WORLD WAR II ON THE TEXAS HOMEFRONT

Uncle Sam, We are at your Service!

Part One: Mobilization for War

On December 8, 1941, the principal (and teacher) of a three-room school in the Central Texas community of Slater summoned all students.   Sixth-grader Donna Williamson marched with fellow students into Mr. Turner's classroom. The pupils listened attentively to serious words coming from a small radio speaker…the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt calling on Congress to authorize America's entry into World War II. The president referred to the previous day, December 7, as a "date which will live in infamy," because Japan had attacked U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

"Where was this Hawaii?" Donna wondered. "Japan? Wasn't that the country that made dolls and Mother's delicate tea set?" Today, Donna Williamson Ellis remembers her feelings that pivotal day. "I understood little of what had happened the day before, but I had a foreboding feeling that life was changing. Gradually, life slipped into high gear."

Three-year-old Lucy King didn't understand what war was, either, but she knew her father was leaving their East Texas hometown of Hughes Springs for a very long time. "I suggested tying him to the bedpost," Lucy King Perez remembers of the day her father went to war. "I stood with Mama, who held my baby brother, and waved as enlistees breezed down Main Street on a bus. Daddy tossed his hat out the window for us to keep. Mama picked up the hat and ran her hand around its sweatband. My insides shook like Jello."

Men like Lucy's father were fighting far-flung battles by the time high school senior Juanita Byrd (later Juanita Candler) gave the Class of 1943 valedictory speech at graduation ceremonies in the West Texas town of Westbrook.

"To our classmates who are to serve in the armed forces, we shout 'Keep 'em Rolling, Keep 'em Flying, and Happy Landings!' Because most of us will soon be far away from home, we say to our parents and friends left behind, 'So Long and Keep the Home Fires Burning.' Tonight, we change our high school banner of blue and gold for the Stars and Stripes of Old Glory. We turn our faces to the future and say, 'We are ready, Uncle Sam. America, we are at your service."

Ask any American older than 70, and they'll likely have their own stories of anxious years, 1941-1945, when the United States fought to end World War II. Men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces recount vivid tales of foreign campaigns in places once unknown to them. But the war also was fought back home by civilians who sacrificed much to provide military might and moral support on the long march to the "inevitable triumph" promised by President Roosevelt in his "Day of Infamy" speech.

This year, as the world acknowledges the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, these homefront stories comprise memories as compelling as warfront stories. Earlier this year, *Texas Highways* asked readers for memories and photographs of what went on in Texas during World War II. More than 160 readers responded with photos and anecdotes—such as the three above—which embody the sense of concern, change, and courage that occupied every aspect of life for 45 tumultuous months.

Following is the first of a two-part series in which readers recall the war years on the homefront. This month, they tell how Texas mobilized for war and how citizens watched for danger at home. The second part (which runs next month) recounts how people in Texas sacrificed and supported the troops. It also offers heartfelt and even surprising reflections on World War II.

By Land, Sea, and Air on the Homefront

During World War II, Texas mobilized like never before. Some 750,000 Texans, including 12,000 women, left home for military service in Europe, the Pacific, and North Africa.

On the homefront, Texas' wide-open spaces and temperate weather proved the perfect place for military training. In fact, air training of British pilots began in Texas even before the U.S. entered the war. Eventually, more than a million ground troops trained at 15 major army camps in Texas, which also served as the nation's center for pilot and bombardier training.

Plants across Texas sprang up to manufacture war supplies. Shipbuilding cranked up along the upper Texas coast. The state also launched into aircraft manufacturing—including the mile-long Consolidated Aircraft Corporation plant near Fort Worth, one of the world's largest bomber facilities.

Farmers and ranchers kept the nation and its soldiers fed. But citizens and entire families also moved from farms to cities to work in war plants and military bases statewide. At the time, men held most factory jobs, so the mobilization of men for war duty meant a workforce shortage. To fill the gap, civilian women—many with husbands in the service and most with no previous work experience outside the home—donned the work clothes of "Rosie the Riveter."

Other women freed up male military pilots for combat duty (women could not fly combat missions at the time) by becoming Women Air Service Pilots. The WASPs trained at Avenger Field in Sweetwater and ferried all kinds of military aircraft from domestic base to base.

The war came uncomfortably close to home in 1942 and 1943 when a fleet of 20-plus German submarines, called U-boats, began sinking tanker ships in the Gulf of Mexico to disrupt oil flow from Texas and Louisiana. In response, citizens volunteered to patrol coastal waters as part of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. In town large and small, plane spotters watched for air attacks. Air-raid wardens also monitored neighborhoods during blackout drills in which

residents turned off all lights or covered windows to darken the landscape. Secrecy on military matters, such as troop movements, was paramount. “Loose Lips Sink Ships,” government posters reminded citizens, the enemy could be listening.

Texas was alert and preparing for war.

ADJUST ORDER TO FIT VISUALS; SUBTITLES MEANT AS AN AID TO MATCH PHOTOS

WORKING IN WAR PLANTS

“We sisters were farm girls in McCullough County when the war began. With all the men gone to war, we had to close down the farm and support ourselves and our mother. We found war work for women in Fort Worth at Consolidated Aircraft. We did sheet metal riveting and upholstering on bombers, working six days a week. We girls at the plant used to put our names and addresses in the planes, down in the upholstery and under the steering wheel. I heard from one of the pilots who found my name, and we corresponded throughout the war. He sent me a picture of himself and his crew. Years later, my son came across that same picture in a book about World War II that a man was autographing at a bookstore. The author was in that same pilot’s crew so long ago.”

--Virgie Moore and Jessie Mae Wood, as told to Jessie Mae’s daughter, Shirley Guthro

“My sister, Marjorie, and I helped build planes at Consolidated Aircraft in Fort Worth while our husbands joined the Army. During one-month training, we learned to drill and rivet sheet metal and read blueprints. This was all new to us. We arose about 4:30 a.m., drove across town and dropped off our pajama-clad children in nursery school, then drove to the plant. One day, I heard a siren from the wing section where Marjorie worked. Sure enough, she had injured

herself by drilling a hole in her finger. She recovered and was back at work very quickly. We couldn't have made it through those years without each other. Marjorie has now passed on and is buried with a footstone inscribed "Marjorie Faubion, Rosie the Riveter."
--Mable Brannon Slovacek

"When my husband went off to war, I wanted to do my part. So after the fall harvest of 1943, my sister, Ruby, and I went to Fort Worth to work at the Consolidated bomber plant. We wore navy pant suits with a matching bill cap and a red vest with 'Inspector' across the back. We felt fortunate to be inspectors instead of riveters. How I loved the B-24s. I cried every time I heard of one crashing. We lived in the 'girls section' of the Victory Apartments across from the plant and felt lucky, as some boys from our hometown of Ranger commuted 160 miles round trip every day to work there. Patriotism was at the top during this time. It was the outstanding part of my life."
--Mary Moore Tarrant

"I worked the swing shift at Aloe Army Airfield in Victoria as a "Rosie the Riveter" repairing airplanes. The hardest plane to work on was the P-40, a small fighter. Because I was small, I was chosen to crawl on my back into the slender tail section, being careful not to dislodge the many wires. I had to go in head first and crawl out feet first. I was glad I was not claustrophobic."
--Zulema A. Watkins Munk

"I got drafted in 1943, and when the doctor at the Army induction center saw the scar on my throat from an earlier tracheotomy, he told me I was unfit for military service and was classified

4-F. I felt dejected. So I helped the war effort by working as a machinist at the North American Aviation Company's B-25 bomber plant in Grand Prairie. I later worked in a machine shop at the Naval Air Station at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Sometimes a military bus would go by and some service men would yell at me, 'Hey, draft dodger!' I guess I didn't appear 'unfit for military service.'"

--Charlie W. Johnson

"As a pilot for an oil company (an essential war industry), my father, Rigdon Edwards Jr., was exempt from military service. But he became a flight instructor at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, where he taught Women Air Service Pilots how to fly. There were over 700 local people who worked in civilian jobs at the airfield. My father was known for his patience with the young women learning to fly. If a girl was about to 'wash out' (be dismissed) from the program, Daddy was often asked to take her up and see what the problem was. What I remember most about Avenger Field is taking Daddy to work every morning. I'd be in my pajamas and robe when the guard at the gate would shine his flashlight into the car to see who was in the back seat. When Daddy was ready to come home after a day of flying, he would buzz the house three times. That was the signal to go get him."

--Sandra Edwards Spears

"I was fortunate enough to work as a dispatcher on the flight line at Avenger Field, working with the Women Air Service Pilots program. The WASPs were given the same flight training as their male counterparts. The flew cargo, soldiers, supplies, and planes to wherever they were needed across the country. They also served as test pilots and even towed targets behind planes so ground crews could practice gunnery skills. The most fun I had was when I was flying

from Abilene with a group commander who ‘dive bombed’ the railway trains and ranches of friends. This fun was saddened when we flew over the site of a WASP plane crash that had just taken place.”

--LeBecca Wills Paddock

WATCHFUL ON THE HOMEFRONT

“In Runge (Karnes County) we all participated in air-raid and blackout drills. During a blackout, all the lights in town were turned off when the signal (a fire siren) was sounded. I can remember sitting quietly with my parents in the pitch dark, almost holding my breath and usually crawling under the coffee table where I felt safe. Finally, the all-clear signal would sound, and we would turn on the lights with relief that it was only a drill.”

--Barbara J. Roberson

“One night, Dad was babysitting us four children when the air-raid siren went off in Galveston. He was an air-raid warden, so he grabbed his large flashlight and hard hat to go do his duty elsewhere in town. We children turned out all lights and sat huddled in the dark house around the large Philco radio to see if it was a real raid or a drill. We were a terrified group. My older sister decided to turn on one lamp and pull down the window shades. After a few minutes, we heard loud footsteps on the porch, pounding on the door, and a gruff stranger saying, ‘Air Raid Warden! Turn out the light!’ After the all-clear sound, my Dad returned home to excited children who knew exactly what he did as an air-raid warden.”

--Editha Wilks Thomason

"When troop trains stopped in Slaton, as a USO volunteer I would pass ice cream and snacks through the windows because the troops were not allowed to get off the trains. They would ask us what town and state they were in. We were not allowed to say anything."

--Mary Harral Crawford

"When my husband went off for duty, we wanted a casual 'good-bye,' so he gave me a peck on the cheek and left me at the bus station to go home. On the bus I had tears running down my cheek. A grandmotherly woman put her hand on my knee and said 'Let me guess. You are pregnant, and he just walked away and sent you home to Mama.' We had been told over and over again not to say anything about troop movement. Posters everywhere showed big ears and said that the enemy was always listening. So I figured it was better to lose my reputation than my husband's life, so I just said, 'Oh, how can you tell, does it show already?'"

--Mary P. Logan

"I worked for the San Antonio branch of the Office of Postal Censorship. Our work was so secret, if we could have come and gone through the walls instead of the doors, we would have. All foreign mail came through our office. I majored in Spanish in college so I read letters in Spanish. Others specialized in other languages. If something seemed suspicious or compromised national security, we submitted a form to our bosses describing the passage. I remember one woman was fired for missing something important."

--Marie Galloway Varney as told to her niece, Ann Gallaway

"One night the phone rang, and my stepfather, Mark Jackson, answered, listened a couple of minutes, and said 'I have to go on patrol with the Sheriff.' There was an urgency in his voice, as

he strapped on his Colt revolver and grabbed a rifle and ammo. He later told us there was a report of a periscope in the Sabine ship channel leading to the Port Arthur refinery. It was never confirmed but was taken seriously by officials and civilians alike, since U-boats were sinking tankers in the Gulf. Had a sub surfaced, they would have quickly learned that they were indeed in Texas. Vehicles and heavily-armed men lined the channel that night."

--Leon Todd

"My father operated a general mercantile store in a small farming community north of Corpus Christi. The store was a designated 'plane reporting station.' My sister and I would stand in front of the store and watch for planes flying over. When we spotted one, we rushed to the back of the store, where the phone was, and called in the description of how many engines, the flight direction, and altitude, as best we could."

--Jack Thornton

"As a teenager, I was a volunteer in the observation tower near our school in Groves (near Port Arthur). We scanned the skies for enemy aircraft. On the walls of our glassed-in tower were silhouettes of German and Japanese planes. I also worked in the shipyards with my father. There were signs and slogans everywhere, all urging greater productivity. Sometimes the managers would trot out a wounded war hero who would exhort us to work harder, and there would be cheers. We dug a bunker in our backyard in case we needed to defend ourselves from attack. Fifty years later, we filled it in, but a sinkhole still appears periodically."

--John E. DeVillier

“I’m one of the few original members of the Coast Guard Auxiliary in Galveston. At the beginning of the war, we had absolutely no way to defend our merchant ships from German U-boat attack. In 1942 volunteers for the Coast Guard Auxiliary operated private boats that were converted for patrolling the Gulf. One trip out, I was positive I heard a U-boat recharging its batteries on the surface in the middle of the night, but it was too foggy to see. The auxiliary lasted only six or eight months and we were all taken into the regular Coast Guard.”
--Charles Stamey

“The idea for the Coast Guard Auxiliary came from yachtsmen who took the idea to Washington. I patrolled on a 52-foot motor yacht out of Galveston. Other volunteers patrolled the Gulf out of Corpus Christi. Regular patrols were four days long, covering 90 square miles of sea. At night, no lights were allowed. We did everything by feel or by moonlight. Navy crewmen back in Galveston called us ‘Hooligan’s Navy’ because we didn’t have real uniforms and sailed on these small boats. One winter day, the Navy sailors were returning to port because of bad weather, just as we were heading out to patrol for the enemy in that same bad weather. They never teased us again.”
--Harvey Shepherd

Resources:

--Texas Handbook Online

--RE: U-boats

http://www.gomr.mms.gov/homepg/regulate/environ/archaeological/world_war_II.html