



WORLD WAR 2 PROPAGANDA POSTERS: *THIS IS THE ENEMY* (USA); *MADAME BUTTERFLY* (JORDAAN, NETHERLANDS, 1938)

GLOBAL WAR, TOTAL WAR

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

*"Do not plan for my return.
They have burned everything above the ground."
~JAPANESE ARMY BIVOUAC SONG*

Everyone in the world must know that World War 2 ended 50 years ago in that incredible and significant year of 1945. The war against Nazi Germany, which began in September 1939, ended May 8, 1945, with the defeat and eradication of Nazism. (It's periodic resurrections in various parts of the world are yet far out on the political fringe.) The Pacific Ocean war came to a conclusion that summer a few days after atomic bombs obliterated two Japanese cities. Japan surrendered to the Allies on August 14, 1945, and officially signed surrender documents aboard a U.S. battleship in Tokyo harbor, the famous *Missouri*, on September 2. (Both dates are claimed as the real 'VJ Day'.)

The scale of World War 2 was enormous. War historian John Keegan wrote that it was *the largest event in the history of mankind*, and that *no populated continent was untouched*. An estimated 50 million human beings perished out of existence during the six years the war spread over most of the world. Though soldiers died by the millions, many millions more civilians were killed in massive bombing raids that destroyed cities or were exterminated in death camps as a result of their religion or race. The war's immensity of death and broken lives, which can never be counted with complete accuracy (nor truly comprehended), were approximately 15 million battle dead, 40 million civilian dead and missing, 35 million military and civilian wounded, 28 million homeless, 35 million imprisoned, 5 million orphaned, and 11 million executed.

World War 2 was a stimulus to unparalleled economic and industrial activity and was a clash of ideologies not experienced since the Crusades. The Axis of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan confronted an uneasy alliance of Soviet Marxism (which was as much a dictatorship as Nazism but differed greatly in political intent) and the principal Western democracies, the United States and Britain. The industrial capacity of the U.S., plus its resources, productivity, economy and manpower, reversed the tide of early Axis victories and provided the technological strength that ultimately won the war.

The global nature of (World War 2), and the ambitions of the belligerents, meant that it was fought on a scale which even today confounds the imagination, Keegan wrote. To be understood and reachable to the individual sensibility, the war's scale must be scaled back, focused on the microscopic but very personal local involvement. The city of Astoria exemplified the war's urgent claim of total commitment of every nation swept into it, though its role was minor and supplementary compared to the large shipbuilding efforts 100 miles up the Columbia River in Portland and Vancouver (Washington). Merchant Marine 'Liberty' and Victory' ships and Navy warships such as the infamous 'Kaiser Koffins', small thinly armored escort carriers, were commissioned, made sea-ready and filled up with crews in Astoria, and steamed out into the vast Pacific to fight in the colossal oceanwide war of extermination against the Empire of Japan, some to never return.

Astoria's participation in World War 2 is on display this 50th anniversary summer at the Clatsop County Historical Society and the Columbia River Maritime Museum, which has a major gallery devoted to U.S. Navy history. The Historical Society this past spring displayed two traveling exhibits about the domestic front during the war (*Fighters On The Homefront* and *Produce For Victory: Posters on the American Homefront, 1941-45*) and is currently displaying *Homefront Clatsop County* which features artifacts, relics and photos (also a shard from a shell that hit Fort Stevens when it was fired on by a Japanese submarine in early 1942).

Although fishing was a priority occupation in Astoria, not to be interrupted by drafting local fishermen away from their important war effort, hundreds of local mariners flocked to enlist after Pearl Harbor. The initial effect of Pearl Harbor on Astoria was anxiety that the Japanese would attack the west coast, as so many rumors claimed. A severe blackout was imposed. Mines were laid at the entrance to the Columbia River to stop enemy ships and submarines, and incoming/outgoing friendly ships were escorted through the minefield by small Coast Guard patrol boats. Tongue Point based Navy PBY seaplanes patrolled the North Coast from San Francisco to the Straits of Juan de Fuca (the PBYs were later replaced by Navy blimps that operated from Tillamook). Young men and women enlisted or were drafted into the armed forces (many joining the naval and maritime services) and were sent to all theaters of the war,

Europe, Asia and the Pacific. A National Guard unit from Astoria saw action on New Guinea and the Philippines. The Navy built a 500-bed hospital for wounded servicemen and Fort Stevens and Camp Clatsop (renamed Rilea) trained troops sent to Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.

Like the rest of the country, the Oregon North Coast settled into a war routine of rationing (food, gas, sugar and shoes), war bond drives and blood banks; and very soon the War Department began sending telegrams to local families reporting the deaths of sons, brothers, husbands and lovers. *People volunteered for (the) Red Cross and for air raid warden duties, worked on scrap drives, rationing and draft boards*, Robert S. Lovell wrote in *Cumtux*, Clatsop Historical Society's quarterly magazine. Women filled most of the cannery jobs previously held by men and helped fit-out ships from the upper river yards. Also exempt from the draft with fishermen were local ship and boatyard workers, marine electricians and other skilled labor necessary to produce the stupendous war machine that America built during World War 2. Forest workers were not draft exempt, however, and while they warred all over the world, Pacific Northwest forests were left to burn untended.

(A successful effort by local Chinese schoolchildren to block shipment of scrap iron to Japan in 1940 *shouldn't be lost to our memory*, Lovell wrote in *Cumtux*. Japanese war crimes in China angered the schoolchildren, who decided to picket a ship that was being loaded in Astoria. *They suddenly appeared on the docks carrying signs, and our patriotic longshoremen decided to honor their picketline*, Lovell wrote. The Port of Astoria subsequently embargoed all further scrap shipments, which angered Japan. *They're going to be shooting that stuff back at us anyway*, Lovell quotes his mother saying (a rather popular opinion at the time). The Japanese sued the Port, longshoremen and Chinese children. Lovell wrote, *Fortunately, the suit dragged on, and was settled when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Of course, it was only 27 months later that Japan did indeed shoot at Clatsop County, with 17 shells aimed at Fort Stevens.*)

A tour of the Maritime Museum's Naval History gallery provides a virtual (perhaps even visceral) experience of World War 2 as it was fought on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by Astorians and other Americans. The centerpiece of the gallery is the steel bridge and pilothouse of a U.S. Navy destroyer that experienced savage combat in the colossal battles of the Pacific War and later in Korea. The museum was built around this metal skull of the *USS Knapp*, which, like a royal head, was detached from its body and shipped downriver from a Portland shipwrecking yard. The gallery it commands is about U.S. Navy history from Revolutionary times through World War 2. An introductory sign to the gallery defines the basic functions of a navy, which are deterring foreign aggression, defending friendly coasts, denying use of the seas to enemies and carrying war to hostile shores. Control of the seas is the central doctrine of modern naval warfare, introduced to the U.S. Navy by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan whose ideas were successfully launched against Spain's last colonies in 1898. The titanic World War 2 seabattles



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