What My Job Means to Me

OPPORTUNITY Magazine announces the awards for its Essay Contest for Women Employed in Private or Government War Factories. The awards were made in War Bonds and War Savings Stamps.

First Award—$50

to MISS HORTENSE JOHNSON

Second Award—$25

to MISS LEOTHA HACKSHAW

Third Award—$15

to MISS NELL CHAPMAN, employed as a Grinder at the Timken Roller Bearing Company, Canton, Ohio.

Fourth Award—$10

to MRS. GERTRUDE A. TINLEY a Primer Machine Operator at Curran Chemical and Tar Products Corporation, Downes Grove, Illinois.

The Contest Judges were Dr. Theresa Wolfson, Associate Professor of Economics, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, N. Y.; Miss Florence Murray, editor of "The Negro Handbook"; and Miss Maida Springer, a member of the Executive Board of Dressmakers' Union, Local 22, I.L.G.W.U.

Published below are the first and second gift-winning essays.

First Essay

• By HORTENSE JOHNSON

Employed at Picatinny Arsenal, Dover, New Jersey

OF course I'm vital to victory, just as millions of men and women who are fighting to save America's chances for Democracy, even if they never shoulder a gun nor bind a wound. It's true that my job isn't so exciting or complicated. Perhaps there are millions of girls who could do my job as well as I—certainly there are thousands. I am an inspector in a war plant. For eight hours a day, six days a week, I stand in line with five other girls, performing a routine operation that is part of our production schedule. We inspect wooden boxes that are to hold various kinds of munitions, and that range in size from eight inches to six feet. When we approve them they are ready to be packed with shells, bombs, fuses, parachutes—and other headaches for Hitler and Hirohito.

Not much to that, you say. Well, that all depends on the way you look at it. A missing or projecting nail, a loose board or hinge—these are some of the imperfections that we watch for. If we miss them, they may be checked later on, or they may not. If they are not, they may mean injury for a fellow worker on a later operation or an explosion in another part of the plant with dozens of lives lost—or they might even spell disaster for American soldiers in a tight spot in North Africa.

Did I say my job isn't exciting or complicated? I take that back. It may be a simple matter to inspect one box or a dozen, but it's different when you are handling them by the hundreds. The six of us in my crew sometimes inspect as many as fourteen or fifteen hundred boxes during one shift. That means two hundred and fifty apiece—an average of one every two minutes, regardless of size and not counting any rest periods. Try that sometime and see if it's a simple job! You stand at your bench all day long, with rest periods sometimes seeming years apart. You fight against the eye fatigue that might mean oversight. You probe with your fingers and tap here and there. Your back aches, your legs get weary, your muscles scream at you sometimes—groan at you all the time. But the dozen and one little operations must be carried on smoothly and efficiently if your work output is to keep up. It's exciting all right, and it's plenty complicated—in the same way that jungle warfare must be. hard and painstaking and monotonous—until something goes off with a bang!

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And then when your shift is finished, you stalk off stiffly to the washroom and hurry to get ready for the bus that brings you forty-five miles back from the plant to your home in the city. You slip on an extra sweater and heavy woolen socks, because the unheated bus is apt to be cold and damp. Even when you get into the bus your day's job isn't over, for you work almost as hard as the driver. You strain with him to see through the heavy winter fog that blankets the highway. You watch with him for the tricky ice that waits at curves to throw you into dangerous skids. When sleet has covered the road and made all travel seem suicidal, you sit ready to get out at the worst spots and walk with the rest of your crowd until the bus pulls across to safety.

So when you get back home, you're glad to jump into bed and die until morning—or until your alarm-clock tells you it's morning, no matter how black it is. Then your two-hour experience of traveling back to the job begins all over again, because in spite of rain, snow, cold or illness, the job is there to be done, and you're expected to do your share. It never occurs to you to figure out how much money you're making, because it isn't much anyhow—after you've had your victory tax deducted, paid for your war bond, set aside money for your bus commutation ticket. By the time you've given grandmother the food and rent money, and paid the doctor for helping you to fight off your frequent colds, and bought the extra-heavy clothes the job calls for, you're just about where the boys in New Guinea are. Don't let Senator Wheeler fool you with his talk about "high wages for war workers!"

So if it's as tough as all that—and it is!—why do you stick on the job? Why did you leave the comfortable job you held with a city business house? Why don't you go back to it and make as much money as you're making now? Why? Because it's not that easy to leave, and it's not that tough to stay! Of course the work is hard and sometimes dangerous, but victory in this war isn't going to come the easy way, without danger. And we brown women of America need victory so much, so desperately. America is a long way from perfect. We resent the racial injustices that we meet every day of our lives. But it's one thing to resent and fight against racial injustices; it's another thing to let them break your spirit, so that you quit this struggle and turn the country over to Hitler and the Talmadges and Dies' who will run this country if Hitler wins. America can't win this war without all of us, and we know it. We must prove it to white Americans as well—that our country can't get along without the labor and sacrifice of her brown daughters, can't win unless we *all* fight and work and save.

So the hardships of war work become willing sacrifices to victory, not to victory for Democracy, but to victory by a country that some day, please God, will win Democracy. In such a spirit, even some of the hardships are forgotten in the daily rewards of the job. After all, we *are* working today and drawing regular pay checks. And there is fun on the bus trips, even when you're half-frozen. There is a comradeship that comes from working and traveling together, expressed in jokes and singing and laughter on the return trip. Sometimes we have parties on the bus, sharing candy or sandwiches, and even cutting a birthday cake bought from a roadside bakery. Frayed nerves and short tempers show themselves sometimes, and that's understandable, but a real quarrel seldom develops. Ill-tempered remarks are usually understood, and passed over without comeback.

I imagine that our boys at the front develop the same kind of tolerance, the same kind of partnership, for the same reason. Wouldn't it be great if the white workers who are fellow-fighters with us in war production, would develop more of the same spirit of partnership? What can we do to make them realize that colored people must be given equal opportunity in every walk of life to make that partnership real—to build an impregnable, free, and democratic America.

Well, that's why I stay on this job, and that's what this job means to me. I might shift plants if I get a good chance. I haven't been very well, and the constant strain and exposure have put me into bed too often for my doctor's satisfaction and my own comfort. But one thing is sure; if I leave this job I'll get another one in war work. Victory is vital and I'm vital to victory. It's going to take courageous deeds at the front, and in the Navy and the Merchant Marine to win this war, but it's also going to take top-speed production in the war plants at home—and that's my assignment.

I'm not fooling myself about this war. Victory won't mean victory for Democracy—yet. But that will come later, because most of us who are fighting for victory today will keep on fighting to win the peace—maybe a long time after the war is over, maybe a hundred years after. By doing my share today, I'm keeping a place for some brown woman tomorrow, and for the brown son of that woman the day after tomorrow. Sterling Brown once wrote, "The strong men keep a-comin' on," and millions of those men have dark skins. There will be dark women marching by their side, and I like to think that I'm one of them.