

# WORLD WAR II'S CAN-DO CITY

*Almost overnight, Evansville, Indiana, found itself transformed by defense contracts into a hotbed of U.S. military production.*

*By Roy Morris Jr.*

*The Chrysler Motors plant in Evansville not only produced 96 percent of all .45-caliber ammunition used by American soldiers during the war but also rebuilt and reconditioned tanks, trucks, and jeeps.*



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**I**n July 1941, a high-powered delegation of business, labor, and political leaders from Evansville, Indiana, traveled to Washington, D.C., to call on the associate director of the Office of Production Management, the newly created federal procurement agency that would later be replaced by the War Production Board. They had come to the nation's capital to express their concern that Evansville was facing an "unemployment catastrophe" even as the agency was channeling defense projects to companies in other American cities of comparable or smaller size. Mayor William Dress, a member of the delegation, conjured the specter of "a sixth column of wandering, confused people, more devastating to our defense efforts and to our efforts to supply the fighting democracies of the world than any fifth column that an enemy could drop out of the skies." Unemployment, Dress said, was a direct threat to national security.

The United States was not at war, but everyone at the meeting in Sidney Hillman's office knew that it soon would be. Under the provisions of the 1940 Lend-Lease Act, American industries were already producing, selling, and shipping food, matériel, and supplies to hard-pressed Great

### **In the 1940s Evansville found itself at the very center of the American war effort.**

Britain, which was standing alone against Adolf Hitler in Western Europe. By the end of the year, China and the Soviet Union would also begin receiving American-made weapons and supplies. It was all part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's pledge that the United States would serve as the "great arsenal of democracy" in the fight against encroaching fascism and totalitarianism. The Evansville contingent, for urgent financial as well as patriotic reasons, wanted to join that effort. Their city, like much of the country, was still struggling to overcome not only the devastating effects of the Great Depression but a major flood of the Ohio River four years earlier that had covered 500 city blocks. Hillman, a lifelong union leader, promised to look into the matter carefully.

Hillman was as good as his word. Two months later he sent Ralph Kaul and August Wilks, two of his top aides, to Evansville to explore the city's potential as a site for new defense industries. Their favorable report induced William S. Knudson, the chairman of the Office of Production Management, to officially certify Evansville a priority location for federal defense contracts. The head of the agency's contract distribution division, Floyd B. Odum, announced

in no uncertain terms that Evansville industries would begin receiving defense contracts "or there must be some damn good reason why they don't." Representative John Boehne Jr. of Evansville lobbied President Roosevelt on his hometown's behalf and reported that large defense contracts, as well as new plant facilities "for another highly important wartime weapon," were in the offing for the city.

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, killing 2,403 American soldiers, sailors, and civilians (among them a 19-year-old Evansville native, Seaman Second Class George James Wilcox), what had been an economic issue suddenly became a matter of life and death. Overnight, American industries switched to a war footing.

For Evansville, the Pearl Harbor attack, though tragic, could not have come at a more opportune time. With its historic role as the hub of the tristate region nicknamed Kentuckiana, which included southwestern Indiana, northwestern Kentucky, and southeastern Illinois, Evansville was well situated to become a leader in wartime industries. Newly renovated ports on the Ohio River, established rail links through the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, a thriving municipal airport, and the Chicago-to-Miami Dixie Bee Highway (U.S. Highway 41) connected Evansville to other American cities and towns. A skilled and committed—if currently underemployed—workforce, long trained in automobile, refrigeration, furniture, and other industrial production, stood ready to convert to military projects at a moment's notice. Two local companies, Bootz Manufacturing and Holdsclaw Brothers, had been producing practice bombs and military tools and dies since the early 1930s.

The work being done in Evansville at Bootz Manufacturing and Holdsclaw Brothers was just the tip of the iceberg: By the spring of 1944, companies in Evansville had received some \$600 million in defense contracts. The city, in fact, found itself at the very center of the American war effort. The Evansville Ordnance Plant would produce 96 percent of all .45-caliber ammunition used by American soldiers during the war, while Republic Aviation turned out more than 6,500 P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers—almost half of all P-47s built during the war. And the Evansville Shipyard would become the nation's largest inland producer of LSTs (Landing Ship, Tanks) which would be used in every Allied amphibious assault from Normandy to Okinawa, and especially during the joint army-navy island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific. LSTs also played vital roles in the Allied landings in the Philippines, Sicily, and mainland Italy.

In February 1942, Evansville was selected as the site for a new 45-acre naval shipyard on the riverfront downtown. The shipyard would be operated by the Missouri Valley



*The 5,000 workers at the Republic Aviation plant in Evansville—half of them women—turned out an average of 14 P-47 Thunderbolts every day, including the long-range P-47N models shown here.*

Bridge and Iron Company of Leavenworth, Kansas, under contract with the U.S. Navy. Six other local companies were involved in the design and construction of the shipyard, including Winston Brothers, Haglin and Sons, Sollit Construction, Bechtel-McCone, W. A. Bechtel, and H. C. Price. At its peak, some 19,000 workers—men and women, Blacks and Whites—would be employed at the shipyard, working three eight-hour shifts: day, graveyard, and swing. Their work would prove vital to the Allied war effort. No less an authority than British prime minister Winston Churchill underscored the importance of the LSTs, remarking later that “the destinies of two great empires seem to be tied up in some God-damned things called LSTs.” Perhaps fittingly, the first LST built at Evansville Shipyard, LST 157, went to Great Britain for use in the Royal Navy.

In time, workers in Evansville would produce 167 of the ungainly but essential transport ships, designed to land directly on beaches and disembark troops, tanks, and other military vehicles through its gigantic bow doors. Under U.S. Bureau of Ships specifications, the vessels were 328 feet long and 50 feet wide, with a minimum draft of 3.8 feet.

LSTs carried 2,100 short tons of tanks and vehicles, and a complement of 193 troops.

Demonstrating their versatility in World War II, LSTs were regularly converted to repair ships, hospital ships, motor launches, and observation plane launches. During the D-Day campaign, LSTs brought 41,035 wounded men safely back across the English Channel from Normandy to England. While the LSTs acquired such unflattering nicknames as “Large Slow Target” and “Large Stationary Target,” only 26 of them were destroyed by the enemy during the war and another 13 lost to bad weather or accident. Of the 10 Evansville LSTs lost in the war, all were casualties of enemy fire; none sank from faulty construction. “This bunch of country boys,” Evansville shipyard worker Roman Ritzert would recall, “built good ships—ships that didn’t sink.”

The Evansville Shipyard was soon joined by another vital weapons producer: Republic Aviation, which was chosen to build P-47 Thunderbolts. The P-47 was a rugged, dependable, easy-to-fly airplane, equally useful as an escort fighter or fighter-bomber. “In all theatres,” wrote one

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historian, “the crippling losses in personnel and material inflicted on the Axis by Thunderbolt attack reached staggering proportions.” Bill Mullen, a pilot from Indiana who flew 72 P-47 missions during the war, attested to the plane’s durability. “It would bring a pilot home after being hit,” he told the *Evansville Courier* 50 years later. “Pilots were real confident with it. The people of Evansville can be thanked for making strong airplanes.” George Meyrer, Republic’s general manager, in announcing the initial arrangement, declared, “Southern Indiana will give us able hands and stout hearts and together we will do our part in backing our fighting forces.” It was an accurate prediction. During the war, Republic would produce 6,242 P-47s—almost 40 percent of all P-47s built in the United States.

Although Republic Aviation Corporation was based in Farmingdale, New York, its president, Ralph S. Damon, had a personal connection to Evansville: Years before, he had been a St. Louis neighbor of C. Nelson Smith, vice president of the Hoosier Lamp and Stamping Corporation. Through Smith, Damon was able to arrange subcontracting for additional parts with Hoosier Lamp and Stamping Corporation and other local manufacturers. A suitable location was found near the airport, and workers toiled around the clock to build a gigantic brick office building and wooden out-buildings. Other workers were already busy fashioning airplane parts in garages, rented factories, abandoned office buildings, and other ad hoc locations. “The first Thunder-

**During the war, Republic Aviation would produce more than 6,200 P-47 Thunderbolts.**

bolt planes were ready for flight,” the *Evansville Press* reported, “almost as [soon as] the roof went on the main assembly building.”

With that strong head start, Republic Aviation was remarkably productive. Its 5,000 workers—half of them women—turned out an average of 14 P-47s per day (at times, as many as 30 per day)

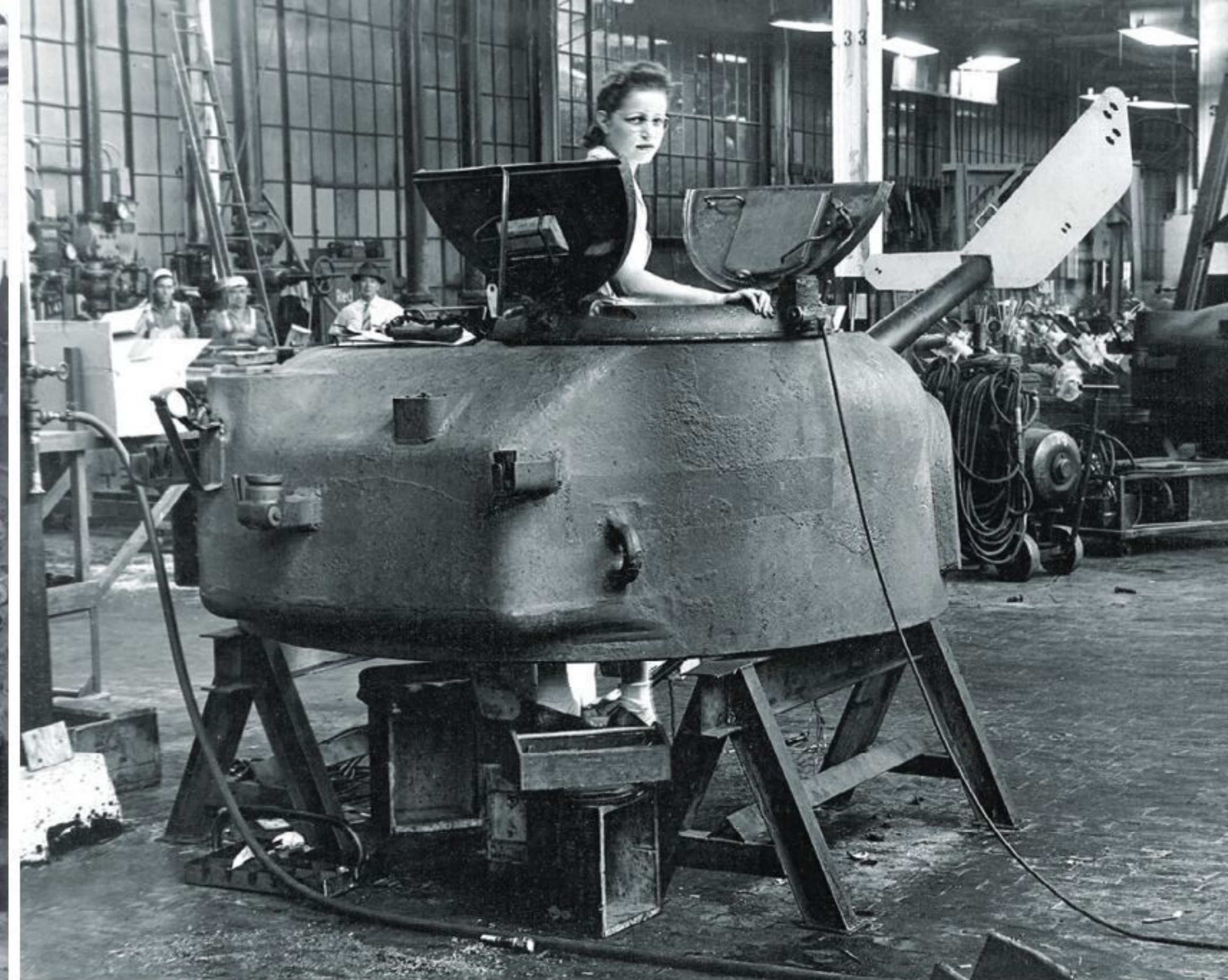
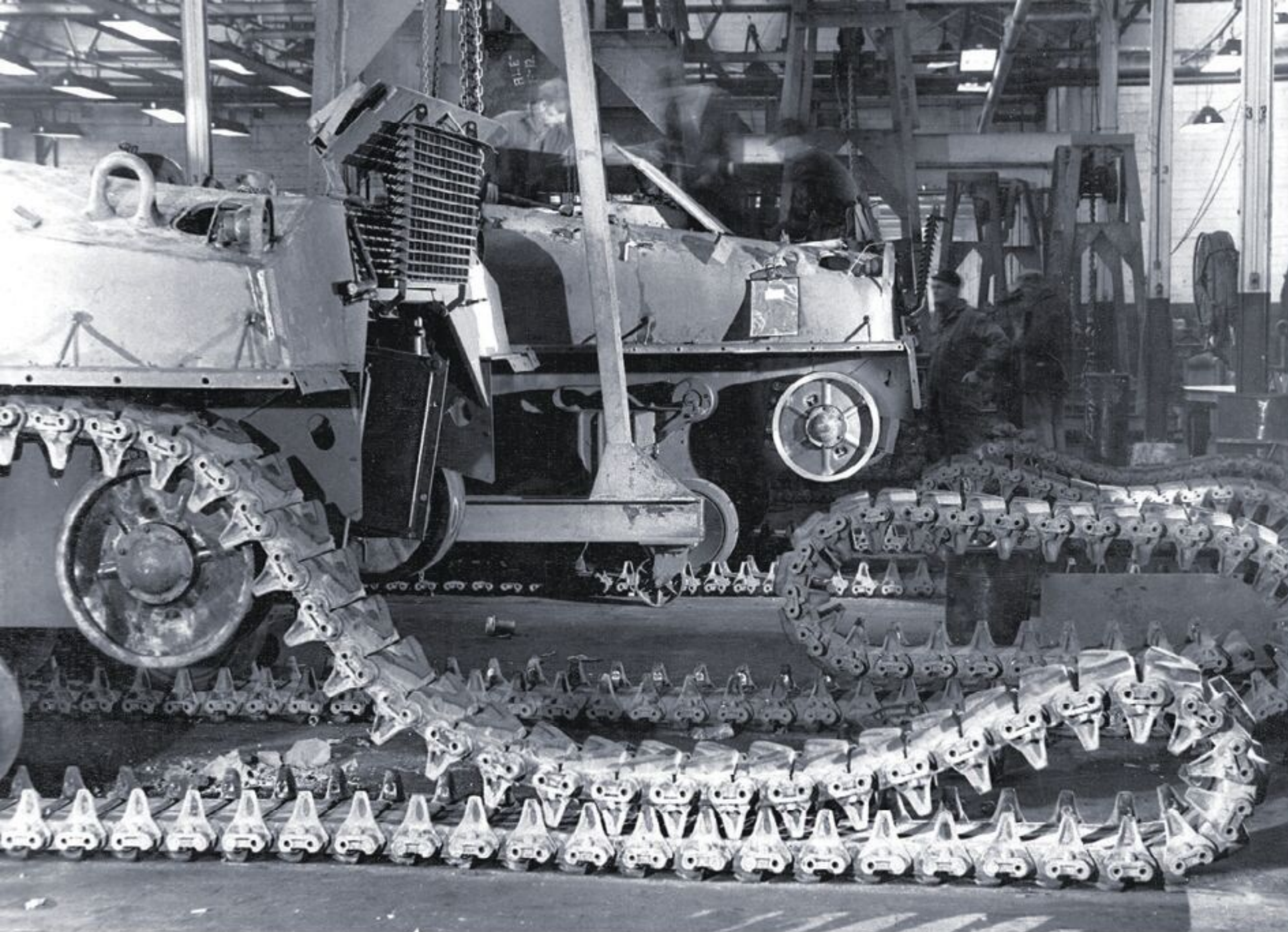
behind the plant’s distinctive four-story rows of blue-glass windows. Republic’s workers, dubbed “the Raiders,” took pride in their name. The plant newspaper, *Republic Aviation News*, reported that pilots on both the Atlantic and Pacific fronts were “calling for every Thunderbolt fighter plane that leaves the hangar apron.” The first plane built in Evansville rolled off the assembly line on September 20, 1942, with Brigadier General Arthur W. Vanaman of the U.S. Army Air Forces telling the workers that their P-47s would “outfly and outfight” any other airplane—ally or enemy. And 20 months later, when the plant turned out its 1,000th plane, Colonel Alonzo M. Drake exulted: “You

have sent out one thousand answers to Hitler and Tojo and I can tell you these answers have been delivered. Because of you, the flag again flies in the Aleutians; because of you our boys are now marching on Rome, and our bomber crews are giving the Nazis a terrible dose of their own medicine.”

Nicknamed “the Jug” because it supposedly resembled an overturned milk jug, the P-47 was a mainstay of the U.S. Army Air Forces and was also flown by English, French, Russian, Mexican, and Brazilian pilots during the war. The plane was 36 feet long, with a 40-foot, 9-inch wingspan. It had a maximum speed of 436 miles per hour and an operational range of 1,031 miles. One of the heaviest fighters of the war, the P-47 mounted eight .50-caliber Browning machine-guns, 10 unguided missiles, and up to 2,500 pounds of bombs. American fighter ace Jim Goodson, who had flown Spitfires for the fabled British Royal Air Force before the United States entered the war, noted that his fellow U.S. pilots preferred the P-47 to all other fighters. British fliers, accustomed to the much smaller Spitfire, did not like the Thunderbolt, which they considered too large and too heavy to perform the RAF’s trademark dive attacks. During the war, P-47 pilots achieved 3,752 air-to-air kills and destroyed 8,000 railroad cars, 9,000 locomotives, 6,000 armored fighting vehicles, and 68,000 trucks—a crushing blow to Nazi transport and armament.

In addition to the Evansville Shipyard and Republic Aviation, 46 other companies in the area eagerly contracted for various types of war work. The most significant of these was the Chrysler Motors plant. Before the war, the plant had produced Plymouth automobiles at the impressive rate of 275 per day. Converting primarily to munitions, the plant began producing .30-caliber and .45-caliber cartridges, specially packed rounds for use in the Pacific theater, and rebuilt and reconditioned Sherman tanks and army trucks. The plant lived up to its proud slogan, “Bullets by the Billions,” turning out nearly 3.3 million .45-caliber rounds, or 96 percent of all .45-caliber ammunition produced in the United States during the war. The plant also rebuilt and reconditioned 5,662 Sherman tanks and army trucks, repacked 1.5 billion rounds for use in the Pacific theater, and turned out 800,000 “grousers”—metal overshoes for tank treads.

Other Evansville companies doing important defense work included Serval Corporation, which manufactured wing panels for the Republic Thunderbolts; Sunbeam Electric, which specialized in converting .45-caliber shell cases from brass to steel; and Hoosier Cardinal, which produced plastic domes for such iconic American bombers as the Boeing B-29. International Steel made bridges, piers, and pontoons; Briggs Indiana manufactured wings for navy planes; and Faultless Caster Company produced millions of fuzes and navy tracer rounds. But weapons and ammu-



*In just under five months in 1942 the Chrysler Motors plant in Evansville went from manufacturing Plymouth automobiles to full-scale war production as the Evansville Ordnance Plant. By the end of the war its workers had rebuilt, reconditioned, and tested some 5,662 Sherman tanks and military trucks.*

nition weren't the only war products being manufactured in Evansville. Mead Johnson and Company made burn and infection medication, including Amigen, the first intravenous protein injection for injured servicemen. Bootz Manufacturing made more gasoline field stoves for the military than any other company in the nation; and Shane Manufacturing made uniforms for the U.S. Army.

American workers, still struggling through the Depression, flocked to Evansville from across the country for the high-paying jobs. Almost overnight, the city's workforce more than tripled from 18,000 to 60,000—a stark contrast to the Depression years in which the city had suffered 25 percent unemployment. Collectively, the Evansville workers represented a vast home-front army. "We have done some amazing things in the 12 weeks since Pearl Harbor," an editorial in the *Sunday Courier and Press* said. "Guns, boats, ammunition and planes will be leaving Evansville in a great stream along with a hundred other items so urgently needed that they mean literally the difference between life and death for our men in the Army and

Navy. A few months ago Evansville seemed to have been left out of the war industrial program. It now becomes one of the most active spots in the country. Not all of us can wear a uniform or do factory work. But all of us can and must cooperate in providing for those who can."

Providing living quarters for the new arrivals was an immediate necessity, and six large federal housing projects were envisioned. A civilian defense council was formed to help workers find suitable housing and, not incidentally, to guard against rent gouging. "Good housing for defense workers not only is our patriotic duty but it is our civic duty," C. B. Enlow, the council's director. The first completed housing project was Armory Apartments, with 12 eight-unit apartment buildings. Local residents of the area sued successfully to reduce the project's size from 200 planned apartments, charging that the new housing was little more than a tenement and did not fit in with the existing neighborhood. Not everyone, it seemed, was thrilled by the defense boom's impact on the city.

Other housing projects included Fulton Square, Parkholm, Dixie Manor, Diamond Villa, and Gatewood Gar-

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dens. Gatewood was by far the largest, with 61 buildings containing 468 units. The sixth housing project, Mill Terrace, was reserved for African American workers. All the projects were made with cheap, wartime materials, with showers rather than bathtubs, gypsum-board walls, prefinished oak floors, and space heaters. The local housing authority emphasized that the buildings were intended strictly for wartime use and would be torn down afterward. (Most were indeed razed, but two of the housing projects—Diamond Villa and Fulton Square—were still intact as late as 2015, and vestiges of Diamond Villa remain today.)

### Women made up more than a third of the workforce in Evansville's war industries.

In addition to the housing projects, 16 licensed trailer parks sprang up in Evansville during the war, along with a number of individual trailers and unlicensed facilities scattered throughout the city. The lack of flush toilets was a common complaint from and about trailer park residents, and sanitation and safety issues were raised regularly with city officials. A deadly fire at one location, Trailer City, claimed the lives of two children on Christmas Eve 1943, and safety inspectors subsequently found that 75 percent of the site's 103 trailers had dangerously inadequate wiring. Four-gallon fire pumps were moved to the park after the fire to prevent another such tragedy.

Despite the federal housing projects, many defense workers had to scramble to find housing in furnished rooms, private homes, and apartments. In the spring of 1943, there were 1,000 applicants for 85 rooms in 16 renovated houses. Horror stories abounded of families crammed eight or nine to a room. Weary workers took turns sleeping in a single bed, according to their eight-hour shifts, in "hot sheet joints."

Two pressing problems were the lack of adequate day-care for the children of working parents—there was not a single local facility for children under age 2—and the need to find room for thousands of new students in overcrowded schools. Evansville and the surrounding Knight Township argued over which municipal body was responsible for educating the new students, and even the issue of whether it was legal to educate students who lived on tax-exempt government property. The city eventually took over the task, though Knight Township provided a handful of school buses to transport students to and from school.

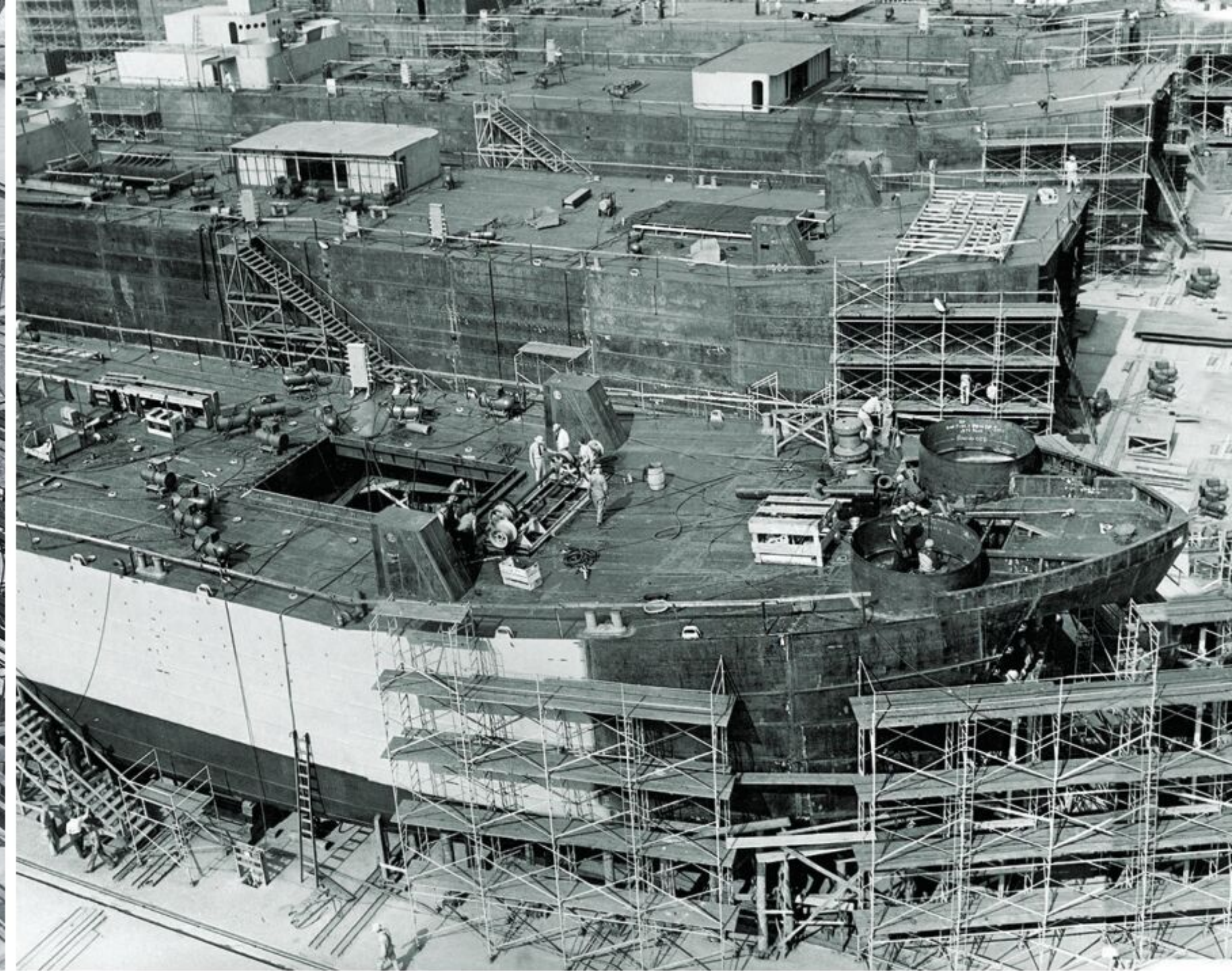
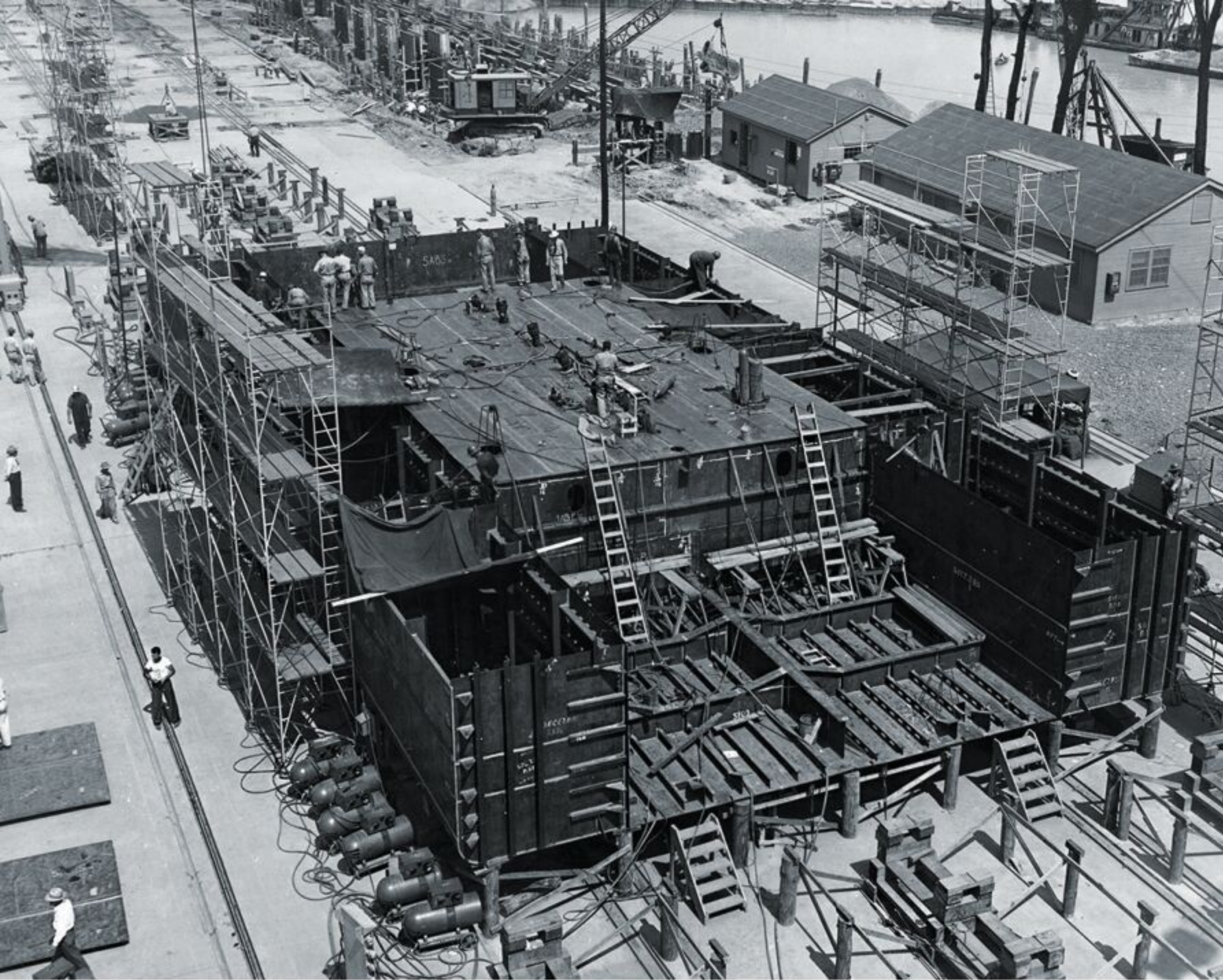
Working conditions at the various plants were dangerous, and the shipyard was particularly hazardous. James and Patricia Kellar, in their 1999 study, *The Evansville Shipyard: Outside Any Shipbuilding Zone*, vividly described the

day-to-day dangers of shipyard work: "The brilliant flashes emanating from hundreds of arc welding devices threatened eyesight almost continuously. Laborers worked high above ground on scaffolds and ship docks where a thoughtless step might result in a deadly fall. And those below were threatened by injury from plummeting tools and pieces of metal carelessly handled." Posters everywhere instructed workers: "Wear your goggles."

The constant cacophony of pounding hammers, welding torches, and heavily laden trucks rattling down congested roadways to and from the shipyard heightened the danger for workers. One fatal noise-related mishap befell 46-year-old Jesse Carver, who was operating a jackhammer and did not hear the warning bell from an approaching crane that struck him and dragged him five feet, tearing one leg from the socket and one foot from an ankle. In all, 10 workers died in shipyard accidents during the war, and another 1,687 suffered disabling injuries, an average of nearly two per day for 30 months. Accidents were less frequent but not uncommon at Evansville's other industrial plants. Adding to the hazards was a painful inflammation of the gums and mouth known as Vincent's disease, which was transmitted through shared drinking fountains and indiscriminate spitting, was so widespread at the shipyard that it was dubbed "shipyard distemper."

Women constituted 34 percent of the workforce in Evansville's war industries. They made up a sixth of the workforce at the shipyard, one-half at Republic Aviation, and almost two-thirds at the Chrysler ordnance plant. Their ages ranged from 21 to 70, with the "Serval Grandmothers Club" representing the top end of the range. One of the more iconic photographs of the American home front during World War II was a 1942 shot of Evansville Shipyard worker Evelyn Whitley Cox, the first female welder, in her full welding gear. A slender 30-year-old, Cox maintained that her welding job wasn't nearly as tiring as doing a day's ironing. "This job is just like going to a picnic six days a week," she told a reporter for the *Sunday Courier and Press*. "It never gets boring. Several times a day I get to switch from one kind of work to another, and that makes it interesting." She said her 9-year-old son greeted her each day after work with the question, "How many ships did you build today, Mama?" A feature in the *Sunday Courier and Press*, by reporter Chickie Frieberg, touted "Woman's Place in the War Plant" and detailed the full day that Chickie had spent riveting, welding, and helping construct an airplane wing. "Girl Reporter Rivets, Welds A Little, Drills, And, Lo,—An Airplane Wing Is Made," ran the subhead.

Concerted efforts were made to provide suitable after-hours recreation for the workers and servicemen. The Red Cross Canteen, across the street from the L&N Railroad



*The Evansville Shipyard was the nation's largest inland producer of LSTs (Landing Ship, Tanks), which were used in every Allied amphibious assault from Normandy to Okinawa. The shipyard employed 19,000 workers at its peak, and crowds filled the city's waterfront area for the christening of each ship.*

terminal, served free coffee and doughnuts to a staggering 1.6 million in-transit servicemen during the war. The abandoned passenger terminal of the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad was converted into a Whites-only USO facility. There were regular dances, balls, bridge parties, with volunteers from the Evansville Girls' Service Club serving as dance partners for the GIs. Local women, both housewives and plant workers, also volunteered at the USO and the Red Cross Canteen. Evansville resident Dorothy Colbert remembered that she had personally danced with more than 200 servicemen at the club and maintained a wartime correspondence with some of them, but she said that "after a while you ran out of things to talk about be-

cause we were only together for a few hours on that one night." She stopped corresponding altogether after one of her letters came back to her marked "deceased."

The shipyard and the defense plants fielded their own intramural baseball, softball, basketball, and bowling teams, with competition provided by other plants as well as athletes from area colleges and universities. The shipyard also sponsored a women's baseball team and put on a gala picnic at a city park to celebrate the laying of the 100th LST keel in July 1944. An estimated 36,000 workers, their families, and soldiers from nearby Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, attended the picnic. A separate picnic was held for the African American workers at Stockwell Woods. The



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National Guard Armory on the city's east side offered continuing-education classes for servicemen and rooms for card playing and reading. And the ornate Grand Theater showed first-run motion pictures.

The separate housing and recreation facilities for Black workers exemplified the harsh racial prejudice that still existed throughout Indiana and the rest of the nation. Evansville, a border city, was described by Hoosier historian Max Cavnes as “essentially southern in outlook.” Race relations in Evansville, as in the rest of the country, were troubled and sometimes violent. Before the war, Black residents were limited to the rundown neighborhood of Baptisttown and, after 1938, the federal housing project known as Lincoln Gardens and, later, Mill Terrace. In 1943 tensions boiled over when White soldiers from Camp Breckinridge clashed with local

### Evansville's 48 defense plants met very high production standards during the war.

African American teenagers. In one altercation, two soldiers, one Black and one White, exchanged shots, and a White paratrooper lieutenant was seriously injured in a separate scuffle. A city official blamed the fighting on “the unruliness of hotheads and smart alecks on both sides.” A few relatively enlightened individuals protested the segregated conditions. Twenty White soldiers walked out of an Evansville restaurant when it refused to serve three of their African American comrades, and two White college students were arrested for disorderly conduct because they refused to leave the “colored” section of the Greyhound bus station in Evansville. A letter to the editor of the *Sunday Courier and Press* apologized to two Black women who had been embarrassed at a local concert when Whites seated next to them walked out in protest.

For the most part, race relations were no better or worse in Evansville than the rest of the country. Although some African American workers in the defense plants were given the opportunity to work on production lines, the majority were restricted to such unskilled positions as common laborer, janitor, waiter, or plant guard. White workers frequently threatened to strike if their Black coworkers were promoted. In March 1944, an unfounded rumor that the shipyard was planning to import 300 Black welders from the South led to mass meetings and another threatened walkout. “We don't work them with on an equal basis where we come from, and we're not going to do it here,” a spokesman for the White workers declared. Eventually the rumor died down and work continued as before. At Chrysler, which employed by far the highest number of African American workers (11.5 percent), Black worker Lucy

Smith reported having no problems with her White coworkers. “They didn't have time to be prejudiced,” she said. Other plants were more segregated. Republic Aviation had 4.3 percent Black workers, Republic Aviation employed 1.3 percent, Briggs had 1.1 percent, and International Steel and Hoosier Lamp and Stamping had none.

Evansville's increasing prominence in the war effort brought some big-name entertainers and other celebrities to the city to headline fundraising events for war bonds. The famous comedy team of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello—the most popular movie stars in the world at the time—visited in August 1942 and helped raise more than \$650,000 in one day. Abbott and Costello led a 10-mile automobile caravan through the city and performed their crowd-pleasing “Who's on First?” skit at the Evansville Coliseum. President Roosevelt himself had paid a brief unannounced visit to Republic Aviation a few months earlier. Altogether, Evansville's residents and workers purchased a remarkable \$150 million in war bonds and stamps.

A longtime resident recalled later that the city had a reputation as “a wild, wide-open town.” Camp Breckinridge, 30 miles away, sent between 7,000 and 10,000 soldiers into Evansville each week on leave. Military police patrolled the city alongside local policemen, seeking to keep order. As in virtually all the world's cities during wartime, prostitution was an around-the-clock activity in Evansville. In the city's traditional red-light district, between North First and High Streets, 26 brothels flourished—24 for Whites and two for Blacks. Pressure from the U.S. Army forced the city to close the district in April 1942.

Periodic crackdowns on prostitution at bars, city parks, and the bus station had little effect, particularly in the face of a new phenomenon: “Little Casuals”—local teenage girls who were engaging in sexual activities, paid or unpaid, with transient soldiers. Complicating matters was the influx of experienced prostitutes who drifted from town to town, using as many as eight aliases at a time to confound police. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases got so bad that the navy took to housing crews for newly completed LSTs in the hamlet of Crane, 100 miles away, and putting them aboard ship as soon as they arrived in town, without a minute of liberty in Evansville itself.

Despite the housing shortages, workplace dangers, and endemic racism, the 48 defense plants in Evansville performed at a very high standard throughout the war. In all, 13 Evansville plants received the top army-navy “E” ranking, which only 5 percent of all defense plants across the nation achieved during the war. As the valedictory edition of the shipyard's in-house newspaper, *The Invader*, noted in May 1945: “Evansville war plants met production quotas that brought amazing victories at Salerno, Anzio, Normandy, Leyte—on all the battle fronts. The splendid team-



From top: President Franklin D. Roosevelt tours the Republic Aviation plant in Evansville in 1943; the 4:30 p.m. shift change (one of three each day) at the Evansville Shipyard.

on September 5 the last remaining government order was canceled. Three weeks later the navy officially declared the shipyard surplus property. On the night of January 26, 1946, the last of a series of fires destroyed much of the shipyard, which by then was deserted.

The end was equally swift for Republic Aviation. After V-J Day, August 15, marked the surrender of all Japanese forces, the army notified the company that all further production of P-47 Thunderbolts was to cease immediately. “When we went to the plant, they told us not to report the next day, but to come back in two weeks for our separation papers and our last check,” a worker remembered later. “That was it.” International Harvest Company purchased the physical plant in early 1946.

Halfway between the two main closings, the city held the last massive public celebration of the war years. On Saturday, June 23—“Evansville Day”—some 150,000 residents turned out for a parade down Main Street. Many local defense companies sponsored floats in the parade, the largest gathering in the city’s history, and groups of veterans and civilians marched behind the floats to the bright strains of martial music. That night, at a banquet in the McCurdy Hotel downtown, John W. Snyder, the federal government’s chief loan administrator, saluted the city’s war efforts in his keynote speech. “Every resident of Evansville is entitled to feel the surge of satisfaction that follows a job well done—a job that has contributed its full share to the national accomplishment,” Snyder told the crowd. “Of this, your production of aircraft, tanks, trucks, mobile equipment, ships and ordnance is adequate evidence.”

If anything, Snyder was underplaying the city’s immense contribution to the national war effort. Few American cities had done more than Evansville to make the United States the “great arsenal of democracy,” as President Roosevelt had stressed in the run-up to the war. The city’s remarkable wartime production was a lasting tribute to the patriotism, pride, sense of civic duty, and sheer grit of Evansville’s longtime residents and the thousands of new workers who poured into town to wield the hammer and the blowtorch. “Give us the tools, and we will finish the job,” British prime minister Winston Churchill had promised four years earlier, and the Evansville defense plants, singly and together, had done just that. **MHQ**

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work among civic organization, labor unions, churches, and retail businessmen is in part responsible for ‘E’ flags over Evansville plants, and battle pennants over tiny atolls in the Pacific. It is a record in which all may be justly proud.”

The Evansville boom ended just as abruptly as it had begun. Hard on the heels of V-E Day, May 8, 1945, the Missouri Valley Bridge and Iron Company, which operated the Evansville Shipyard, began transferring its top supervisors and skilled workers to Hawaii, where the company had a new contract to manage a naval ship-repair operation. The number of workers at the shipyard steadily declined, and