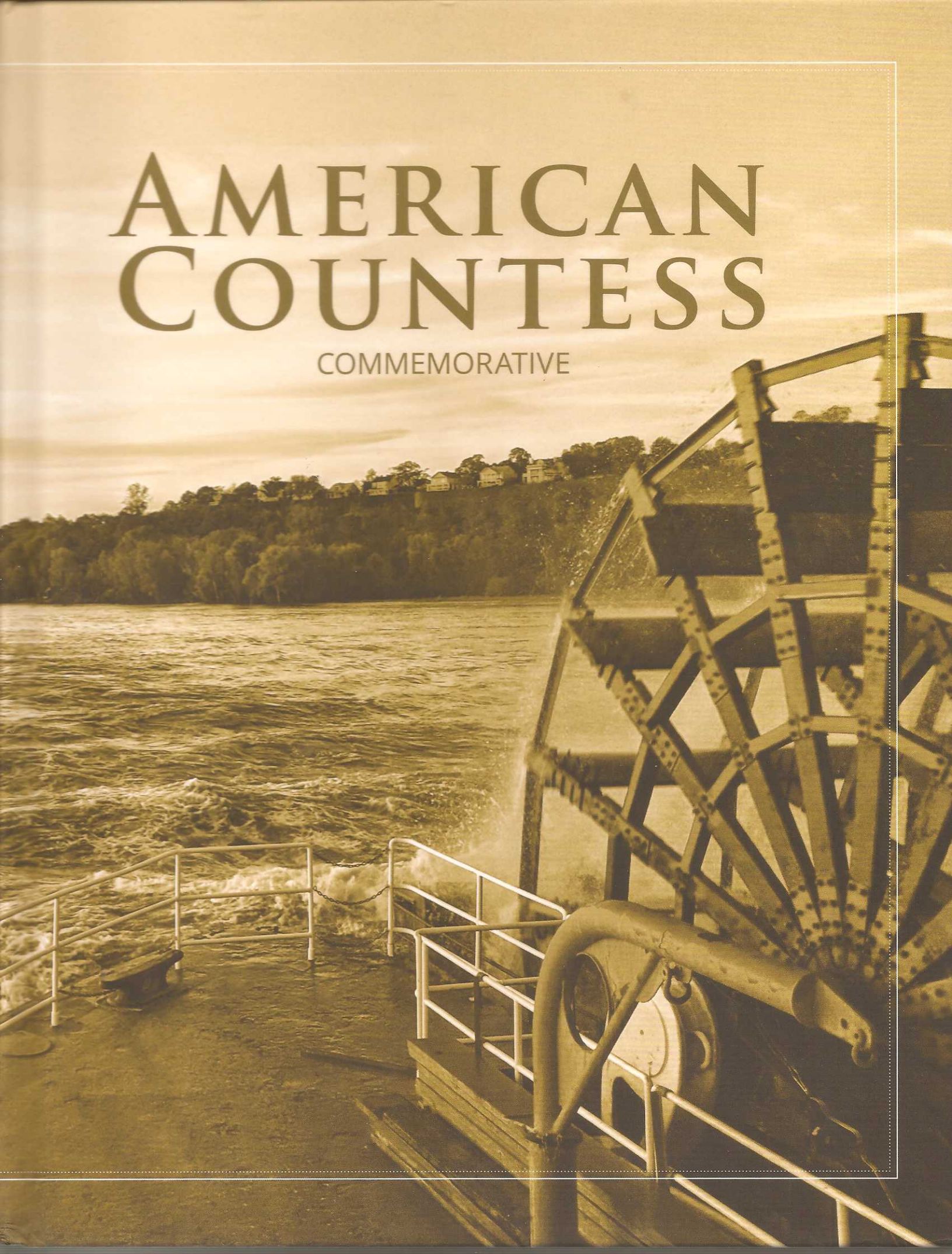
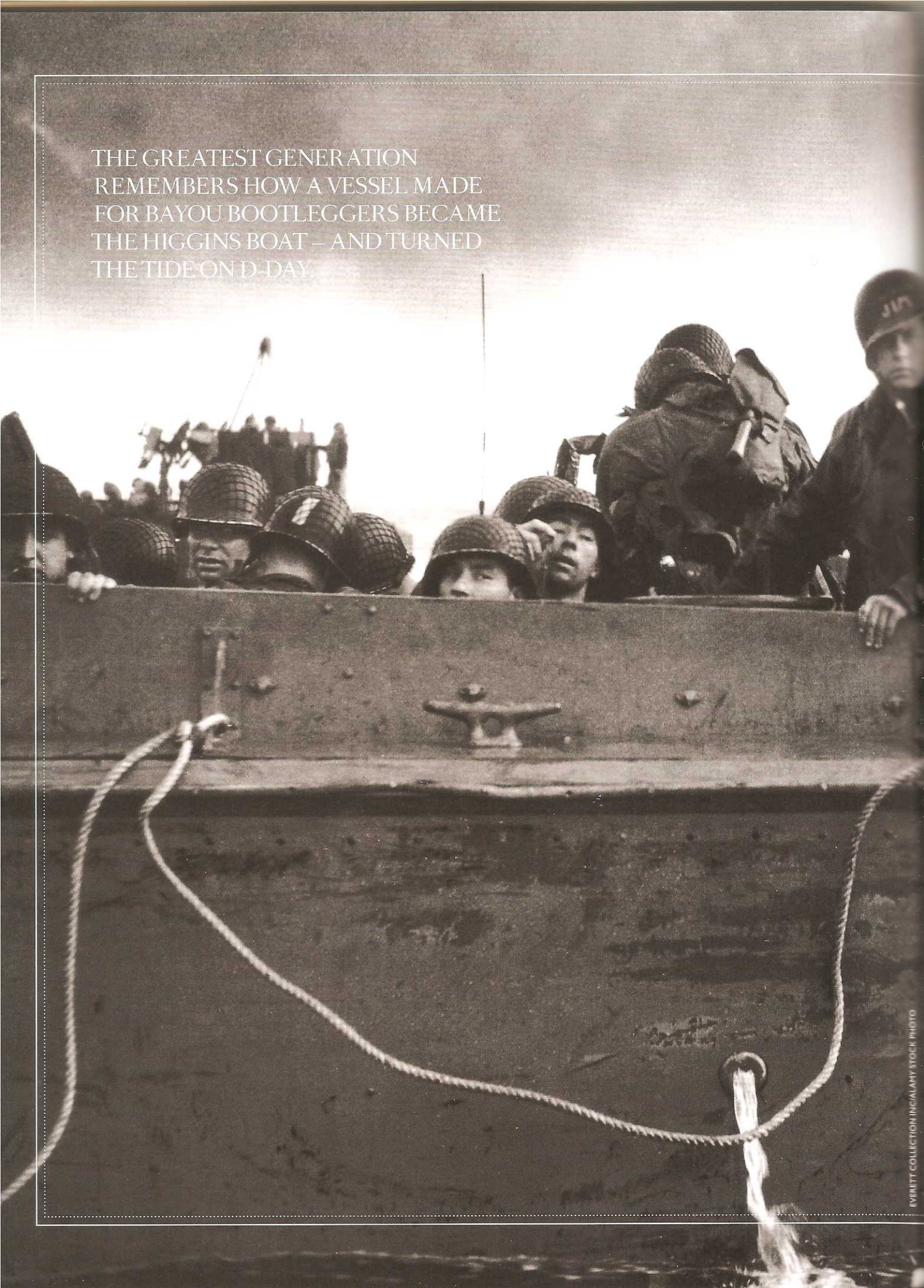
AMERICAN COUNTESS

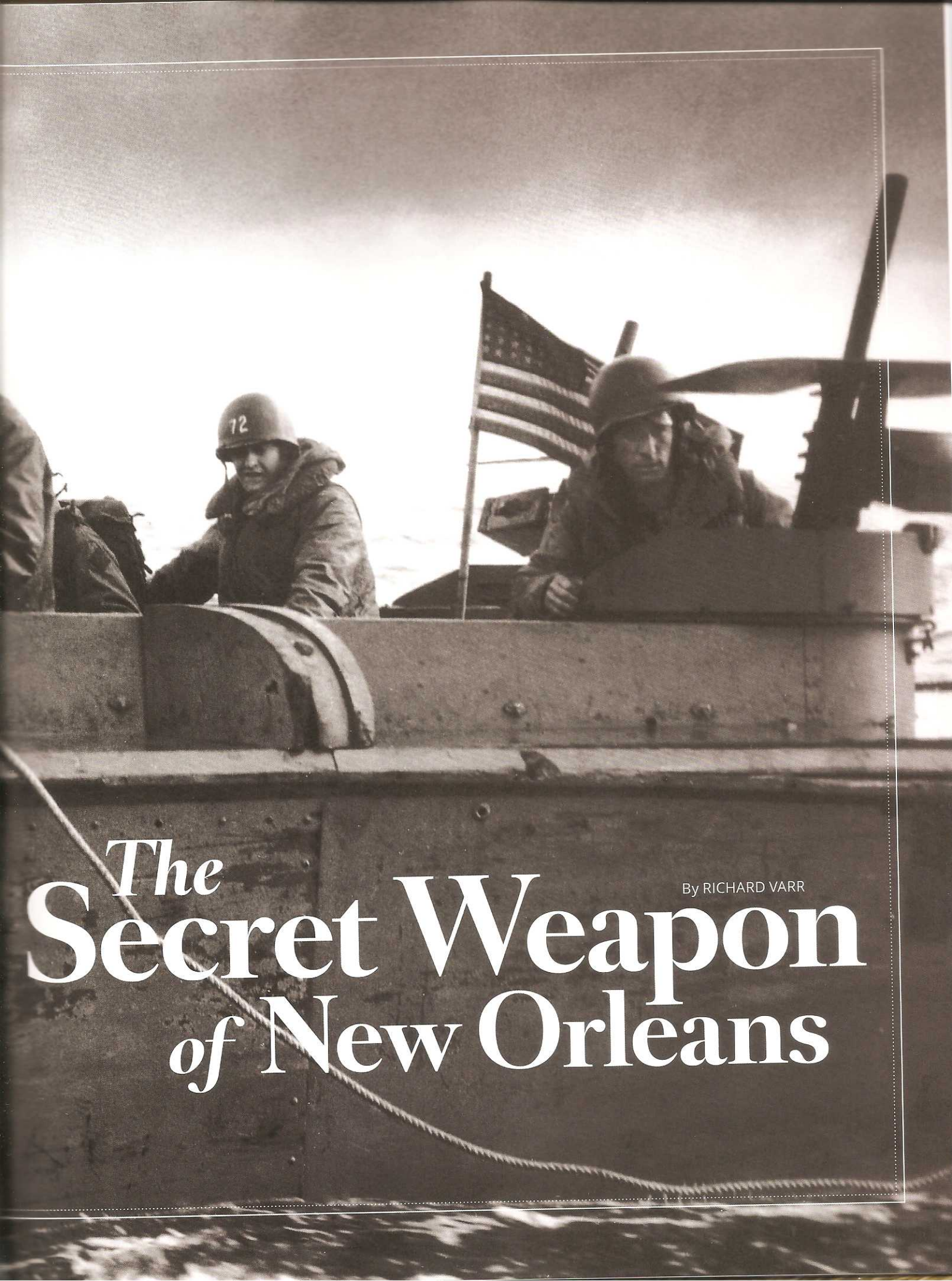
COMMEMORATIVE



THE GREATEST GENERATION REMEMBERS HOW A VESSEL MADE FOR BAYOU BOOTLEGGERS BECAME THE HIGGINS BOAT – AND TURNED THE TIDE ON D-DAY



EVERETT COLLECTION INC/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

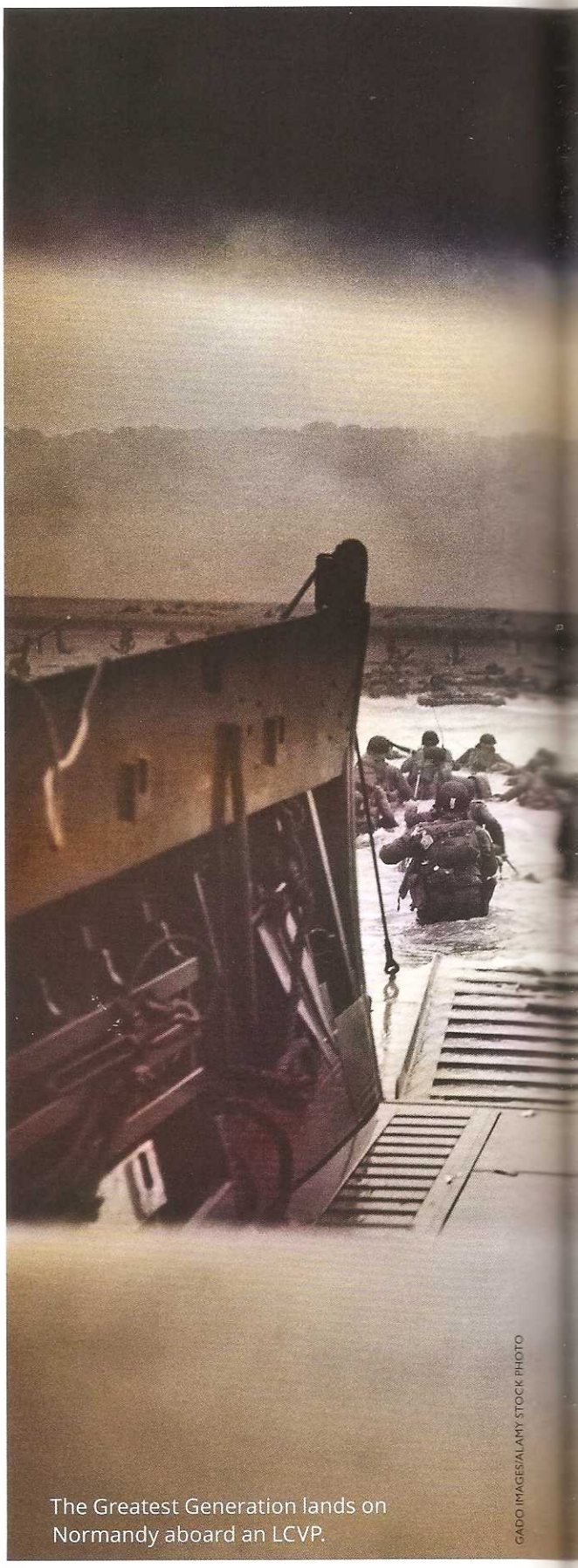


The Secret Weapon *of* New Orleans

By RICHARD VARR

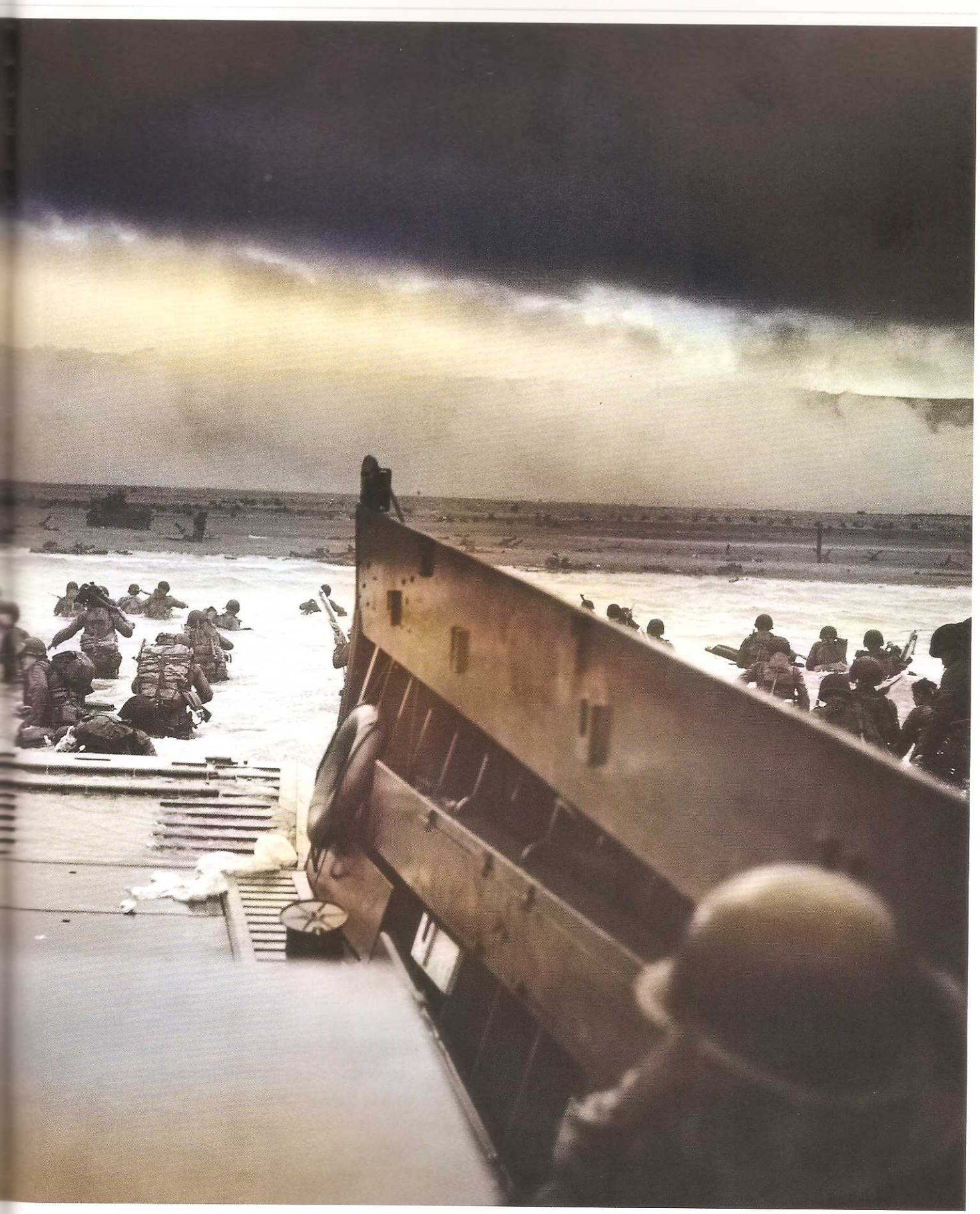
THEY CHUGGED ALONG in single file on what seemed to be superhighways atop the water, crossing the English Channel and onward to what would soon be one of history's most momentous military events. Thousands of sleek watercraft, each with the capacity to haul 36 combat-ready soldiers, headed to Normandy's beaches to begin the Allied forces' D-Day assault on a heavily fortified Nazi battlefront — an invasion on June 6, 1944 that would have been simply impossible just a few years earlier.

That's because as World War II began, the landing watercraft — the so-called "Higgins Boat" — was just an idea of a tough but spirited, hard-drinking and hard-cussing Louisiana industrialist named Andrew Higgins, whose inspiration changed the course of history. Spawned from his simple but uniquely designed shallow-draft boats, his prototypes for the LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle Personnel) caught on quickly for its most obvious feature: a forward bow ramp that drops open, allowing soldiers to quickly storm beaches and shorelines.



The Greatest Generation lands on Normandy aboard an LCVP.

GADO IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

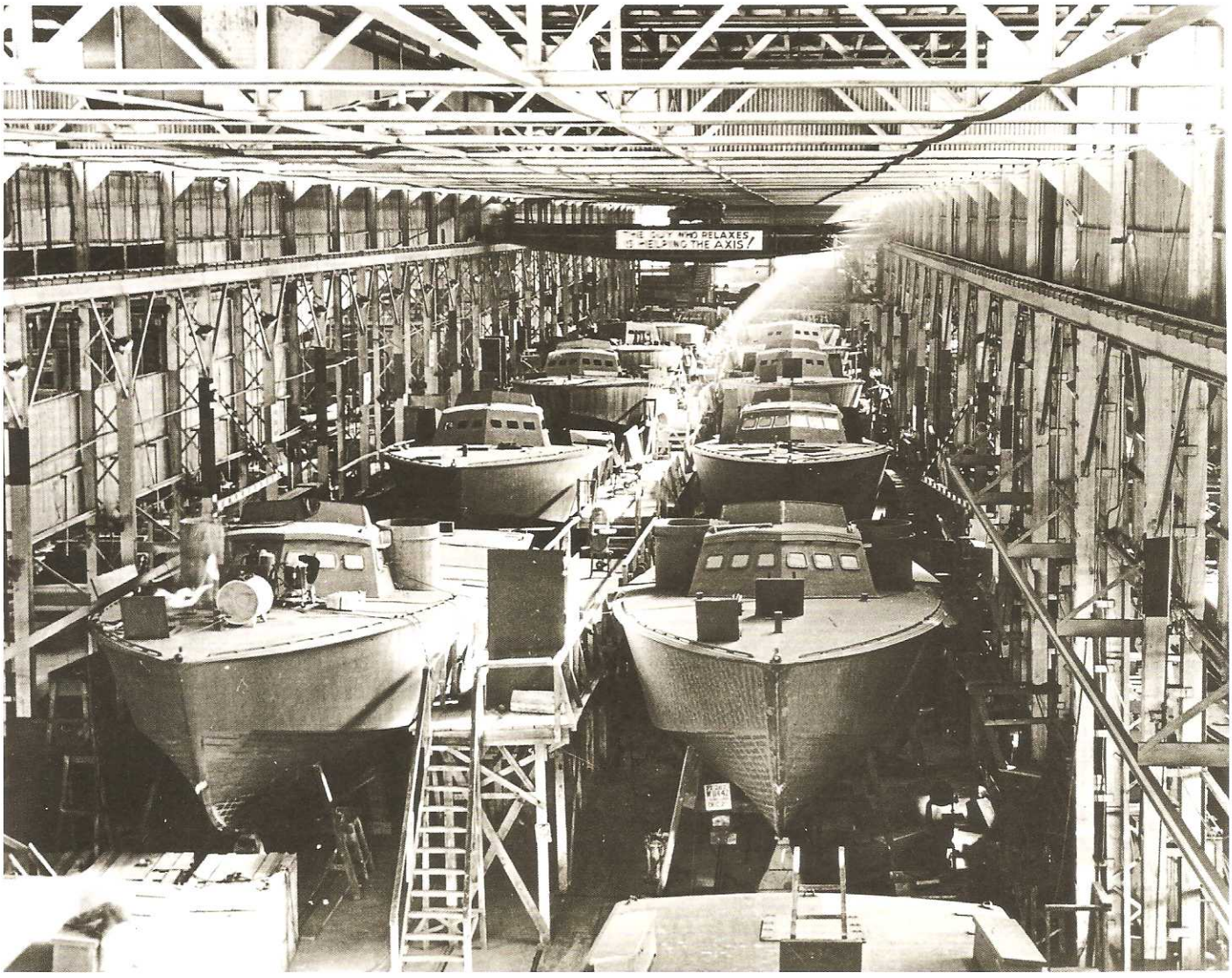


"ANDREW HIGGINS IS THE MAN WHO WON THE WAR FOR US," DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER SAID. "IF HIGGINS HAD NOT DESIGNED AND BUILT THOSE LCVPS, WE NEVER COULD HAVE LANDED OVER AN OPEN BEACH."

Opposite page: The Higgins Industries factory floor

While never achieving the status or fame of a World War II hero, general or admiral, historians and military leaders tip their hats to this New Orleans industry titan for his indefatigable drive to build as many landing craft as possible — thus the means to quickly deliver boots on foreign shores. "Andrew Higgins is the man who won the war for us," said Dwight D. Eisenhower during a 1964 interview. "If Higgins had not designed and built those LCVPs, we never could have landed over an open beach." Eisenhower, the former U.S. president and Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, explained: "The whole strategy of the war would have been different."

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM (2)



AN IDEA MAN

Andrew Jackson Higgins was born in Nebraska in 1886. After brawls in school, he dropped out and joined the National Guard. He moved to New Orleans in his early 20s, got a job in the lumber industry and eventually started his own lumber exporting business. By the mid 1920s, he began a boat-building company that produced the so-called "Eureka Boat," a shallow-hulled and inexpensive cargo-hauling craft that could maneuver through Louisiana's bayous and marshes and along the mouth of the Mississippi River. A key feature was the up-slanted "spoonbill" bow, which allowed easy access onto riverbanks for unloading, as well as quick pullback into the water. The design included a recessed propeller within a groove in the hull that helped protect the blades from debris in shallow water.

The Eureka Boat, typically made of plywood, was used by oil companies with the Gulf Coast emerging as a tapping ground for oil reserves, as well as with trappers and, purportedly, liquor bootleggers. In fact, it was during Prohibition that Higgins Industries built the fast-moving boats for the U.S Coast Guard cracking down on rumrunners and whiskey smugglers.

In the 1930s, business lagged with the end of Prohibition and the onset of the Great

IT'S PERHAPS SURPRISING THAT THESE WARTIME LANDING CRAFT WERE MADE PRIMARILY OF WOOD – MAYBE FLIMSY BUT NONETHELESS EFFICIENT AND LIGHTWEIGHT, AND QUICKLY BUILT AT A LOWER COST.

Depression, but Higgins Industries found its greatest success as the war years loomed ahead. The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps got wind of the practical watercraft and thought it ideal for their amphibious operations; namely, landing on beaches. A 30-foot version based on a government design was first built, but Higgins urged the Navy to build bigger for better performance, and it was soon replaced with a 36-foot boat.

Early designs, however, did not have the dropping bow ramp to allow easy access onto the beaches and shorelines, leaving troops more vulnerable to gunfire as they climbed over the sides. The ramp was actually inspired by Japanese engineering — U.S. military observers had taken note of a similar troop-carrying boat used since 1937 during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The U.S. Marines were particularly interested in this feature and requested that Higgins add it. Prototypes were successfully tested on Lake Pontchartrain and contracts soon followed. While the LCVP dominated the production lines, Higgins Industries also built other varieties of landing craft including 50-foot-long LCMs (Landing Craft, Mechanized) to transport tanks, along with PT boats, torpedo tubes, gun turrets and many other watercrafts and weapons.

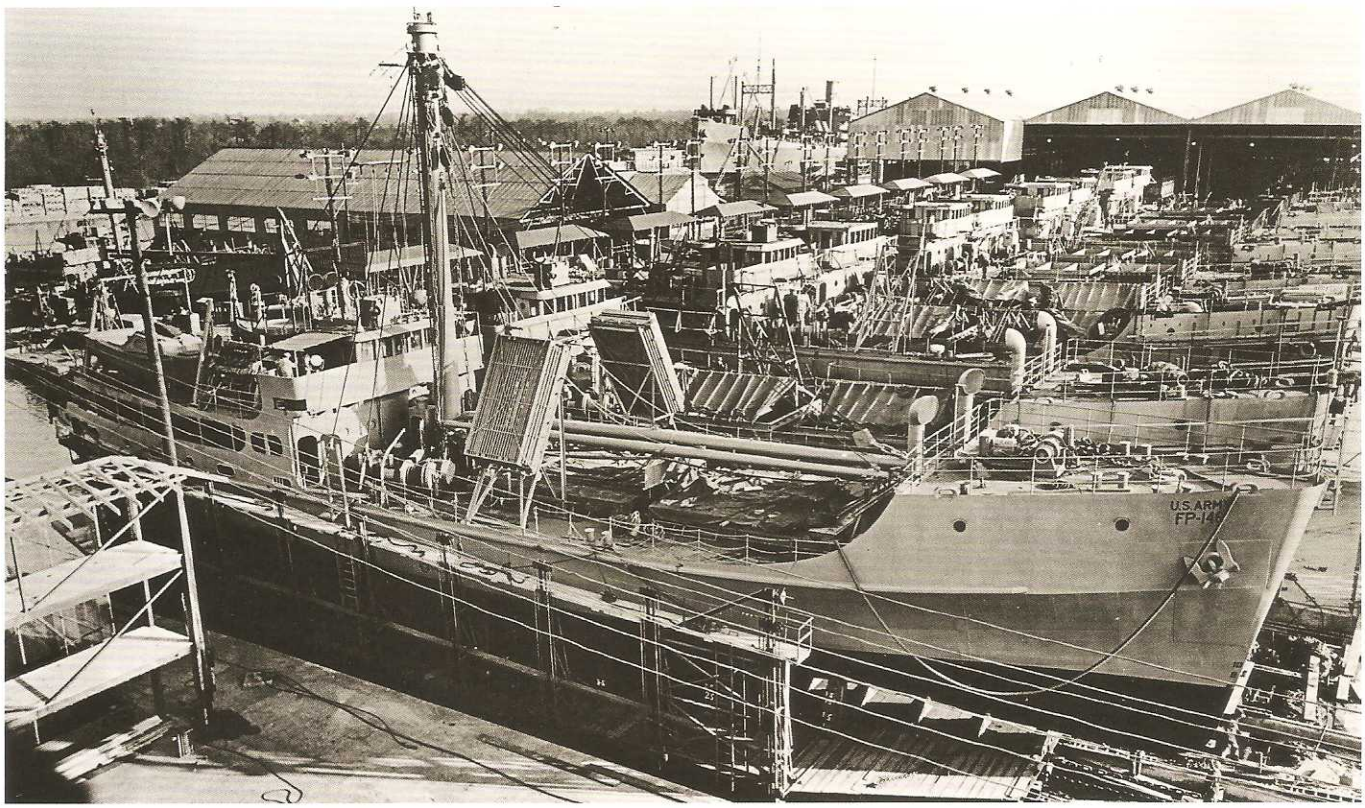
Opposite page: (top) An electric arc welder at Higgins Industries in July 1942; (bottom) More than 20,000 Higgins Boats were made through the war.

A DESIGN REMEMBERED

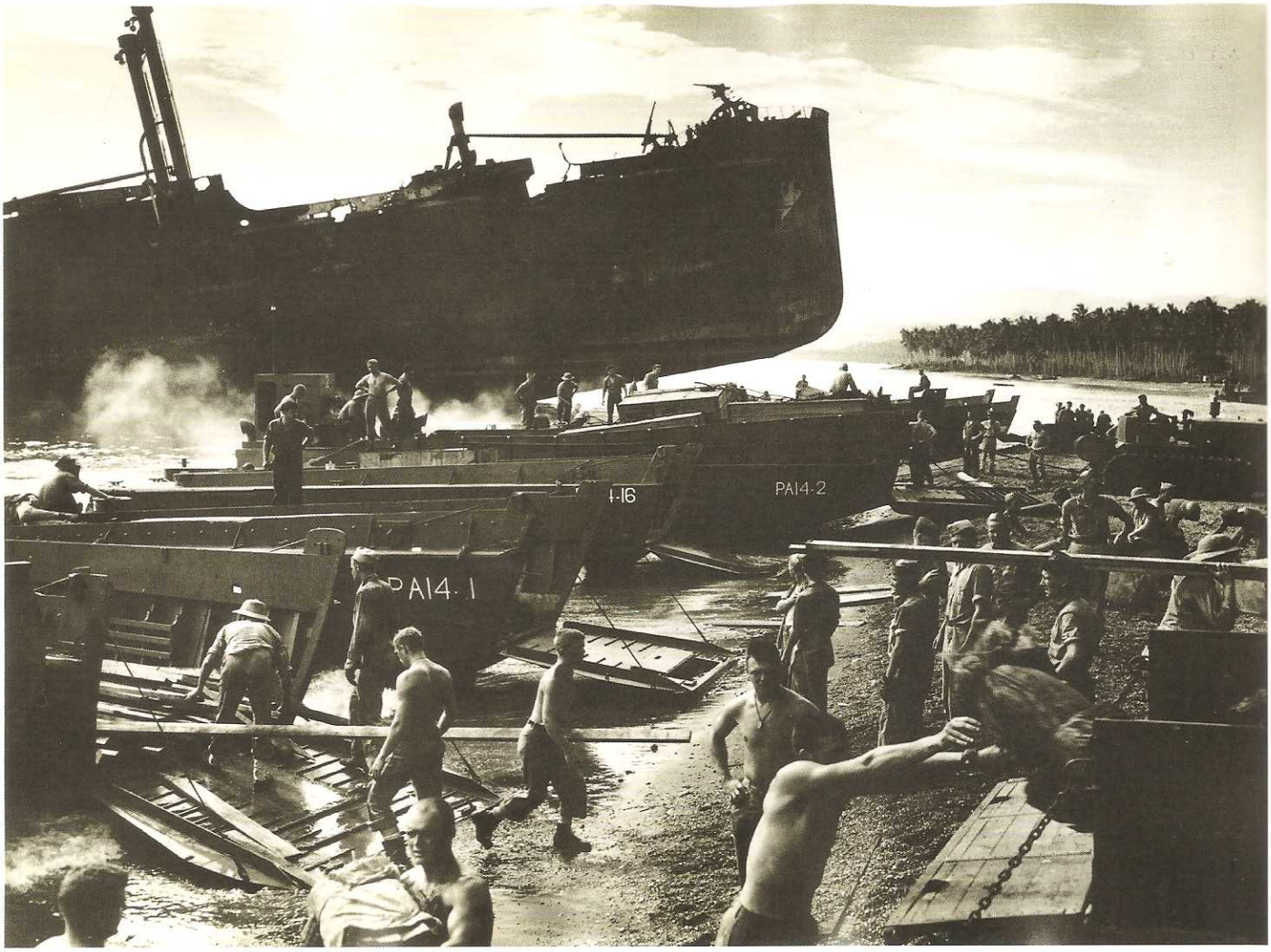
"Higgins was a visionary. He knew he had the right boat for the right moment, and he was not shy about telling the U.S. Navy and the world that his boat was the best for the job," says Joshua Schick, curator at New Orleans' National World War II Museum which has a reproduction of the Higgins Boat as part of a permanent exhibition. "Higgins' success was based on his own personal drive. The swearing and outbursts are a very small part of the vast energy put out by a man who was truly passionate about his work and getting it done correctly, and at a fair price."

The museum's exhibition, *Bayou to Battlefield: Higgins Industries During World War II*, showcases how the landing craft evolved from Higgins' Eureka Boat and the dramatic and historical impact the new LCVPs had on beach landings and amphibious assaults. The exhibit also details the history of the burgeoning company through artifacts, panel displays, model LCVPs and video. Artifacts include employee work helmets, LCVP steering wheels and prototype testing boats, among others, while the perspectives of Higgins Industries employees can be heard through oral history clips. Higgins Industries also built precision components for the Manhattan Project.

Higgins' company, by all accounts, became an enormously successful business. A workforce of only 75 in 1938 swelled to more than 20,000 by 1943, just a year before the Normandy invasion. Higgins' fully integrated workforce included men



GLASSHOUSE IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM



and women, elderly and disabled, whites and African Americans — virtually unheard of at the time in the segregated South. Together, they built more than 20,000 Higgins Boats through the war, and all were paid equally depending on their job status. Raw materials took shape quickly: flat-bottomed hulls and other war machines crammed the multiple assembly lines in seven plants that produced 700 boats a month. Besides the dramatic effort on D-Day, Higgins Boats were also used in other amphibious landings throughout World War II, including in North Africa, Sicily, mainland Italy and Provence, as well as in the Pacific at Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and the Philippines.

Higgins' LCVP was 36 feet long and about 11 feet wide with two .30 caliber machine guns. It fit 36 combat-ready soldiers or other cargo such as a jeep, small truck or supplies and a smaller number of soldiers. Its 225-horsepower diesel engine could reach speeds of 12 knots, or 14 miles per hour. It's perhaps surprising that these wartime landing craft were made primarily of wood — maybe flimsy but nonetheless efficient and lightweight, and quickly built at a lower cost. The steel bow ramp did offer protection against enemy fire, while armor plating was eventually added to the wooden frame.

When the war ended, demand for the Higgins Boat dwindled. The company was forced to

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM (3)

Andrew Jackson Higgins

restructure, eventually closing all but one of its plants and changing its boat manufacturing from combat designs to pleasure craft. Andrew Higgins died from complications due to a stomach ailment in 1952. His sons took over the business, but it eventually fell into debt and was sold in 1959.

With some 30 patents to his name, Andrew Higgins no doubt played a key role in winning World War II — an honor that has received the recognition it deserves. "It's easy to view Andrew Higgins through the lens of a talented, but temperamental Southern boatbuilder," concludes Schick. "Yet this view only does partial justice to the complexity of Higgins' personality and his impact on history."

Ask your booking specialist about the **Hidden History: World War II in New Orleans** excursion, visiting the National World War II Museum.