

Believe it or Not, Milkweed Equals WW II Life Jackets

When I was eleven years old, back during WW II, I lived an almost idyllic life with my brother, a year younger than I. It was hard work as my mother and father would not tolerate any slacking off, but we both had our share of jobs to do that included weeding the garden. However, we also went fishing constantly, as the fish were an important part of our family's diet.

All the Burns clan lived on one street in Buchanan, NY, with my grandmother and father at one end. For me going to my grand parents house was the height of my day as they treated me like a god. They too were hard working as well as constantly volunteering to help others who may have needed help in one way or another.

My favorite visitors to my grandparents house was the Junk man, the Vegetable Man, the Leather Man and others who never would pass up an opportunity to stop, have a sip of home made wine by using a rubber hose, thrusting it down inside the barrel and pulling out a "swallow". Then we would sit under the apple tree in the back yard and "talk".

One day the Junk Man with his horse and carriage pulled up and, after the usual temptation, began telling my grandfather that there was a serious need for children to collect the flax from the local milkweed plants.

by Jack Burns



Monarch Butterfly on a Milkweed plant.



Milkweed filled World War II life jackets.

Today, nature lovers treasure the common milkweed because it offers crucial habitat to the monarch butterfly. But back in 1944, military planners treasured the plant as a raw material in the war against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

Milkweed seeds have white, wispy hairs referred to as "floss." When the seed pod cracks open, the seeds are distributed by the winds, an ingenious evolutionary adaptation employed by the dandelion, cottonwood tree and many other species.

In an era before the pervasive use of synthetic fibers, the value of milkweed floss lay in its buoyancy. The armed forces used it in the manufacture of life preservers needed for its airmen and sailors. Life preservers were critical to Allied success, since so much of the war was fought on or over the seas.

Milkweed, though, was not the first choice for life preserver stuffing. During World War II, the Japanese gained control of the Dutch East Indies (today Indonesia), cutting off the main U.S. supply of floss, which came from the tropical kapok tree. Like the common milkweed, delicate strands of cotton-like fiber carry aloft kapok seeds.

Luckily, milkweed proved an acceptable substitute. One problem, though, was that it would take upward of three years to produce a commercial crop. Thus the government had no choice but to make the unusual call for the collection of seed pods wherever

Milkweed grew wild in the forty acres of fields behind my grandparent's house, and many others fields within walking distance of our home. My brother and I, and many other young people in town, collected the milkweed pods in onion sacks and had it ready for the junk man to take on his next round. No one received any reward for his or her efforts it was just something that you did for the war effort.

I found out later that the first year of milkweed collection a million pounds was processed from 29 states east of the Rocky Mountains for this purpose.

Interestingly enough one of the most serious and satisfactory story's to come out of WW II was the direct affect these milkweed plants had on survivors of the terrible tragedy, the sinking of the cruiser Indianapolis. This ship was sunk in the closing days of the war by a Japanese submarine.

The Indianapolis had just dropped off the original atomic bomb to the island that was used as the staging area for B 29's attacking Japan. The ship had only left the island overnight, when one of the largest subs in the Japanese navy fired a salvo of torpedo's that did its terrible work.

The ship was under secret orders and did not report its position, even after it was struck. For three days and nights the sailors who were in the shark-infested waters, kicked away the sharks, many to no avail as they floated in their milkweed filled life jackets.

This book *Indianapolis: The True Story of the Worst Sea Disaster in U.S. Naval History and the Fifty-Year Fight to Exonerate an Innocent Man* by Lynn Vincent and Sara Vladic is available on Amazon.com

Today the common milkweed plant has disappeared, just as the fields did due to the tremendous buildup of homes and business's in Buchanan, NY and many locations throughout the Northeast Pollinated Pathway of the Monarch Butterfly.

Without a major effort to stop the eradication of what is left of the common milkweed plant, the Monarch Butterfly will be doomed!