at his Falls River Village home brought back memories of the crash of his B-17 bomber 56 years ago. The letter was from Louis Chartier who had been a boy of 12 in 1943. It stoked the memory of the tragic event when Copeland's bomber, the Mehitabel, was shot down on the boy’s grandmother's farm in Belle Isle, France.

Chartier, an armchair historian, had written to tell Copeland, the only surviving member of the 10-man crew, that he had erected a monument to memorialize the three members of the Mehitabel’s crew who had perished in the crash. He described the stone monument and marble plaque “to make sure their sacrifice would not be forgotten.”

Following the crash, Copeland had been captured by German soldiers almost immediately. He spent the next two years in a prison camp in occupied Poland where “as American pilots, we were treated with respect and dignity, unlike the treatment of many POWs.” To pass the time, the prisoners wrote and performed plays, 20 of them in the 23 months of incarceration. “The German officers allowed us to have props to make the plays more professional,” but the brightest aspect of life as a prisoner were the letters and small packages from home.

Copeland was drafted in 1943 right after his high school graduation. He took basic training before being selected for pilot training in Arizona. Copeland departed for England with the 851st Bomber Group. “Our initial target was the submarine pits on the French coast. Intelligence had reported they could only be taken out if bombed when open, and of course, the Germans would be waiting. We were on our fifth mission when we were gunned down.”

The war was a distant memory until Chartier’s letter arrived. Copeland hopes to start an e-mail correspondence with the Frenchman and perhaps exchange other memories from half a century ago.