

The Insider

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“We never know how high
we are till we are called to rise.”

— EMILY DICKINSON

HOMAGE TO INDUSTRY

Arsenal of Democracy Museum is a hands-on
tribute to efforts on the homefront

BY GEORGE BULANDA // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON KEEN

When Detroiters were called to rise to help build the Arsenal of Democracy in the first half of the 1940s, they stood tall as giants.

From titans of industry to humble men and women who worked incalculable hours assembling planes, tanks, Jeeps, trucks, and weaponry, Detroit turned into a 24/7 hive of activity. Plants that normally cranked out Chevrolet, Buick, Packard, Ford, and Dodge automobiles were rapidly transformed into feverish powerhouses in a desperate push to beef up the military.

"At that time, the United States was ranked 17th in the world in the size of its military," says John Lind, founder and director of the nonprofit Detroit Arsenal of Democracy Museum in St. Clair Shores.

"In 1940, Roosevelt wanted us to help the Allies in Europe by building vehicles and weapons. But a lot of Americans were isolationists and Congress didn't want a war, either," he says. Those attitudes suddenly changed on the Sunday morning of Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Although other cities such as Pittsburgh and Chicago also produced vehicles and munitions, metro Detroit, with its industrial might, is often used in the same breath with the Arsenal of Democracy. In fact, two factories — the Chrysler Corp. Tank Arsenal in Warren and the Willow Run Bomber Plant — were built exclusively to boost production.

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt used the phrase "arsenal of democracy" in a 1940 radio fireside chat, the slogan stuck.

May will be a busy month at The Detroit Arsenal of Democracy Museum. The museum celebrates its first year. May also marks the 70th anniversary of V-E Day, when Germany surrendered. And Memorial Day will be observed with various events.

The 10,000-square-foot building houses notable

> **THIS PAGE:** John Lind, founder and director of Arsenal of Democracy Museum (top). 1938 Cadillac once owned by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (left). 8th Air Force officer's tent as it looked in England during World War II (right). **OPPOSITE PAGE:** A 1941 Harley-Davidson military police interceptor motorcycle (left). "Lonely Bull" is a 1944 Ford armored car (right).



vehicles: a 1941 Harley-Davidson used during the Battle of the Bulge; a 1942 Willys Jeep; a 1943 GMC cargo truck; and a 1942 Cadillac limo that transported Gen. (later President) Dwight D. Eisenhower.

"We swap out the vehicles because it helps keep the exhibits fresh," Lind says. There are also some vehicles from the Korean War period and after. The museum owns many of the vehicles, but members also lend their trucks, tanks, and Jeeps for exhibits.

Unlike most museums, this one encourages visitors to touch the vehicles, and in fair weather, people are invited to take a spin in a vintage ride.

"We're in an industrial park that's a three-quarter-mile oval, so we don't have to go out on the main roads," Lind explains. "People love to go out in a Jeep, truck, or an armored car ride."

One of the armored cars is a 1938 Cadillac once owned by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, complete with bullet holes (he made enemies the way Dale Carnegie made friends).

"This was the car that the Secret Service wanted to put Roosevelt in because they needed an armored car for his protection," Lind says. "So they went to Hoover, but he said no and that was that. Hoover was too powerful; you didn't mess with him."

The museum also features rotating exhibits, military re-enactments, and a Veterans History Project.

"We let veterans tell their stories, and it's an open forum," Lind says. "We have approximately 40 veterans from World War II who tell their experiences."

Lind, himself a veteran of the Marine Corps, Air Force, and Navy, realizes those stories are crucial, be-

cause one day there will be no one around to give firsthand accounts. According to the Veterans Administration, World War II vets are dying at a rate of about 550 each day.

Lind is also quick to salute women's war contributions — not only the WAVEs and WACs in the military, but also civilians who stepped up. "World War II did more for women's lib than any other

Visitors can touch the vehicles, and more. "People love to go out in a Jeep, truck, or an armored car ride." — JOHN LIND

presidential decree has done since," he says. "As the personification of Rosie the Riveter, they built aircraft and ships, tanks, and munitions. They also ran farms and businesses when the men left for war."

The museum's thrust is World War II, but Lind also includes vehicles and artifacts from the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. "We'll be going on more of a Vietnam footing this year because we'll be marking the beginning of the Vietnam War." Although U.S. military advisers were in Vietnam since the 1950s, American combat troops landed there in 1965.

Lind believes it's important to engage kids in history, so there are video games tailored to young people as well as exhibits such as a ground school where they can don a parachute and swing in a harness.

Although the museum is only a year old, Lind says the idea got off the ground about 15 years ago.

"Back then, we were a traveling museum," he says. "We were a group of people who wanted to honor veterans and show off our vehicles and artifacts. We would go to schools, parks, and events."

Although the museum is relatively spacious, Lind says only about 50 percent of its collection can be displayed at any given time. "That's why we still do rotating exhibits outside the building. Right now, we have vehicles and artifacts at the Macomb Cultural Center that will be on exhibit through May."

The museum also provides vehicles for events, most notably Memorial Day parades in Dearborn and St. Clair Shores, which Lind says are the two biggest such parades in the region.

Museum staffers are all volunteers and most are veterans. Lind says it stays afloat through donations and charity poker events.

He says his hope for visitors is simple.

"I would like them to go away with an appreciation of what veterans have done to keep this country free," he says. ■

Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays; by appointment for groups. Suggested donation: \$5 (\$20 family). 22960 Industrial Drive West, St. Clair Shores, north of Nine Mile Road, east of I-94. 586-604-5393. detroitarsenalofdemocracy.org