

1945 February 19-25

A Man of Two Wars



(La Crosse Tribune, 1944 June 24, page 2)

**West Salem Sailor
To Be Discharged**

WEST SALEM, Wis. — (Special)
—Carl M. Keefe RM1c landed at
Norfolk Tuesday. Keefe has been
in service 27 months. He has spent
22 months of this time overseas.
Keefe also served in the navy dur-
ing World war I.

Mrs. Keefe will go to Chicago
to join her husband after he re-
ceives his discharge from the navy.

La Crosse Tribune, 1945 February 8, page 17

Carl M. Keefe of West Salem had the distinction of being one of the few men from the county to be a veteran of both world wars. Many of the higher-ranking officers in the United States Armed Forces had

also been in World War I, but these were career military men who had mostly remained in the military after the end of the First World War. It was more unusual for lower-ranking servicemen to have been in both wars mainly because there was a new generation of younger men who were called on to serve.

Carl Michael Keefe was born on November 27, 1894 at Trempealeau, Wisconsin.¹

Keefe found his career working for railroads. At the age of 18, he was employed by the C. & N.W. railway at Beloit, Wisconsin.² Two years later in 1914, he was a telegraph operator for the Northwestern Railroad at Mountain, Wisconsin.³

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Keefe served in the Navy “in and around North Africa.”⁴ His service entitled him to become a member of the Elmer R. Towner Post, Veterans of Foreign Wars, at Trempealeau after the war.⁵ He would later become commander of the Alex J. Berg post of the American Legion in West Salem.⁶

Keefe returned to the railroad after his discharge from the Navy. He was a station agent at Camp McCoy in early 1934.⁷ In 1937, Keefe became the station agent in West Salem.⁸

He had married Lillian Cisewski in April 1923. They had a son and three daughters together.⁹

Keefe’s railroad career was again interrupted by a world war. On November 13, 1942, just short of his 48th birthday, Carl Keefe reenlisted in the United States Navy. His background as a telegraph operator was useful in earning him a rating of Radioman, First Class.¹⁰



(United States Navy)

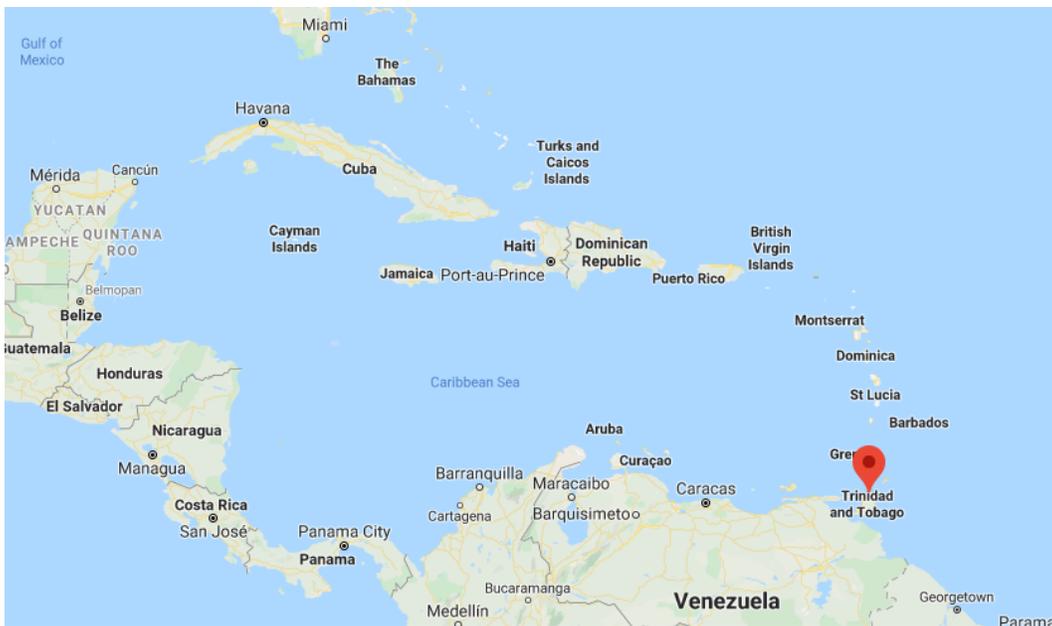
One month after his enlistment, Keefe was shipping out of Philadelphia on an oil tanker. He remained on that ship for his entire stint in the Navy. Keefe was the oldest man on the ship, so the younger sailors regarded him as sort of a father figure. Whenever they were in danger, they observed Keefe’s demeanor for an indicator of how much trouble they were in. “If he was calm, they were calm. If he was scared, so too were they.”¹¹

Being a crewman on an oil tanker was one of the most dangerous duties in the war. A ship full of gasoline and oil is a ripe target for enemy bombers and submarines. One hit on the ship could create an almost instantaneous fireball that would hell on earth for any human being unfortunate enough to be in it.



Model of a 1940s oil tanker
(Smithsonian National Museum of American History)

After spending Christmas 1942 in Miami, his ship sailed into the Caribbean where its job was to haul high octane gasoline between Trinidad and South America. In British and Dutch Guiana (now Guyana and Suriname respectively), the tanker went upriver fifty miles to supply air bases in the jungle. They made a stop at French Guiana near the French prison called Devil's Island. The prison commandant and a crew of convicts rowed out to meet them. The American sailors exchanged items with the convicts and guards. One of the convicts devoured an apple (he had not seen one in years) on the spot.¹² Keefe's first six months in the Navy were spent in the vicinity of South America.¹³



Trinidad
(Google Maps)

A convoy to New York took Keefe back to the United States.¹⁴ Then he had a few days of leave in May 1943 to visit his wife and daughter in West Salem.¹⁵

His ship left New York on June 13 and headed to the Mediterranean. They docked in Algiers 24 days later. Keefe's ship participated in the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. Then it hauled oil to supply the Army Air Corps bases in North Africa, Corsica, Sardinia, and Italy.¹⁶

During his time in Italy, Keefe visited Rome and Vatican City. He saw Mount Vesuvius at Naples, and he also made several trips by airplane from city to city.¹⁷

Keefe's ship was bombed several times, but its closest call was in the Italian port of Bari on December 2, 1943 when German bombers attacked. A near miss slightly damaged his ship. An officer suffered a broken back, two other men had shrapnel wounds, and another was shell-shocked. Keefe narrowly escaped being hit by shrapnel.¹⁸

His ship was very fortunate to survive the disaster at Bari, which was in the British area of operations on the Italian peninsula. Seventeen ships were sunk, including five American ships, and six more were damaged.¹⁹



Bari, Italy
(Google Maps)

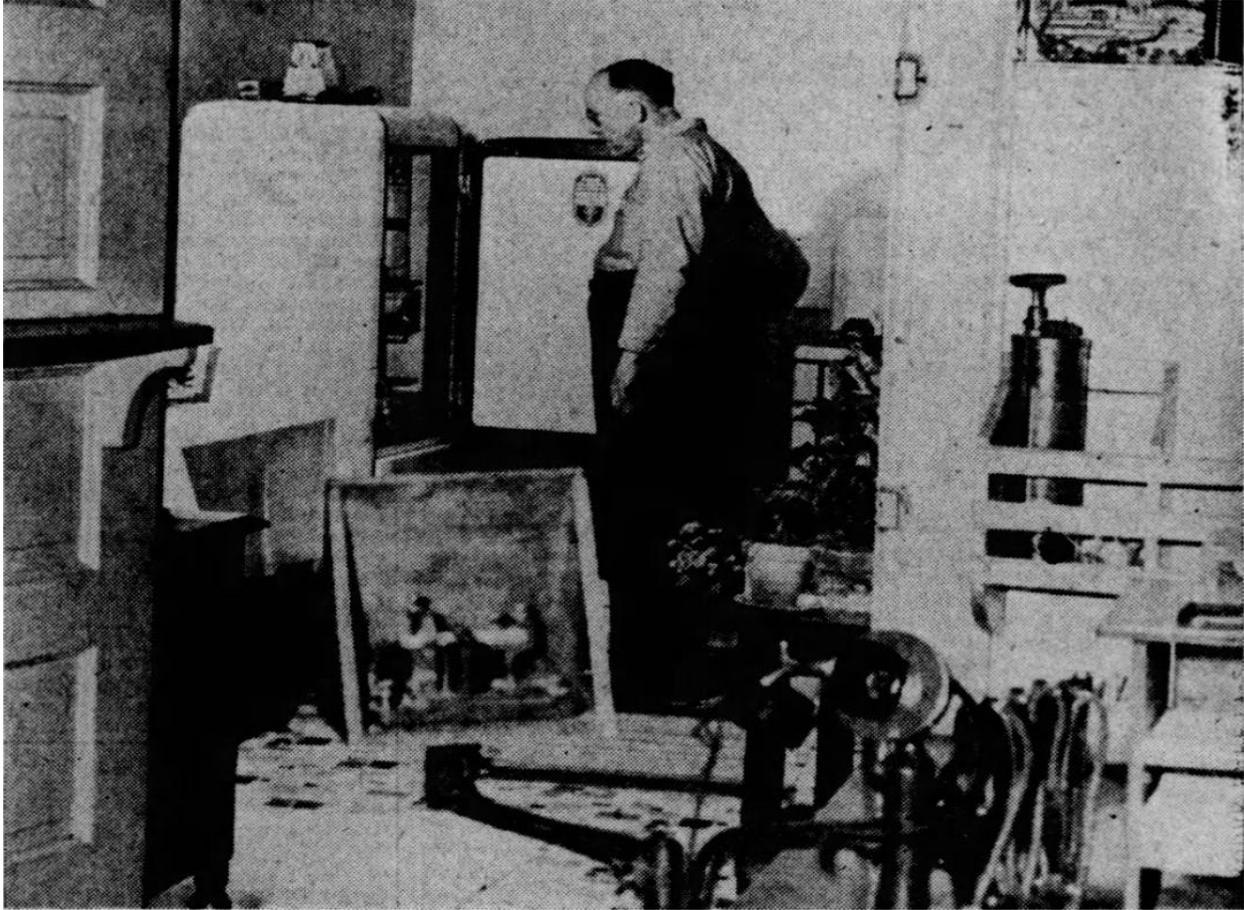
Very few people knew then, and even for years later, that one of the ships destroyed was carrying a cargo of mustard gas. The merchantman *S. S. John Harvey* was carrying 100 tons of one-hundred-pound mustard bombs.²⁰ The Germans had used mustard gas in World War I, and the Allies were concerned that they might resort to it again in World War II. Just in case, the Allies were prepared to retaliate in kind. When the *John Harvey* sank, its mustard gas mixed with the oil that coated many of the surviving seamen. None of the medical personnel in Bari knew about the secret cargo, so they were not prepared to treat patients affected by it. While the more seriously wounded were being treated, other survivors were just wrapped in blankets for as much as a day before being cleaned up.²¹

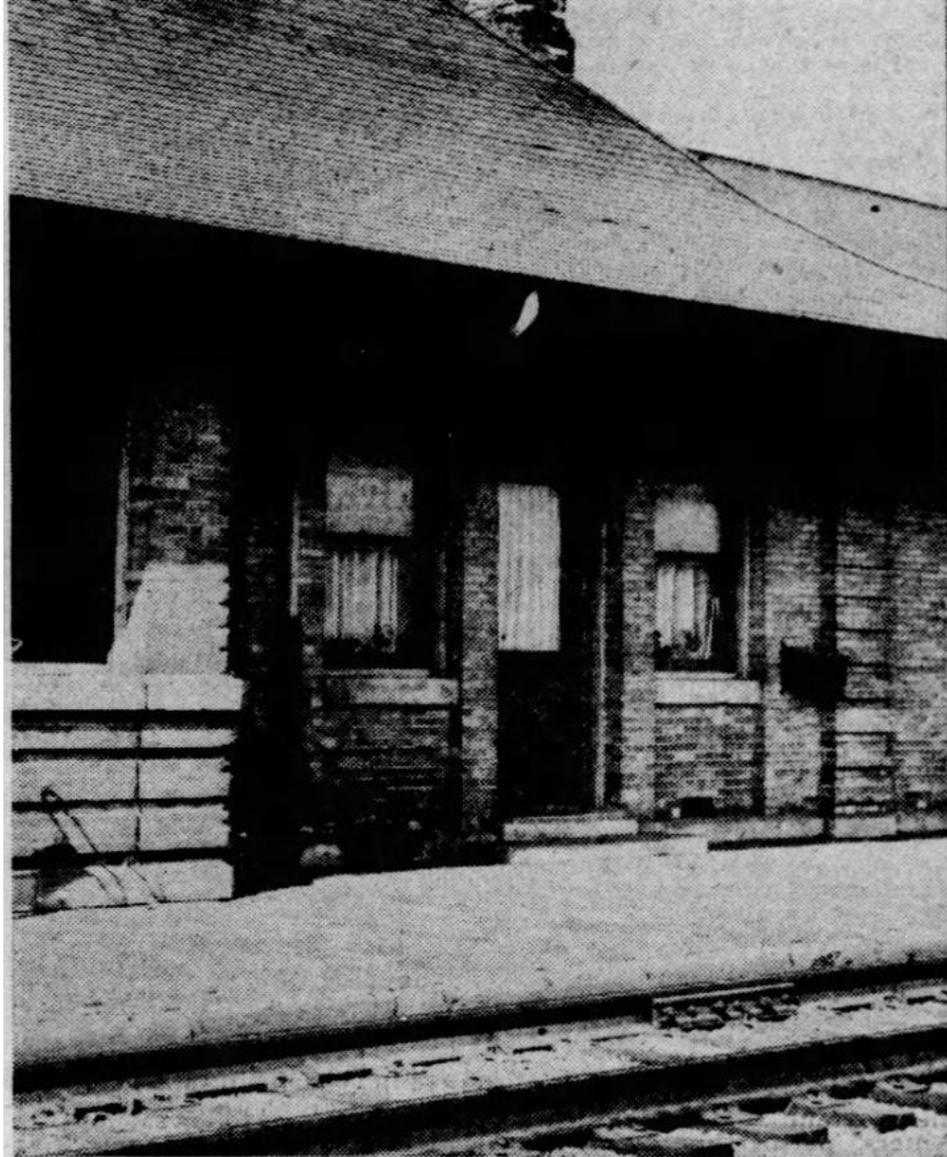
Eighteen hours later, seamen started to die from mustard gas poisoning.²² Of the more than 800 casualties hospitalized after the raid, 628 of them, nearly all of them American merchant seamen, were

affected by mustard gas and sixty-nine of those died.²³ When it was all over, more than 1,000 men were dead or missing from all causes due to the German air raid on Bari.²⁴

Bari, Italy was Keefe's last port of call because the Navy was releasing men older than 42 years old. After 27 months, Carl Keefe's second stint of Navy service came to an end in early 1945. Another Keefe was still in the military though--his 27-year-old son, Carl M. Keefe Jr., was a radioman/gunner on a B-17 bomber and stationed in Oklahoma at the time.²⁵

Keefe returned to his work as the station agent at the West Salem railroad depot.





—Tribune Photos

When Carl M. Keefe feels the urge to raid the ice-box, especially during the late afternoon hours when time wears on, he finds he has the ideal set-up. All he has to do is halt his work as station agent at West Salem's railroad depot and open the door to his apartment. He and his wife were forced to renovate one of the depot rooms for home use. A veteran of both world wars, Keefe has been assigned to West Salem since 1937. After his release from World war II, owners of his home sold, forcing the Keefes to move. The lower picture shows the curtained windows of the depot.

La Crosse Tribune, 1946 May 12, page 13

Carl Keefe worked for the railroad until he retired. His wife, Lillian, died in 1982. Carl Keefe lived to the age of 92, dying on November 20, 1987 in the Onalaska Care Center. This man, who had served his country in two world wars, is buried in the Holy Cross Cemetery in Trempealeau.²⁶

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La Crosse Public Library

Sources & Notes:

¹ Ancestry.com. *U.S., World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

² "Trempealeau, Wis." *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1912 December 12, page 8. Also: "Carl Keefe," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1914 April 9, page 2.

³ "Personals," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1914 December 31, page 4.

⁴ "Our Men in Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 June 24, page 2.

⁵ "Galesville," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1932 December 13, page 11.

⁶ "West Salem," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 July 16, page 9.

⁷ "Trempealeau," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1934 March 8, page 16.

⁸ "When Carl M. Keefe," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1946 May 12, page 13.

⁹ Carl M. Keefe obituary, *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1987 November 21, page 4.

¹⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 June 24.

¹¹ "Keefe, World War II Vet, Home to Stay," *Nonpareil-Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 February 22, page 1. For more information on supplying oil for the war effort, see: Keith Martin, "The Big Inch: Fueling America's WW II Effort," *National Institute of Standards and Technology*, 2018 March 26, <https://www.nist.gov/blogs/taking-measure/big-inch-fueling-americas-wwii-war-effort>.

¹² *Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 February 22.

¹³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 June 24.

¹⁴ *Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 February 22.

¹⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 June 24.

¹⁶ *Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 February 22.

¹⁷ *Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 February 22.

¹⁸ *Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 February 22.

¹⁹ "Naval Armed Guard at Bari, Italy," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 2007 June 23, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/n/naval-armed-guard-service-in-world-war-ii/naval-armed-guard-at-bari-italy.html>.

²⁰ Glenn B. Infield, *Disaster at Bari* (New York: Ace Books, 1971), 9.

²¹ *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 2007 June 23.

²² *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 2007 June 23.

²³ *Naval History and Heritage Command*, 2007 June 23.

²⁴ Infield, *Disaster at Bari*, 324.

²⁵ *Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 February 22.

²⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1987 November 21.