



THE HINGHAM SHIPYARD

Hingham, MA

HISTORY

In the spring of 1940, World War II seemed a million miles from Hingham, Massachusetts. But in June, the world began to crumble. Germany occupied France. Nazi U-boats sank hundreds of British ships. To keep England alive, the United States offered to lend it ships. It seemed like the only way to avoid another war in Europe. The United States thought that if it gave all its Allies all this material, then it wouldn't have to send its boys over there. But the United States fleet was small and outmoded. Most ships were remnants from World War I.

The Navy began designing a new ship, the Destroyer Escort. It commissioned Bethlehem Steel to be the major contract, but Bethlehem's shipyards were already working at full capacity.

A new shipyard had to be built from the ground up. A site was found on the Massachusetts coast in the tiny town of Hingham. It had a deep harbor and few existing buildings. Life in Hingham was about to change.

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor. Within weeks of the attack, a survey party arrived in Hingham. The construction team would have to build a shipyard at lightning speed. Immediately, crews began working around the clock to clear 150 acres. After the land was cleared, workers erected the skeleton of a steel mill that stretched more than a third of a mile. The workers built wooden cradles to house each ship and brought in over a dozen giant cranes. Before they were done, the Navy had spent the equivalent of 250 million dollars.

The shipyard needed thousands of workers to build a single ship. But most men over the age of 18 were going off to war. The ships would have to be built by boys too young to fight or men who were injured and couldn't fight. Some men hadn't worked in years because of the Depression.

In order to turn these men into shipbuilders, Bethlehem imported a team of 400 veteran workers. In less than a year, there were over 15,000 workers in the yard.

As more and more men went to war, the labor shortage intensified. So, like other factories across the America, the shipyard began hiring the only workers left -- women. The Hingham Shipyard began an active program to recruit women. Soon, over 2500 women were punching the clock.

The problem was how to churn out ships faster than ever before. Fighting ships were highly complex machines that were usually made one at a time, piece by piece. The engineers needed to simplify the process so that it could be done quickly by inexperienced workers. They invented a system of mass production in which many ships could be built at the same time. Sheets of steel were cut using patterns creating hundreds of individual parts. Each part was given a number and, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, the parts

THE HINGHAM SHIPYARD IS A JOINT VENTURE OF LENNAR URBAN, ROSELAND PROPERTIES,
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would be assembled into large sections of a ship. The first sections were laid one next to another. Then, the welders fused them together. Next, the crane operators lowered the upper sections in place. Within days, workers built the entire ship from the ground up.

In less than two years, Hingham had transformed itself into one of the largest shipbuilding centers in the entire country. Workers were pounding out ships at a rate of over six a month. Each one was a cause for celebration.

The Navy pushed Hingham hard, demanding 60 Destroyer Escorts in 1943 alone. But, the shipyard ground out 90 — 50% more than the Navy thought possible. In August, the Navy recognized the shipyard's hard work by awarding Hingham with an "E" for Excellence, an honor usually reserved for sailors in action. On the day of the ceremony, work halted for one of the only times in the life of the shipyard.

The Destroyer Escorts guarded thousands of convoys across the ocean. On each one, they faced the threat of submarine attack. Several Hingham ships sank U-boats in battle. By late 1943, the fight against the U-boats was largely won. But to win the war, the Allies would have to land in Europe. Blocking the way, was the heavily fortified French coast. With conventional ships, a beach landing was impossible. The Allied plan was to crash land on the beaches with a fleet of flat-bottomed ships.

Hingham was flooded with orders for new ships. The largest of these could carry ten tanks and equipment or 1000 men. It was called the Landing Ship Tank or LST.

On June 6, 1944, D-Day, thousands of flat-bottomed ships landed on the coast of France. In the months following, other crucial landings would take place on beaches in the Pacific. Together the landings helped turn the tide of the war.

All in all, 227 ships were built in 3-1/2 years at the Bethlehem Hingham Shipyard. A record not claimed by any other shipyard.

It was years before people came to realize the importance of work done on the home front. And how ships built at home helped make victory possible overseas.

We can now only begin to wonder how small towns like Hingham could have done so much in so short a time.