

# THE VERMONT HOME FRONT: MOBILIZING FOR WAR



A U.S. Navy submarine-chaser made at Shelburne Shipyard and docked at Burlington beside the steamship *Ticonderoga* in 1944. Photo by L. L. McAllister. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Vermont Library.



Few events have so shocked people throughout the United States as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Americans who lived through the war years still reminisce about what they were doing on Sunday, December 7, 1941, when they heard the news. Japanese bombers had caught U.S. air force and naval bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, by surprise. Twenty-one American ships and 188 aircraft were destroyed or badly damaged. Over 2,400 soldiers, sailors, and civilians were killed.

Caroline Sullivan was ten years old and living in Northfield. She heard the news on the radio her father had just bought. Television had not been invented yet. "We were just stunned," she said, "especially as stories came back of the men lost and all our battleships sunk." To many people it seemed that this single event had changed their lives forever.

Before Pearl Harbor, most Americans had their minds on making enough money to get by. The country was just pulling itself out of a long depression. Polls showed that while Americans were concerned about the fighting in Europe and the growth of Nazi Germany, most felt we should stay out of any war. Certainly the American public did not think that Japan would attack us. But the attack came and Americans' attention turned to the task of winning the war.



Vermont factories won this Army-Navy "E" award for excellence in production.

War depends not only on fighting, but on having weapons, ammunition, ships and tanks, uniforms and food for the troops to fight with. All over America, factories switched from making peacetime products to things that were necessary for the war. The granite sheds of Barre switched to making tools and chains for navy ships. Bell Aircraft in Burlington made parts for B-29 bombers. Fellows Gear Shaper in Springfield made tools and radar parts, Simonds-Benton in Vergennes made spark plugs for airplanes, and Windsor Manufacturing sewed life jackets. A company in St. Albans even dehydrated eggs so it could ship them to soldiers and sailors around the world.



Welding anchor chain built for the U.S. Navy at Barre Products, Inc., a converted granite shed. Courtesy of Green Mountain Power Corporation.

The war cut America off from its supplies of rubber, oil, and some metals. Food and paper also became precious. The government urged Vermonters to collect scrap iron, tinfoil, rubber, and all the old newspapers they could find. People carpoled or walked to work or school to save gasoline. At home, rationing limited how much meat, sugar, and butter they could buy. People bought rationed items by giving the cashier at the store a ration stamp with their money. Each family got the same number of stamps, so that everyone got his fair share of foods in short



Trolley tracks are removed for scrap in Burlington in 1943. Photo by L. L. McAllister. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Vermont Library.

supply. Vermonters also ate more meatless meals, saved fats for making ammunition, and planted victory gardens so they would not have to buy as many vegetables.

After Pearl Harbor, people were afraid that Japan or Germany would bomb the U.S. In Vermont, the targets would be factories that made war materials and the dams and electric plants that made power. Once enemy bombers crossed the New England coastline, experts said, they could reach Vermont in fifteen minutes. To keep enemy pilots from finding their way, Governor William Wills declared that “during the hours of darkness, no person shall show or use any unauthorized lights of any kind.” To accomplish this blackout, Vermonters turned off all outside lights at night. They hung heavy black shades over every window. They put shades and deflectors on car headlights, too.

Twenty-five thousand Vermonters volunteered for civil defense duty. Some, like Edwin Gray of Putney, were aircraft spotters. He took a midnight-to-6 A.M. shift, watching for enemy airplanes atop a twenty-foot tower along the Connecticut River. Mr. Gray waited in the dark in the little tower room, open to the sky, listening for planes.

Vermonters also prepared for the enemy by holding

