

1945 November 26-December 2

From Red Raider to Marine Raider

Marine With Carlson's Raiders Gets Release, Has 131 Points

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 2, page 13)



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 March 5, page 7)

Julius Wittenberg of La Crosse was a kid from a broken home who made his mark as a high school athlete and went on to become a member of one of the elite fighting units of World War II.

Julius C. Wittenberg was born on May 2, 1920, in La Crosse to Frank and Sylvia (Miles) Wittenberg.¹ He was named after his grandfather, Julius Wittenberg.² Frank Wittenberg was a painter and wallpaper hanger.³

Young Julius was just four years old when Sylvia Wittenberg filed for divorce in September 1924 from her husband of 18 years. She alleged that Frank Wittenberg had "repeatedly struck her, used abusive language toward her and failed to properly support her."⁴

Four years later, Frank Wittenberg was living in Waupun, Wisconsin.⁵ He had taken a job as a guard at the Wisconsin state prison in Waupun. Julius, and his brother, Frank Jr., who was two years older, lived with their father at Waupun, as did a 21-year-old housekeeper named Virginia H. Ebner.⁶

Sylvia Wittenberg had also moved on. In October 1929, she married Arthur Hoeft in the German Lutheran parsonage in Caledonia, Minnesota.⁷ Arthur Hoeft of La Crosse was a veteran of World War I.⁸ In 1924, he had started working for his sister, Helen Mae Hoeft, at the Paramount Photo Shop at 225 Main Street. Helen Hoeft and photographer Millard Reynolds had created the first mail-order photo finishing business in the nation, and she named it Ray's Photo Service. For 25 cents a roll, anyone in the country could mail their film to La Crosse for hand processing into prints. At one time, their photo-finishing business employed 150 people working in three shifts to keep up with the business.⁹ Arthur and Sylvia Hoeft lived by themselves in a rental at 609 King Street.¹⁰

Sylvia's two sons would visit La Crosse on occasion. In August 1931, one of their visits turned into a near-tragedy. Thirteen-year-old Frank Jr. and 11-year-old Julius were playing in the Hoeft residence when they found a .32-caliber revolver in the pocket of a coat stored in a closet. Although the pistol was unloaded, they found a bullet and put it into one of the chambers. A short time later, forgetting that there was a bullet in the gun, Frank pulled the trigger and shot Julius in the shoulder. Julius was taken by ambulance to a local hospital for treatment. Fortunately for him, the wound was not serious.¹¹

By late 1931, Arthur and Sylvia Hoeft were living at 531 Main Street.¹² When they hosted a Christmas Day party for Sylvia's two sons in 1932, they were living at 215 Ferry Street.¹³

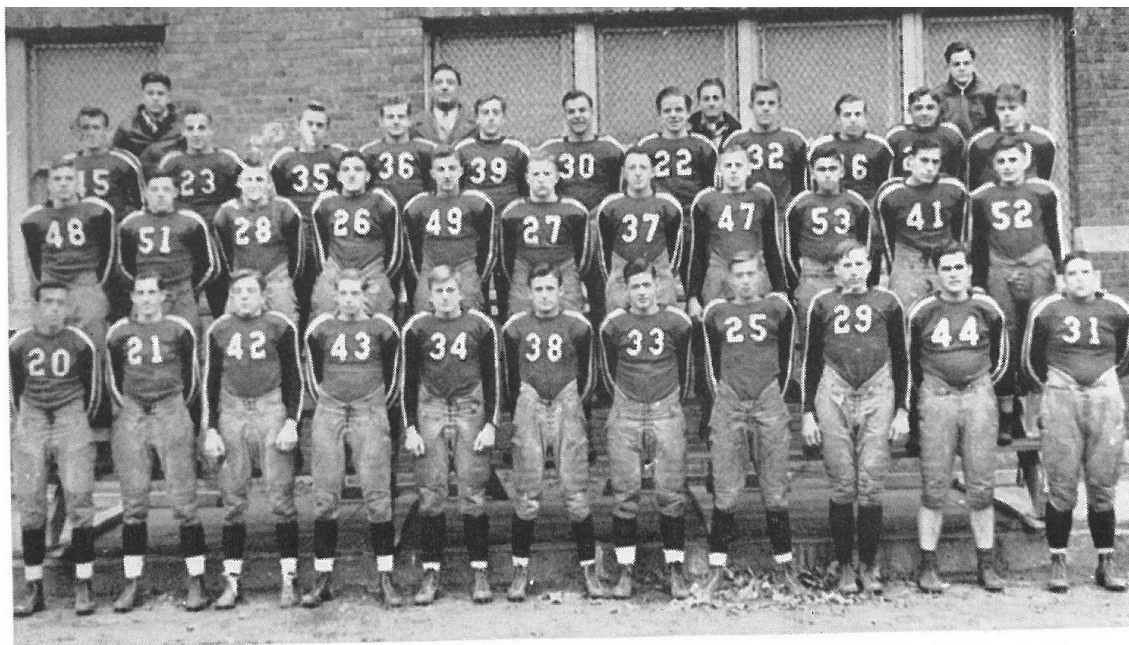
In January 1935, Julius Wittenberg's life would be upended again. His father, Frank J. Wittenberg, died at the age of 47.¹⁴ Frank Wittenberg had been in poor health, and he went through three operations. He died about a month after the last one, performed in Madison, in late 1934. His body was brought back to La Crosse for a funeral at the home of one of his sisters, and he was buried in Oak Grove Cemetery.¹⁵

Frank Wittenberg, Jr. and 14-year-old Julius Wittenberg moved to La Crosse to live with their mother and stepfather, Arthur Hoeft.

Julius Wittenberg graduated from La Crosse Central High School in June 1938.¹⁶ He was a multi-sport athlete for the Red Raiders.

Wittenberg, a running back on the football team coached by the legendary Walter (Babe) Weigent, made his mark early in the 1937 season with an outstanding game against Winona Cotter. The five-foot, nine-inch "powerhouse" scored 20 of Central's 38 points, including a 99-yard interception return for a touchdown. He was also the kicker for extra points.¹⁷ In a game against Chippewa Falls that ended in a scoreless tie, Wittenberg carried the ball on nine straight plays in the fourth quarter to gain four first downs.¹⁸ In the final game of the season, Wittenberg kicked the extra point to tie the game against Logan High School. A reporter called that extra point "the most valuable Central point of the season." The *La Crosse Tribune* described the game this way:

Playing the greatest game ever exhibited in the 10 years of competition between the two schools, hard-fighting football machines of Logan and Central high schools battled to a brilliant, thrill-filled 13-13 deadlock at the Teachers college field Saturday before an overflow audience.¹⁹



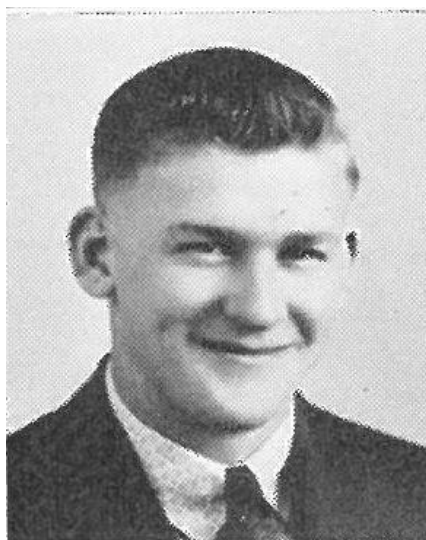
Top Row—R. Delphenic, Coach Weigent, F. Kingdon, N. Mahoney. *Second Row*—R. Deal, R. Johnson, J. Rau, D. Niemeyer, E. Zoerb, W. Rose, R. Rennebohm, K. Thompson, E. Lentz, F. Guenther, J. Anderson. *Third Row*—E. Morse, R. Olsen, J. Wittenberg, A. Abraham, G. Naegle, R. Wallace, J. Howe, L. Gobis, R. Reichgelt, A. Wicks, R. Keller. *Front Row*—J. Jungbluth, R. Stuckey, W. Riley, D. Faustman, G. Johnson, D. Waterman, J. Krause, F. Swertfeger, H. Schultz, J. Hillebrandt, W. Loveland.

1937 La Crosse Central Football Team

Julius Wittenberg is #28

(*Booster*, 1938 La Crosse Central yearbook, page 90)²⁰

Julius Wittenberg also played basketball, volleyball, hockey, baseball, and track and field in his three years at La Central High School. He was the vice-president of the senior class.²¹



Julius Wittenberg

(*Booster*, 1938 La Crosse Central yearbook, page 42)

Just after Julius Wittenberg graduated from high school in June 1938, his older brother, Frank, who was working for the Hoeft family at the Paramount Photo shop, married Wallie Rathke of La Crosse.²²

The younger Wittenberg chose a different path. He worked at Ruplin's bakery after graduating from high school for a time.²³ Perhaps looking for some excitement, Wittenberg joined the United States Marines on August 15, 1939, in Chicago. After boot camp, he was stationed in San Diego. Wittenberg was transferred to Hawaii on October 14, 1939, where he was stationed at the Marine barracks at [Hickam Field](#). He was a member of the 8th Marine Regiment of the 2nd Marine Division.²⁴

It would be two years before Wittenberg saw La Crosse again. In November 1941, he was granted a 15-day furlough to visit his mother at 215 Ferry Street, and his brother, who lived at 1223 S. 4th Street.²⁵ After his furlough, his next duty station was to be San Diego.²⁶

Wittenberg was still in La Crosse when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He left for San Diego on December 8 with his nation now at war.²⁷



(La Crosse Tribune, 1941 December 8, page 7)

Probably within months of arriving in San Diego, Wittenberg became involved in one of the elite units of the United States armed forces during World War II.

United State Marines were stationed in China when the Japanese and Chinese were already at war in the 1930s. Captain [Evans Carlson](#) learned to speak Chinese and asked Chinese Communist leader [Mao Tse-tung](#) if he could spend some time with his army in the field. From that experience, Carlson gained valuable experience on how to use guerilla tactics to fight the Japanese.²⁸ President Franklin Roosevelt requested personal reports from Carlson on the people and conditions in China. Carlson was not shy about using this personal connection with Roosevelt later on.²⁹

In 1941, Carlson proposed the creation of an elite commando-type unit within the Marines. This would become the [1st and 2nd Marine Raider Battalions](#). Colonel [Merritt Edson](#) commanded the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, and Major Evans Carlson commanded the 2nd Marine Raider Battalion. The executive officer of the 2nd Battalion was Captain [James Roosevelt](#), son of President Roosevelt. With his direct Roosevelt channel, Carlson made sure his unit had the best equipment available.³⁰

[Marine Raiders](#) were hand-picked volunteers who went through strenuous physical training, marksmanship practice with a wide variety of weapons, and hand-to-hand combat training. Carlson's 2nd Battalion, Wittenberg's unit, adopted his "gung ho" (Chinese for "work together") philosophy. Rank was ignored, and Carlson had daily meetings with his men and large-group discussions once a week where everyone could speak freely. Carlson also developed the idea of the [fire team](#) by dividing his heavily-armed ten-man squads into three fire teams, each with an automatic rifle, a submachine gun, and a rifle, that could operate independently. This tactical concept was later adopted by both the Marines and the Army.³¹



Marine Raider patch
([International Military Antiques](#))

Corporal Julius Wittenberg was part of the bold raid by two companies of Carlson's 2nd Battalion on Makin Island in the Gilbert Islands on August 17 and 18, 1942.³² Two submarines transported them from Hawaii to Makin, and the Marines landed using rubber boats. In a first-person account, Lt. W. S. Le

Francois described the initial advance: "Sergeant Thomason . . . led the reconnoitering group across the island, following the course of a shallow ditch for cover. He was followed by the squads commanded by Corporals Pisker, Debosik and Witenburg (sic). Corporal Young was at the head of the column, waiting my arrival before going farther."³³ The Marines killed most of the Japanese on the island, but the action cost them 18 killed in action and 12 missing. Nine of the missing surrendered after 12 days on the run and were later beheaded by the Japanese.³⁴

Wittenberg's next action was at [Guadalcanal](#) in November and December 1942 where he was with the 2nd Raider Battalion on their 30-day mission behind Japanese lines. They ambushed, attacked, and harassed the Japanese day and night. The 2nd Raider Battalion received a unit citation for this operation.³⁵ The "Long Patrol" had killed 488 Japanese soldiers while the Marine Raiders suffered 16 dead and 18 wounded.³⁶

After Guadalcanal, the Raiders were sent to a rest camp. Wittenberg wrote to his mother on December 20, 1942, that his unit had been through some "terrible fighting." "He wrote that he was well and that cigarettes were plentiful." Wittenberg also indicated that the best gifts from home were candy, gum, and cookies.³⁷

On November 1, 1943, Wittenberg landed on [Bougainville](#) with the 2nd Raider Battalion where they fought for two and one-half months.³⁸ Bougainville was to be the last operation for the Marine Raiders.

Men were needed for the newly-created 5th and 6th Marine Divisions. The battlefield of the Pacific war had changed to the point where there was not a demand for special commando-type units. There was also resentment over the siphoning of the best personnel and equipment to elite units in what was already considered an elite branch of the armed forces. General [Alexander Vandegrift](#), Commandant of the Marine Corps, disbanded special Marine units on January 8, 1944. Wittenberg's 2nd Raider Battalion became the weapons company for the [4th Marine Regiment](#).³⁹

Evans Carlson, who was considered somewhat of an eccentric outlier by his peers in the Marine Corps, was also resented for using his connections to President Roosevelt to get whatever he wanted. He continued to serve in the Pacific Theater, but Carlson was never given command of another unit.⁴⁰



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 2, page 13)

Wittenberg was back home in La Crosse in early March 1944 for a 30-day leave. He brought with him a Japanese rifle and ammunition belt as war souvenirs. His mother had not seen him for more than two years.⁴¹ Following his leave, Wittenberg reported to [Camp Pendleton](#) in California.⁴²

Sgt. Julius Wittenberg was with the [5th Marine Division](#) when they hit the beach at [Iwo Jima](#) in early 1945. He was wounded there on March 12. His brother, Frank, who was now also in the Marines, was wounded on Iwo Jima too. Frank was hospitalized in Guam.⁴³ Julius Wittenberg, the man who had said a year earlier he had been lucky not be wounded ("They can keep their purple hearts."), now had a Purple Heart of his own.⁴⁴

Julius Wittenberg, injured by a hand grenade, spent two weeks in an Army hospital in Guam before being sent to Hawaii for another week of treatment. Then he returned to his division, which was back in training in Hawaii. They were still in Hawaii when the war ended. Wittenberg went to Japan as part of the occupation forces for a few months. Sgt Wittenberg was discharged from the Marine Corps on November 21, 1945, at the Great Lakes separation center at Chicago.⁴⁵

When he applied for a marriage license in April 1953, his address was shown as the YMCA.⁴⁶ Julius Wittenberg was working for Joseph Leinfelder and Sons when he married Marilyn Joan Herlitzka of 618 La Crosse Street at the St. John's Evangelical and Reformed parsonage on the evening of April 10, 1953. The newlyweds lived at 1116 East Avenue in La Crosse.⁴⁷ They would have a son and a daughter together.⁴⁸

Red Cloud Park in La Crosse was dedicated on Sunday, May 26, 1957; it was named in honor of Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud of Black River Falls who was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for sacrificing his life to save his Army infantry comrades on November 5, 1950, during the Korean War. Julius Wittenberg was one of the guests of honor. So was Robert Dwyer of La Crosse. Mitchell Red Cloud had been a member of Carlson's Raiders, as were Wittenberg and Dwyer, during World War II.⁴⁹



(Wisconsinhistoricalmarkers.com)



Front: Edward Svach, a member of Mitchell Red Cloud's unit in Korea; Nellie Red Cloud, Mitchell's mother.

Back: Robert Dwyer and Julius Wittenberg, members of 2nd Battalion Marine Raiders with Mitchell Red Cloud during World War II

(La Crosse Tribune, 1957 May 27, page 11)

Compared to his adventures during the war, civilian life must have seemed mundane to Julius Wittenberg. He joined the local Veterans of Foreign Wars in late 1948.⁵⁰ Wittenberg was also a member

of the Masonic Lodge.⁵¹ Wittenberg liked to go fishing and play pinochle.⁵² He was a volunteer for Meals on Wheels.⁵³

In 1963, Wittenberg was one of 16 men nominated for the position of La Crosse County Veterans Service Officer. He did not receive any votes in the first round of voting and was eliminated from consideration.⁵⁴

Julius Wittenberg's last job before retirement was with the United States Postal Service.⁵⁵

Julius C. Wittenberg died at Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center in La Crosse on April 21, 1997. He was 76 years old. Memorials were directed to St. John's United Church of Christ.⁵⁶



Wittenberg

(La Crosse Tribune, 1997 April 23, page B4)

La Crosse Central High School recently announced the retirement of the "Red Raider" nickname, 26 years after the depiction of a Native American in its logo was discarded. This action was met with mixed reactions by Central alumni.⁵⁷ No matter whether one believes the "Red Raider" nickname is a sign of respect for Native Americans or a hurtful stereotype, there is no doubt that Julius Wittenberg and his comrades earned the moniker "Marine Raiders."

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Sources & Notes:

- ¹ "Julius C. Wittenberg," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1997 April 23, page B4.
- ² "Julius Wittenberg funeral," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1928 March 9, page 6.
- ³ "Restraining Order In Electric Case Is Asked Of Belden," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1923 January 9, page 1. In "W. Freitag Loses Suit Over Papering Job," Wittenberg was called as an "expert witness" in a civil lawsuit alleging a faulty job of wallpapering some rooms at the Adolph C. Knutson home.
- ⁴ "Four Wives Seek Divorces; Cruelty Is Charged By All," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1924 September 17, page 6.
- ⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1928 March 9.
- ⁶ 1930 U.S. census, Dodge County, Wisconsin, population schedule, Waupun, p. 3A, dwelling 57, family 68, Frank T. Wittenberg; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 December 6); citing NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 2667.
- ⁷ "Two La Crosse Couples Wedded At Caledonia," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1929 October 22, page 9.
- ⁸ "Arthur H. Hoeft," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1962 February 27, page 10.
- ⁹ "Mail Order Photo Business Pioneered By Local Woman," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1954 March 14, page 25. Others copied her business model, and La Crosse was the home to 15 different mail-order photo processing businesses in the early 1930s.
- ¹⁰ 1930 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse, p. 3A, dwelling 361, family 447, Arthur N. and Sylvia Hoeft; image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 December 6); citing NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 2667.
- ¹¹ "11-Year-Old Youth Accidentally Shot By Older Brother," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1931 August 21, page 1.
- ¹² "Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hoeft," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1931 November 25, page 5.
- ¹³ "Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hoeft," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1932 December 12, page 4.
- ¹⁴ "Frank J. Wittenberg," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1935 January 25, page 6.
- ¹⁵ "Announcement Of Frank Wittenberg Death Premature," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1935 January 26, page 1. When his mother called relatives in La Crosse on January 25th, her message was misinterpreted to indicate that Frank had already died. That was not the case, but he did die later that same evening.
- ¹⁶ "Marine Corporal At Hickam Field Leaves After Visit With Parents," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 December 8, page 7.
- ¹⁷ "Wittenberg Runs 99 Yards As Central Wins, 38-0," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1937 September 19, page 13.
- ¹⁸ "Central, Chippewa Falls Battle to Scoreless Tie," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1937 October 10, page 10.
- ¹⁹ "Central Retains Ark In 13-13 Tie With Logan," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1937 November 14, page 12.
- ²⁰ George Naegle, #49, was killed in the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, while serving on the battleship *Oklahoma*. His remains were positively identified and returned to La Crosse for burial just last year. (Steve Cahalan, "At long last, a proper burial," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2019 March 31, page A1.)
- ²¹ *Booster* [La Crosse Central High School yearbook] (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Central High School, 1938), 42. His freshman year of high school was at Waupun.
- ²² "Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hoeft," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1938 June 22, page 8.
- ²³ "Returns To Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 24, page 18.
- ²⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1941 December 8.
- ²⁵ "Here From Hawaii," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 November 20, page 16.
- ²⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1941 December 8.
- ²⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1941 December 8.
- ²⁸ Col. Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret.), *A Fellowship of Valor: The Battle History of the United States Marines* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 62.

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- ²⁹ Thomas Parrish, ed., *The Simon and Schuster Encyclopedia of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 105.
- ³⁰ Michael Tesluk, "The Marines' Comma," *Naval History*, 2014 August, https://www.usna.edu/History/_files/documents/Tesluk%20paper.pdf
- ³¹ Tesluk.
- ³² "Marine Sergeant From South Pacific Makes Surprise Visit To Home Here," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 March 5, page 7.
- ³³ S. E. Smith, ed., *The United States Marine Corps in World War II, Vol. I Beginning's End* (New York: Ace Books, 1969), 255-256. Sgt. Clyde Thomason was killed during this operation, and he was the first enlisted Marine to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor during World War II. (Cpl. Jacques-Rene' Hebert, "Marine Raider headed for home," *Hawaii Marine*, 2001 May 17, https://static.dvidshub.net/media/pubs/pdf_22606.pdf.)
- ³⁴ Patrick K. O'Donnell, "Marine veterans recount daring raid on Makin Atoll," *Marine Corps Times*, 2019 November 4, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/military-honor/salute-veterans/2019/11/04/marine-veterans-recount-daring-raid-on-makin-atoll/>. Private First Class Norman Mortensen of Camp Douglas, Wisconsin, was one of the Marines killed in the Makin raid. His remains were recovered in November 1999 and buried at Camp Douglas. (Cpl. Jacques-Rene' Hebert, "Marine Raider headed for home," *Hawaii Marine*, 2001 May 17, https://static.dvidshub.net/media/pubs/pdf_22606.pdf.) For a list of those killed in the Makin Island raid, see <https://www.naval-history.net/WW2UScasaaDB-USMCbyDate4208.htm>. Although the raid was initially viewed as a success, it alerted the Japanese to the need for better defenses in the Gilbert Islands. The island of Betio was fortified, and this caused horrific casualties for the Marines when they invaded the Tarawa atoll in 1943.
- ³⁵ "La Crosse Man Serves With Famous U.S. Marine Corps Carlson Raiders," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 October 3, page 3.
- ³⁶ Major Jon T. Hoffman, "From Makin to Bougainville: Marine Raiders in the Pacific War," *United States Marine Corps University*, accessed 2020 December 6, page 22, <https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/From%20Makin%20to%20Bougainville-Marine%20Raiders%20in%20the%20Pacific%20War%20PCN%2019000313000.pdf?ver=2018-10-30-102328-017>.
- ³⁷ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 February 17, page 13.
- ³⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 March 5.
- ³⁹ Hoffman, 38-40.
- ⁴⁰ Parrish, 107.
- ⁴¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 March 5.
- ⁴² "Raider Member, Veteran Of Four Pacific Battles, Home on Furlough," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 May 21, page 3. This is an article about Corporal Robert Dwyer, of 1523 George Street in La Crosse, who was also a member of Carlson's Raiders. Wittenberg is mentioned at the very end of the article.
- ⁴³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 May 24.
- ⁴⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1944 March 5.
- ⁴⁵ "Marine With Carlson's Raiders Gets Release, Has 131 Points," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 December 2, page 13.
- ⁴⁶ "Marriage Licenses," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1953 April 6, page 12.
- ⁴⁷ "Herlitzka, Wittenberg," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1953 April 14, page 7.
- ⁴⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1997 April 23.
- ⁴⁹ "Dedication Ceremonies At Red Cloud Park Sunday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1957 May 23, page 1.
- ⁵⁰ "V.F.W.," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1948 November 30, page 3.
- ⁵¹ "Masonic Organizations In City Install New Officers," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1957 January 20, page 12.
- ⁵² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1997 April 23.
- ⁵³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1997 April 23.
- ⁵⁴ "County Board Proceedings--Election, County Veterans Service Officer," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1963 December 17, page 14.
- ⁵⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1997 April 23.

⁵⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1997 April 23.

⁵⁷ Olivia Herken, "Team name, mascot retires," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2020 November 10, page A1.