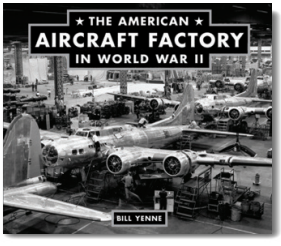
300,000 Airplanes

A salute to the aesthetics of war production.

IN 1939, U.S. AIRCRAFT FACTORIES MANUFACTURED 921 warplanes. By 1944, the annual output was a staggering 96,318 units. Total U.S. wartime production of military aircraft surpassed 300,000. A new book, *The American Aircraft Factory in World War II* (Zenith Press, 2006), documents the industry's transformation from an enterprise of craftsmen building airplanes by hand to a powerhouse of men and women toiling with assembly-line efficiency. "The aircraft manufacturers were dedicated to engineering and manufacturing excellence, but arguably no more so than they are today," says the book's author, Bill Yenne. "What happened was that the whole nation came together for a single purpose, and successfully committed itself to doing all that was necessary. All aspects of what the United States did during World War II, both at home and on the global battlefronts, were unlike anything before or since."



BOEING ARCHIVES

Over the years, Yenne has written histories of the great U.S. airplane makers, including Boeing, Convair, Lockheed, McDonnell Douglas, and North American Aviation. "While doing this, I was time and again amazed by their Herculean wartime effort," he says. "This book gave me an opportunity to tell the story in both words and pictures." In addition to Yenne's meticulously researched text, the book offers 175 photographs, many of them candid black-and-white images that reveal the sculptural beauty of airplane parts precisely arrayed on factory floors. The book also has plenty of posed, beautifully lit color photographs of workers on production lines.

The federal government's Office of War Information and company photographers made the images in an effort to publicize the war effort. In Yenne's book, they remind us that the work was not just an exercise in patriotism, but a giant step forward in transforming aviation into one of America's biggest industries.

—The editors

★★★ OVERHEAD LIGHTS AT A factory in Santa Monica, California, are reflected in row upon row of Plexiglas noses destined for Douglas A-20 attack bombers.

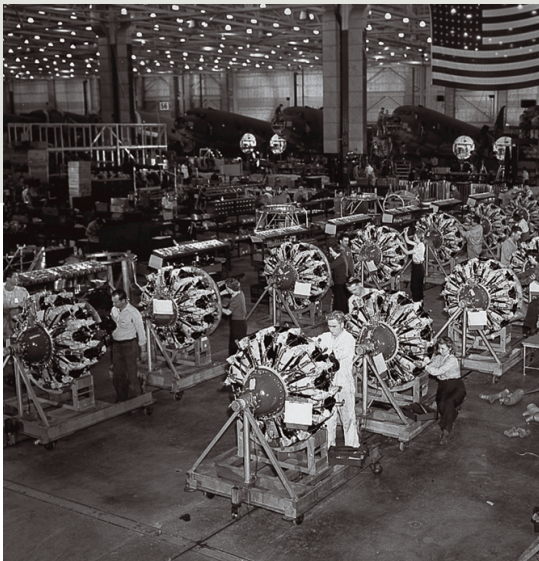
★★★ **A TECHNICIAN AT VEGA AIRCRAFT** in Burbank, California, inspects electrical subassemblies probably destined for U.S. Navy PV-1 Ventura patrol aircraft. When the Office of War Information released this photograph, it was accompanied by a caption that read in part, "Hollywood missed a good bet when they overlooked this attractive aircraft worker."

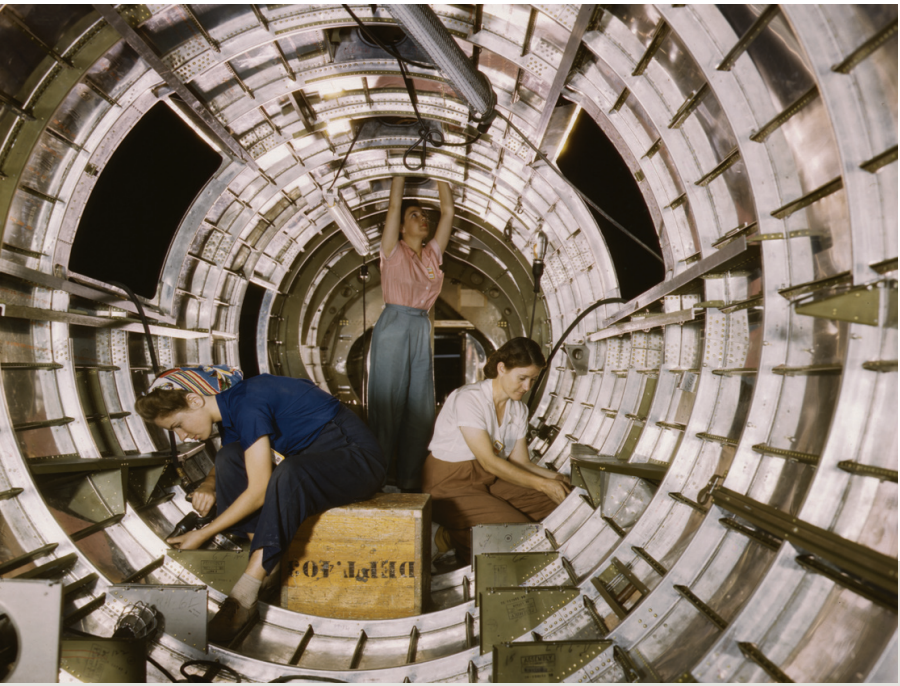
LEFT: DAVID BRANSBY/OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION TOP: COURTESY HARRY GANN

BILL YENNE COLLECTION

★★★ **A WORKER AT VULTEE'S NASHVILLE,** Tennessee factory makes final adjustments in the wheel well of an inner wing before the installation of landing gear — one of the numerous assembly operations in the production of Vengeance dive bombers.

★★★ **BUILT AT FACTORIES IN CONNECTICUT,** New York, and Illinois, Pratt & Whitney R1830 Twin Wasp radial engines were shipped to California to power Douglas C-47 transports. These two dozen Twin Wasps were among more than 173,000 built between 1932 and 1951.





ALFRED PALMER/OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION

COURTESY HARRY GANN

★★★ **WORKERS AT THE DOUGLAS** factory in Long Beach, California, prepare a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress fuselage near what will be the waist gun positions. Douglas built B-17s as part of the Boeing-Douglas-Vega committee, which pooled production resources.

BILL YENNE COLLECTION

★★★ **LOOKING DAPPER** in a tie and vest, a Consolidated welder fashions an airplane part. Even as late as the 1930s, many critical parts for the company's aircraft were made by hand. Both the technology and the dress code would change.

★★★ **STAFF AT THE NORTH AMERICAN AVIATION** plant in Inglewood, California, observe a scale model of a B-25 Mitchell bomber in wind tunnel tests (right). On April 18, 1942, 16 B-25s took off from the aircraft carrier *Hornet* and, led by Jimmy Doolittle, raided the Japanese mainland.

ALFRED PALMER/OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION (2)

★★★ **DOUGLAS TECHNICIANS READY** a Pratt & Whitney radial engine for installation in a C-47 transport at Long Beach.

BOEING ARCHIVES

★★★ **DOZENS OF B-17 AFT FUSELAGE/TAIL SECTIONS** crowd Shop 308 of Boeing's Plant 2 in Seattle, Washington. During the war, the bombers earned a reputation for flying on even after sustaining heavy damage.