

History in the Hills: There always is a best

PAUL ZUROS, Apr 13, 2024

Two weeks ago, we returned from visiting my wife's family in New York City. We had a fabulous time visiting and sightseeing all around the city. We were fortunate to have good weather while we were there, and for the drive to and from. Driving up without stopping is about six-and-a-half hours, but traveling with four children takes significantly longer, with many breaks. And if we are lucky, we can make the trip in eight.

Traveling is monotonous sometimes and usually after listening to hours of music, I start to listen to audiobooks. Rummaging through my CD selections, I found an interesting recording I forgot I had. This was the broadcast of the bestowing of the Army-Navy "E" Award to the Weirton Steel Co. on March 16, 1944. Funny, but it was almost 80 years to the day in which I rediscovered this recording. Thankfully, my family enjoyed listening to this past broadcast with me and it made the drive a lot less tiring.

I have written a lot about Weirton Steel during World War II and it's a topic that, in my opinion, everyone in the area should feel extremely proud of. Weirton Steel reached great heights during the war and its accomplishments were second to none. Being that it is the anniversary of the bestowing of this coveted production award, I hope you will permit me to visit this topic once again.

The Army-Navy "E" Award was an award for excellence in war production. It was a merger of several production awards prominent in the decades before World War II, specifically the Army A, Navy "E" and the Gold Star award of the Army-Navy Munitions Board. These awards have a long storied past and the history is too much to include here, but these awards were separate until July of 1942 when they were combined to one award called the Army-Navy "E" Award.

There is a fascinating book called "To the Unsung Heroes of the Production Front," written by Lloyd Hargest, who was the former chief of statistics and reports and recorder of the Army-Navy Production Award Board of the Pittsburgh Ordnance District from 1943-45. Hargest's book is one of the best accounts of war production in the Pittsburgh district during those years. According to Hargest, the Pittsburgh Ordnance District, composed of about 50,000 square miles in area, was

the home of 5.5 million people during the war years. The district was activated on Aug 16, 1940, consisting of all of Western Pennsylvania, except Erie, Mercer and Crawford counties; all of West Virginia; Belmont and Jefferson counties in Ohio; and Garrett and Allegheny counties in Maryland. The district was responsible for working with industries within the district and awarding contracts to those companies. In the Pittsburgh district alone, 95 million tons of steel were produced during World War II.

With that said, according to Hargest, there is always a best. And in his opinion, the best was Weirton Steel. Weirton ranked third in the Pittsburgh District as far as the tonnage of steel produced during the war years. United States Steel and its subsidiary, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corp., produced the most. Of their plant, the Mingo Works at Mingo Junction received many accolades for war production. Secondly, Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp.'s Pittsburgh and Aliquippa works made huge amounts of material for bomb tubing, shell billets and forging, in addition to being the area's largest producer of tank armor plate.

Weirton, however, had a stellar record — and not just in production. Hargest writes, "Weirton Steel Co. ... whose record stands as the acme in loyalty and devotion to its county's cause in time of war. Had Weirton nothing more to its credit than its amazing labor record of no time lost through strikes, walkouts or slowdowns during the entire war period, it would rate the approbation of every American for its example. Weirton alone, among all the great steel plants in the United States, can boast such a record."

There were other plants that went on strike during the war. Hargest recounted that in the Pittsburgh District, there were more than 750 work stoppages. Fewer than 20 lasted more than 36 hours. Work never stopped in Weirton. And Hargest says that Weirton broke seven world records on open-hearth production alone in those years, too.

Weirton's record in war production was second to none. In addition to the record tons of steel produced, the mill developed and manufactured eight new products in those years, including alloy steel; forging steel, used to manufacture shells; bonderized sheets — chemically-treated steel to take paints, lacquers and enamels; and electro-plated tinplate. These three huge lines, according to Hargest, "are 100 percent the product of American ingenuity — and largely the product of Weirton

ingenuity.” Whereas most of the tin plate lines in the United States at that time were based on foreign concepts. These electrolytic lines started in March of 1943 in Weirton Steel. Other products included electro zinc-coated sheets; hot-dipped lead-coated sheets; and high-carbon, cold-rolled strip steel, used for rifle shell clips and machine gun belt links. This steel needed to be just right to prevent jammed guns in the field, a deadly scenario.

And finally, of the new products, Weirton produced gild clad metal for bullet jackets. Weirton Steel produced 3 billion 30- and 50-caliber bullet jackets alone. In addition to that, Weirton’s steel was just about used in everything else the army needed for vital war equipment. Additionally, Weirton Steel rolled brass, magnesium and silver chloride sheets, a feat no other steel mill would try. My favorite thing Weirton Steel made was the production of the 8-inch howitzer shell. Weirton turned out more than 70,000 of these shells every month from the Weirton and Steubenville plants. Most impressive was the role of Weirton Steel in the production of the atomic bomb. Weirton provided an essential material for the production of the weapon that other companies refused to undertake or failed at in the attempt.

Naturally, one would agree that Weirton Steel deserved the coveted Army-Navy “E” Award for its outstanding war record. Due to prejudices on the national level, specifically in the Army and Navy Ordnance Committee for awards in Washington, regarding the type of union the workers were members of, the award was delayed for more than two years.

In those days, Weirton was a member of the Weirton Independent Union, or the WIU, despite attempts, primarily in the 1930s, for Weirton workers to join the CIO. Despite many nominations of Weirton Steel by the Pittsburgh Ordnance District, members of the award committee would not bestow the award on the mill citing that “no award to Weirton should be made unless and until assurances could be given that future production could be maintained without the danger of work stoppages.”

Weirton had not seen a strike since 1933. What made the award board change its mind was the strike of December 1943 in which many plants stopped production. Weirton Steel however, did not strike and with that record, the award board had no choice but to bestow the much-deserved award to Weirton Steel, voting on

Jan. 27, 1944. The ceremony was scheduled for March 16 with Ted Husing, Columbia Broadcasting System's chief sports broadcaster, as master of ceremonies. The day saw torrential rain damping the event, but it did not dampen the spirits of the men and women of Weirton Steel. Thousands came out to the award ceremony despite the wet weather. Many spoke that day, but most remembered the comments of Larry Lafferty, president of the WIU. He said, "Our most cherished record is the fact that we have never lost one minute of production since long before Pearl Harbor. And this is our solemn pledge — we are determined not to lose one minute of production time between now and the war's end. I declare that there will be no strikes, slow-downs or sabotage of our beloved country in these mills."

It was Lafferty's words that struck me 80 years later as I listened to that "live" broadcast as I drove to New York a few weeks ago. Weirton has a lot to be proud of and our impressive war record still stands as a bright spot in our local history. It's not just a local story, but one that impacted our national history as well. And it's not the factory or mill leadership that made those important contributions, but our local people. Even though it has been 80 years since that day, the spirit of our people is still strong. And with that history behind us, there is nothing we can't accomplish.

(Zuros is the Hancock County administrator)

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