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Bethlehem-Hingham Shipyard History

Today, The Hingham Shipyard is home to hundreds of people of varying ages. Many make use of the ferry for shorter commuting to work, while some go to Menchie's, Wahlburgers, and Patriot's Cinema. Others stroll around, looking in the stores, or at the breathtaking views of the sunset on the waterfront. From December of 1941 to 1945, Bethlehem-Hingham was a fully functional shipyard.

The Shipyard was founded after the United States Navy designed a new ship, the destroyer escort. The Bethlehem Steel Company was assigned to make the new ships.¹ Because of the large demand for ships, all of their current shipyards were running at their max capacity. Hingham was close to deep water, had a utility railway running throughout it, was close to an airport, and had many jobs available for eager citizens. The company employed workers to clear 150 acres of land and construct a steel structure for the shipyard.

The Bethlehem Steel Company was in need of more people to help assemble ships. At the time, only 8,000 people lived in Hingham. Almost all men over 18 were in the fighting, so many young boys and injured men did the work. As it took thousands of people to build a single ship, Bethlehem Steel Company transferred 400 men who had worked at the company for many years to the Shipyard. These people gave new employees knowledge on how to construct ships.

¹ "The History of Hingham Shipyard – From the documentary Remembering the Hingham Shipyard". Hingham Shipyard Marinas. Retrieved November 20, 2019.

As the Great Depression was going on, people wanted the opportunity to get paid. After just one year, 15000 men and boys worked on the ships. Soon, over 23,500 people worked daily at the Hingham Shipyard, more than the current population of the town. The Shipyard allowed women to make money and incorporate themselves in the war effort. After the first year, over 2700 female workers were employed at the shipyard.²

Ralph “Chick” Papile of Hingham was one of the workers who lived in Quincy during World War Two.³ During his enrollment at an engineering school in Quincy, Chick learned how to work with sheet metal and weld. His expertise came in handy when he was on a Destroyer Escort when the engine lost all power. He was able to weld a part of the engine together and the ship was able to return to a port. That day, he saved 122 lives. His responsibilities in the shipyard included pipe fitting, welding, and cutting sheet metal. He recalls taking the bus to work five days a week when he was 16 years old. He worked at least eight tiring hours a day to help the war effort. Some days, Chick would pay the crane operators 25 cents, about five dollars in today’s money, and they would put him in the basket and lower him on the other side of the fence. He would escape to baseball games and hang out with other work colleagues. The workers covered each other’s work when they were put across the fence for the day. Claire Sheehan’s father worked at the shipyard because he was considered too old for enlisting in World War Two. He was a shift manager and Claire came to see a couple of ships being sent off.⁴ “You would stand on the dock and schwapoo! The glass would break, champagne went everywhere

² "Bethlehem-Hingham, Hingham MA". Archived from the original on 28 July 2014. Retrieved 20 November 2019

³ Papile, Ralph “Chick”. Interview by William Buckley. Unpublished interview. Hingham Shipyard. Hingham. Nov. 2019

⁴ Sheehan, Claire. Interview by William Buckley. Unpublished interview. Hingham Shipyard, Hingham. Dec. 2019.

and the crowd went wild! I think it was the wife of whoever the ship was named for who broke the champagne”, Claire recalls. Her father helped with the important task of testing ships. The ships would go out around the harbor for a couple of days up to a couple of weeks. Ms. Sheehan recalls, “Oh he went around the harbor on some [Destroyer] Escort, oh what was its name. Ah yes, the USS. Buckley.

Though Chick did not live in the shipyard, some men did. This included Claire’s father. Claire, her brothers and mother lived in Quincy and would visit their father on the weekends. “At Hingham, the blocks had accommodations only. Men billeted there were given a special victualling allowance of \$1.50 per day and were expected to feed themselves” says Donald Collingwood.⁵ The blocks referred to barrack-like buildings in which workers could sleep. Other shipyards allowed men to eat, drink, and hangout. Hingham settled for giving workers their allowance for them to go into town to get three substantial meals. Mr. Collingwood states that not all of the generous allowance was used for food, but on entertainment.

The Bethlehem-Hingham Shipyard produced the Evarts, Edwal, Cannon, and Buckley-Class destroyer escorts. Bethlehem Hingham specialized in Buckley-Class Destroyer Escorts, hence the street name USS Buckley Place. Buckley Classes were narrower, faster, and had a longer range. By the end of the war, 154 Buckleys were built. Around half of those were made in Hingham. The leading ship of that class, the USS Buckley was sold for scrap on July 26, 1969.

Upon entering the Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard, one would notice Destroyer Escorts lined up in different stages of completion, some surrounded with wood, others being boarded for

⁵ Collingwood, Donald (1998). *The Captain-Class Frigates in the Second World War*. Leo Cooper.

a voyage to deliver the ships across seas. In the three and a half years it was open, 227 ships were built. The shipyard set a record for building a Destroyer escort in 23 days and 5 landing ship tanks in 50 hours.⁶ The Shipyard was awarded with a rare award, The Army-Navy E Award. Only about five percent of companies had received the award by the end of the war.⁷ The awards were handed out to Shipyards that excelled in quality, efficiency, record keeping. One time, the Navy ordered 60 ships to be built in 1943. The workers were able to make 90 ships that year, which gave them the award that year. They then went on to get one the following year.

Men and women had different jobs around the shipyard. Some were nurses, welders, painters, riggers, the list goes on. An important job in the shipyard was a shipfitter. A shipfitter is a metalworker who works on durable materials such as aluminum and steel. Shipfitters assembled all structural parts of a ship, a job that the whole ship was built around. Shift managers coordinated all of the workers and monitored progress on ships. They were also tasked with testing the ship's durability, speed, and comfort for the troops. They also used heavy machinery such as presses up to 750 tons.

One of the many essential roles workers played in the shipbuilding process were sheet metal workers. One of these people was Mr. Paplie. Chick remembers, "We would get the metal in full sheets and had to work it until it was to the right consistency. There were no mechanical tools by the time I started working, so we went to work with saws and hammers. Eventually, machines were added when the demand increased for more ships.

⁶ Rines, Lawrence S.; Sarcone, Anthony F. "A History of Shipbuilding at Fore River". Thomas Crane Public Library. Retrieved 20 November 2019.

⁷ "Army-Navy "E" Award Termination Sees Award Granted to 5% of Eligible Plants". The War Department Bureau of Public Relations. Naval History and Heritage Command (archivist). 1945-12-05. Retrieved 2016-09-20.

A tedious, but necessary job in the shipyard was a checker. They would count the rivet holes and mark them with chalk. James Kilroy, from Boston, would draw on the ships, most notably, the phrase “Kilroy was here” with a head looking over a wall. He worked in the Fore River Shipyard and then the Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard.⁸

The Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard was able to build 227 ships to help the war effort. Thanks to the service of the hardworking men and women during World War Two, we are able to enjoy freedom in the Hingham Shipyard and our entire country.

⁸ Rines, Lawrence S.; Sarcone, Anthony F. "A History of Shipbuilding at Fore River". Thomas Crane Public Library. Retrieved 20 November 2019.

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Interview

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Papile, Ralph "Chick". Interview by William Buckley. Unpublished interview. Hingham Shipyard. Hingham. Nov. 2019

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