

# A CHILD'S VIEW OF WORLD WAR II

by Paul Roth

I had just returned home from a trip to the movies, most likely McKeesport's Liberty Theater. The Liberty played the Republic Studios' western stars such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, while the Capital Theater played Monogram films with Tex Ritter or Buck Jones. I don't remember if I took the bus or walked: either was acceptable for 9-year-old boy in those days.

When I arrived, my father said grimly, "The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor" and returned to the radio. I'm not sure how this news registered with me, because at the time I didn't know what or where Pearl Harbor was.

Up to that time, the acknowledged enemy was Germany because of the media attention to the war in Europe. Who could ignore the exciting movies such as *A Yank in the RAF* or *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*? It didn't matter, as the U.S. was now "in it."

The country immediately went into "war mode," including air raid drills and rationing. From a kid's viewpoint, the first major effect was the disappearance of chocolate. We were given Horlick's Malted Milk but that was a poor substitute.

Gradually my friends and I switched our games and imaginations from fighting rustlers and stagecoach robbers in the West to killing Japanese on some island or bombing oil fields in Europe. "The Hollow," a brush-covered hillside at the end of Library Avenue, became our field of battle. At the top was a little-used row of garages, which we adapted into a military headquarters, a prison, or whatever source of concealment was required for the day's play.

The war quickly enveloped us kids. Besides hearing news broadcasts at home, the schools involved us in war-consciousness. They collected money for defense by selling War Stamps. They encouraged patriotic songs and plays. They had practice air raid drills. I particularly liked these because at Centennial School we huddled in the basement hall, and my position was always next to the little blonde girl upon whom I had a secret crush.

## Radio, Movies, and Music

The children's radio serials were now slanted towards the war and patriotic subjects. Terry, of "Terry and the Pirates," was in-service overseas flying missions. Little Orphan Annie and even Gene Autry and his western comrades were all busy fighting spies and home front sabotage.

The Green Hornet's Japanese companion Kato suddenly became "Filipino." Comedian Bob Hope and bandleader Kay Kyser broadcast their shows from military bases, as did the "Victory Parade of Spotlight Bands."

Jack Benny's sponsor, Lucky Strike cigarettes (originally in a green package), were now sold in a white package as the ads proclaimed that "Lucky Strike Green has gone to War!"

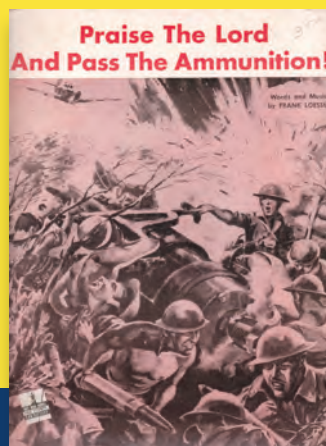
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The U.S. Navy requested 10,000 each of 50 different model fighting planes to help troops with aircraft recognition, range estimation in gunnery practice, and formation flying training.



Author Paul Roth has collected sheet music all his life, including these WWII tunes.



My in-service relatives were my heroes. They provided me with military souvenirs: insignia that became part of a comprehensive collection by the war's end, and WWII badges, below.



Movie serials almost exclusively featured plots involving fighting America's enemies. "Don Winslow of the Navy" fought the war overseas. Dick Tracy engaged villains who were spies or home front threats.

Feature movies were devoted to patriotic endeavors too. Already in 1941, Abbott and Costello were in *Buck Privates* and *In the Navy*. Soon, *Air Force*, *Bombardier*, and *Back to Bataan* were must-see attractions. Movie newsreels such as *The March of Time* (with Westbrook van Voorhees), provided visual documentation to the war's progress.

Looking back it almost seems as if the war was *predicted* by the popular songs of the day.

The war started for the U.S. in late 1941 but for a couple years before that we had been hearing "war-propaganda" songs. Irving Berlin published "Any Bonds Today?" and "Arms for the Love of America." The draft was commemorated by "Goodbye, Dear—I'll Be Back in a Year." A British import—remember that England was in the war by 1940—became a Hit Parade favorite: "He Wears a Pair of Silver Wings."

The first pop song to be published and recorded after December 7, 1941, was bandleader Sammy Kaye's flag-waving "Remember Pearl Harbor," followed by "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition" and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" (composed by Pittsburgh native Sam Stept). Tin Pan Alley was busy and the airwaves and jukeboxes were full of patriotic tunes. However, by late 1943, the tone to the songs was changing from flag-waving to longing and repatriation as exemplified by "I'll Be Seeing You," "Just a Blue Serge Suit," and many others.

## Toys, Photography, and Instruments

As the war progressed, many metallic toys became plastic or disappeared entirely.

For boys, toys such as the Hubley cap pistols ("Roy Rogers Frontier 44") and Daisy air rifles were no longer on the market. Erector Sets were gone too from the need for industrial metals. However, model airplane kits made from balsa or pinewood were plentiful, especially "solid" model warplane kits produced by Hawk (balsa) and Strombecker (pine). Kits for "flying" models, made of balsa strips and paper, propelled by rubber bands, were plentiful but not the "gas models" due to a scarcity of internal combustion engines made of metal. My model airplanes too transitioned from DC3s and Piper Cubs to P-40s and B-17s.



Electric trains, also made primarily of metal, were out of the question: Lionel and American Flyer were busy turning out war supplies. But Strombecker made an attempt to fill the gap by manufacturing kits of non-operating “HO-gauge” trains made *entirely of wood*.

Plastic army helmets and wooden replica army rifles also filled the stores. Fine cameras made primarily of metal with high-quality optical glass were likewise unavailable. Low quality or beginners’ cameras made of plastic were on the market. Even so, film was rarely available. When a store had a stock of film, the grapevine quickly diminished the supply. Movie cameras and film completely disappeared from the marketplace.

Musical instruments made of metal disappeared as well. Used horns and woodwinds were coveted. (My first instrument was an ancient Holton alto saxophone.) Pianos were “out for the duration.” Manufacturers like Steinway (pianos), Conn (wind instruments), and others advertised in the trade papers that they had “gone to war.”

## What kids did

Our school started a weekly scrap drive, to which kids brought used tin cans. It was competitive because you were rewarded with points, which were totaled to award military-style chevrons: I made corporal (two stripes) but never quite made it to sergeant.

I seem to remember seeing an important politician drive by our school. He must have been visiting McKeesport’s steel mill, which, like all the others, was going full tilt 24 hours a day. The skies over the Monongahela Valley were illuminated with orange light every night!

My in-service relatives were my heroes. Uncle Jerry (Roth) was in the Transportation Corps in Belgium. Uncle Ben (Siegal) was an Air Corps navigator in the Pacific. Uncle Billy (Goldstein) was a Naval Officer at a training base in the U.S. Cousin Lester (Herrup) was in the Artillery. They provided me with military souvenirs: insignia that became part of a comprehensive collection by the war’s end.

As the war went on, my media role models became the great radio journalists and war correspondents such as Edward R. Murrow, Eric Sevareid, and Howard K. Smith. On Pittsburgh radio, Beckley Smith reported the war news.

As the war progressed, it became part of daily life but it did not end with a bang. It dwindled. It was expected. The European war ended in April 1945. Almost simultaneously, chocolate and camera film came back. I was at the YMHA’s Camp Laurel Y in the Laurel Highlands in August 1945 when the Pacific War ended. The news was celebrated, but did not much disturb our routine of softball, hikes, swimming, and socials.

By that time, due to my advancing age—I was 13!—the neighborhood war games had dwindled and were replaced by other interests. Library Avenue became a baseball field, and girls (who had been denied participation in our games) were now being welcomed into our lives. The soldiers and sailors returned, and the war was over for me.

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**Paul Roth** has written about commuter trains, big bands, and Buffalo Soldiers for this magazine, often with co-author Pat Finkel. He is a retired professor of computer science, a railroad historian, and a researcher of mid-20th century Pittsburgh music.



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