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July 04, 2006

Celebrating the Men and Women Who Supported Freedom

By Stephen Skojec

GM is proud to have been an important part of the American effort during World War II. As we remember our American independence today and the soldiers who have fought to defend it, we also owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women back at home who helped to make victory possible.

In 1940 the United States of America maintained a cautious distance from the conflicts emerging in Europe and the Pacific, but also kept a watchful eye on events as they unfolded.

In May of 1940, [William S. Knudsen](#), then president of GM, received a call from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. “We need you down here,” said FDR. Knudsen was asked to head up the National Defense Advisory Committee, and later would chair a new government body, The Office of Production Management. The office was created by Roosevelt to “increase, accelerate, and regulate the production and supply of materials, articles and equipment and the provision of emergency plant facilities and services required for the national defense” and “to insure effective coordination of those activities of the several departments, corporations, and other agencies of the government which are directly concerned therewith.”

As head of the largest auto manufacturer in the world, Knudsen’s understanding of the business of manufacturing would be needed in gearing up the American capacity for war. “Big Bill” Knudsen accepted the offer, leaving behind his job at GM to head up the new office for a dollar a year. “It was the least I could do,” he said, for the opportunities that had come his way in the 41 years since arriving in America from Denmark in 1900.

The office was officially [established](#) by executive order on January 7, 1941 — exactly 11 months before the United States would be drawn into the war by the attacks on [Pearl Harbor](#) in the early morning of December 7, 1941.

These unprecedented attacks were condemned by FDR as “a date which will live in infamy.”

Shortly thereafter, the American war machine was revving into high gear, and it would take every ounce of available material to create the materiel needed to conduct the massive operations of a global theater of war. By January of 1942, the government banned the sale of all non-essential cars and light trucks. More than half a million vehicles already in dealerships were rationed, and GM moved quickly to announce that it would buy back any new cars still in inventory at the request of dealers in the hopes that distribution of these vehicles would be conducted equally across the country. When raw material rationing was eased, fuel rationing still kept automobile sales low. In the calendar year of 1942, only 16,601 Buicks were built in the United States.

Buick would play a bigger role than automobile manufacturing in 1942. Knudsen asked Buick president [Harlow Curtice](#) to take on the production of Pratt & Whitney aircraft engines. Curtice eagerly agreed, and began immediately to set plans in motion to turn automotive manufacturing plants into aircraft engine production facilities. Curtice and his production team met with the War Department in Washington, then traveled to Hartford, Conn., to visit the Pratt & Whitney plant. Within a week of Knudsen's original request, Buick was working out plans to build an entirely new plant to make the engines.

Curtice had to find a large enough site to handle the constantly increasing demands from the government for more engines, which grew rapidly from a few hundred to several thousand per month. He settled on a 120-acre parcel in Melrose Park, Ill. On March 17, 1942, construction began on the new plant. On September 17, just six months later, [the plant](#) was ready for business — complete with shatterproof glass windows and government-mandated night-blackening metal shades to hide the plant in case of a night air raid.

Buick's Plant 11, one of the largest automotive engine manufacturing facilities in the world, was also converted to war production in 1942. Entire assembly lines were ripped out, equipment was put in storage, and new floors put in. Buick didn't waste any time getting the job done.

Across GM, the story was similar. The vast experience GM had with mass production was converted toward preparing the various mechanisms of war. Buick produced Pratt & Whitney Engines, the [T-70 Tank Destroyer](#) (later known as the M-18 Hellcat) and invented a new 75 MM shell casing made of a carbon-steel and manganese alloy to replace the copper jackets when copper became scarce.

During the course of the war, Buick produced:

- 424,000 steel cartridge cases
- 19,428 tank powertrains
- 9,719,000 20MM shell bodies
- 2,507 [Hellcat Tank Destroyers](#)

Five plants in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic (Baltimore, Bloomfield, Linden, Tarrytown and Trenton) were merged into an ad hoc GM division called "Eastern Aircraft." [Facing tremendous engineering challenges](#), Eastern Aircraft stepped to the plate to meet the Navy's increasing demand for [TBM Avenger torpedo bombers](#), as well as [FM-2 Wildcat fighters](#) to combat [Japan's Mitsubishi A6M2 'Zero' fighter](#), an agile powerhouse of a plane that dominated the early part of the air war and participated in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Eastern Aircraft produced more than three-quarters of the Wildcats and Avengers delivered during the war.

GM's various divisions produced a wide variety of vehicles and equipment for the war effort, and the women of GM's workforce were among those who inspired the iconic [Rosie the Riveter](#). By the time production was done, the men and women of GM had produced:

- Nearly 2 million machine guns
- 1 million M1 [Carbine rifles](#)
- 13,000 fighter planes and bombers
- 38,000 Tanks and Armored Vehicles
- 20,000 Aircraft Engines
- 25,000 Amphibious Vehicles

Information for this post came from several sources with a great deal from [The Buick : A Complete History \(An Automobile Quarterly Magnificent Marque\)](#). For more information, search "General Motors history" at your favorite bookstore or online seller.

Happy Independence Day.

Posted by Editor at July 4, 2006 12:43 PM

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Comments

Stephen,

Wonderful post.

GM has supported America in tough times as well as celebrated those who served. Thanks for GM.

GM's Keep America Rolling was another great way to support America's economy during difficult economic times that have followed the 9/11 attacks.

I've heard the stories from old timers about WWII and preparation on the home front. My students know it, my business associates know it. Many WWII refugees found jobs in America working for suppliers to GM.

Is today any different? Freedom is still on the ropes. In the same way, many Americans are counting on GM to lead the way, just as during World War II.

GM's plans are working, let's hope GM doesn't give in to the opposition, or sell out to the foreign competition.

GM's new products, including the Buick Lucerne are gaining favor, it proves what can be done.

Some of us are wondering if there will be an America left in a few decades, whether America will become, albeit, a colony for Europe and Asia to plunder.

Posted by: Edwin at July 5, 2006 01:09 PM

Good job guys! American Pride!

Posted by: Frank at July 5, 2006 03:23 PM

Thank you, Mr. Skojec, for referencing Lawrence R. Gustin and Terry B. Dunham's excellent "The Buick: A Complete History," now in its sixth edition. It is much to Buick's credit that such exemplary historians are so inspired by the brand.

It is gratifying that Buick's contribution to the Allied war effort is remembered. Reassurance has long been a typically Buick attribute.

<http://www.friendsofbuick.com/reassurance.html>

It was Buick, after all, who reassured one Billy Durant that automobiles were not repugnant; that the horseless carriage was the way forward.

Durant borrowed a 1904 Buick and was so impressed that he invested in the company, joining the board of

directors; selling 1,108 Buicks at the 1905 New York Auto Show before the company had even built forty, and going on to found General Motors on September 16th, 1908.

Buick led GM - and American - production that year. Indeed, the consistency of Buick was critical to General Motors' early years, as the nascent corporation experienced considerable financial trouble.

"It is better that the rest of General Motors be scrapped than any chances be taken with Buick's earning power," wrote new GM head Alfred P. Sloan in late 1920.

Thus was Buick the cornerstone of General Motors. Buick would reward both its parent company and its customers several times over, with - as early as 1914 - standard electric self-starting; standard headlights, and its first six-cylinder engine.

In World War I, Buick would give back to the nation. The French government awarded a Buick ambulance the Croix de Guerre (and that vehicle is now on display at the Washington Red Cross museum).

After hostilities ended, Buick again gave back to its parent company. "When times were bad in the early-1920s, it was the profits from Buick that kept GM going," recalled Forbes columnist Jerry Flint recently, adding a period quote from Sloan: "it was Buick that made any kind of General Motors car line worth talking about."

Soon, as Mr. Skojec's post describes more thoroughly, there were Hellcats on the Buick assembly line, as the automaker joined America's World War II effort.

"Until total victory, we dedicate ourselves to the objective, when better war goods are built, Buick workmen will build them," promised Buick.

"This is a war not only of men in uniform, but of men in work clothes; engineers in their shirt sleeves; executives at their desks. Every machine; every drawing board; every conference table where decisions are made concerning war goods - all these are battle stations where part of the work of forging Victory goes on," mused Buick General Manager Harlow H. Curtice (later President of GM).

Yet with the arrival of peace in 1945, Buick was - in October of that year - again ready to take up where it had left off.

It has been a postwar path that has led to legendary, reassuring reliability, through care in engineering that was won awards time and time again.

They used to say that the Buick was the automobile of those possessed of uncommon good sense.

We at Friends of Buick would submit that it remains as true today as fifty years ago, when the phrase was first coined.

Buick is a brand of quiet attribute, but its values are enduring, and this opportunity to remember its proud heritage is much welcomed.

Posted by: [Friends of Buick](#) at July 8, 2006 05:07 AM

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