

December anniversaries commemorate key dates in Hanford's history

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This coming Friday, Dec. 7, will mark the 60th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the startling event that propelled a divided and ambivalent America into total war. Pearl Harbor presaged the birth of the Hanford Engineer Works, former name of the Hanford Site. It was the very reason our site was created as the mightiest ordnance plant in the World War II United States.

Later this month, on Christmas Day, we will note the 10th anniversary of the official breakup of the Soviet Union, the Cold War adversary that fueled Hanford's production for more than 40 years after World War II ended. Indeed, Hanford might have been decommissioned and shut down in the late 1940s if the Atomic Energy Commission, created in 1947, had not decided that increased production at the site was needed to combat ominous new developments behind the "Iron Curtain."

Awash in memories, we at Hanford in the 21st century cannot help but reflect on who we are today, the way we were and our unique role in American history. Especially in light of the events of Sept. 11, 2001, questions about our legacy and heritage in this old arsenal site beg to be examined. What do we have in common with those Hanford warriors of the 1940s, and how are we different?

War clouds loom

Before the explosive attack on the U.S. Naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941, the U.S. had witnessed (but largely remained separate from) more than six years of war in other parts of the world.

In October 1935, fascist Italian dictator Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. When the League of Nations (vaguely a predecessor of the United Nations) protested, Italy simply withdrew and formed an alliance called the "Axis" with Nazi Germany.

In the summer of 1936, fascists in Spain revolted against the existing government, initiating the Spanish Civil War. This conflict inspired Ernest Hemingway to write *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, a classic book that warned, in the simple terms of human suffering, that when the bells of fascism tolled the death of a small country, the whole world was at risk. Yet, to many, these events in distant parts of the world were seen as unrelated and irrelevant to life in the United States.

In September 1939, Hitler's armies overran Poland. A year later, Japan, already assaulting China, signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, extending the Axis alliance. In June 1940, France fell to Nazi forces, and a year later Hitler turned against its sworn ally and invaded the Soviet Union.



The Hanford Engineer Works Christmas celebration in 1944, three years after Pearl Harbor, occurred as the site rushed to finish construction of plutonium facilities. Less than eight months later, a bomb containing plutonium from Hanford would help end World War II.



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These events, together with the “blitzkrieg” (lightning war) over London, generated wary attention and a growing sense of unease in the United States. By October 1941, more than 200 Allied (mostly English) ships had been sunk. That same month, the famous Reuben James became the first American warship to be sent to the bottom by German U-boats while escorting a convoy of the British Royal Navy.

The United States was already helping the Allies with massive materials programs, notably the Destroyers-for-Bases Agreement and the Lend-Lease Act. This country instituted the first peacetime draft in its history in September 1940, and President Franklin Roosevelt declared a state of national emergency in May 1941.

Still, many Americans believed that the conflicts then boiling in the world were simply extensions of the power-brokering and territorial struggles that had plagued Europe, Africa and Asia for millennia. A well-organized “America First Committee” held huge rallies in Madison Square Garden and elsewhere, arguing sincerely that it wasn't in America's best interests to send U.S. citizens to help one dictator, tribal king or warlord oppose another. This “great debate” raged until the very morning of Dec. 7, 1941, when America Firsters, along with all others, witnessed the Pearl Harbor attack and abruptly joined other Americans in waging the war now thrust upon them.

End of innocence

Until that fateful Sunday morning, Americans merely watched the world, mesmerized by flickering newsreels narrated in stentorian voices and flourishing phrases. Teenagers and young men, soon to become the heroes of the “greatest generation,” tell me they often laughed uproariously during the newsreels showing Hitler speaking to German crowds. Not understanding the horrific and racist German words, they saw only a smallish man with a funny mustache gesticulating wildly and working himself into a frenzy. He seemed like a buffoon, and they laughed because they did not know he was about to change their lives.

People in 1941 got married, went to movies that included “Citizen Kane” (the year's favorite), danced to Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller and shopped for Christmas up to and including the abnormally balmy Dec. 6.

The next morning everything changed, as innocence and isolationism ended; hurt and the instinct to defend one's home took over. Along Battleship Row just off of Ford Island inside snug and lovely Pearl Harbor, a few miles west of Honolulu, more than half of the entire U.S. Naval force was destroyed in less than three hours.

The Arizona was hit worst of all. Early in the attack, it received a blast through the starboard side that went straight into the magazines and aviation gasoline. Flames shot more than 400 feet into the air, and the ship went down within minutes, killing 1,177 men (almost half of the total number who died at Pearl that day).

After the West Virginia sank, several men aboard were trapped in the forward pump room, where they lived until nearly Christmas. Despite rescue attempts, they could not be reached. Amidst the other burning ships, many died of burns and blast effects (mostly concussions), some drowned, and some who survived got so much oil in their eyes that they could not see for days. In all, 2,403 Americans died, 1,178 were wounded, and 347 planes were destroyed or disabled.

The U.S. response was swift — a declaration of war the next day, and President Roosevelt's resonant phrase that the date was “a day that will live in infamy.” Germany and Italy, through the Axis agreement,

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pledged mutual aid to Japan, and declared war on the United States on Dec. 11. Our own alliance with England, and theirs with Australia and several British colonies, brought in much of the rest of the world. Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Czechoslovakia and much of the rest of Europe had already been conquered by the Nazis.

America responds

In America, young men left their homes the very afternoon of Dec. 7 to enlist in the armed forces, standing in huge lines that snaked around many city blocks. They simply never went back to school. During this incredibly tragic time, they weren't home to open Christmas presents already purchased before the bombing, and some never came back to open them at all. Women joined the services to work as nurses, stenographers and cooks, or they wrapped bandages and collected scrap cans and other items to aid the war effort. Everyone experienced shortages.

But for those people in late 1941, the news got steadily worse. The attack on Pearl Harbor was just the opening salvo in a coordinated series of blows by the Japanese. The U.S. Army base at Clark Field in the Philippines was attacked on the same day as Pearl Harbor, with half of the Air Corps equipment there demolished. Guam was attacked and conquered on Dec. 10, Wake Island on Dec. 23.

On Dec. 22, Japanese forces landed both north and south of the Philippine capital of Manila, at Lingayen and Luzon respectively. They began simultaneous marches to the capital and took Manila on Jan. 2, 1942. U.S. General Douglas MacArthur withdrew his troops far to the south, to a narrow peninsula along Manila Bay called Bataan. American troops held out there, starving and unreinforced, until they surrendered in early April. They walked for many days in a horrific parade known as the "Bataan Death March" to prison camps in the Philippines, where many stayed for almost three years.

One of these soldiers, a Prosser resident, later wrote his story in a heartwrenching book called *1051*, named for his prisoner-of-war number. (Millard Hileman's book, self-published in 1992, is available at local bookstores and libraries. In the book, Hileman tells dramatically how the atomic bomb made from Hanford plutonium saved his life in 1945.)

British Singapore fell to the Japanese on Feb. 15, 1942, along with Burma on Feb. 27 and Java in the "Dutch East Indies" on March 9. In less than six months, the Japanese had seized more than a million square miles of land and come to dominate nearly the entire western half of the Pacific Ocean. More than 150 million people had been subjugated. Most of this happened in just the time that has elapsed since this year's Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The Allies didn't get a major victory in the Pacific until the Battle of Midway, an island just northwest of Hawaii, in June 1942. The battle cost the lives of 307 Americans, 150 planes, a destroyer and an aircraft carrier. From that point forward, the Allies began an arduous trek lasting more than three years to reclaim from Japan the Pacific territories taken so quickly.

Hanford's role

Ironically, in the same month the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the Uranium Committee of the federal Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD) decided to sponsor an intensive research project on

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plutonium. This strange new substance had been isolated for the first time just nine months earlier in a University of California laboratory by Professor Glenn Seaborg. The OSRD placed the research contract with the University of Chicago's Metallurgical Laboratory.

From then on, the war proceeded on two tracks. The military track was reported in headlines around the world. The scientific track was conducted entirely in secret.

In the same month as the Battle of Midway, the Army Corps of Engineers formed the Manhattan Engineer District to construct industrial-size plants to manufacture the plutonium and uranium being investigated by Met Lab scientists.

Six months later, just as the nostalgic wartime song "White Christmas" was topping the charts, Colonel Franklin T. Matthias and two engineering scouts from the DuPont Corporation visited the future Hanford Site. On the evening of December 31, 1942, Matthias reported to General Leslie Groves, chief of the Manhattan Project, that the Hanford region was "ideal in virtually all respects" in terms of the criteria defined for the plutonium production site.

In March 1943, as construction began at Hanford, the Allies inflicted heavy losses on the Japanese in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. In Europe, Allied bombing of the Ruhr Valley began.

Parallels continued on the two war fronts — the battlefield and the home front of science and secrecy. Each had its milestones, its discomforts, examples of extraordinary personal dedication, near-misses and vast unknowns. And through all the trials on both war fronts, people on the ragged end of exhaustion encouraged each other with the slogan "Remember Pearl Harbor." Signs at HEW carried these words. Whether shouted on the battlefield or spoken softly with a nudge and a meaningful glance, these words inspired a whole nation of people and bound them together in a common cause.

Americans together

When I was in high school, we were called to assembly every "Pearl Harbor Day" to listen to fathers who were World War II veterans (as most were). That was less than 25 years after Pearl Harbor. Today, to high school students and to many of us, that war seems as much in the past as the American Revolution.

Until this past Sept. 11, the World War II figures portrayed in "Pearl Harbor," "Saving Private Ryan," "The Thin Red Line" and other popular movies, or in Tom Brokaw's books about "the greatest generation," seemed at once distant, ordinary and larger-than-life. In photos of World War II Hanford, we see serious-looking men with slicked-back hair and bulky clothes. We see squat-looking vehicles with huge rolling fenders and "bug-eye" headlights. In the context of our world of microchips and palm-sized computers, we have questioned many of the decisions made at the wartime Hanford Engineer Works.

On Sept. 11, however, we learned in an instant that we are bound together — that we felt that same shock, ache and immediate impulse to defend our country as Americans did in 1941. We were just as unprepared for

CREHST
to commemorate Pearl Harbor
*Hear Pearl Harbor survivors
and their spouses share
their memories*
Friday, Dec. 7, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.
The Columbia River Exhibition of
History, Science and Technology
95 Lee Blvd., Richland
Adults \$350, seniors \$2.75,
students \$2.50. No charge for
CREHST members.

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war, but as a nation we are going to the caves of Afghanistan as Americans went to the caves of Iwo Jima and Okinawa to seek justice for our dead. Vulgar songs and needlessly violent games suddenly seem just that: vulgar and needless. We are inspired to be our most decent, generous and selfless.

We lost twice as many Americans on Sept. 11 as died at Pearl Harbor. We lost as many Americans that day as in the entire American Revolution. We have also seen how good causes and good ideas can be hijacked in repulsive ways. Just as the good and decent religion of Islam has been hijacked by a few to "justify" terrorism, so the Japanese of the 1940s carried out their rapacious plunders of Pacific territories under the egalitarian slogan, "Asia for the Asians." As did the Americans of 1941, we have learned firsthand that evil, fear and heartache exist not just in the recesses of history.

Cold War heritage

Less obvious than the straightforward victory Hanford helped to achieve in World War II is the role the site played in winning the Cold War. Hanford produced more than half of the total U.S. supply of weapons-grade plutonium during the Cold War. During the Cold War production years, 1947-1988, the Hanford region sometimes expanded so rapidly and monumentally that the impacts of growth were painful. Other times, cyclical federal decisions contracted the region's economy. Whether boom or bust, every citizen living here felt the impacts.

When the economy of the Soviet Union could not withstand the costs of the long years of weapons production, it collapsed, and the government followed suit in 1991. After these momentous events, Americans and former Soviets have embarked on a series of weapons cuts, cooperative agreements for converting weapons reactors to power plants, and pacts to finance and build spent fuel storage facilities in Russia. The first Russians ever to enter Hanford's Plutonium Finishing Plant toured in July 1994, and many mutual visits have occurred at weapons sites since then. In today's war on terrorism, Russian cooperation is vital and welcome.

Surely these are immensely positive signs, and we at Hanford can be proud that we did so much for our nation in the 20th century. As we face the enormous new challenges of the 21st century, let's draw upon our heritage of strength and sacrifice to guide us. ■



Before the Cold War ended, Hanford workers could not have imagined that Russian government representatives would one day visit Hanford. Author Michele Gerber, left, visits with Russian energy official Nikolai Egorov through an interpreter in 1994.