

TIMELINE TO 2000

TORPEDO STATION

When the call came down

More than 12,000 people working at the Torpedo Station in Newport went into action

By Phil Sweeney
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — The Torpedo Station's log for Dec. 7, 1941, indicates that at 3 p.m. the Secretary of the Navy ordered War Plan 46 against Japan to be put into effect.

The exact meaning of that action is not recorded, but the result is unmistakable. America was at war, and life on Goat Island was immediately and dramatically altered.

Production at the Torpedo Station quickly soared, and by the height of the war it boasted a workforce of more than 12,000 people — making it the largest industrial employer in Rhode Island.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the nation quickly positioned itself to fight, and the war effort became the guiding force for nearly every daily activity.

In Rhode Island, that activity became most evident at the Torpedo Station. In a single year near the beginning of the war, the Navy appropriated \$2.3 million just for improvements to the buildings and facilities on the small island in Newport Harbor. The station employees worked around the clock to build and test many of the torpedoes used by the Navy in fighting World War II.

The Goat Island facility grew into a small town during the war years. It was crowded with assembly plants, housing areas and other buildings. Boats and ships lined up along its docks. Smokestacks rose into the sky.

At any given moment of the day or night, thousands of men and women were at work there and at a related facility further up the bay on Gould Island. The work was done under the watchful eyes of Marine guards.

Workers earned \$20 to \$30 for a week's work, which for some meant more than 50 hours on the job. The laborers included men, women, whites, blacks, some teen-agers and a few blind workers.

To house the thousands of Torpedo Station employees, the federal government built the housing units at Park-Holm, Tonomy Hill and the Anchorage. In downtown, Perry Mill Wharf was converted into housing specifically for women workers.

As boats were the only way to



A supervisor stands over workers on a line at the Torpedo Station in 1943. World War II meant the height of work at the station.

reach Goat and Gould islands, ferries ran almost continuously between the station and downtown Newport. Extra bus service was added to move workers around Aquidneck Island.

The Torpedo Station employees formed a community. They organized bowling and golf leagues. They played night baseball at Cardines Field and threw Christmas parties and dances.

Still, the workers' contribution to the war meant hard work at a nearly non-stop pace. Conditions were not always pleasant. Employees taking the ferry boats to Goat Island during the unusually harsh winter of 1942-43 endured many days with temperatures reaching 20 below zero.

The job of building torpedoes also proved difficult.

Early in the war, Navy commanders complained about the ineffectiveness of the torpedoes fired on Japanese vessels. The weapons often misfired and failed, they reported.

Design flaws previously had gone unnoticed because the Navy had not spent the money to fully test them during peacetime, said Anthony Nicolosi, director of the Naval War College Museum.

And because the pre-war years were such hard economic times, Torpedo Station workers did not push



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for testing and changes. "They had jobs and they wanted to keep them," Nicolosi said. "They didn't want to make waves."

By 1943, the problems had been identified and modifications were made to the torpedoes' firing pin. From that point on, naval forces felt confident in using them in battle.

On numerous occasions during the war, the Navy praised the Torpedo Station and presented it with awards.

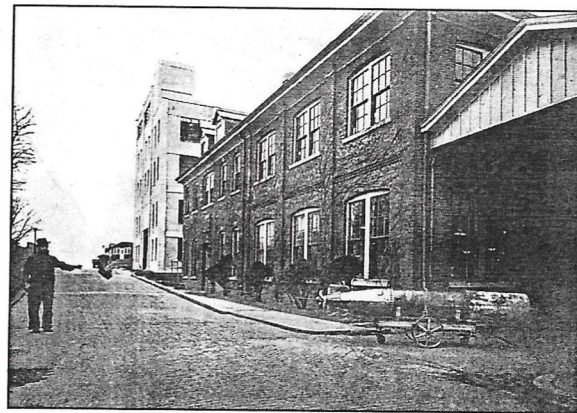
About 15,000 torpedoes were used during World War II, and the Navy's ability to gain control of the Pacific Ocean proved to be a turning point in the war against Japan.

Nearly one-third of the 62,000 torpedoes manufactured during the war were built in Newport.

Just as quickly as the outbreak of war brought great activity to the Torpedo Station, the arrival of peace made the facility all but useless.

All torpedo production stopped in May 1945, and by the beginning of 1946, civilian employment at Goat Island had fallen to about 2,500.

By then, the Navy had huge stock-



A worker pulls a torpedo at the Torpedo Station on Goat Island.

piles of torpedoes and no enemies to fire them at.

Weapons manufacturing was being shifted to private contractors, and the Navy had no further need for torpedo plants.

Research and experimentation

work previously done at the Torpedo Station shifted to the Naval Underwater Ordnance Station, a new and growing command in Middletown. That operation later grew into what is now the Naval Undersea Warfare Center.