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MEMORIES OF WORLD WAR II

by Buck A. Young

What are your memories of the “big war,” the one that started fifty years ago? Mine are full of such things as rationing and scrap drives, war movies and newsreels, air raid drills and the draft board, and gold stars on front windows.

World War II was looming on the horizon when I started public school in September 1938. Actually, it had begun in 1931 when Japan, taking advantage of the Great Depression, invaded Manchuria and was not stopped. In 1935 Italy’s Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in extremely cold blood and the so-called “great powers” did nothing to stop him. Then, early in 1936, Germany’s Adolph Hitler, whose attempted coup of Austria had failed, entered the Rhineland and was not stopped. Later in 1936 the Spanish Revolution began and both Hitler and Mussolini openly interceded to assure a fascist victory. In 1937 the Japanese attacked China and were not stopped. In March 1938 Hitler swept into Austria, and as summer ended, pushed into Czechoslovakia. This time Great Britain and France acted; they gave Hitler partial occupation in the false hope that that was all he wanted. Six months later, he broke his promises made at Munich and overran the rest of Czechoslovakia. Not to be outdone, Mussolini invaded lowly Albania.

Since I was a young child, I paid little attention to such happenings in far away places. The daily newspapers and the network radio broadcasts were full of the war news from Europe and the Far East, and I do remember the dismay in my parents’ voices as they discussed the news at night in our living room. At the Alamo “picture show,” the Movie-Tone and Pathe newsreels showed us the German’s goosestepping into Prague and the Japanese destroying China and Singapore. Something was very wrong in my childhood world.

Then, in September 1939, I learned a new word — “blitz-krieg,” or lightning war. In only eleven days Hitler’s armies overran Poland and World War II formally began. By the next summer we saw Denmark and Norway overrun, Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg conquered, and even France smashed. Great Britain, alone, stood against the German might and her ability to endure was in doubt.

In shock, the United States began to crank up its defense production, not only to arm itself, but to assist Great Britain and Russia. The Selective Service set up local draft boards across the country in the fall of 1940. Local Board 63 started calling men from the Tri-Cities of Baytown, Pelly, and Goose Creek, but it was not until after that black Sunday in December 1941 that the draft touched almost every family in the area. None of the boys in my immediate family were old enough for

the service (Korea caught us, however), although my older brother Alfred did join the Merchant Marine near the war's end. My father's half-brother Louis was called even though he was in his thirties. The only time I saw my father cry was when he kissed Uncle Louis goodbye just before Louis shipped out to the Pacific Theatre. Uncle Louis saw combat, hand-to-hand he claimed, but returned unharmed. My brother-in-law, Leonard Hillhouse, had already fathered three children and my sister Bernice was pregnant with the fourth, but when he quit his job, he too was drafted. He missed combat only through my father's efforts to get him a hardship discharge and a war-essential job at Humble Oil and Refining Company.

The only other real soldier I knew was a friend of my other sister, Darline. Tommy (I can't remember his last name) and I exchanged V-letters when he went overseas. From Morocco he sent me a wallet made from camel leather. As I recall, it stunk and I did not keep it long. I never learned whether Tommy made it home all right.

Even before the Japanese sneak attack at Pearl Harbor, Hollywood prepared us for the war. By early 1941 scores of war movies were being cranked out. My brother Dick and I saw "Submarine Patrol," "Wings of the Navy," "Victory," "Abbott and Costello in the Navy," and many others. We soon learned hate words such as "Japs," "Nazis," and "Axis" and patriotic words such as "Allies," "Tommies," and "Free French."

After Pearl Harbor the first scrap drives were started and we gathered old metal and turned it in at special collection centers. An old cannon that symbolically guarded the front entrance to the high school for years went to the war effort. Tin cans were flattened and saved, and we rolled the "tin foil" from cigarette packages into giant balls and turned them in. Used grease was poured into special containers and after solidifying went to the collection center, too.

Bond drives began, and at school we bought ten-cent savings stamps and stuck them in a book until we had the equivalent of a bond. Those who consistently saved received special certificates every school term. In my shoebox of memories I have an old green certificate that testifies that I saved every "savings day" for the school year 1939-1940.

During the big national bond drives, movie stars traveled the country, and, occasionally, even came to our small town. I recall going down on Texas Avenue in Goose Creek to see cowboy star "Wild Bill" Elliott and western singer Jimmy Wakely. "Wild Bill" twirled his pistols, practiced his cross-hand quick draw, and auctioned some of his silver bullets. Wakely sang "Cool Water," "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" and other Sons of the Pioneers songs.

At school we had periodic air raid drills. As the siren warbled, we filed out of our classrooms into the inner halls away from glass windows and sat on the floor against the walls with our heads between our legs. Air raid wardens were appointed for all areas of town and they scanned

the skies daily for enemy planes. Due to its extreme importance to the war effort, the Humble Oil refinery in Baytown was ringed with anti-aircraft guns manned by an Army artillery unit. My father took me on a tour to see the big guns mounted on high platforms around the refinery's perimeter.

During the war Humble produced crude oil in the hundreds of millions of barrels and furnished pipeline transportation of its own crude and even a large volume purchased from others. It manufactured such products vital to the war effort as aviation gasolines and fuel oils in tens of millions of barrels, toluene (TNT) in millions of barrels, and over a hundred-thousand tons of butadiene and butyle for making rubber products. In the company publications that my father brought home, the Humble employees were exhorted to produce more and better products. The company bragged on its posters and billboards that every fourth bomb being dropped on Nazi Germany had its beginnings at the Baytown refinery, and, the planes dropping those bombs used gasoline refined in Baytown.

To produce such a quantity of aviation gasoline, Humble built two giant catalytic cracking units called "cat crackers," each 260-feet high and containing 8,500 tons of steel. The first unit was completed in November 1942. Originally designed for a capacity of 13,800 barrels a day, the unit was stepped up to between 24,000 and 26,000 barrels, and in a single day could produce enough components for aviation gasolines used in a thousand B-25 medium bombers. The second unit was completed in 1944 and could produce even more aviation gasoline. These 21-story "cat" units were our skyscrapers and every Christmas thousands of colored light bulbs were strung on them in the shape of giant stars that could be seen for miles around.

I kept track of the war through the radio broadcasts of such commentators as Elmer Davis, Lowell Thomas, and Edward R. Murrow, the daily newspapers, and the movie newsreels, going from those first agonizing days when island after island fell to the Japanese, through Bataan and Corregidor, when the Germans were sinking our ships all over the Atlantic, to the invasion of North Africa, Sicily, Italy, then the stunning success of D-Day, the sweep across France, the set-back at the Battle of the Bulge, the push into Germany, and, following a series of island-hopping Pacific victories, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan and its surrender on August 14, 1945. For almost four years, I clipped out and saved the campaign maps from the local newspapers, that showed the numbers of our units and their relative positions, with large sweeping arrows showing the direction of the attack and dotted lines the distance of their advance or retreat.

From time to time, and usually after a big battle, the local paper would publish the growing casualty lists of area boys killed in action and gold stars appeared in windows throughout our town. On Gulf Hill, across the highway from us, a gold star appeared on the front window of the Grants'

house. Our friend and neighbor, John Grant, would not be coming home. After the war a new football field, Memorial Stadium, was built and dedicated in his honor and the other fifty-eight Tri-Cities boys who lost their lives in combat. Their names are embossed in bronze on the flagpoles' base.

Rationing came soon after the war began, and we were issued a book of stamps for each member of the family with which to buy practically everything. At first, it was for obviously scarce items such as gasoline, tires, butter, meats, sugar, shoes, and cigarettes, then included such items as paper, toasters, cameras, electric trains, girdles, bicycles, and on and on. If you asked someone in authority why this or that was being rationed, you received the stock answer — "Don't you know there's a war going on?"

A housewife, such as my mother, had to watch for frequent changes in the rules and regulations of the Office of Price Administration (OPA) as to what was being rationed this week, how many stamps were required for a certain item, and what colors were valid. Then she had to find a store that had what she wanted, for scarcities were common. The week cigarettes came back after some absence, every store was out of matches, or vice versus. I believe that was the reason my father bought a cigarette rolling machine and started using Bull Durham again as he had during the Depression.

Even with rationing, our family did all right. We had plenty of butter from our cow, eggs from our chickens, and fresh vegetables from our garden, or from the Mason jars from my mother's canning efforts. And, extra money came from the sale of surplus butter and eggs. Practically every year my father would buy a hog, fatten it, and then on a cold, freezing day, butcher and dress it. For sometime afterwards, we had plenty of bacon, ham, and pork chops, plus buckets of lard.

After 1942 no new civilian cars were produced in Detroit, but, fortunately my father had a good 1940 Ford sedan. In fact, it was in such good shape and with brand new tires, that someone made him an offer he could not turn down. My father would sell anything as long as he could make a profit on the deal. He then bought an old pickup truck that he drove throughout the war years. Since he had a war-essential job, he had no problems getting enough gas. Those who did not have such a job had to get by on three gallons a week.

Shortages of steel, copper, and other war-needed metals, and cotton, wool, and other fabric materials were evident, and plastics and imitation leathers became more numerous on the home front. Toys were not as sturdy as before, clothes were of lower quality, and even our money changed. In a move to save copper, in 1943 the penny was made from silver lead and the "in" thing that year was to pass off this slate-colored coin as a dime. In dark places such as the picture show, you could easily

pull off the switch.

As the tide of war changed to the Allied side, prisoners of war by the thousands were shipped to the United States. A German POW camp was opened outside of town towards Barbers Hill. The prisoners were used on projects around the area since many were excellent craftsmen. They were treated well so the Germans would treat our captured boys well, and few tried to escape. I can recall only one event in the entire war that involved spies or saboteurs. Pelly's city marshal claimed one day to have arrested two men who were saboteurs out to blow up the refinery. They turned out to be two German farmers from Schulenburg who spoke English with a heavy accent.

It was the era of the big bands, and classic songs such as "Elmer's Tune," "String of Pearls," and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," but I enjoyed novelty tunes such as Spike Jones' "Der Fuehrer's Face," "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," and "He's 1-A in the Army and A-1 in My Heart." There were "Sad Sack" cartoons in the papers and Bill Mauldin's "Willie and Joe" cartoon adventures in the magazines. I particularly liked the one with those typical GIs sitting in the rain in a foxhole and Willie remarking, "Yes, it does remind me of rain hitting on a tin roof," as water splashed off his helmet. Everywhere you went "Kilroy" had been there before and left his autograph behind.

In reflection, I now realize that we knew at the time that "a war was going on," but it was far, far away from us. There were some sacrifices we had to make such as doing without a new car for five years, resoleing our worn shoes for the fourth time, making do with products that fell apart after several months, and missing all that sugary, penny candy with which we had once gorged ourselves, but we still lived fairly comfortably. My father had a good job at the refinery and our family was so large that we did not use all the ration stamps issued to us. Still, we were caught up in the patriotism of the time, weeping at our war losses and cheering our gains. We papered our living room wall with certificates from the savings programs at school and work, and participated in every scrap drive from cane, to foil, to used grease. And, we cheered and wept simultaneously when, at last, the refinery whistles announced the end of the war and we watched our boys come home again.