

AT WAR IN ASTORIA

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"Four years of war is forty of anything else."
—CYNTHIA BASS ('SHERMAN'S MARCH')

World War 2 began on September 1, 1939 and ended on September 2, 1945. Between those two days lay six years of the most tremendous and monstrous carnage ever experienced by humanity. Its most enduring tragedy and legacy to the future is that it was self-inflicted.

Military historian John Keegan wrote that World War 2 "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, sailors and airmen died by the millions, many more millions of civilians were killed in massive bombing raids that destroyed cities or were exterminated in death camps as a result of their politics, religion, or race (as well as for 'sexual degeneracy'). 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 or missing, 35 million military and civilian wounded, 28 million homeless, 35 million imprisoned, 5 million orphaned, and 11 million executed (which includes the infamous 'Holocaust' of 6 million Jews exterminated in Nazi death camps whose names will probably bring a shudder far into the future: Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau.)

To be understood and reachable to the individual sensibility, the war's enormous scale must be scaled back, focused on the microscopic but very personal involvement. The Columbia River city of Astoria, Oregon, ten miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, 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 upriver in Portland (Oregon) and Vancouver (Washington), and of course, like every other city in the USA, it was untouched by actual combat. Merchant Marine 'Liberty' and 'Victory' ships and Navy warships such as the infamous 'Kaiser Koffins', small thinly armored escort aircraft 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 annihilation against the Empire of Japan, many to never return.

Although fishing was a priority occupation in Astoria, not to be interrupted by drafting local fishermen away from their important war effort of supplying food to the armed forces, hundreds of local mariners flocked to enlist after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, two years after the war began with Nazi Germany's attack on Poland, and six months after its massive invasion of Russia in June.

The initial effect of Pearl Harbor on Astoria was anxiety that the Japanese would attack the West Coast of the USA, 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 vessels were escorted through the minefield by small Coast Guard patrol boats. Tongue Point based Navy PBV seaplanes patrolled the North Coast from San Francisco to the Straits of Juan de Fuca. (The PBVs were later replaced by Navy blimps that operated from Tillamook.) Astoria's young men and women enlisted or were drafted in 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 in 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.

Among many personal accounts of those first months in Astoria after Pearl Harbor is one by the late Paul Barkman, who served on a Coast Guard patrol boat guarding the entrance to the Columbia River. "The river filled up with vessels of every kind," he wrote. "Ships anchored below Desdemona Light that had escaped Japanese submarines. A couple of ships were torpedoed just off the coast but most managed to get across the bar and safely into harbor. Everything was painted wartime gray. The Coast Guard vessels *Fir*, *Manzanita* and *Rose* took on a drab appearance. Seabags began to stack up at all naval and Coast Guard stations as floods of new enlistees took berths among the huge fleet of small craft that were taken over for the duration of the war. Yachts from the Astoria and Young's Bay clubs, tugboats and fishing boats of every sort were pressed into service and painted gray. Each received numerical designations based on their length and most were mounted with guns."

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 the Summer 1995 *Cumtux*, Clatsop County Historical Society's quarterly magazine. Women filled most of the cannery jobs previously held by able-bodied men and helped fit-out ships sent incomplete to Astoria from the upper river shipyards. Also exempt from the draft with fishermen were local ship and boatyard workers, marine electricians and other skilled labor necessary to produce the local portion of the stupendous war machine that America built during World War 2. Forest workers were not 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 atrocities 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 quoted his mother as saying (a rather popular opinion at the time). The Japanese sued the Port. Longshoremen

(* The title of this article is from Barkman's: *NCTE*, Aug/Sept '95. After the war he taught high school history in Northern California, and worked on a horse ranch. He returned to Astoria in 1985 and was employed at the Columbia River Maritime Museum and developed jobs for Green Thumb. He died in California in the late 1990s.)



HANS ALEXANDER MUELLER

Astoria, Oregon is the oldest city in the American West. Its history is rough and stormy on both land and sea. Its mythlike 'Golden Age' is perceived to have been in the late 19th Century when its riverfront ten miles inland from the Pacific Ocean was crowded with ships from all over the world that exchanged the fineries of Victorian era civilization for Columbia River salmon, timber from the bountiful forests and wheat from farms along the lower river. Yet World War 2 might also be considered a period of great prosperity for the city, though it refrains from acknowledging war profiteering as part of its history.

Astoria was hot during World War 2. Thousands of sailors came from all over the USA to fill the crews of ships built upriver in Portland and Vancouver. They were young to war, aware they might be killed, their ships sunk, so they partied in Astoria like there was no tomorrow, which for many there were few tomorrows left.

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."

Barkman wrote of the shelling of Fort Stevens, "On the night of June 21, 1942, a Japanese submarine surfaced offshore and slammed a few shells at Fort Stevens. Everyone waited for Battery Russell to reply but there was only silence. Afterward the sub moved down the coast and shelled California."

A tour of the Columbia River Maritime Museum on the Astoria riverfront provides a virtual (perhaps even visceral) experience of World War 2's titanic seabattles in the Pacific between the USA and Japan and the pitiless no-quarter submarine wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 in the North Atlantic.

The centerpiece of CRMM's Naval History 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 13-ton metal skull of the *USS Knapp*, which, like a royal head, was detached from its body and shipped downriver from a Portland shipwrecking yard.

One corner of the gallery is devoted to an exhibit of the heavy cruiser *USS Astoria*, including a model by CRMM founder Rolf Klep. *Astoria* was the first of two warships named after the city of Astoria and was sunk by Japanese ships off Guadalcanal one August night in 1942 with three other Allied cruisers.

The Battle of the Savo Sea was a nighttime gunfire and torpedo fight, at which the Japanese excelled. *Astoria* (which had conveyed home to Tokyo the body of a Japanese ambassador a few years earlier) was riddled with shell hits. An all-metal, electronically guided, mechanically powered warship engaged in

the largest naval war in history. *Astoria* went down like an antique sailing man-of-war gunned to death broadside to its enemy.

Two hundred and thirty-eight of *Astoria's* crew died with their ship; 142 were wounded. Above Klep's model is a diagram showing where each of approximately 200 Japanese shells struck *Astoria*.

A 50th anniversary reunion of survivors was held at the Museum in 1992, and a number have been held since. They gather on August 9, the date of *Astoria's* sinking (and also the date of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945).

Exhibits change and rotate in the Naval Gallery, and a convoy of World War 2 warships that used to fan out from the *Knapp* has been pared. Noticeably missing is the U.S. Navy destroyer *Reuben James*, generally considered the first American naval vessel lost in the war (though the gunboat *Panay*, sunk in China by Japanese air attack in 1937, might also have a claim). *Reuben James* was torpedoed by a Nazi U-boat while escorting a convoy of cargo ships to England two months before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Its loss characterized the grim six-year battle to maintain English and Russian ocean supply lines against attacking German submarines. Thousands of ships and lives were lost, and for a perilous time U-boats sank more Allied cargo ships faster than they could be replaced. In response, American shipyards revolutionized shipbuilding, particularly the Henry J. Kaiser yards on the Pacific Coast. By war's end, the Kaiser yards in Portland and Vancouver were producing their famous 'Liberty' and 'Victory' ships one a day.

A classic example of a World War 2 Liberty ship is the *Star of Oregon*, which was built in Portland and launched in September 1941. It was the second Liberty launched, the first on the West Coast. A year later, on August 30, 1942, a Nazi submarine sent it to the bottom of the Caribbean on its return to the USA from its maiden voyage to the Persian Gulf. A builder's model of *Star of Oregon* is in CRMM's Steamship Gallery, just preceding the Naval Gallery.

The Kaiser yards on the Columbia River also built warships, one of which was the escort aircraft carrier *Gambier Bay*. The model of *Gambier Bay* in the Naval History Gallery was built from scratch by two Beaverton (Oregon) dentists, Nick Marineau and Robert Norgren, who singly or together made most of the ship models in the gallery, including a magnificent scale model of the battleship *Oregon* (Marineau). The real *Gambier Bay* was built upriver and was one of fifty small aircraft carriers commissioned and crewed in Astoria. Escort carriers like *Gambier Bay* were constructed to provide air support for amphibious operations in the Pacific or against U-boats in the Atlantic. They carried a crew of 900 and their air squadrons were torpedo planes and fighters. They were the first all-welded carriers, prefabricated to be built quickly — an average of one every seven days. A popular name for them was "Kaiser Koffins," which five commissioned in Astoria became, sunk by torpedoes, Japanese kamikazes and one by surface fire.

Thomas Y'Blood, author of *The Little Giants*, wrote a tribute to the crews of the escort carriers, which is displayed on a plaque next to the *Knapp's* bridge (one of three recently put on exhibit). "They came from all corners of America — the grassy plains, the mountain heights, the big cities, the wave swept shores, from north and south, east and west, most came to the escort carriers, not as seasoned sailors, but as individuals setting out for the far oceans for the first time."

Paul Barkman wrote that although Astoria was generally a "pleasantly quiet liberty town," later in the war "when the (escort) carriers started coming downriver from the Kaiser shipyards in Portland and Vancouver, large numbers of shore patrol and local police were called out because too many of the crews aboard the 'Kaiser Koffins' were not too optimistic about their

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