United We Stood

1940 - 1949

On Dec. 10, 1941, World War II came home to Indianapolis. It came in the form of a photo on the front page of The Indianapolis Star showing a confident-looking young man, Robert Allen, age 21. He was the first Hoosier reported killed in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Such pictures soon became a staple in Indiana newspapers. By the time the last soldier had been accounted for, 300,000 Hoosiers had served in the war and more than 10,000 had died.

The city's mettle had been tested before – by the previous war, by flood, epidemic and the lingering Depression – and through it all, people seemed able to hold onto the belief that there was a better future, no matter how bleak the moment.

At least the war blew away the cobwebs of the Depression, as thousands of jobs were created. Industry went into overdrive. Allison churned out airplane engines, Studebaker produced trucks, Eli Lilly and Co. supplied blood plasma and RCA turned out proximity fuses.

Before Pearl Harbor, Indiana was considered among the most isolationist states in the nation. A Gallup Poll in May 1941 showed only 15 percent of Hoosiers favored the United States' entry into the war. But after Pearl Harbor, Indianapolis reacted as if the Japanese had attacked Monument Circle.

From the pages of The Star on Dec. 8, 1941: "Indianapolis unfurled hundreds of American flags to gray and cold December skies yesterday, determined to keep the Stars and Stripes flying as a symbol of Hoosier and National unity as the country declared war on Japan."

Hundreds of young men showed up at the Navy recruiting office, thinking the Navy offered the quickest opportunity to strike back at the Japanese.

"They put aside their high school and college textbooks, their mechanic's tools, their ledgers, their briefcases and their truck driver's caps; they left their schools and their farms and their jobs behind counters," Mary Bostwick wrote in The Star.

As the young men went off to war, those left behind had to deal with rationing. They stood in line for ration books and then stood in line again to buy what scarce commodities were available. But even standing in line seemed patriotic.

Even high school students found that war changed the type of math problems they had to solve. Instead of the usual problems, students were confronted with navigation, surveying and gunnery questions.

And suddenly high school machine shop classes that seemed pointless during the Depression, since there were no jobs, took on a new urgency. The students were learning to work in defense plants. One local defense plant was the Naval Ordinance Plant (later known as Naval Avionics), which manufactured the Norden bombsight, which allowed American bombers to strike targets from high altitudes.

As more and more men were taken away, a labor shortage was created, and women and blacks stepped into the breach, setting the stage for the civil rights and women's rights movements of the 1960s. Such moves caused people to confront racial issues and create day-care centers for children whose mothers were now working.

Women had been in the work force before the war, but of the 250,000 women working outside the home in Indiana in 1940, most had clerical or service positions. The war changed that. The number of Hoosier working women jumped to 390,000 by 1943. By the end of 1943, women made up one-third of the factory workers in the state.

The Indianapolis Star, the city's only morning newspaper, had been owned and operated by John Shaffer since 1908. But in 1943, Shaffer died and The Star was up for sale. Although the suitors included several nationally known publishers, in the end the winning bidder was a small-town Indiana publisher named Eugene C. Pulliam, who took ownership of The Star in 1944.

Pulliam already owned papers in Franklin and Lebanon and, in 1948, he also bought The Indianapolis News. It was the beginning of a newspaper dynasty that would last half a century.

Just days before the war ended there was a disaster at sea. The U.S.S. Indianapolis, a heavy cruiser with more than 1,100 men on board, was sunk by Japanese torpedoes while on its way back to the Philippines after delivering components for the atomic bomb. Although some 900 men survived the initial attack, they floated for five days in the shark infested waters. When help finally arrived, only 317 men were alive.

Opposite page: VJ Day on Monument Circle, August 1945.