

World War II in Plaquemines Parish

By Rod Lincoln

As the world prepared for war, Plaquemines Parish was experiencing an era of renewed prosperity. The oil and sulphur industries had begun moving employees from all over the U.S. into lower Plaquemines Parish. What in 1932 was a small orange grove, had been leveled, filled with dirt from a dredge and reconstructed into the Port Sulphur town site. In 1940 it boasted nationally of being one of the most modern cities in America with paved roads, drainage, recreation, etc. Young men from the area, like Sherman O'Brien from Nairn would go into the military. Sherman went into the army and was stationed near Pearl Harbor. On December 7, 1941, "the day that would go down in infamy" O'Brien would be one of the first Plaquemines Parish residents to see the face of war as the Japanese attacked all in the area.

The world was shocked. Local residents and businesses knew there was much to do to prepare for war. In the local high schools, students were told what to expect. Everyone would have an opportunity to contribute to the war effort. Seniors boy would likely be going into the military soon after graduation. The girls and younger boys would be going door to door collecting metal for recycling, manning the observation tower on the levee at Port Sulphur looking for enemy aircraft, canning food in the Port Sulphur "Bar-be-que Pit" building next to the community house, and performing any job they could to help the war effort. Many women went to work in non-traditional manufacturing jobs to replace the young men that went to war. Everyone would have to sacrifice.

In early 1942 a Civilian Defense School was established to train all of the people in the parish on what to do in the event of an attack. The school was in place for a month and trained about 95% of the citizens in the area.

Most families planted small gardens called Victory gardens to raise much of their food because like everything else, processed food was limited. Money had little value without ration stamps. To purchase meat, coffee, sugar, dairy products and gasoline ration stamps were required. Tires, petroleum products and rubber tires were very limited and most of this went to the war efforts. Young people fished, hunted, and trapped for fresh meat or seafood to supplement what they would get

with ration stamps. Families often traded for fresh food. If a family had extra vegetables, fruit, meat, seafood, etc. there was always someone willing to trade for something they had extra. The canning of fruits and vegetables took on a whole new importance.

At night families were expected to either turn their lights out at night or make thick blackout curtains to put on their windows so enemy ships and potentially aircraft cannot determine where they are or what buildings to destroy. It was known that enemy submarines used civilian lights as points of reference to prowl in the Gulf at night. Civil Defense volunteers would schedule drills and run through neighborhoods looking for lights showing from houses. If you did not turn your lights off or cover your windows, you would be chastised. Burrwood and Port Eads would blackout nearly every night due to their proximity to the coast. By August 28, 1942, Port Sulphur could boast that they could have the entire vicinity blacked-out within 45 seconds of the siren.

Freeport's Grande Ecaille Sulphur mine was the second largest sulphur mine in the U.S. and would later become the largest. Sulphur was a critical resource during war. Sulphur was needed for gunpowder, medicine, and manufacturing. The federal government determined Grande Ecaille Mine and/or Port Sulphur would likely be Germany's #3 target on the Gulf of Mexico. Since both were so accessible from the Gulf they might be very easy targets. They had to be protected! In addition to this, Port Sulphur had become one of the largest ports on the Gulf because of the over 4,000,000 long tons of sulphur shipped each year during the war. Foreign and domestic ships routinely loaded at Port Sulphur. This meant both a greater possibility of enemy sabotage of the facility and a concern for all of the seamen leaving this port to travel across the enemy infested Gulf.

Within two weeks of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the first military unit was sent to Port Sulphur. They set-up two machine gun nests on the booster line and established riflemen at the Grande Ecaille plant and the reservoir pump station at Port Sulphur. This military unit was only there until February 16, 1942. This gave Freeport time to staff-up and begin training their war-time security force to 40 watchmen and position a nine member state police team on site. Many young men decided to go into the military to fight, so older men, many retired or older farmers and fishermen were recruited.

Within a week after the first military unit left, the 143rd Field Artillery unit that had previously been positioned in Boothville asked to move their coastal artillery battery and campsite to Port Sulphur. They constructed their campsite on the baseball field near the Community House and mounted four 75 mm guns along the river below the loading facilities. The Coast Guard established regular patrols along all of the major waterways in Plaquemines Parish while the air bases from New Orleans to Houma were scouting the area daily looking for submarines or irregularities.

German submarines were prowling the Gulf of Mexico particularly between the Mississippi River and Houston within two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. To protect the ships traveling the Gulf, ships were often lined up in the Mississippi to be convoyed out of the river's mouth and across the gulf. The Naval munitions facility at English Turn, just North of Belle Chasse, was significantly expanding to store and safeguard weapons and munitions to protect local shipping.

Despite all of the work the Navy did to protect local shipping, by the end of May 1942, forty-one ships were torpedoed by German submarines in the gulf near our coast. Those rescued would be rushed to Venice or the Pointe-a-la-Hache courthouse for triage and then put on either ambulances or buses and rushed to hospitals in New Orleans. Local doctors would actively participate in stabilizing the burn victims and other seriously injured sailors. When a ship was hit by a submarine, especially an oil tanker, the flames could be seen burning across the parish at night.

Local residents at Burrwood and Port Eads reported routinely seeing German submarines on the surface, charging their batteries at night between the river passes.

The Bar Pilots had a close-call with German submarines that would have a profoundly permanent effect on their operations. Up until World War II when a ship needed a pilot, the pilot would travel to the ship, an apprentice would row the pilot to the stopped ship where they boarded the stopped ship. Because this was a dangerous practice with submarines in the area the Coast Guard recommended that the incoming or outgoing ship not stop for the pilots. Under the new boarding process, the small pilot boat would snuggly move against the large ship, the ship would drop a Jacob's ladder off the side, and the pilot would climb up the

moving ship. Though this was safer for the ships, it was much more dangerous for the pilots.

By May 1942 Port Sulphur and Grande Ecaille were declared combat zones. Submarine attacks in the Gulf were occurring at least once a day, so the Coastal Artillery replaced the artillery unit at Port Sulphur with two 155 mm guns and four 800,000,000 candle power search lights and mounted them on the levee below Port Sulphur. Freeport would report numerous penetrations of their facilities. Unknown boats coming in from the Gulf toward Grande Ecaille or unusually close torpedoing of ships by submarines forced Grand Ecaille into a total blackout on and off throughout the war. Several suspicious people were also arrested in or near the plant and turned over to the FBI. In July 1942 the Justice Department received intelligence that the enemy planned to land agents along the Gulf Coast for sabotage purposes and that all enforcement agencies should be alert. At the end of June 1943 fishermen reported seeing two nude men with side arms and carrying a leather bag at the mouth of Grand Bayou. They escaped into the water with the fishermen in pursuit.

Military bases were established at both Burrwood and Port Eads when the war began. Burrwood was the larger base with concrete guard stations on the pass and a tall observation tower near the end of the jetties. Burrwood was on Southwest Pass which is the larger and deeper pass where most ships would enter the river. On at least one occasion a German submarine, not realizing the jetties were between them and the ship they were trying to destroy, shot a torpedo hitting the seawall at Burrwood, knocking over the observation tower and killing one man on the tower. The ship was un-effected, but people as far north as New Orleans claimed to have felt a "land ripple" like an earthquake when it happened.

On July 29, 1942 the passenger ship "*Robert E. Lee*" was approaching the mouth of Southwest Pass when German submarine U-166 attacked it. The U.S. convoy escort PC566 that was escorting the passenger ship immediately attacked the submerged submarine and sank it. The German U-166 was the only enemy submarine sunk in the Gulf of Mexico during World War II. It is estimated that there were up to two dozen German submarines in the Gulf of Mexico during the war. It was discovered after the war that the primary mission of U-166 was to mine the mouth of the Mississippi River to stop all shipping.

By 1944 a Prisoner of War camp was established just south of Port Sulphur near St. Patrick's Catholic Church for prisoners taken during Rommel's African Campaign. It was a small camp, thought to house less than a hundred German prisoners. The prisoners were well behaved and glad not to be fighting in the war. Those that got out of line would have their shirts confiscated. Without a shirt, mosquitoes would swarm and by the end of the day the punished soldiers were happy to follow all orders without question to get their shirt back. The prisoners worked on the parish levees, highways, and wherever there was a need for unskilled labor. Some of the prisoners would stay on after the war to marry Louisiana girls and settle in the area.

By 1945 the war was concentrated to Europe and the North Pacific and Plaquemines would begin a slow steady return to life as it was before the war with a renewed energy and focus.