

In the Navy

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States Navy was comprised of 790 ships ranging from its seven fleet carriers to its 112 submarines. Navy personnel strength amounted to 35,000 officers and 301,600 enlisted men. With American entry into a global war and the need to project power over the seas, the United States began a crash building program that would see the numbers of ships of all types grow to a previously unimaginable figure. To man the ships that would escort war supplies and troops across the wide oceans and carry the fight to the Axis powers, the Navy would also grow its personnel strength. William Clarence Holcombe, Jr. of Greenville was among the millions of young Americans who responded to their country's crisis by becoming sailors.



Holcombe matriculated at Clemson in the late summer of 1942 with the United States already at war. An engineering major, he was assigned as a cadet private to Company I, 3rd Battalion, 1st Regiment of the Cadet Brigade. At the end of his freshman year, Holcombe left campus to join the Navy.

More than three-and-a-half million Americans entered the Navy during World War II, including nearly 95,000 women. The Navy's peak active-duty strength occurred at the end of July 1945 as it prepared for the invasion of Japan. At that point, 3.4 million Americans were serving on ships and at posts around the world. Of course, many sailors never left the United States, serving in domestic training commands, supply depots, and other stateside headquarters. That was the case with Seaman Apprentice Holcombe, whose Navy career was cut short by illness.

In June 1943, Holcombe was admitted to the Naval Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. He died there on June 17 after a brief illness.

