Those who have been reading the Archival Minutes have no doubt noticed that in reality it took considerably longer than one minute to read them. While the original intent was to publish a brief story about the Archives or an event or person from Wayne State’s history, I’m afraid I got so wrapped up in telling the stories that I went beyond the original intention. I’m not giving up on telling in-depth stories, but, for the sake of this newsletter, I’m returning to the original idea of brief stories. The current series of telling the story of Wayne State history through the lens of the Spizz will continue as I’m able to get to it, but separate from this newsletter.

Now, a (shorter) Archival Minute.

Honoring the Fallen

With the recent (re)dedication of the Veterans Memorial near Terrace Hall and 2015 being the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, I thought I’d share a story about a veteran from that war.

The 1946 Memorial Homecoming Program (June 14, 1946) honoring students who served in World War II lists 34 students who gave their lives for their country during the war (there may have actually been more; the program states “We feel that this list is incomplete.”).

One of those who gave their life was Eugene Huntemer (who often went by the name “Jean”). His father, E. J. (Edward J.) Huntemer (1885-1965), was an early Wayne State faculty member who was head of the Manual (Industrial) Arts department and designer of many of the early campus buildings (as well as some of the buildings downtown). He and his wife, Claire (1888-1976), were also co-sponsors of the Catholic Newman Club on campus.
Jean graduated from the college high school and attended Wayne State before entering the Naval Academy at Annapolis. After graduating in June 1942 he was sent to active duty in the Pacific.

On Thanksgiving Day 1942 E.J. Huntemer and his wife (who had left Wayne and were then living in Grand Island) received a message from Rear Admiral Randall Jacobs, Chief of Navy Personnel:

“The navy department deeply regrets to inform you that your son, Ensign Eugene James Huntemer, United States navy, is missing following action in the performance of his duty and in the service to his country. The department appreciates your great anxiety but details are not now available and delay in receipt thereof must necessarily be expected.”

Ensign Huntemer was serving on the destroyer U.S.S. Cushing during the Battle of Guadalcanal on November 13, 1942. (A short history of the U.S.S. Cushing here can be found here: http://destroyerhistory.org/goldplater/usscushing/; here is a longer, more detailed history: http://destroyerhistory.org/assets/pdf/wilde/376cushing_wilde.pdf) The ship was hit during the battle and eventually sank.

The Wayne Herald reported on December 3, 1942 that Mr. Huntemer wrote that “We are hoping for the best.”

In its January 28, 1943 issue the paper carried the text of a letter from Edward N. Parker, commanding officer of the U.S.S. Cushing, to the Huntemers. Parker wrote:

Ensign Huntemer was torpedo officer of the Cushing and directed the fire of the torpedoes that hit the Japanese battleship that we were in action with. He left the bridge to go down to the torpedo tubes to fire the remaining torpedoes. On the way down he was evidently
wounded as he never arrived at the location of the torpedo tubes. However, I have just recently heard from a wounded officer that your son was in the forward battle dressing station where he talked with one of the wounded officers who was saved. About that time an enemy shell burst in the battle dressing station, wounding the doctor, causing a fire and necessitating the abandonment of the station. All personnel who were alive were removed to the main deck and then, as the ship was abandoned, placed on life rafts and taken away from the ship. The ship burned before sinking.

That morning, after daybreak, the battle area was thoroughly searched and the survivors picked up and taken to shore.

Due to the fact that your son was not seen after the shop was abandoned, he was reported as “Missing in action.”

Ensign Huntemer was an intelligent and eager young man and performed well all duties as a naval officer. His conduct during three actions in which the Cushing took part was all that could be desired of an American.

May I extend to you and your family my sincere sympathy at this time and can only hope that your knowledge that your son was performing his duty in the service of our country may be of some help.

If there is any way which I can be of further service please feel free to call on me.

Yet the Huntemers remained hopeful that their son somehow survived: “‘Though this is from the commander, it is in no way final,’ writes Mr. Huntemer, who adds that he and Mrs. Huntemer are ‘expecting word from two of the officers we know were saved and who were in the battle dressing station.’”

The navy was still reporting Jean as missing six months later, which led the Huntemers “to cling to the hope that the young man may be found on an island in the south Pacific . . . .” (The Wayne Herald, May 27, 1943).

That issue of the newspaper also carried information about a letter the Huntemers received from Lieutenant (junior grade) Don Henning who was on the ship with Jean. Henning is evidently one of the officers from whom the Huntemers were waiting to hear. According to the newspaper’s account “Jean was on the bridge with him and had directed the fire of torpedoes into the Jap [sic] battleship. He then went below to direct the remaining when . . . ‘he must have been wounded.’”
The newspaper goes on to quote from Henning’s letter:

“It was on my arrival at New London [Connecticut submarine base] that I received your letter of January 21. In answer to your questions the information I can give you of Jean may be meager but possibly more in detail than other [sic] you have received.”

My battle station was the after-gun, which was put out of action by Jap [sic] fire. I then went to the battle station dressing room and was helping the doctor when Jean entered. He had apparently been wounded in the hip as when I asked him he indicated by holding his hand to his hip and said, “yes.” Then he went to lie down in a bunk on the port side of the ward room battle dressing station. Shortly after the ward was hit by two shells. It was at this time that I was injured. Only three or four men escaped. I have no idea how badly Jean was injured when he entered, but I doubt if he ever got out. He may have been killed by the second explosion or have lost consciousness when he reached the bunk. I never saw him after that meeting.

In answering your question as to the possibility of Jean reaching some island, our ship was sunk between Savo [I]sland and Guadalcanal. North of this is the island of Tuogi about 15 miles. As far as I know no one occupied Savo but undoubtedly after the battle it was searched for possible survivors. Tuogi was quite a distance off and was occupied by our forces. So I rather doubt if Jean, if put on a life raft and not rescued otherwise, got to either of these since they are both small. But still there is always hope.

The lieutenant concludes:

Jean was, as I knew him, very happy on board ship. Nothing ever seemed to bother him, he always seemed the luckiest man on board. We often stood watch together on the bridge. We went to [Catholic] mass together shortly before leaving Pearl Harbor for the south Pacific. We often talked over our days at the academy though we were of different years. After the battle I was hospitalized in Auckland, New Zealand, for two and one half months but have now fully recovered. After finishing sub school, I hope to go back to the Pacific and will endeavor on my way west, to stop and see you.

In December 1943 the Huntemers received a letter from Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox that ended all hope. *The Wayne Herald* of December 23, 1943 quoted from the letter:

After a full review of all available information, I am reluctantly forced to the conclusion that your son, Ensign Eugene James Huntemer, United States navy, is deceased, having been reported missing in action as of November 13, 1942, following the third battle of Savo [I]sland in which the U.S.S. Cushing participated.
In accordance with section 5 of public law 490, 77th congress, as amended, your son’s death is presumed to have occurred on November 14, 1943, which is the day following the expiration of an absence of 12 months.

I extend to you my sincere sympathy in your great loss and hope you may find comfort in the knowledge that your son gave his life for his country upholding the highest traditions of the navy. The navy shares in your sense of bereavement and feels the loss of his services.

Ensign Huntemer was awarded the Purple Heart posthumously in March 1944. In their son’s honor, the Huntemers were also presented the American Defense medal with the fleet clasp, the Asiatic-Pacific area campaign medal, citation from the Nebraska Advisory Defense committee bearing the signature of [Nebraska] Governor Dwight Griswold and the American Legion’s gold star citation.

In 1969 the Professor E. J. Huntemer and the Ensign Eugene Huntemer Memorial Scholarship was established at Wayne State through a gift from Claire Huntemer (widow and mother, respectively) and Marcella Huntemer Ternus (daughter and sister, respectively).