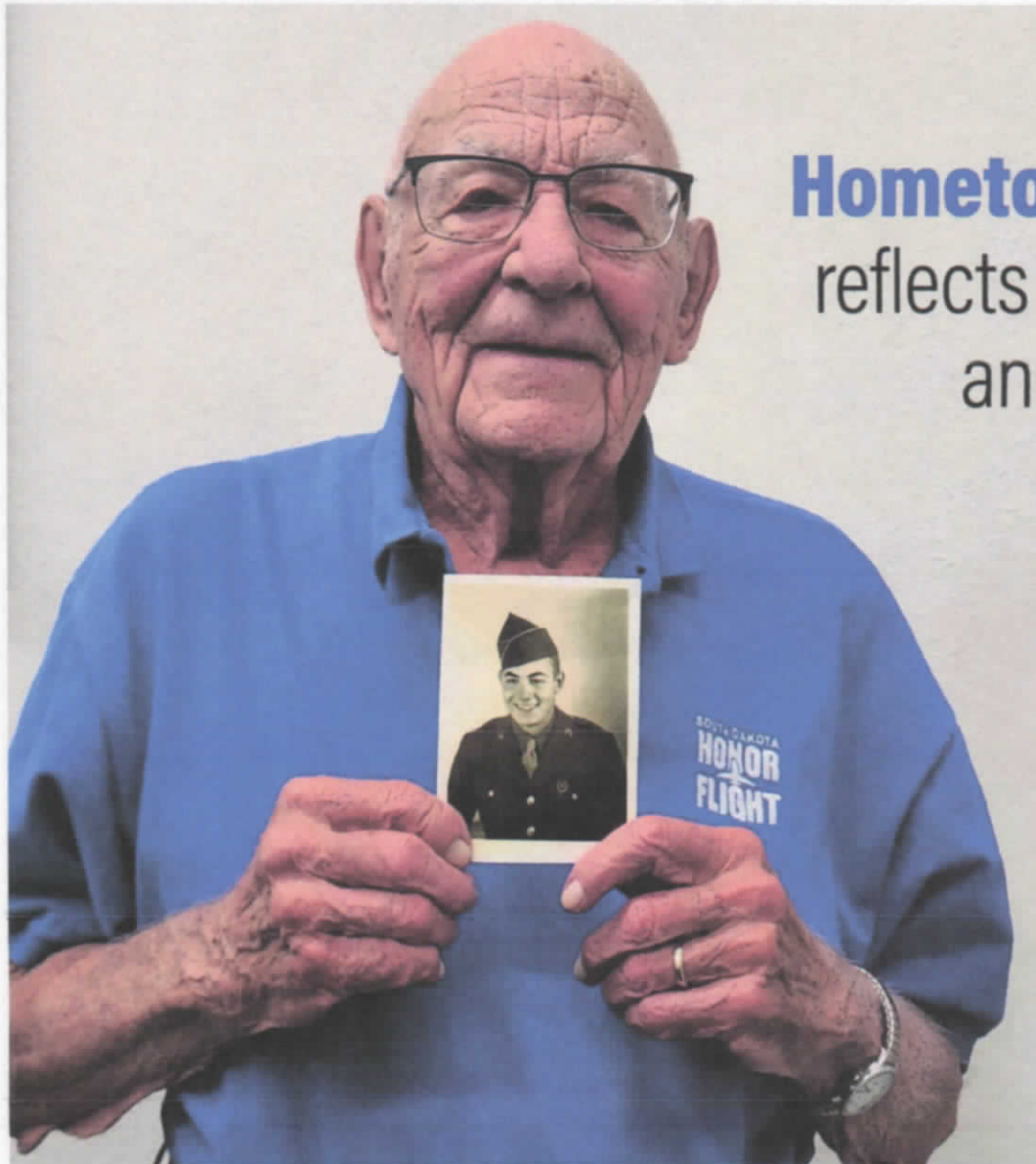




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Hometown WW2 hero reflects on war, service and freedom

BY IAIN WOESSNER

When G. Homer Harding recalls the time he was drafted to fight in World War 2, he first remembers a spirit of universal love of country.

"At that time you understand, everybody was very patriotic. So you automatically registered for the draft as soon as you were 18," Harding said. "A lot of the women went and took jobs in the factories so the men could go fight. The only ones excluded were farmers, because we needed the food, and a lot of them volunteered. I was drafted and went to Fort Snelling in Minnesota and from there I was hoping to get the Navy but signed into the Army."

Young Harding was sent down to Texas for infantry training, and in December, 1944, he graduated as a machine gunner.

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"At that time they wanted infantry and riflemen in Europe and they wanted machine gunners in the Pacific, so I was sent to the Pacific. I went to Midway and joined our convoy at Midway, took us 30 days," Harding said. "We joined the convoy and went to ...the Philippines. There I was unloaded and Sergeant picked me up at the beach and told me I was going to go to the 40th infantry as a machine gunner."

Harding took part in a series of missions, carving a path north towards Japan, capturing islands along the way, targeting in particular Japanese air bases, all in anticipation of an invasion of Japan — an invasion that carried a grim promise of death.

"We were practicing for the invasion of Japan and we heard rumors that a bomb had been dropped," Harding said. "We thought 'nothing could be that big, to stop the war' but Truman, fortunately for us, did it. We didn't have to make the invasion to Japan, which had been planned, because we were going to have 40 percent casualties just getting to shore. So we were tickled about that."

Rumors proved real when, at long last, a tangible sign appeared that proved the war was, indeed, over.

"We realized the war was over when the Navy ships were out there,

waiting to take us to Japan, they started firing off all the rockets and pressure ammunition they had," Harding said. "And we knew the war had ended and we celebrated there on the beach. From there we moved to Korea and in Korea ... they hadn't seen Americans before and they were cheering, lined up on the streets, cheering us. They were under Japanese rule (until then)."

Harding was born in South Dakota, hailing from Pierre, and with the war done, he was ready to return home. The whole experience had taken him far from the prairie.

"You gotta remember, none of us had been out of South Dakota our whole lives," Harding said. "So when we came home, we went under the Golden Gate Bridge in Frisco and it was lined with people, with flags and cheering. And it was quite a sight."

By the war's end he was a staff sergeant and as such, when he got back stateside he joined the National Guard and got his commission. After that, he got married and went to college, continuing to work in the military in order to afford college, all with the expectation that he'd soon be hanging his uniform up for good.

"I'd never intended to make the military a career but when I graduated, it was 1950 and before we got out of the Guard, the Guard was activated to go into Korea," Harding said.

While he'd been initially sched-

uled to go to Korea himself, Harding would end up being assigned to Alaska, where he'd be stationed for the next two years. After that, having spent some years in the military already, Harding decided that destiny was calling for him to make a career of it, and so he'd remain in the service.

All told, his career would span 39 years. Harding retired as a brigadier general, his career spent half in active duty and half in the National Guard.

Since then, he's seen both the military and country change dramatically.

"(The culture today) is totally different. We were all so patriotic then. My two boys were both military and my five grandchildren were all military. They were deployed to Iraq and that area. The whole family's been pretty much military," Harding said. "I think (the military) has changed a lot. It's gotten more 'woke' as they call it. It's a little different, (but) it's coming back and it's an honorable career for anybody. We certainly need more military than we've got right now."

At 98-years-old, Harding is now long retired, but he had an illustrious career after the military, serving in the South Dakota Senate and as State Treasurer. Having spent his life in service of his country, he has a simple answer to the question of what it



is that makes America special, and worth fighting for.

"Freedom. If anybody saw those other countries, they'd realize what freedom meant to us. It was worth fighting for and I don't regret it one bit," Harding said. "This is the greatest country in the world, it still is and hopefully it'll remain that way."

To all those, past and present, who have served, we at the Capital Journal offer a heartfelt thank-you for your service.