

Sheboygan's Donald Yecke died in World War II at age 20. People across the globe continue to honor the memory of him and his shipmates.

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Published 6:00 a.m. CT Nov. 15, 2021

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SHEBOYGAN - Dennis Yecke, 89, visited Sheboygan for one last time on a weekend in late October.

Yecke, who now lives in Red Wing, Minnesota, was born and raised in Sheboygan and came back to relive memories of his "wonderful" childhood here, he said.

For him, the city is full of memories and memorials of his older brother Donald's life and death, from the bakery where the two of them used to work to the place his brother's name is etched in stone at [Urban Middle School](#), formerly [North High School](#), in recognition of giving his life in World War II.



Donald Yecke in Nov. 1944. Donald Yecke was a 2nd Class Petty Officer Baker aboard the USS Emmons. Courtesy Of Cheri Yecke

Donald Yecke was drafted into the [Navy](#) at age 19 and was a baker on the [USS Emmons](#) destroyer until he died in the [Battle of Okinawa](#) on April 6, 1945 — four months before Japan announced the surrender that ended the war. Survivors of the battle and their family members still maintain connections, and annual dives to the sunken ship honor the sacrifices of men in the battle.

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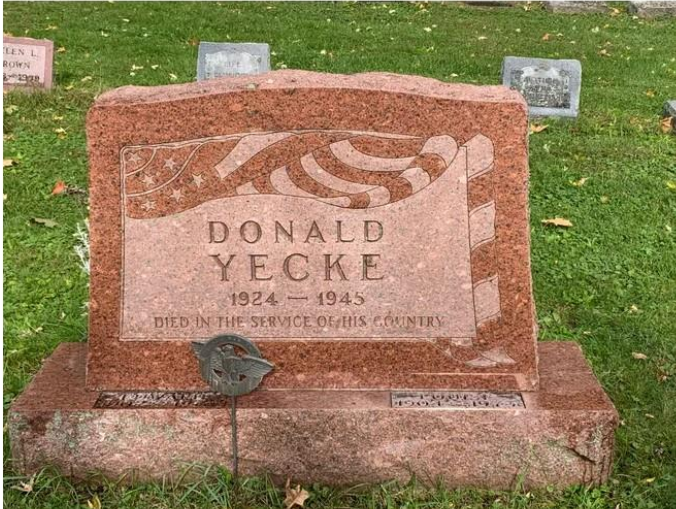
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Swimming, baking, and buckets of beer: Dennis Yecke remembers 1940s Sheboygan



A gravestone for Donald Yecke, 1924 - 1945, in Wildwood Cemetery in Sheboygan. Courtesy Of Cheri Yecke

Donald Yecke graduated from North High School in the early 1940s — as would Dennis in 1950. Both brothers were confirmed at [St. Paul's Lutheran Church](#) and worked at [City Bakery](#).

On his recent trip to Sheboygan, Dennis Yecke crisscrossed the city visiting these and other sites.

"The fact that City Bakery is still open was a huge thing for him," said Cheri Yecke, Dennis's daughter-in-law. The two went into the backroom and saw that the oven, mixer and big table were still there from 75 to 80 years ago when Dennis and Donald worked at the bakery.

Other things have changed.

Yecke remembers swimming in the Sheboygan quarry on a whim (now a [beach and water park](#)), and remembers kids sometimes being sent from home to retrieve a bucket of beer at the end of the day.



Dennis Yecke, age 6, at a kindergarten maypole event circa May 1938. Yecke is standing in the front row third from left. Courtesy Of Cheri Yecke

He also remembers being called out of school one day in 1945.

"He remembered walking home very slowly and knowing the whole time that there was bad news at the other end," Cheri Yecke said. "He knew that the only reason he was going to be called out of school was if something had happened to his brother."

Dennis Yecke had been just a boy when his brother left to fight in World War II.

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Donald Yecke's service on the USS Emmons 'speaks volumes' about the sacrifices of a generation

Donald Yecke joined the crew of the USS *Emmons* in October 1943, shortly after graduating from high school.

"Everyone knew Donald," Dennis Yecke said. "Because he was baker, and there's only one baker on the ship, so he was one of the favorites. If somebody'd want something to eat, they'd come sit down in the galley and he'd give them something sweet."

The USS *Emmons* was a formidable destroyer and "well-honored ship," Dennis Yecke said.

On the [D-Day](#) invasion of Normandy, France, in June 1944, the USS *Emmons* was the first ship to be fired on and the first ship to return fire to the German military, he said.





"Target of Opportunity," a painting by U.S. Navy combat artist Dwight Shepler of the USS *Emmons* in battle at Normandy, France. Courtesy Of The USS *Emmons* Association

After fighting in southern France and Italy, the ship turned to the Pacific to support the U.S. invasion of Japan. On April 6 — the "worst day of the war," where more ships were sunk than any other day, Dennis Yecke said — the USS *Emmons* was hit by five Japanese kamikaze planes.

The attack killed about 60 [members of the crew](#), including Donald Yecke, whose battle duty was helping to man one of the ship's guns.

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As the crew abandoned the burning ship after the attack, wounded men were thrown overboard and pulled onto life rafts, including Yecke, but several eyewitness accounts noted that he had already passed. A month before his 21st birthday, he was buried at sea.

Cheri Yecke recently completed a [book](#) where she transcribed eyewitness accounts written by 60 men within two days of the attack, and described the sacrifices of men on the USS *Emmons* as extremely humbling.



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“Their letters were run-on sentences, there was no punctuation, it was like a stream of consciousness, and you could tell that their emotions were still running high from having seen and experienced what they did,” she said.

“You look at the ages of these young men who wrote the letters — 18, 19, maybe 23. One who was 24 was called ‘Pappy’ because he was so much older than the others,” she went on. “It just speaks volumes about that generation and the sacrifices they made.”

USS *Emmons* shipmates remembered with annual dives and reunions




The USS Emmons DD-457/DMS-22 destroyer, pictured in 1943. Courtesy Of The USS Emmons Association

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The badly damaged USS *Emmons* was purposefully sunk by gunfire from another U.S. ship after the April 6 attack, and was discovered in the waters off Okinawa about 20 years ago.

Since then, American and Japanese divers have taken care of the ship, going every year to place flowers, wreaths and flags on it, Dennis Yecke said.

The USS *Emmons* Association also works to preserve the memory of the ship and facilitate relationships among family and friends of its former crew members, as well as representatives from Japan, with annual reunions.

Dennis Yecke and his son belong to the association and have met with Donald's shipmates several times, he said. With the ship having sunk more than 76 years ago, there are now only three living shipmates, he said.

According to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, about 240,000 of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II — now in their 90s or older — are alive in 2021.

Others in the Yecke family have continued the family's military tradition, including some of Dennis Yecke's sons and grandsons, who are retired service members, he said.



Dennis J. Yecke in 1973. The sons of Dennis E. Yecke carried on the family's tradition of military service. *Courtesy Of Cheri Yecke*



Donald Yecke in 1977 (The namesake of Donald who was killed aboard the USS *Emmons*). The sons of Dennis E. Yecke carried on the family's tradition of military service. *Courtesy Of Cheri Yecke*



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