Kansas At War

Part 1

The Call To Arms

A half-century ago, the United States stood on the threshold of a monumental task. The surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which took over two thousand American lives and decimated the U.S. Pacific fleet, was followed by a string of Japanese victories in the Pacific. Within days, America was at war with the mighty Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis—a war for which she was woefully prepared. Nevertheless, at home and abroad, Americans tackled their responsibility with confidence and determination. For the next three and a half years, they worked together to “win through,” in the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, “to absolute victory.” The photographs in this essay, and those that will appear in the next three installments of “Kansas At War,” serve as a partial record of the commitment and sacrifice that were ultimately required to achieve that victory.

To say that the Second World War was arguably the pivotal event of the twentieth century is a truism. It is important to recall that World War II brought the United States out of the Great Depression, as mobilization for total war pumped money and confidence into the nation’s economy. In addition, the task of fighting a global war brought unprecedented political and social change to America—change that would greatly impact the postwar decades. The role of the federal government, which had increased prodigiously during the New Deal decade, changed dramatically. Domestically, geographic mobility, the labor movement, and the role of women and minorities in American society had far reaching and long lasting consequences. Internationally, the country broke with traditional isolationism and embarked on an unprecedented role as world leader, accepting a global responsibility that had been rejected in 1919. In many ways, World War II transformed the nation and set the stage for a new era.

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The call to arms during the years of the Second World War was answered by over 200,000 of Kansas' young men and women. Some remained within the states, but many were shipped out for active duty overseas. Here a night train of troops prepares for departure from a Lawrence station, and a couple bid each other a fond farewell.
Coffey County photographer William Batdorf documented many war-related scenes in his area during the 1940s. In July of 1942, his camera captured this gathering of young friends who had recently "joined up" to serve their country. This bittersweet scene, and others like it, the photographer entitled simply, "Soldiers Leaving."
The Kansas experience, for the most part, was little different from that of the other forty-seven states. Like the rest of the country, Kansans were still suffering the effects of the Depression when war contracts and demand began to stimulate the economy in 1940. Throughout the Midwest, people tended to be more isolationist than the rest of the country with respect to foreign affairs. Kansans had a particular aversion to participation in “Europe’s wars” and frequently recalled George Washington’s admonition to avoid foreign entanglements, despite ominous signs coming out of Hitler’s Germany. Generally, the Kansas citizenry supported the administration’s efforts to beef up the nation’s defenses, but they opposed the Selective Service Act of 1940, which implemented the first “peacetime draft” in U.S. history. Like their president, most Americans favored the allies, but many Kansans opposed giving aid to belligerent nations, no matter who they were, fearing that it would inevitably lead to direct U.S. involvement. “I hope from the bottom of my heart that the French and the English will

Coffey County. Summer of 1942. A young enlistee holds his baby for the camera to record the moment and the memory.
defeat Germany and Italy, or rather Adolph Hitler's organization and Mussolini's organization," wrote a veteran of the first war in June 1940. "[B]ut nevertheless, I feel very strongly that it would be the worst possible thing for the United States to embark in this international conflict."

When war came to America on December 7, 1941, however, most people enthusiastically joined the crusade against worldwide fascism and totalitarianism. Sen. Arthur Capper, one of the country's leading isolationists and frequent critic of administration foreign policy, quickly pledged his support to the necessary war effort:

Now that an attack has been made on the possessions of the United States, there is only one thing to be done. America must carry on whatever operations are necessary against the Japanese to a successful conclusion. Japan's attack means war and we will see it thru.

On December 9, he wrote the president that "The people of Kansas will do their full duty. . . . We are all Americans now, united and invincible." Kansas Gov. Payne Ratner, in a December 7 telegram to FDR, "pledged to the nation all Kansas resources and facilities." "Kansas, now as always in her eighty years of existence, stands ready to do her part in defending America in unified action against aggression and dishonor."
Government Issue for new recruits included everything from winter wool to summer cotton uniforms, helmet, canteen, tent, bayonet, mess kit, toilet kit, haversack, and on and on. Practically overnight, John Q Public became G I Joe. Induction center, Lawrence, 1940s.

"If you've got eyes, ears, and a throat," reported one recruit, "you're in." Induction center, Lawrence, 1940s.
To help honor this pledge, tens of thousands of Kansas men and women enlisted in the armed forces. In addition to the men who were already serving in the Kansas National Guard, which had been mobilized in December 1940, thousands enlisted at local recruitment centers throughout the state, voluntarily joining the army, the navy, and other branches of the military service. Others, especially those between the age of eighteen and thirty-six who for various reasons did not opt for this course of action, more than likely received a draft notice during the course of the war and quite
possibly began their military obligation at Fort Leavenworth, one of the nation's major draftee-processing centers.

By war's end, an estimated 215,000 young men and women from Kansas had served in the armed forces of the United States. Most were ordinary soldiers, sailors, or nurses; a few were singled out for special honors; but all were vital components of the massive Allied war machine that finally rolled to victory in that "last good war."