

WWII Homefront articles

Article I- After the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on the American naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the U.S. was thrust into World War II (1939-45), and everyday life across the country was dramatically altered. Food, gas and clothing were rationed. Communities conducted scrap metal drives. To help build the armaments necessary to win the war, women found employment as electricians, welders and riveters in defense plants. Japanese Americans had their rights as citizens stripped from them. People in the U.S. grew increasingly dependent on radio reports for news of the fighting overseas. And, while popular entertainment served to demonize the nation's enemies, it also was viewed as an escapist outlet that allowed Americans brief respites from war worries.

The Task of Winning the War

On December 7, 1941, the U.S. was thrust into World War II when Japan launched a surprise attack on the American naval fleet at Pearl Harbor. The following day, America and Great Britain declared war on Japan. On December 10, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S.

Did you know? During World War II, as an alternative to rationing, Americans planted "victory gardens," in which they grew their own food. By 1945, some 20 million such gardens were in use and accounted for about 40 percent of all vegetables consumed in the U.S.

In the earliest days of America's participation in the war, panic gripped the country. If the Japanese military could successfully attack Hawaii and inflict damage on the naval fleet and casualties among innocent civilians, many people wondered what was to prevent a similar assault on the U.S. mainland, particularly along the Pacific coast.

This fear of attack translated into a ready acceptance by a majority of Americans of the need to sacrifice in order to achieve victory. During the spring of 1942, a rationing program was established that set limits on the amount of gas, food and clothing consumers could purchase. Families were issued ration stamps that were used to buy their allotment of everything from meat, sugar, fat, butter, vegetables and fruit to gas, tires, clothing and fuel oil. The United States Office of War Information released posters in which Americans were urged to "Do with less—so they'll have enough" ("they" referred to U.S. troops). Meanwhile, individuals and communities conducted drives for the collection of scrap metal, aluminum cans and rubber, all of which were recycled and used to produce armaments. Individuals purchased U.S. war bonds to help pay for the high cost of armed conflict.

READ MORE: [These World War II Propaganda Posters Rallied the Home Front](#)

The Role of the American Worker

From the outset of the war, it was clear that enormous quantities of airplanes, tanks, warships, rifles and other armaments would be essential to beating America's aggressors. U.S. workers played a vital role in the production of such war-related materials. Many of these workers were women. Indeed, with tens of thousands of

American men joining the armed forces and heading into training and into battle, women began securing jobs as welders, electricians and riveters in defense plants. Until that time, such positions had been strictly for men only.

A woman who toiled in the defense industry came to be known as a “Rosie the Riveter.” The term was popularized in a song of the same name that in 1942 became a hit for bandleader Kay Kyser (1905-85). Soon afterward, Walter Pidgeon (1897-1984), a Hollywood leading man, traveled to the Willow Run aircraft plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan, to make a promotional film encouraging the sale of war bonds. One of the women employed at the factory, Rose Will Monroe (1920-97), was a riveter involved in the construction of B-24 and B-29 bombers. Monroe, a real-life Rosie the Riveter, was recruited to appear in Pidgeon’s film.

During the war years, the decrease in the availability of men in the work force also led to an upsurge in the number of women holding non-war-related factory jobs. By the mid-1940s, the percentage of women in the American work force had expanded from 25 percent to 36 percent.

The Plight of Japanese Americans

Not all American citizens were allowed to retain their independence during World War II. Just over two months after Pearl Harbor, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945) signed into law Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the removal from their communities and the subsequent imprisonment of all Americans of Japanese descent who resided on the West Coast.

Executive Order 9066 was the offshoot of a combination of wartime panic and the belief on the part of some that anyone of Japanese ancestry, even those who were born in the U.S., was somehow capable of disloyalty and treachery. As a result of the order, nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans were dispatched to makeshift “relocation” camps. Despite the internment of their family members, young Japanese-American men fought bravely in Italy, France and Germany between 1943 and 1945 as members of the U.S. Army’s 100th Battalion, 442nd Infantry. By the end of the war, the 100th had become the most decorated combat unit of its size in Army history.

Baseball and the Battlefield

In January 1942, Kenesaw Mountain Landis (1866-1944), the national commissioner of baseball, wrote a letter to President Roosevelt in which he asked if professional baseball should shut down for the duration of the war. In what came to be known as the “green light” letter, Roosevelt responded that professional baseball should continue operations, as it was good for the country’s collective morale and would serve as a needed diversion.

During the war, 95 percent of all professional baseball players who donned major league uniforms during the 1941 season were directly involved in the conflict. Future Hall of Famers Bob Feller (1918-), Hank Greenberg (1911-86), Joe DiMaggio (1914-99) and Ted Williams (1918-2002) exchanged their baseball jerseys for military fatigues. Feller,

in fact, enlisted in the U.S. Navy one day after Pearl Harbor. Because baseball was depleted of so many able bodies, athletes who otherwise likely never would have made the big leagues won spots on rosters. One of the more notable was Pete Gray (1915-2002), a one-armed outfielder who appeared in 77 games for the St. Louis Browns in 1945.

Not all those who served in the military were superstars. Elmer Gedeon (1917-44), an outfielder who appeared in five games for the 1939 Washington Senators, and Harry O'Neill (1917-45), a catcher who played in one game for the 1939 Philadelphia Athletics, were the two big leaguers who died in combat. Over 120 minor leaguers also were killed. Other players overcame debilitating wartime injuries. One was Bert Shepard (1920-2008), a minor league pitcher turned air force fighter pilot. In 1944, Shepard's right leg was amputated after he was shot down over Germany. The following year, he pitched three innings for the Washington Senators in a major league game.

READ MORE: See Photos of WWII Naval Cadets Training Like Pro Athletes

Throughout World War II, American moviegoers were treated to a steady stream of war-related programming. The movie-going experience included a newsreel, which lasted approximately 10 minutes and was loaded with images and accounts of recent battles, followed by an animated cartoon. While many of these cartoons were entertainingly escapist, some comically caricatured the enemy. Among these titles were "Japoteurs" (1942) featuring Superman, "Der Fuehrer's Face" (1943) starring Donald Duck, "Confessions of a Nutsy Spy" (1943) with Bugs Bunny, "Daffy the Commando" (1943) with Daffy Duck and "Tokyo Jokie-o" (1943). Documentaries such as the seven-part "Why We Fight" series, released between 1943 and 1945 and produced and directed by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Frank Capra (1897-1991), included Axis propaganda footage and emphasized the necessity of America's involvement in the war, as well as the importance of Allied victory.

As for the main program, movie theaters showed non-war-related dramas, comedies, mysteries and Westerns; however, a significant segment of feature films dealt directly with the war. Scores of features spotlighted the trials of men in combat while demonizing the Nazis and Japanese who perpetuated the conflict. "Wake Island" (1942), "Guadalcanal Diary" (1943), "Bataan" (1943) and "Back to Bataan" (1945) were a few of the titles that centered on specific battles. "Nazi Agent" (1942), "Saboteur" (1942) and "They Came to Blow Up America" (1943) portrayed America's enemies as spies and terrorists. "So Proudly We Hail!" (1943) and "Cry 'Havoc'" (1943) recorded the heroics of women nurses and volunteers at faraway battlefronts. "Tender Comrade" (1943), "The Human Comedy" (1943) and "Since You Went Away" (1944) focused, respectively, on the trials of average American women, communities and families while exploring the very real fear that a loved one who went off to war might never return. The struggles of citizens in occupied countries were portrayed in such films as "Hangmen Also Die!" (1943) and "The Seventh Cross" (1944).

Meanwhile, some of Hollywood's top stars joined the military. Many appeared in government-produced training films and morale-boosting short subjects. Others participated directly in the fighting. Clark Gable (1901-60), the beloved, Academy

Award-winning actor, served as a tail-gunner with the U.S. Army Air Corps and flew combat missions over Germany. James Stewart (1908-97), another equally adored Oscar winner, had enlisted in the corps even before Pearl Harbor. He eventually became a B-24 combat pilot and commander and also flew missions over Germany.

Patriotic Music and Radio Reports from the Frontline

As the U.S. became immersed in the war, Americans listened to more patriotic or war-related music. Even before the country entered the war, such ditties as “The Last Time I Saw Paris,” which evoked nostalgia for a peaceful pre-war Paris, and “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,” which charted a young soldier’s military experiences, were extremely popular. Other songs with self-explanatory titles were “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,” “Comin’ In on a Wing and a Prayer” and “You’re a Sap, Mr. Jap.”

Radio was the primary source of news and entertainment for most American households during the war, and as the conflict progressed, people grew increasingly dependent on radio for updates on the fighting overseas. They were riveted by the frontline reports from such legendary journalists as Edward R. Murrow (1908-65). Meanwhile, big bands, most famously the orchestra headed by Glenn Miller (1904-44), and entertainers such as Bob Hope (1903-2003) performed before thousands at military bases. These programs were aired directly on the radio to listeners from Maine to California.

Dramatic radio programming increasingly featured war-related storylines. One of the most jarring was “Untitled” (1944), a production penned by writer Norman Corwin (1910-) and broadcast on the CBS radio network. “Untitled” traced the story of Hank Peters, a fictional American soldier who was killed in combat.

Citation Information

Article Title

The U.S. Home Front During World War II

Article 2-Take A Closer Look: America Goes to War

December 7, 1941: A Day That Will Live in Infamy

America’s isolation from war ended on December 7, 1941, when Japan staged a surprise attack on American military installations in the Pacific. The most devastating strike came at Pearl Harbor, the Hawaiian naval base where much of the US Pacific Fleet was moored. In a two-hour attack, Japanese warplanes sank or damaged 18 warships and destroyed 164 aircraft. Over 2,400 servicemen and civilians lost their lives.

America’s Reaction

"No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."

-- President Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 8, 1941

Though stunned by the events of December 7, Americans were also resolute. On December 8, President Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war against Japan. The declaration passed with just one dissenting vote. Three days later, Germany and Italy,

allied with Japan, declared war on the United States. America was now drawn into a global war. It had allies in this fight--most importantly Great Britain and the Soviet Union. But the job the nation faced in December 1941 was formidable.

JOINING THE MILITARY

The United States faced a mammoth job in December 1941. Ill-equipped and wounded, the nation was at war with three formidable adversaries. It had to prepare to fight on two distant and very different fronts, Europe and the Pacific.

America needed to quickly raise, train, and outfit a vast military force. At the same time, it had to find a way to provide material aid to its hard-pressed allies in Great Britain and the Soviet Union.

Meeting these challenges would require massive government spending, conversion of existing industries to wartime production, construction of huge new factories, changes in consumption, and restrictions on many aspects of American life. Government, industry, and labor would need to cooperate. Contributions from all Americans, young and old, men and women, would be necessary to build up what President Roosevelt called the "Arsenal of Democracy."

In the months after Pearl Harbor, the nation swiftly mobilized its human and material resources for war. The opportunities and sacrifices of wartime would change America in profound, and sometimes unexpected, ways.

Recruitment

The primary task facing America in 1941 was raising and training a credible military force. Concern over the threat of war had spurred President Roosevelt and Congress to approve the nation's first peacetime military draft in September 1940. By December 1941 America's military had grown to nearly 2.2 million soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines.

America's armed forces consisted largely of "citizen soldiers", men and women drawn from civilian life. They came from every state in the nation and all economic and social strata. Many were volunteers, but the majority, roughly 10 million, entered the military through the draft. Most draftees were assigned to the army. The other services attracted enough volunteers at first, but eventually their ranks also included draftees.

Barracks Life

Upon their arrival at the training camps, inductees were stripped of the freedom and individuality they had enjoyed as civilians. They had to adapt to an entirely new way of living, one that involved routine inspections and strict military conduct, as well as rigorous physical and combat training. They were given identical haircuts, uniforms, and equipment, and were assigned to spartan barracks that afforded no privacy and little room for personal possessions.

The Draft

By late 1942 all men aged 18 to 64 were required to register for the draft, though in practice the system concentrated on men under 38. Eventually 36 million men registered. Individuals were selected from this manpower pool for examination by one of over 6,000 local draft boards. These boards, comprised of citizens from individual communities, determined if a man was fit to enter the military. They considered factors like the importance of a man's occupation to the war effort, his health, and his family situation. Many men volunteered rather than wait to be drafted. That way, they could choose their branch of service.

Potential servicemen reported to military induction centers to undergo physical and psychiatric examinations. If a man passed these exams, he was fingerprinted and asked which type of service he preferred, though his assignment would be based on the military's needs. After signing his induction papers, he was issued a serial number. The final step was the administration of the oath. He was now in the military. After a short furlough, he reported to a reception center before being shipped to a training camp. New recruits faced more medical examinations, inoculations, and aptitude tests.

Training

The training camp was the forge in which civilians began to become military men and women. In the training camps new servicemen and women underwent rigorous physical conditioning. They were drilled in the basic elements of military life and trained to work as part of a team. They learned to operate and maintain weapons. They took tests to determine their talents and were taught more specialized skills. Paratroopers, antiaircraft teams, desert troops, and other unique units received additional instruction at special training centers.

THE HOME FRONT

"I need not repeat the figures. The facts speak for themselves.... These men could not have been armed and equipped as they are had it not been for the miracle of production here at home. The production which has flowed from the country to all the battlefronts of the world has been due to the efforts of American business, American labor, and American farmers, working together as a patriotic team."

--President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Navy Day speech, October 27, 1944

Raising an armed force was just part of America's war effort. That force had to be supplied with the uniforms, guns, tanks, ships, warplanes, and other weapons and equipment needed to fight. With its vast human and material resources, the United States had the potential to supply both itself and its allies. But first the American economy had to be converted to war production.

The war production effort brought immense changes to American life. As millions of men and women entered the service and production boomed, unemployment virtually disappeared. The need for labor opened up new opportunities for women and African Americans and other minorities. Millions of Americans left home to take jobs in war plants that sprang up around the nation. Economic output skyrocketed.

The war effort on the "Home Front" required sacrifices and cooperation. "Don't you know there's a war on?" was a common expression. Rationing became part of everyday life. Americans learned to conserve vital resources. They lived with price controls, dealt with shortages of everything from nylons to housing, and volunteered for jobs ranging from air raid warden to Red Cross worker.

RATIONING AND RECYCLING

"Food for Victory"

To conserve and produce more food, a "Food for Victory" campaign was launched. Eating leftovers became a patriotic duty and civilians were urged to grow their own vegetables and fruits. Millions of "Victory gardens," planted and maintained by ordinary citizens, appeared in backyards, vacant lots, and public parks. They produced over 1 billion tons of food. Americans canned food at home and consulted "Victory cookbooks" for recipes and tips to make the most of rationed goods.

"Make It Do or Do Without"

War production created shortages of critical supplies. To overcome these shortages, war planners searched for substitutes. One key metal in limited supply was copper. It was

used in many war-related products, including assault wire. The military needed millions of miles of this wire to communicate on battlefields.

To satisfy the military's demands, copper substitutes had to be found to use in products less important to the nation's defense. The US Mint helped solve the copper shortage. During 1943 it made pennies out of steel. The Mint also conserved nickel, another important metal, by removing it from 5-cent coins. Substitutions like these helped win the production battle.

"Do With Less, So They'll Have More"

The military needed more than guns and ammunition to do its job. It had to be fed. The Army's standard K ration included chocolate bars, which were produced in huge numbers. Cocoa production was increased to make this possible.

Sugar was another ingredient in chocolate. It was also used in chewing gum, another part of the K ration. Sugar cane was needed to produce gunpowder, dynamite, and other chemical products.

To satisfy the military's needs, sugar was rationed to civilians. The government also rationed other foods, including meat and coffee. Local rationing boards issued coupons to consumers that entitled them to a limited supply of rationed items.

"Save Waste Fat for Explosives"

Ammunition for rifles, artillery, mortars, and other weapons was one of the most important manufacturing priorities of World War II. A key ingredient needed to make the explosives in much ammunition was glycerine.

To help produce more ammunition, Americans were encouraged to save household waste fat, which was used to make glycerine. Other household goods, including rags, paper, silk, and string, were also recycled. This was a home front project that all Americans could join.

SALVAGE FOR VICTORY

Canteens are a standard part of military equipment. Millions were produced during the war. Most were made of steel or aluminum, metals which were also used to make everything from ammunition to ships. At times, both metals were in short supply.

To meet America's metal needs, scrap was salvaged from basements, backyards, and attics. Old cars, bed frames, radiators, pots, and pipes were just some of the items gathered at metal "scrap drives" around the nation. Americans also collected rubber, tin, nylon, and paper at salvage drives.

"Share Your Cars and Spare Your Tires"

America's military needed millions of tires for jeeps, trucks, and other vehicles. Tires required rubber. Rubber was also used to produce tanks and planes. But when Japan invaded Southeast Asia, the United States was cut off from one of its chief sources of this critical raw product.

America overcame its rubber shortage in several ways. Speed limits and gas rationing forced people to limit their driving. This reduced wear and tear on tires. A synthetic rubber industry was created. The public also carpooled and contributed rubber scrap for recycling.

Dollars for Defense

To help pay for the war, the government increased corporate and personal income taxes. The federal income tax entered the lives of many Americans. In 1939 fewer than 8 million people filed individual income tax returns. In 1945 nearly 50 million filed. The withholding system of payroll deductions was another wartime development. The government also borrowed money by selling "war bonds" to the public. With consumer

goods in short supply, Americans put much of their money into bonds and savings accounts.

MOBILIZING THE ECONOMY

America's economy performed astonishing feats during World War II. Manufacturers retooled their plants to produce war goods. But this alone was not enough. Soon huge new factories, built with government and private funds, appeared around the nation. Millions of new jobs were created and millions of Americans moved to new communities to fill them. Annual economic production, as measured by the Gross National Product (GNP), more than doubled, rising from \$99.7 billion in 1940 to nearly \$212 billion in 1945.

Production Miracles In industry after industry Americans performed production miracles. One story helps capture the scale of the defense effort. In 1940 President Roosevelt shocked Congress when he proposed building 50,000 aircraft a year. In 1944 the nation made almost double that number. Ford's massive Willow Run bomber factory alone produced nearly one plane an hour by March 1944.

To achieve increases like this, defense spending jumped from \$1.5 billion in 1940 to \$81.5 billion in 1945. By 1944 America led the world in arms production, making more than enough to fill its military needs. At the same time, the United States was providing its allies in Great Britain and the Soviet Union with critically needed supplies.

Civilian Defense

Many Americans volunteered to defend the nation from enemy bombing or invasion. They trained in first aid, aircraft spotting, bomb removal, and fire fighting. Air raid wardens led practice drills, including blackouts. By mid-1942 over 10 million Americans were civil defense volunteers.

Though America's mainland was never invaded, there were dangers offshore. Several Japanese submarines were spotted near the Pacific coast, and German U-boats patrolled the Atlantic coast, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. At least 10 US naval vessels were sunk or damaged by U-boats operating in American waters.

A Workforce Changed by War: Unemployment Disappears

The war virtually ended unemployment in America. The need for workers led manufacturers to hire women, teenagers, the aged, and minorities previously excluded by discrimination from sectors of the economy. Plentiful overtime work contributed to rising wages and increased savings.

Military and economic expansion created labor shortages. To fill the gap, government and industry encouraged women to enter the workforce. Though most working women continued to labor in more traditional employment like waitressing and teaching, millions took better-paid jobs in defense factories.

African Americans and other minorities also took high-paying industrial jobs previously reserved for whites. In 1941, black labor leader A. Philip Randolph threatened to organize a protest march on Washington, D.C. if the government didn't bar racial discrimination in defense plants with government contracts. Faced with this threat, President Roosevelt banned such discrimination and created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to investigate bias charges.

Millions of women, including many mothers, entered the industrial workforce during the war. They found jobs in especially large numbers in the shipbuilding and aircraft industries. "Rosie the Riveter" became a popular symbol of patriotic womanhood. Though defense jobs paid far more than traditional "female" occupations, women were

still often paid less than men performing comparable work. Moreover, at war's end, women were expected to leave the factories to make way for returning male veterans.

HIGGINS BOATS

Higgins Industries designed and built two basic classes of military craft.

The first was landing craft, constructed of wood and steel and used to transport fully armed troops, light tanks, field artillery, and other mechanized equipment and supplies to shore. These boats helped make the amphibious landings of World War II possible.

Higgins also designed and manufactured supply vessels and specialized patrol craft, including high-speed PT boats, antisubmarine boats, and dispatch boats.

LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel)

The LCVP was the most famous landing craft designed and produced by Higgins Industries. It could land soldiers, and even jeeps, on a beach. LCVPs were used in North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific during the war.

From the Eureka...

The LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel), the best-known landing craft designed by Andrew Higgins, evolved from a boat he created before the war for use in the swamps and marshes of Louisiana. Trappers and oil companies needed a rugged, shallow-bottomed craft that could navigate these waters, run aground, and retract itself without damaging its hull. Higgins developed a boat that could perform all these tasks: a spoonbill-bowed craft he called the Eureka. Over time he modified and improved his craft and found markets for it in the United States and abroad.

...to the LCP(L)

During the 1930s Higgins tried to interest the U.S. Navy in adapting his shallow-draft Eureka for use as an amphibious landing craft. The navy showed little interest, but Higgins persisted. After a long struggle, he finally secured a government contract to build modified Eureka for military use. The new boat was called the LCP (Landing Craft, Personnel) and, later, the LCP(L) (Landing Craft, Personnel, Large). In its most advanced form the LCP(L) measured 36 feet in length. It could transport men from ships offshore directly onto a beach, then retract itself, turn, and head back to sea.

The LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel) was developed because the U.S. Marines needed a boat capable of transporting vehicles to shore. Higgins adapted the LCP(L) to meet this requirement. He replaced the LCP(L)'s rounded bow with a retractable ramp. The new craft was tested for the first time on May 26, 1941, on Lake Pontchartrain. It carried a truck and 36 Higgins employees safely to shore. The LCVP became the military's standard vehicle and personnel landing craft. Thousands were in service during the war.

New Orleans" Home of the Higgins Boats

"If Higgins had not designed and built those LCVPs, we never could have landed over an open beach. The whole strategy of the war would have been different."

--General Dwight D. Eisenhower

The city of New Orleans made a unique and crucial contribution to America's war effort.

This was the home of Higgins Industries, a small boat company owned by a flamboyant entrepreneur named Andrew Jackson Higgins. The story of Higgins' role in the war is little known today, but his contribution to the Allied victory was immeasurable.

World War II presented Allied war planners with a tactical dilemma--how to make large amphibious landings of armies against defended coasts. For America this was a particularly thorny problem, since its armed forces had to mount amphibious invasions at sites ranging from Pacific atolls to North Africa to the coast of France.

Higgins' contribution was to design and mass-produce boats that could ferry soldiers, jeeps, and even tanks from a ship at sea directly onto beaches. Such craft gave Allied planners greater flexibility. They no longer needed to attack heavily defended ports before landing an assault force. Higgins' boats were used in every major American amphibious operation of World War II. His achievements earned him many accolades. The greatest came from General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who called Higgins "the man who won the war for us."

From the Bayou to the Battlefield

Before World War II Andrew Higgins operated a small boatyard, building workboats designed to operate in the shallow waters of Louisiana's bayous. During the 1920s and 1930s America's military began exploring ways to make amphibious landings. Higgins became involved in this effort, adapting designs for shallow-draft boats he had developed for peacetime uses. His company created amphibious assault craft capable of shuttling men and equipment quickly and safely from ship to shore. When the war came, business boomed. Higgins built new factories with mass production lines and employed thousands of workers. He even opened a training school for boat operators.

New Orleans Naval Giant During World War II Higgins Industries grew from a small business operating a single boatyard into the largest private employer in Louisiana. The company turned out astounding numbers of boats and ships. In September 1943 the US Navy had 14,072 vessels. Of these, 8,865 had been designed and built by Higgins Industries.