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W. J. New, left, and Winford Dean check the thickness of sheet metal to be made into identification tags for GI's.

At a punch press, Melvin Hukill stamps out plates of dog-tag shape. His hand is on the waste material that's left.

IT'S A GRIM BUSINESS

'Dog tags'—for identification of dead or wounded GI's—are produced by the million in an obscure Frankfort shop

By JERRY GAMMON

FOOTNOTE to mobilization: Kentucky now is the nation's largest supplier of identification plates—"dog tags"—for the men and women of the armed forces.

The George W. Gayle and Son shop at 514½ Logan Street in Frankfort has made 2,500,000 of the tags since last year, and has contracts for 1,500,000 more.

George W. Gayle undertook the manufacture of fishing reels in 1855, in a one-room shop not far from the site of the present State Capitol Building.

Gayle handmade reels became nationally famous—they were precision-made of nickel silver, with bronze gears.

The business prospered and, one room at a time, Gayle added to his shop. Other family members learned the tricks of fine machining, and during World War II, when the Government was looking for a subcontractor to make especially difficult parts for atomic bombs and gyroscopes, the Gayle firm got the contract.

Without knowing exactly what they were turning out, workers at the Gayle plant produced about 30,000 parts of 20 different types for the then-secret atomic-bomb plant at Oak Ridge, Tenn.

Then, last year, with the armed forces once more expanding, the Government needed an extra-large supply of identification tags, and fast. F. Coburn Gayle, grandson of the firm's founder, promised that his shop would be able to do the job.

He wasn't the lowest bidder, but Gayle and Son got the contract.

The shop's 40 employees turn out 40,000 tags a day. The average Frankfort citizen hasn't seen the busy little plant and can't tell you how to get to it. But that isn't at all surprising, since its main entrance fronts on an obscure alley.

But from inside come staccato sounds of big punch presses, stamping out 40 of the

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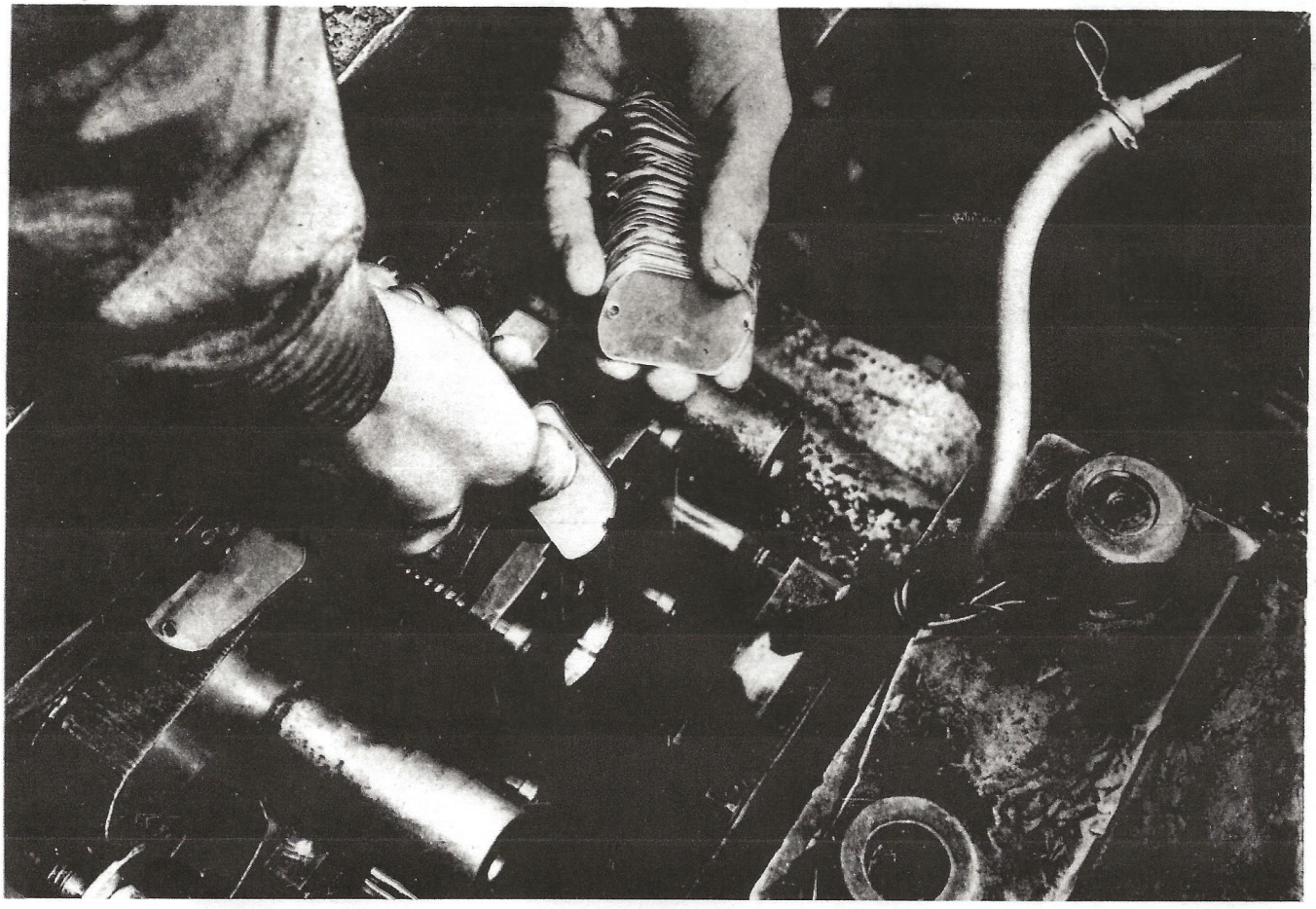
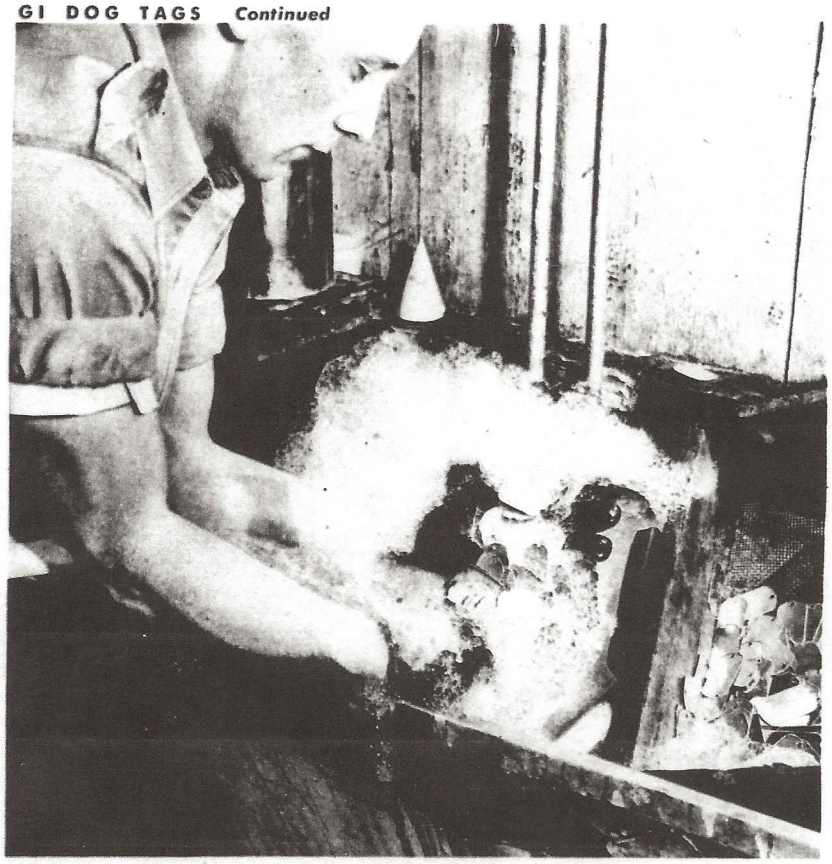
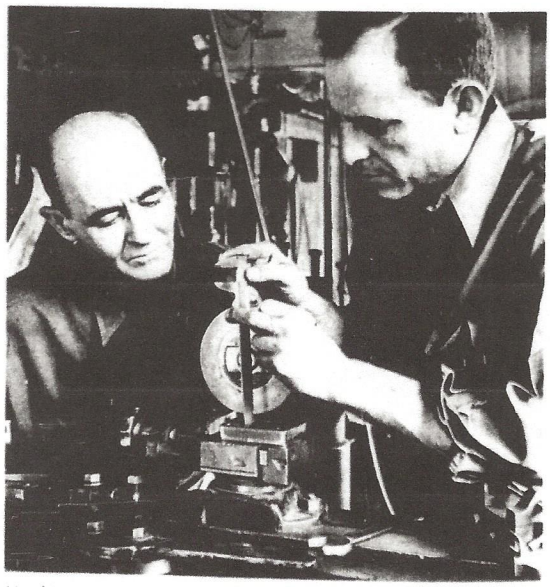




This is the final operation in the identification-tag manufacturing process. Kenneth Miles is washing a batch of tags in soap suds, to remove the grease and metal shavings.

The inspectors must be doing a good job of it, for the Gayle firm never has had a shipment of the tags rejected.

Mrs. Mary S. Bryan, manager of the plant, stands before crates—each containing 4,800 tags—ready for shipment.



Machining dies used in tag stamping are Thornton Bryan, left, Mrs. Bryan's husband, and superintendent Allen Gee.

The tags cost about 2 cents apiece back in 1941; now the Government pays nearly 5 cents for them

servicemen's all-important identification tags in each minute of the plant's operation.

His dog tags are the GI's most constant companion.

The little 2x1⅛-inch metal plates carry his name, serial number, tetanus inoculation record, blood type and religious faith. All this information is stamped on early in the recruit's training period, and the GI is required to carry his tag on his person at all times.

Two of the oval-shaped tags are issued to each serviceman.

Their purpose is grim—identification of the wounded, and of the dead.

Each tag has, at one end, a punched hole for the string which the GI uses in wearing the tag around his neck. At the other end is a notch.

This notch poses particular manufacturing problems, and the Gayle firm's manager, Mrs. Mary Bryan, often has wondered about its purpose.

"I'VE heard a lot of stories about that little notch," she said. "One man told me he saw hundreds of bodies on battlefields, with a dog tag sticking out of each one's mouth. He said the notch was to anchor the tag between the teeth."

Another story goes that the notch is for nailing the tags to coffins.

"But I think those are only wild tales," said Mrs. Bryan. "The notch probably is used simply for fitting the tag into stamping machines at receiving centers." She's right.

The tags must resist wear, corrosion and fire. For that reason, they're made of a nickel-copper alloy.

The term "dog tags" dates back to World War I, but it wasn't until 1940 that the tags were issued in their present shape.

Servicemen of 1917-18 wore round, aluminum identification tags. First of the new-type tags were ordered in November, 1940, and were in use a few months later.

The original contract, $84,200 for 4,000,000 tags—or a fraction over 2 cents apiece—went to the Addressograph-Multigraph Corporation, Washington.

The Government pays Gayle and Son just a fraction under 5 cents each for the tags. The cost has gone up, because of the shortage of coil stock.

THE shop is using sheet metal which, unfortunately, is too thick for the Government's tag specifications. Each sheet must be cut into strips, cold-rolled to the proper thickness, and heat-treated to the proper temper—all this before the identification tags, or "blanks," are stamped out.

The Government allows a tolerance of only five thousandths of an inch in the thickness of the metal used in tag making. In width and length, the tags may vary only two thousandths of an inch over or three thousandths under the prescribed dimensions.

If Gayle's dog-tag manufacture continues—and indications are that it will—there'll be serious expansion problems. Already, the crowded shop is fairly bursting at its seams. All its activity now is concentrated into 10 rooms, on various levels. Four garages provide storage space.

Mrs. Bryan, an attractive brunette who has worked in the shop 25 years, now supervises all its manufacturing activities. She can operate any machine in the plant and could, if necessary, complete a tag all by herself.

Among those who call her "boss" is machinist Thornton Bryan, her husband, who has worked at the shop since 1922. Mrs. Bryan apparently has solved this touchy problem in employer-worker relations.

"He's used to calling me boss by now," she explained. "We don't have a bit of trouble that way."

Jerry Gammon, who authored this story, is newsreel editor for WHAS-TV. As a spare-time writer, he has contributed frequently to this Magazine.