PERSONAL GLIMPSES OF A TEENAGER DURING THE WAR

by

Victor D. Plantico

World War II was a catalyst for the greatest industrial expansion of the 20th century. Cities large and small were transformed by the nation's unity and by the need to produce the machines of war. One such small city, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, was the birthplace of Victor Plantico. Vic was 12 when the U.S. entered the war. As a teenager he witnessed the boom of a small town. The larger of the two shipbuilders in the city, the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Co., built 28 submarines, the most complex vessels that had yet been conceived. In doing so its employment swelled from 500 before the war to a peak of 7000. Submarine crews were brought to Manitowoc to conduct trials of the new boats. The town of 24,000, like the rest of the nation, banded together to help win the war. The following is a small part of Vic's memories.

We lived in downtown Manitowoc at 7th and Washington Streets. I grew up in the center of the town's activities, half a block away from the only taxicab office. In the evenings the whole downtown was a center of activity: taverns, sailors and one taxicab office. My dad had a furnished upstairs apartment which he rented to submarine officers as they passed through. The officers brought their wives on their brief stays. My dad had no trouble with these renters as they were excellent people.

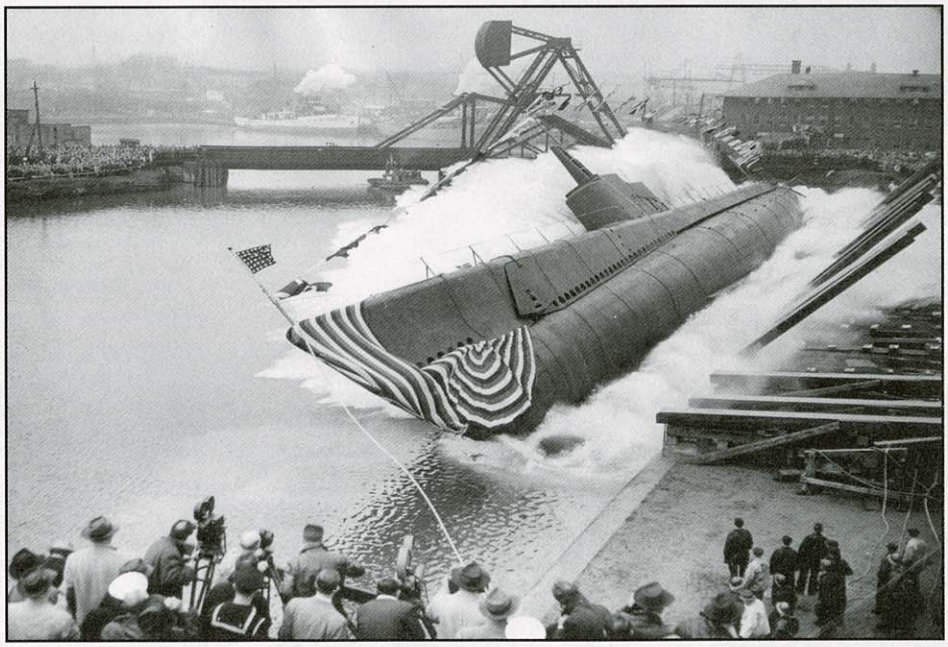
One such officer, Enders P. Huey, arranged to tour the submarine ***Lizardfish (SS-373)*** upon her commissioning on December 30, 1944. Enders was an officer on the boat. We had to climb down a ladder inside. Everything was so compact with lots of machinery, valves and gauges. The officer cabins were small cabins with a curtain between them; even the sink folded down. There was no wood on the boat; all was metal. There were areas that were secret, such as the conning tower. The galley was a study in compactness. Torpedo rooms were off-limits. We climbed out on another ladder.

Incidentally, Enders Huey went on to a distinguished career in the submarine service. He was in command of the submarine ***Tang (SS-306)*** when she reported to Bikini Atoll for the first atomic bomb test in July 1946. Although heavily damaged, Enders Huey reported he was able to get the ship under way under her own power. He was the commanding officer upon the commissioning of the new submarine ***Tang (SS-563)*** (second sub to carry this name) on October 25, 1951. The last I heard of him, he had retired as a rear admiral.

My father owned and ran a coal yard in Manitowoc, Wisconsin which was founded in 1937. It consisted of several employees, both full and part time, and several trucks. Help at the yard was hard to retain as the shipyard paid high wages – up to $1.50 an hour for skilled help, $1.00 an hour for laborers, compared to $0.50 per hour for most other jobs. I was not allowed to work in my dad's coal yard as I was not yet 18 years old.

My mother was in charge of our downtown coal office. We had this office in our home. We did have a telephone for taking coal orders. Once a month my brother and I helped make out coal statement billings. Most of the billings and envelopes were made out on an old upright Underwood typewriter. The office was quite modern with a hand operated adding machine, a steel filing cabinet, and a cash drawer. We also had mail delivery six days a week. The huge amount of mailings that we get now did not happen during the war years. Like everything else, paper was hard to come by.

The family was active in church going during the war. We belonged to the First Reformed Church, a derivative of the



*Launching of the **Peto**, April 30, 1942. This was the first of a fleet of submarines built by the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Co. during the war.* *MPL/WMHS Marine Collection Photo*

Manitowoc, WI, in 1933 before its burst of shipbuilding for the wartime effort. *MPL/WMHS Marine Collection Photo.*

Evangelical Church. I was one of the ushers in the Sunday service. My dad sold stoker coal at cost to the church, plus gave a sizable yearly donation. The Sunday service was well attended as I remember. On the downside, you were billed for yearly dues and your name was in the yearly church book along with how much you gave. I never fully agreed with that procedure.

One of my jobs was to take the company's money deposits to the bank. The bank had adding machines and not much more. A teller served you and personal communication was a must. Remember, there were no computers! The stores had either a cash drawer or one of those cash registers where you punched the keys and the drawer flew out. Courting to the customer was a must! The storekeepers went out of their way to help you. Many items were in short supply or rationed.

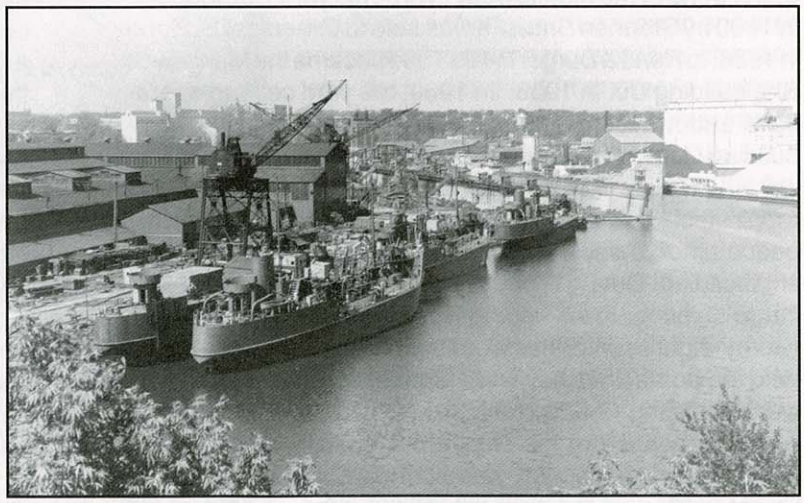
In the summer of 1944, at the ripe age of 15, I took a job as a waiter in the Colonial Inn, a tavern/restaurant a block from my home. The owner was a coal customer of my dad's. I got the magnificent sum of five dollars a week plus tips and the supper meal. I also had a supplementary morning job of filling the bottle beer cooler and doing general outside work such as window washing, etc. For this I received a sum of two dollars a week.

During the war years, I belonged to the Boy Scouts – Troop One, Flaming Arrow patrol. We participated in the war effort in several ways. We made model boats and airplanes for Government Ship Identification Program for training. I also remember the Waste Paper Program. We would bring baled newspapers with our coaster wagons to the basement of the Roosevelt Elementary School, our troop meeting place. Every couple of months all the Boy Scouts in the city would bicycle to railroad yards to load a box car or two. The paper was trucked to the railroad yard by other service organizations like the Elks or Eagles.

In the interest of conservation, the war effort reclaimed baled newspapers, cardboard, flattened tin cans, waste cooking oil, scrap iron, rubber tires, bottles, glass, etc. There was a shortage of practically anything the consumer needed. Milk seemed to be in good supply, although butter, cheese, sugar, cooking oils, meats and gasoline were rationed. Coal was available; although sometimes the railroads were slow in delivering it to the coal yards.

Milk wagons, ice wagons and some delivery wagons were horse drawn. Electricity was available, although conservation was asked. Telephones were available, though long distance calls could be trying at times.

Most items, including coal, were under Office of Price Administration control. This means the government could dictate to the merchant how much he or she could charge the customer. Likewise, my father's apartment was under rent control. This bureau dictated how much you could charge for an apartment or house. This was all well, but if you had an undesirable renter, you were stuck with them. This was especially true if they were a war worker. You could get them out but only after a long and tedious court ordered eviction notice. And, if the renter could not find another place to rent, you were stuck with them. I still believe this is the reason my father rented his apartment to submarine officers that were fitting out the boats. They were a good grade of men and, if not, they would be gone in a short time.



Manitowoc Shipbuilding Co., June 23, 1945, Tankers for the Navy.
MPL/WMHS Marine Collection Photo

Most of the buildings were heated with coal fuel. There were no less than six coal dealers including my dad's. Fuel oil was used in a number of homes. Gas heating was only used in the homes of the wealthy. Manufactured gas was produced by burning coal by the local gas company. This was used in kitchen gas stoves. Electric refrigerators were common, though home freezers were very scarce. So were fluorescent lights.

Electricity was generated in a city-owned coal fired power plant. This brings to mind an incident that happened several years after the war. The Chamber of Commerce was holding their annual dinner meeting in the early evening at the vocational school gym. Dick Cannard, the manager of the power plant was giving a report on the electrical production, costs, efficiency, etc., when the overhead lights gradually dimmed and went out. It seems a boiler at the plant had a ruptured steam superheater. It took about eight or nine hours before another boiler could be put on the line. Poor Dick quickly got the name of "Lights Out Dick". He must have taken a lot of ribbing on this for he took early retirement six months later and moved out of town. As a result of this blackout, the power plant joined the state power grid.

Manitowoc had one daily newspaper, the Herald Times, which was not printed on Sunday. It had all of the local news i.e. traffic violations, births, death notices, marriages, want ads, movies, programs, etc. They had pictures of marriages and other notable events. The front page had up to date war news that was released to the press. With the European invasion, up to date maps showed progress of the Army's advance.

We had a radio, one of the Atwater-Kent table models that would pick up broadcasts (AM) as far as Chicago. We did not have any FM broadcasts. We had one local radio station (WOMT) that broadcast local programs. That was the extent of our media. When Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, we heard the news early in the afternoon. Our family was quite shocked at the news. Today's electronic items such as televisions and computers were not invented yet.

The Manitowoc Shipbuilding Co. was located on an upper bend of the Manitowoc River. This yard was founded in 1860 by Stephen Bates. It was sold to Greenleaf S. Rand in 1866; to Rand & Burger in 1883 and became the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Co. in 1903. In 1969, the yard ceased operations and moved to Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. Bay Shipbuilding Corp. was organized there in 1970.

The Manitowoc yard was fully equipped to build and repair steel ships with a 600-foot floating drydock. During the peace-time years, the yard was engaged in commercial shipbuilding. During World War I, they built 250-foot "Laker" cargo ships for the Shipping Board. During World War II, twenty-eight submarines were built for the Navy. Five ways held the boats until they were launched. They finished the war by building 174-foot tankers (YO 196-203) for the Navy.

Because of the shipyard's location on the inside bend of the river, security was a concern. Manitowoc's 10th Street fronted on the east side of the river, so several tall guard towers were built and manned with guards with binoculars night and day. Taking pictures of the shipyard was punishable under the "Espionage Act". If any arrests were made, it was never mentioned in the newspaper to my knowledge.

*Keel laying of submarine **Peto** being built at the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Co., June 1941.*

MPL/WMHS Marine Collection Photo.

The shipyard had a peak employment of 6,000 workers, working round the clock. Housing was critical and rent control was imposed by the government. A housing development was created on the west side of Manitowoc called Custerdale. The housing was prefabricated homes designed for the West Coast and not insulated. The government soon found out Manitowoc's winter was quite cold. They were two family homes with a common wall between and heated by oil furnaces with a 50 gal. barrel mounted lengthwise some distance from the ground. This meant the oil supplier had to use a ladder to fill the tanks. The homes were arranged in a circular pattern and numbered in a typical complicated government letter and number system. It was very hard to find an address. After the war, cross streets were put in. These streets were named after submarines built there and a standard house numbering system was put in.

Radar on the boats was ultra secret. One man would install a certain phase of work, another man would do more work, another man would do other work, and so on. No one man knew the entire radar installation. My mother had a friend, a former County radio dispatcher, who was part of this radar installation.

As I mentioned, I lived downtown during these years. Down the block was the only taxi service with its three cabs. The place got quite busy and noisy in the later evening with the submarine sailors and their girl friends having to get a ride to the shipyard. Unfortunately the taxi office had only one lavatory, so the sailors would often go across the street and water the bushes by a doctor's office. The doctor was very upset with his dead bushes, so he coated the bushes with drain oil. The white uniformed sailors went over there and discovered the oil. It caused quite a stir.

To make things worse, the home owner next to the doctor's office got sick and tired of being awakened every

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night. He procured a bee-bee gun and would pepper the noise makers. One night a sailor and his girlfriend were sitting onthe steps outside the hardware store. Apparently they were making a lot of noise, because the woman was hit in the leg with a bee-bee. However, she wasn't aware of the sniper and thought that her date had pinched her. She got quite upset and started hitting the sailor with her purse. The police had to be called to quiet the commotion. All this with a growing boy like me living a half a block away.

Around the corner from the taxi office, was a place called the "Five O'Clock Club" which was another one of my dad's coal customers. The submarine commissioning parties were held there. Of course I never went in there – I wasn't old enough. Next door, a local dairy opened. The dairy bar was for teenage trade and the younger sailors. It also was one of my dad's customers.

The wage level was 50 to 75 cents an hour. Skilled workers as in the shipyard earned $1.08 to $1.50 an hour. Since most of the war factories were working 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, there was a lot of overtime paid. I do remember some unions. Most workers were unorganized however. Municipal and school workers had very permanent jobs as I remember.

Many of the shipyard workers were farmers. There were many women doing the men's work in the war industries. War work was not only the two shipyards, but also included Mirro Aluminum, Gaterman Manufacturing, and Aluminum Foundry. In the schools, teachers likewise kept working past their retirement. I had an elderly 4th grade teacher that taught my dad 30 years before. Her father was a judge advocate in the Civil War. She was a real lady. At that time the school board had a rule that teachers were not allowed to marry, so she had remained single her entire life.

Military draft was very much in existence. Draft age was 18 to 35 years and was extended to 17 and 36 later in the war. There were exemptions if you were in a critical job including merchant seamen. Medical doctors were drafted if needed, which meant many other doctors kept working past retirement age. With the shortage of workers, early retirement at 62 was not done.

Manitowoc's National Guard was activated at the start of the war and joined the 32nd Red Arrow Division. The men saw action in New Guinea and the Philippines. My dad and a number of World War I veterans were placed in a home guard. The city went into a civil defense mode with block wardens, air raid shelters, blackouts, etc. I cannot remember the shipyards being blacked out any time. There was a general feeling of pulling together for the war effort.

Submarines ran their trials in Lake Michigan. A Coast Guard buoy tender, the ***Tamarack*** was fitted out as a submarine rescue vessel. I do not believe its services were ever needed. My uncle was a bridge tender on the Eighth Street bridge and told me the Navy would call them and say a boat was to pass through at a certain date and time. The bridge tenders would log in the date and time. No submarine names were used, only a number of the boat such as 265.

Yes, there was alot of excitement for a young man growing up in a small town.