WE CAN DO IT! WWII

By Leslie A. Przybylek, Curator of History
EVERY TIME I APPROACH PITTSBURGH, ESPECIALLY BY PLANE, I GET A SENSE OF TREMENDOUS POWER, A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT. PITTSBURGH THRILLS YOU.
Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox

Opposite: A real-life Rosie, Julie Bodnar inspects 155 mm shell casings at the Christy Parks Works of National Tube Company in McKeesport.

War worker identification badges illustrate just a few of the many thousands of area residents who contributed to the war effort through companies such as Dravo, Westinghouse, and Carnegie-Illinois Steel.

Thousands of Westinghouse workers pledge to speed up production at this wartime rally, c. 1944.
HHC Detre L&A, Western Pennsylvania Overview Photograph Collection, WES 566.
“We are living in a jittery world, wondering what is going to happen next. And in my judgment it looks like anarchy. Law and order is breaking down all over the world. The nations are sure of nothing.”

Letter to the Editor, The Pittsburgh Press, October 6, 1938

As hostilities escalated in Europe in the late 1930s, Americans watched and debated. World War I had ended barely 20 years earlier, its millions of casualties and apocalyptic vision of trench warfare still vivid in many people’s minds. Fathers who had served in battles such as the Meuse-Argonne and in the Marne now faced the prospect of sending their sons overseas to a similar fate. How could the United States be drawn so soon into another global conflict? Many Pittsburgh residents urged caution: America was officially neutral and needed to stay that way. Typical of such sentiments, a letter to the editor of The Pittsburgh Press in October 1938 warned: “Now this subject of war. Are we to be tricked and blindfolded into another conflict? Are we going to be glorified soldiers of today and bullet riddled corpses of tomorrow?” ²

Many agreed that staying out of the “European mess” was a wise decision.³ Others did not have the luxury of choice: they were already involved. Members of Pittsburgh’s Jewish community sounded the alarm as early as 1933, when the first local campaign for the United Jewish Appeal raised $50,000 to help German Jews and Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler’s new Third Reich.⁴ Fearing all such “isms”—Nazism, Communism, Socialism, and Fascism—one Donora resident advocated that the “steel center of the world” needed a National Defense Unit as early as 1938.⁵ Another, signed JUST AN AMERICAN, urged that all “isms ... pestilences ... should be annihilated entirely and completely.”⁶

Residents of Pittsburgh’s Polish neighborhoods took to their churches and prayed when Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, officially igniting World War II. “Oh, God, Save Our Poland,” pleaded an article in The Pittsburgh Press.⁷ By May 1940, Germany’s invasion of France and the Netherlands made it clear that the “European mess” wasn’t going away, only getting worse. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for a new level of defense spending, raising his request for the U.S. Army’s 1940 federal appropriation from $24 million to $700 million. He put American industry on notice, saying: “I should like to see this nation geared up ... to turn out at least 50,000 planes a year.”⁸ At the time, only one-hundredth of that was being produced.⁹

Pittsburgh Blazes the Way

To many people, “American Industry” meant Pittsburgh. While other cities proved equally crucial to the war effort, Pittsburgh’s miles of steel mills, foundries, and other heavy manufacturers captured public imagination, the blazing nighttime skies along the Ohio and Monongahela rivers symbolizing American industrial capacity. Those mills and factories

Factories and mills throughout Pittsburgh produced an almost limitless variety of material for the war effort. The Scaife Company in Oakmont, Pa., produced defense-related armaments, including bomb casings and mortar shells. HHC Collections, 2006.139. Photo by L. Simpson.
Arsenal of Democracy

Pittsburgh produced an amazing array of goods and equipment for the war effort, including:

- Ships
- Airplane Propeller Blades
- Torpedoes
- Electronic Radio Systems
- Anti-Aircraft Guns
- Mortar Guns
- Breathing Equipment
- Steel
essentially began fighting World War II by 1940, ramping up for an industrial escalation over the next four years. While multiple key innovations were underway by early 1941, the attack on Pearl Harbor redoubled efforts. By January 1942, a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette correspondent in Washington, D.C., stressed this in an article titled “Nation Looks to City for Industrial Needs”:

This is no peanut war. It demands a vast all-out effort to make the United States the mightiest military force in the world.

The Pittsburgh district arsenal, with its great steel mills, munitions manufacturing and food processing plants, coal mines and steel products concerns—in short, everything that goes into use in modern warfare—is expected to blaze the way.10

Blazing that way would require effort from every Pittsburgh worker, the reporter reminded readers. More than people had given before, more than they were already giving:

The eyes of the United States Government are on the arsenal of Pittsburgh.… If you operate or man a war goods production plant and you think you’re doing all right, you will be expected to do 100 per cent better. If you think you’re doing fine, you will be expected to do half again as well. If you think you are getting along splendidly, you must do even better.11

From 1942 to 1945, thousands answered those expectations. Western Pennsylvania men and women waged war by producing crucial defense materials in the region’s factories,
foundries, and shipyards, helping to earn the state its keystone position in the nation’s “Arsenal of Democracy.” Factories idled by the Great Depression now ran day and night, producing an amazing array of goods and equipment including ships, airplane propeller blades, torpedoes, electronic radio systems, huge anti-aircraft guns, mortar guns, generators and breathing equipment, glass lenses and optical equipment, and, of course, steel—95 million tons of it for tank and aircraft armor, ship plates, and artillery shells. By the end of 1942, U. S. Steel and its subsidiaries smashed 1,000 previous production records. Westinghouse’s Micarta Division produced 13 million helmet liners; millions more came from Westinghouse’s Bryant Electric Division and from Mine Safety Appliances. Shipyards at Dravo and American Bridge launched more than 200 LSTs (Landing Ships, Tanks) for the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, and Dravo produced multiple other types of ships, including destroyer escorts and gate vessels (used in harbor defense). The scale of this production made a lasting impact. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox once said, “Every time I approach Pittsburgh, especially by plane, I get a sense of tremendous power, a sense of accomplishment. Pittsburgh thrills you.”

The war also spawned new innovations. Westinghouse’s Research Laboratories engineered thousands of technological breakthroughs, including new developments in radar, atomic energy, and the creation of a gyro-controlled tank gun stabilizer that improved firing accuracy in moving armored vehicles. In Butler, the nearly bankrupt American Bantam Car Company bravely rose to the challenge of an impossibly fast federal proposal deadline by developing a working prototype for a new small reconnaissance car in a mere 49 days. Delivered on time to Camp Holabird, Maryland, the rugged little prototype endured a bevy of tests to confirm that it met all of the Army’s specifications. Although mass-production of the design eventually fell to the Willys-Overland Company, Bantam’s odd-looking prototype introduced a new American icon. Eventually dubbed the “Jeep,” it accompanied American troops across Europe and the Pacific, helping
Even at home and off the clock, the war was never far away. Businessmen, school children, and homemakers saved grease, collected tin and scrap iron, learned how to install blackout blinds, volunteered for local Civil Defense zone activities, and gathered around the radio to hear the latest wartime news.
The Courier, the nation’s leading African American newspaper, had been a vocal advocate for equal rights and integrated service in the American military since World War I. Ever watchful, the paper had stationed reporters overseas to cover the escalating crisis in Europe and North Africa by the 1930s. Now the Courier announced the “Double V” campaign, urging that victory overseas against the Axis be won in tandem with victory over discrimination within the United States. The Courier’s campaign soon went nationwide, reminding both supporters and detractors there were still battles to be fought on American soil as well.

Even at home and off the clock, the war was never far away. Businessmen, school children, and homemakers saved grease, collected tin and scrap iron, learned how to install blackout blinds, volunteered for local Civil Defense zone activities, and gathered around the radio to hear the latest wartime news. Department stores such as Kaufmann’s offered floors of merchandise to be used in soldiers’ care packages. Shoppers at the store’s “Victory Center” could get maps and war news, sign up to volunteer for Civilian Defense and the Red Cross, and purchase defense stamps and war bonds. Even Kaufmann’s famous display window at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Smithfield Street routinely featured war-related motifs such as factory scenes, women war workers, and displays of pilots and other military personnel. Pittsburgh’s position as a key industrial city brought air raid tests and military fly-overs as early as April 1941. A “dress rehearsal for a blitzkrieg” the Pittsburgh Press called that first test, as “the greatest audience ... ever assembled in Western Pennsylvania” crowded the hilltops around Pittsburgh to watch the city go partially dark while U.S. Army airplanes roared overhead.

Serving with Distinction

Of all Pennsylvania’s contributions to the war effort, none was more crucial than servicemen. Approximately 1.25 million Pennsylvanians entered the military during World War II. Only New York contributed more. They paid a price for that service—more than 33,000 Pennsylvania soldiers died on the battlefield or in a hospital. Pennsylvanians also distinguished themselves in combat: 33 were awarded the Medal of Honor, the second highest total of any state in the nation. Among them were Pittsburgh native Corporal Charles E. (“Commando”) Kelly for fighting off a German platoon near Altavilla, Italy, and Charleroi native and Marine Corps Platoon Sergeant Mitchell Paige, who fearlessly held off an entire Japanese regiment with machine guns during the Battle of Guadalcanal.

Many other Western Pennsylvanians also served with distinction. Oscar-winning movie actor and Indiana, Pa., native Jimmy Stewart proved himself a hero in real life, joining the Army Air Corps and eventually flying 20 bombing raids over Germany. He received two Distinguished Flying Crosses and rose to the rank of colonel by the end of the war. Oil City native Francis S. “Gabby” Gabreski also flew into the history books with the Air Corps as the leading American air ace in Europe, with 28 German “kills” to his credit. Czech-born Marine Corps Sergeant Michael Strank of Cambria County near Johnstown led the patrol that raised a flag on bloody Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima, an image immortalized by photographer James Rosenthal.

A remarkable number of African American men from Western Pennsylvania...
(plus one woman) made history as part of the legendary Tuskegee Airmen. Ninety-five served, including the Hill District’s Lieutenant Elmer Taylor and Lieutenant Carl Woods of Mars and Homewood, both killed in combat over Europe. Approximately 22,000 Pennsylvania women officially joined the Armed Forces, serving with the WACS, WAVES, SPARS, or WASPS. Others contributed their services with the Medical Corps, including Bradford’s Second Lieutenant Mary T. Sullivan, a nurse who ministered to wounded soldiers recovering in England after the D-Day invasion. A notable number of Western Pennsylvania women distinguished themselves as pilots with the WASPS (Women’s Airforce Service Pilots), ferrying planes between bases on the home front, towing gunnery targets, testing aircraft, and doing nearly every aviation job imaginable, freeing male pilots for combat overseas. Among the most famous was McKeesport’s Helen Richey, a renowned aviator before the war, who first volunteered as a commander with the British Air Transportation Auxiliary before joining the WASPS in 1943.

No one rose higher than Uniontown’s General George C. Marshall. Appointed Army Chief of Staff by President Roosevelt, Marshall oversaw the expansion of the U.S. Army into a modern fighting machine, engineering the transition of a small force of about 200,000 men into more than eight million by 1945. Marshall was also credited with skillfully maintaining the delicate relationship between American and British military forces during the war, a crucial but sometimes prickly Allied partnership. He was, according to Harry S. Truman, “the greatest military man America ever produced.”

Beyond the names and actions that garnered headlines, thousands of other Western Pennsylvania men from the Hill District check draft numbers posted at the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House in October 1940. The first peace-time draft in American history was issued by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1940 due to the escalating war in Europe. Nationally, by the end of the war 61 percent of those who fought had been drafted.

The country’s unified stance after Pearl Harbor didn’t erase the discrimination that many black families faced every day. Just as in World War I, they were now being asked to serve a nation that had yet to regard them as fully equal.
Pennsylvania men of every race and nationality headed off to war between 1941 and 1945, serving without fanfare aside from the dearest hopes of their families, neighborhoods, and communities. Some enlisted voluntarily, others were drafted. Nationally, the ratio was approximately 39 percent volunteers to 61 percent draftees. While some men remained stateside, 73 percent served overseas, many traveling away from home for the first time. They built roads, bridges, and landing strips in the Pacific with the U.S. Navy Construction Battalion (“Seabees”) and carved out the Ledo Road in the China-Burma-India Theater with the 1875th Engineer Aviation Battalion. They drove tanks for the U.S. Army and guarded coastal fortifications and ports with the Coastal Artillery. They served on U.S. Navy and Coast Guard ships, including LSTs built in Pittsburgh and Ambridge. They flew fighter planes off carriers in the Pacific and led bomber squadrons out of England and into the heart of Nazi Germany. They jumped behind enemy lines as paratroopers on D-Day, and fought with infantry divisions at the Battle of the Bulge. They survived German and Japanese POW Camps, fought with the Marines at Iwo Jima, and liberated Paris with Pennsylvania’s own 28th Division, the “Keystone Division,” or the “Bloody Bucket.”

Many paid the ultimate sacrifice; many more endured and survived, although no one came back unchanged. Surviving veterans witnessed a side of humanity that most of us will never see. “We did what we had to do to save the world from evil,” one later recalled. They mourned friends, counted themselves lucky, and returned home to move on with their lives—marriage, children, college through the G.I. Bill, a return to a factory job, or a new career made possible by skills mastered during the war. Many never spoke again of what they had seen and experienced in the service. Some waited nearly half a lifetime, only beginning to open up as a growing wave of oral history initiatives spread across the country prompted by the 50th anniversary of World War II in 1995. Today, a number of local veterans’ stories, recorded through projects of the Senator John Heinz History Center and Veterans Voices of Pittsburgh, will be featured in We Can Do It! WWII. An article drawn from some of those oral histories can also be found elsewhere in this special issue of Western Pennsylvania History.

While some families waited a year or more to welcome home returning servicemen following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, other impacts were more immediate. A few companies such as Westinghouse continued their defense work related to atomic exploration and technology, but many mills and other large manufacturers saw their remaining federal contracts cancelled outright; most rapidly began the process of converting back to the production of civilian goods. Women returned home as men resumed their places in mills and factories, and the Pittsburgh Courier stopped using the Double V logo in September 1945. But like those who had served in the war, men and women on the home front had witnessed changes that could no longer be ignored. Expectations about new opportunities for better jobs, better education, and increasing demands for civil rights would remake the social landscape over the next generation, seeds planted in part by awareness born during the war years.

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An unpublished memoir by Frank Inouye recalls growing up in Los Angeles in the 1930s as a typical American teen: playing baseball, attending Catholic school, watching cowboy movies, and lettering in tennis at college. Having Japanese parents, however, made the 1940s less than typical. His daughter Cookie, a Pittsburgh resident, shared her father’s experiences after Pearl Harbor.

When I heard on the radio the president’s message to Congress and to the American people and later saw the dramatic scene on newsreel broadcasts in the theatres, I was incredulous and heartick. I simply didn’t want to believe my ears or my eyes, even as the newspaper headlines confirmed the truth—Japan and the U.S. were at war. My worst fears and those of all Japanese living on the West Coast were now realized.

The true significance of the Pearl Harbor attack did not strike home to us immediately, especially those of us attending colleges and universities. There, we were effectively insulated among well-educated young people of our own age and interests, young adults with whom we shared classes, sports, and a common loyalty to our schools. The professors continued their class lectures, gave exams, and rarely, if ever, referred to the Japanese attack or its aftermath….

Outside the protected walls of school there was a noticeable change in the community’s behavior toward the Japanese. As the Japanese military forces actually fought against American troops in the Philippines and on some Pacific islands, with initial victories going to the Japanese, public opinion, fed by the media, turned against us. The many years of depicting the Japanese as ugly, bandy-legged, eyeglass-wearing, grinning yellow dwarfs in ill-fitting uniforms made it a simple matter to convert Americans’ fears and ridicule of the Japanese into open hatred. And the media, especially the newspapers on the West Coast, made no attempt to distinguish between the Japanese armed forces and the Japanese immigrants and their children living in America. In the public’s mind, the perception was allowed to grow that we were the same people responsible for the military actions and atrocities committed overseas.

After being sent to Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming, Frank returned to a normal life, marrying a girl he met at college who had also been in a camp. Frank earned a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California in 1951, and later was the founding director of the University of Hawai’i-Hilo.
Even Pittsburgh itself would eventually be remade. The massive industrial effort spurred by defense manufacturing had benefitted many, but the long-term future of that same industrial base was in doubt. It also reinforced concerns about air quality and smoke control. Images taken of Pittsburgh by 1940 showed city streets and hills shrouded in dark fog, even in the middle of the day.34 One national news service later described Pittsburgh as a “smoke-begrimed old girl” who looked like “she’ll die of dirt and old-age.”35 The city actually passed a smoke ordinance in 1941, but critical war needs delayed its implementation. In 1946, following much debate, the new regulation finally went into effect—enabled by a compromise that staggered enforcement for industrial and home use.36 The group that brokered the deal was a new player in town. The Allegheny Conference on Community Development was incorporated in 1944 by a small circle of business and education leaders concerned about the city’s image and long-term economic prospects. Pittsburgh, they feared, would be a “dying city” unless proactive measures were taken to rewrite its future in the postwar world.37 Their foresight created a model that would one day be studied by civic leaders across the country. The Allegheny Conference laid the foundation for Pittsburgh’s Renaissance—for the creation of Gateway Center, Point State Park, a thriving Cultural District, clean rivers, and a downtown that is now the envy of many mid-size cities. Once again, it was one collective effort born of another, an innovation that allowed the “industrial arsenal” of World War II to weather dark days ahead and emerge as the vibrant 21st century community we know today.

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3 Jen (no last name), “Agrees We Should Forget War,” Letters to the Editor, The Pittsburgh Press, April 7, 1940.
4 The campaign started July 1933, see “Women Assist in Relief Drive” in “Organization Activities,” The Jewish Criterion, July 21, 1933, 14; and “Pittsburgh Ranks High in Relief Campaign,” The Jewish Criterion, August 11, 1933, both accessed via Carnegie Mellon University’s Pittsburgh Jewish Newspaper Project: http://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/pjn/index.jsp; and also: 1933 — Timeline, A Tradition of Giving, website for the Rauh Jewish Archives, http://www.jewishhistoryhfc.org/timeline.aspx#455ef6f1-cfca-40c3-b819-7fb9830d330b.
7 Edward J. Lally, Jr., “Oh, God, Save Our Poland,” Herron Hill Women Wail,” The Pittsburgh Press, September 1, 1939. Wide scholarly consensus typically identifies Hitler’s invasion of Poland as the official start of World War II, since this act prompted both France and Great Britain to declare war on Germany.
9 The number of planes produced per month in 1940 was 560, as cited in “Nation Looks to City for Industrial Needs,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, January 2, 1942.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Men and Women of Wartime Pittsburgh and Environs: A War Production Epic (Pittsburgh: Frank C. Harper, 1945), 5. This comprehensive 1945 publication remains the primary source on Pittsburgh’s industrial and corporate involvement during World War II. Individual volumes also explore the contributions of many local companies, including David Oakes Woodbury, Battlefronts of Industry, Westinghouse in World War II (New York: J. Wiley, 1948) and William


14 In fact, American Bantam, which, as its name implies, produced small automobiles as a subsidiary of the British Austin Car Company, had been exploring ideas for light military vehicles for years. Much of Bantam’s role in the creation of the Jeep was originally forgotten when Willys-Overland was awarded the larger contract to put the design into mass production. Indicative of the popularity that the Jeep eventually enjoyed in the service, the story of the vehicle’s origins involved such controversy that the Office of the U.S. Quartermaster General published a report outlining its creation. See: Herbert R. Rifkind, *The Jeep—Its Development and Procurement under the Quartermaster Corps, 1940-1942* (Washington, DC: Office of the Quartermaster General, 1943).

15 Men and Women of Wartime Pittsburgh, p. 11.

16 Ibid.


18 The Courier’s European correspondents included Joel A. Rogers, who also covered the Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia. See: Samuel Black, “America’s Best Weekly: 100 Years of the Pittsburgh Courier,” *Western Pennsylvania History* (Spring 2010), 28.

19 The campaign officially launched in February. The logo debuted first, followed by an explanation of its meaning the following week, see: “Double V Campaign,” Pittsburgh Courier, February 7, 1942; and “The Courier’s Double ‘V’ for a double victory campaign gets country-wide support,” Pittsburgh Courier, February 14, 1942.

20 Examples can be seen at the Senator John Heinz History Center: Photographs of Kaufmann’s Department Store, c. 1880-2001, MSP 371, Box 7 Folder 16, Detre Library & Archives.


22 As found in “Chapter 2: Pennsylvanians at War” in *The Arsenal of America: Pennsylvania During the Second World War*, part of ExplorePAhistory, accessed at: http://explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=1-9-194&chapter=2. Casualty and death figures vary. Given the length of time it has taken to recover and identify some remains, the exact numbers will probably never be known. Different service branches maintained their own records, and some are more complete than others. According to
Oscar-winning actor and Indiana, Pa. native Jimmy Stewart proved to be a hero in real life too. Here Colonel Stewart receives the Croix De Guerre for exceptional services in the liberation of France from Lt. Gen. Valin, Chief of Staff, French Air Force.

The Department of the Navy’s 1946 publication, *State Summaries of War Casualties for the United States Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard, Pennsylvania war dead from that service, via combat or prison camp losses, totaled 4,142.* See: http://research.archives.gov/description/305222. By far the highest number of war dead came from the U.S. Army, in which nearly 9% of the Pennsylvanians who went to war failed to return. See: “Foreword I - The Honor List of Dead and Missing for the State of Pennsylvania, part of the National Archives portal – World War II Honor List of Dead and Missing Army Air Forces Personnel, accessed via: http://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/army-casualties/pennsylvania.html.


In lieu of
AAF Form No. 5

**INDIVIDUAL FLIGHT RECORD**
(Balloted Men)

**NAME**
William Manno

**RANK**
Sgt.

**GROUP**
Arm Gunner

**ORGANIZATION**
52nd Bomb

**STATION**
Gowen Fld, Idaho

**DATE**

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Certified corrects: Jimmy M. Stewart,
Captain, Air Corps, Operations Officer.

Oscar-winning actor and Indiana, Pa. native Jimmy Stewart proved to be a hero in real life too. Here Colonel Stewart receives the Croix De Guerre for exceptional services in the liberation of France from Lt. Gen. Valin, Chief of Staff, French Air Force.


28 Information based on artifacts and documents in the Mary T. Sullivan collection, courtesy of Betty M. Arenth.


33 This wave ultimately included Tom Brokaw’s book, which popularized the term now often associated with this group: Tom Brokaw, The Greatest Generation (New York: Random House, 1998).

34 Many of these images can be viewed online as part of the Smoke Control Lantern Slide Collection, ca. 1940-1950, AIS.1978.22, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh, see the entry portal at: http://digital.library.pitt.edu/images/pittsburgh/smokecontrol.html.


36 Industries and commercial fuel users would observe the new ordinance first, followed by homeowners in the fall of 1947, see: “Council to Get Smoke Control Compromise,” The Pittsburgh Press, April 14, 1946.