

FORT WAYNE IS STILL SEVENTH ON HITLER'S LIST

By B.J. Hollars

In the 1940s, citizens would tell you that Fort Wayne, Indiana was so wrapped in magnetic wire, superchargers, sonar systems, bombshells, pistons, amplidynes, and dynamotors, that for a brief moment, the people there became important enough to fear obliteration. Employees at General Electric, Rea Magnet Wire Company, and International Harvester clocked in seven days a week to support the war effort, churning out all the necessary parts.

Without Fort Wayne, perhaps there would be no B-24 bomber.

Without Fort Wayne, perhaps there would be no atomic bomb.

When *Little Boy* was dropped over Hiroshima, a small piece of Fort Wayne was lodged inside. On Taylor Street, Joslyn Steel Manufacturing shaped uranium to ingots, contributing to the killing of 160,000 people 6700 miles away.

Days later, when *Fat Man* was dropped over Nagasaki, once more, Fort Wayne was to blame. Twenty-one-year old assistant flight engineer Corporal Robert J. Stock of 415 Downing Street—just five miles from where I grew up—peered down from his instrument panel at the mushroom cloud ballooning thirty thousand feet below.

His mission: measure destruction.

Which he did, admirably, making him better prepared than most to know the effects of the bomb had Hitler dropped his own upon the steeples of the churches of Fort Wayne.

A questionnaire from a May 18th, 1942 citywide meeting clarified Fort Wayne citizens' questions on how to respond if Hitler bombed the city.

Q. Aside from ordinary fires due to combustion or any other natural source, do you feel there is any danger from fire that we might expect?

A. Yes, there is another danger we must face now that we are at war. That danger is from enemy airplanes dropping incendiary bombs.

Q. What is an incendiary bomb?

A. It is a small bomb weighing about two pounds.

They burned at 4500 degrees Fahrenheit.

In a coffee shop on Broadway, old men still talk about the planes humming over their city.

“Probably twenty or thirty of them,” a retired mailman shrugs, sipping his coffee. “We had to look up and try to figure out if they were our planes or theirs. We were always waiting for the day when we saw a swastika on the back wing.”

That day never came.

With their heads tilted skyward, they spied only skywriters or C-47s droning high above.

The only strike they ever knew was lightning.

In October of 1941, in the months prior to Pearl Harbor, Charles Lindbergh spoke to a crowd of ten thousand at the Gospel Temple on Rudisill Boulevard. His noninterventionist group, America First Committee, was opposed to the American invasion of Europe and Lindbergh looked forward to sharing his feelings with Fort Wayne. The city was proud to host him, onlookers sprawling along the streets and sidewalks to catch a glimpse. But in the early afternoon on December 7th, 1941, as Fort Wayne citizens stepped from their churches and received word of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Lindbergh and his isolationist policy was quickly forgotten. The American First Committee disbanded within days while the men of Fort Wayne rushed to recruiting stations.

Six hundred and twelve men who were raised on Wayne Street and Sherman Street and Clay Street would die in places they never knew existed.

My father gets his oil changed at a service station on Covington Road.

“Eighteen bucks for the full service,” he says. “You can’t beat it.”

Once, many years back, I attended Lindley Elementary with the owner’s son. His name was Ryan, and for a time, our desks sat in the same row. During free-reading period, Ryan and I often hunkered into beanbags that swallowed us whole, taking turns holding *The Illustrated Guide to Fossils*, pointing out which fossils we would most like to find on our way home from school. We had never heard of Hitler, nor had we ever been told that Fort Wayne—our beloved home—was important enough to make it to the top of any list.

“I want to find a trilobite,” Ryan once told me, so I said, “Okay. I want to find one, too.”

Nearly twenty years later, Ryan died. Small arms fire from insurgents in Balad, Iraq. He was a corporal. He was a paratrooper. He was no longer in the beanbag chair beside me.

Once, during an oil change, my father asked his father how many tours his son had served. Ryan’s father didn’t speak, just held up grease-stained fingers.

In the coffee shop on Broadway, just a few blocks from General Electric, old men still talk about the German prisoners of war.

“Probably thousands,” the retired mailman continues. “I was just a little boy then, but we used to sit on my grandmother’s porch and wave to them as they jogged by for their daily exercise.”

Reports show that by 1945, six hundred German prisoners had infiltrated our city.

Camp Scott was originally constructed for the 130th Railroad Battalion, but by 1944, it had transformed to a prison camp. Guard towers were erected, barbed wire rolled out.

The camp was situated just beyond McMillan Park, between Wayne Trace and the Pennsylvania Railroad. The Germans were captured from Rommel's Africa Korps before flying into Fort Wayne.

The men at the coffee shop recall Sunday afternoons spent driving past the camp, the prisoners peeking out from the fences. Once the prisoners arrived, some parents no longer allowed their children outside after dark. But some parents did. There are stories of German POWs playing soccer in the park, of children accepting nickels to buy the prisoners sodas from nearby drugstores. The prisoners had access to radios and received more generous beer and cigarette rations than American soldiers overseas. They enjoyed Ping-Pong. They found girlfriends. They stuck around.

You ask them, they'll tell you—Fort Wayne is a good place to live.

The night after three hundred and fifty-three Japanese aircraft attacked Pearl Harbor, the General Electric factory on Broadway turned off its glowing sign for the first time since 1928. The GE symbol had become a stalwart of the Fort Wayne skyline, though the red encircled letters remained dark until war's end. Nine hundred and twenty-five bulbs quieted their hum, and six months later, GE produced its last civilian motor before focusing entirely on war production. Security fences were constructed around the factory, and employees were given high-level identification badges. Armed guards were stationed in guardhouses. The war had reached our backyard.

Nearby, at the Wolf and Dessauer department store on Calhoun Street, the forty thousand lights depicting a glowing Santa and sleigh flickered into darkness as well.

The citizens of Fort Wayne knew one thing for certain:

They did not want Santa Claus in the German crosshairs as the bombs began falling from the sky.

Cloistered in the backroom of Fort Wayne's History Center sits a gray box filled with various manila folders, one of which reads simply "Bombs." Inside, a list of the most likely threats Fort Wayne may have endured, as well as information related to how citizens were to respond if Hitler bombed the city.

One pamphlet reminds Fort Wayne citizens that should they find themselves in a blackout, they are to remain calm, obey all traffic signals, and assist the infirm, the frightened, and the lost. And remember, the pamphlet chides, "a blackout or air raid warning is a warning and not a promise of one."

Q. what usually happens when an incendiary bomb strikes a home?

A. It will penetrate the roof of any ordinary constructed home. The force of the contact will ignite it and the chemicals within the bomb itself will start working. It will generate heat at about 4700 degrees Fabrenbeit. At that heat almost anything will burn.

Q. A lot of questions have arisen on air raids. What would you suggest as a first step in protecting yourself from an air raid?

A. Every person should select in his home a place that would be suitable for occupancy during an air raid. It has been suggested that a basement room is preferable for this purpose.

The questionnaire also recommends that a radio, table, chairs, books and magazines be kept in the basement, as there is no telling for how long the bombing might continue. Newspapers described basements filled with water and non-perishable food, of men preparing to darken the city at a moment's notice, air wardens stationed at the top of the Lincoln Tower, scanning the skies. Posters plastered to telephone poles and trolley cars reminding citizens, "Loose lips sink ships."

If the blackouts were done properly, even the posters would disappear.

Most blackouts were announced in advance, but not always.

One flyer reads:

Black Out

Sunday Night

May 24, 1942

From 10 p.m. to 10:15 p.m.

Please Follow This One Rule:

Turn Off All Lights During This Period!

Yet in late May, the flyers were replaced with a confidential memo, one in which Carter Bowser of Fort Wayne's Command Control Center informed the FWPD of a surprise blackout scheduled for June 4th, 1942 from 9:30 p.m. until 9:45 p.m. Bowser hoped the unannounced blackout might better simulate the conditions of a true bombing, might strike fear into Fort Wayne's citizenry by keeping them on full alert.

On June 4th, a siren rang and light bulb filaments throughout the city rattled and died away. The trolleys stopped in the streets, their lights dimmed, while cars killed their engines. When

Colonel Robert Harsh of the Office of Civilian Defense came to inspect Fort Wayne's preparedness, he left quite impressed by the city's ability to turn itself invisible, returning the land to fallow fields, the city to grids on a map.

A month later, an instructional film entitled "Bombs Over Fort Wayne" premiered at the Murat Temple Theatre on New Jersey Street in Indianapolis. Though the sixteen-millimeter film is lost, the original script remains.

Narrator: "It's a warm spring night in the city where three rivers meet. Late theatre-goers and workers have long since departed for their homes. A lone policeman patrols his beat. Far off—an automobile horn shatters the stillness of the night."

Then—silence, the city settling in for a night of rest.

Moments later, the calm of the Fort Wayne night is disrupted by the German air strike.

Controller: "High explosive bombs at Calhoun and Pontiac! Casualties approximately ten. Fire in three buildings. Electric wire down."

Police: "Enemy aircraft crashed through high tension wires at Delaware and Alabama. Some persons still in plane, some thrown out. Approximately six persons injured."

Incendiary bombs explode at the corner of Berry and Union as messenger boys are sent sprinting through streets.

"Several enemy escaped from the plane and seen going east!" actors cry. "Several unexploded bombs scatter in vicinity. Some smell of gas!"

Bomb squads and decontamination teams enter into the scene. Officers in riot gear chase after the six downed Germans as they scatter past the Embassy Theater, their swastikas reflecting on their aviation suits.

By movie's end, it's made clear that Fort Wayne's quick thinking and preparedness has saved the city.

As the house lights come up the narrator notes: “You’ve observed the drama of self-defense.”

Fort Wayne citizens deemed the film a success, and Commander Bowser encouraged representatives from the Office of Civil Defense in Washington D.C. to buy the rights to the film and screen their production elsewhere.

James Landis, the director of Civil Defense, congratulated Bowser on a “very excellent job” before informing him that they would not be purchasing the film but wished Fort Wayne and its movie the best of luck.

Q. what precautions can a person take and what can be used to combat an incendiary bomb?

A. Sand is the most efficient material which can be used to smother such a bomb. Water can be sprayed, but not poured in a steady stream on the bomb first to avoid the possibility of the fire spreading. Then the sand should be poured over the bomb until it is entirely covered. It can then be picked up in a shovel and placed in a partially filled bucket. A bucket with about six inches of sand in it will be satisfactory. The bucket can be carried out by using the handle of the shovel thrust through the handle of the bucket.

If I had been alive during the blackouts, I would have lived in District 5. My warden would have been Donald H. Jones of 3424 N. Washington Road. He would have called me the day prior to a blackout to remind me to close my blinds, extinguish all light, do my part to obliterate ourselves from the aerial eyes of the Luftwaffe. He would have informed me not to strike a single match, and that if I needed to smoke—if I needed to calm my nerves—then I should have the courtesy to strike my light in a hallway far from the planes.

People still speak of the Civil Defense demonstration held in Hamilton Park years before. How the Civil Defense representative struck a single match from the outfield of the baseball diamond and how the citizens' faces erupted in firelight. How you could read the street sign:

Poinsette.

Today, just a few hundred feet from that baseball diamond, a plaque reads, "In honor of all who served in the armed forces of the Second World War from the Third Civilian Defense District."

I would have been in the Fifth District. I have yet to find our plaque.

Q. to sum up the situation, what would you say would be most essential then for the protection of a home?

A. A hose of approximately fifty feet in length. A bucket, a long handled shovel and a supply of sand are the most essential requirements.

As other cities and manufacturers became aware of Fort Wayne's bombing problem, Fort Wayne Mayor Harry Baals began receiving literature on the latest anti-bomb technology in order to safeguard the city from foreign attacks.

For just \$2.50, one could purchase a Bomb-Quench.

"Bomb-quench may be used with complete ease by anyone in home or factory," claims the brochure. "Simply remove top from the tube carton, sprinkle free flowing Bomb-Quench over the burning bomb or magnesium fire."

Or if Fort Wayne citizens preferred, they could invest in the Bomb-Snatcher, an orange metal scoop that stifled unexploded bombs.

“With the Bomb-Snatcher, Removal of Burning Bombs is Speedy and Safe,” the pamphlet promises.

However, the people of Fort Wayne were far more interested in simply buying bombs themselves. A dozen practice incendiary bombs could be purchased for just over seven dollars.

“Our Bomb is low in cost and its action similar to a real one,” the pamphlet assures. “Dispel the fear which nearly all persons have of an Incendiary Bomb by giving them an opportunity to see these PRACTICE INCENDIARY BOMBS demonstrated and actually allowing them to practice with one.”

Intrigued, Commander Carter Bowser wrote the Baltimore Fire Works Company. “Will you please advice [sic] us if you have available for demonstration purposes any small incendiary bombs. Also, quote us prices, quantities and delivery date.”

There is no evidence Fort Wayne ever purchased a bomb, nor is there evidence we ever endured one.

A few years back, while driving along Jefferson Boulevard, I momentarily lost sight of the city’s one and only skyscraper. Thankfully, it remained intact—just hidden in the fog.

Q. do you feel that because of our inland location, the possibility of an air raid is very remote and that all these preparations are in vain?

A. I certainly do not want to say such a raid is impossible here, nor do I want to say that it is sure to come. I do however know that if we are raided these precautions and this training program will be invaluable. You don't carry fire insurance on your home because you are sure you will have a fire. You carry it for protection when it might be needed.

If you look hard enough in Lindenwood Cemetery, eventually you'll stumble across the gravestone of Victor F. Rea, the man responsible for creating Rea Magnet Wire Company and bringing Hitler's name to every citizen's lips. If you look harder still, you'll find Ryan Woodward's grave as well, a slab of perfectly polished black marble, photos of him and his family laser-etched into the stone. Fourteen flags surround the monument, and even though the burial took place in 2007, at last glance, there were still fresh roses resting their petaled heads against his name.

I wonder what room we were in at Lindley Elementary when Ryan and I first learned of Hitler, learned what a bomb was, what small arms were, wondering if we would ever die by them and if so, who would remember our names.

The day Truman announced the end of the war—August 14, 1945—the Fort Wayne newspapers were on strike. Airplanes buzzed over the city, though they did not drop bombs.

They dropped leaflets.

Japan Surrenders! Tune Into WGL For News.

According to newspapers, Fort Wayne's children crouched over the fallen materials and struggled to make out the words. When they finally did—sounding out every last syllable—the children ran up and down Bowser Avenue banging pots and pans, no longer even fearing fear itself.

On Calhoun Street, cars honked as bells rang from the spared church steeples, while not far away, the GE symbol re-lit the sky. No longer a target, Santa Claus followed soon after.

For the first time in a long time, Fort Wayne filled a newspaper with good news.

Q. if we were to be subjected to a bombing attack, what type bombs would probably be used against us?

A. We would first, in all probability, be bombed by Incendiary Bombs.

But we were not.

We were just prepared for it.

You, too, have observed the drama of self-defense.