A B-26 medium bomber used on missions over Germany was one of some 30,000 planes sold off as "flyable."

By James R. Chiles

How the great war on war surplus got won—or lost

Getting rid of $34 billion worth of old ships, planes and guns, not to mention seven million tubes of toothpaste, was no picnic

In the closing scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, a clerk rolls the crated Ark of the Covenant into a military depot for storage. The camera slowly tilts up to follow the clerk, showing the vast scale of the warehouse stacked with crates stretching away and away into the hazy distance. The scene drew gasps from theater audiences. But the fact is that no silver screen could ever be big enough to show—or even suggest—the true scale of the goods produced during that era for World War II or how much surplus remained following Japan's surrender. To buy supplies and equipment for the war, the United States spent three times more than the entire gross national product of 1940.

In our day, when even city budgets come in billions, it's hard to convey with figures what an enormous amount of wealth this was. It bought 299,000 airplanes, 1,300 war production plants and 5,400 cargo ships. And every soldier overseas—some 3 million of the 16 million Americans in the Armed Forces—needed a good-sized pile of food, supplies, ammunition and machinery.

Waiting to be scrapped, Curtiss P-40 pursuit planes, which had been replaced by faster and better-armed aircraft before the war ended, were stacked by the thousands at this air base in Walnut Ridge, Arkansas.

Through lend-lease we also supplied many Allied troops. On the day Germany signed the armistice, the American Armed Forces found themselves surrounded by 24 million tons of supplies in Europe. By rough estimate, when Japan gave up on August 14, 1945, there was more war stuff in stockpile than four years of combat had consumed. The shooting was over, but another battle was about to begin: America's war on war surplus.

The three-year war on surplus would take a heavy toll on bureaucrats. Twenty-six separate Congressional committees would summon them to the Capitol for grillings on subjects ranging from the sale of icemaking machines to Yugoslavia, to inventory costs for Army screwdrivers. We fought this enemy by selling it, scrapping it, giving it away and dumping it in the ocean. We even dropped atomic bombs on it. Some goods escaped the onslaught, however, and can be found today in the hands of proud collectors. But the public was never happy; at one point the surplus-disposal agency was logging 7,500 letters of complaint a day. Industrialist and Presidential adviser Bernard Baruch had foreseen it all. "Whatever you do," he told one of the first surplus czars, "it ain't goin' to be no good; and if you did the opposite, it also ain't goin' to be no good. . . . When in doubt, sell."

The surplus story begins in August 1945. At that time, just before the V-J Day surrender, the Armed Forces were poised for an invasion of Japan expected to require at least another six to eight months. Field commanders had been in the habit of taking some care of equipment. But after two atomic bombs brought the fighting to a close, the machinery of war suddenly lost its luster. From Burma to Bremen, the variety and volume of the war's leftovers stretched beyond the most productive imagination. Over and above what the Armed Forces would conceivably need for postwar duty, there were more than 6,000 oceangoing American vessels, including 1,164 warships and 125,000 trucks. We had 94 chemical and ammunition plants so big that a day's production from a single plant was enough to supply the nation's peacetime TNT requirements for the

Eddie Tarashinsky, one of few war-surplus dealers still in the business, stands with son Rick in the front of his Brooklyn store. He bought cheap and managed to sell everything from gas masks to drawstring pants.

next five years. What was to be done with the 25 million extra folding chairs or the captured German submarine, the U-505? There were 7 million tubes of unsquished toothpaste and 11,800 tons of anti-gas clothing impregnated with a gas-neutralizing chemical that caused wearers to itch vigorously. There were 4.6 million tons of ammunition, 1,800 religious chapels and 21,000 tanks. There were a million gallons of olive drab paint used for camouflage and a million pounds of imported hog bristles for paintbrushes, as well as millions of jars of black camouflage face cream. Some 17,208 drums of gasoline and fuel oil were stranded on a remote peninsula in Alaska. And there was much more.

Of course, nobody knew these numbers at the time because the pace and fury of the war had scrambled supply records. Troops landing supplies on some disputed shore under heavy machine-gun fire were not inclined to walk around with clipboards checking box labels against requisitions; they chucked everything on the beach. Many supplies were still in transit on V-J Day, including 300 Navy freighters loaded with cargo.

But no matter how big the supply, not a single nut or bolt was allowed to be "surplus"—meaning that it was obsolete or more than would be needed in the foreseeable future—until the Army or Navy declared it so. This world-class bottleneck could be dealt with in two ways. Swift destruction (if the material was hazardous) or slow disposal by sale to government agencies and qualifying buyers from the public. The process sounded business-like but depended on many things, beginning with inventory. Think that's easy? The American Armed Forces stocked about four million types of products. The inventory covered great quantities of pesky enemy equipment too, like the U-505 and 112 Japanese submarines.

The author is a regular contributor to SMITHSONIAN. *His grandfather worked for the WAA's Smaller War Plants Corporation, selling surplus bulldozers.*

Capt. J. A. Strong, an Army Air Force officer, ran an inventorying operation in Germany that opened and sorted through 60,000 tons of crated goods in two years. "Every day was Christmas," he says. But many bases did not have the manpower for a box-by-box inventory, particularly in the Pacific. Why? Because the general voting public (not to mention the troops themselves) wanted all the G.I.'s back home—and right now. Wives organized hundreds of "Bring Back Daddy" clubs around the country. A Congressman from Kentucky reported 700 angry letters a day from servicemen and their families. "After the war," recalls Paul Poberezny of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, a pilot for the Army Air Force, "most people just wanted to turn their backs on it."

The official story from a Congressional investigation team that visited Pacific bases was as follows: there *were* no documented cases of flagrant and wasteful destruction. But homecoming veterans told a different story, full of accounts of large-scale burning, burial or dumping of all kinds of usable goods simply to get excess stocks out of the way.

Leslie R. Tinkler, a master sergeant at a Marine service depot on Guam, remembers that "after the tires and anything usable were removed, scores of vehicles got bulldozed over." George Ashton of Maplewood, Minnesota, a Marine driver on Peleliu Island at war's end, says, "Within a couple of days, they were hauling barges full of supplies out to sea and sinking them. We were told there was no way to bring all this stuff back to the States and besides, if we did, the companies making these things wouldn't be able to sell anything."

Robert (Bigjohn) Littlejohn, the WAA's fifth and most-energetic chief, enjoys a rare moment of repose.

V-J Day found Marine pilot Bill Cantrell of Springfield, Missouri, stateside, teaching combat flight tactics. Orders arrived to hand over his flight gear, which included a leather flight jacket and a shearling-lined jacket. "Like a good boy, I turned them in," Cantrell says. "The enlisted seaman wrote me a receipt and tossed them over his shoulder to another seaman, who cut the jackets right up the back with a combat knife. The word got around pretty fast. Just say you lost them—and take them home."

Bulldozing supplies amid the general uproar

Army captain John Cunningham watched P-51 Mustangs being tumbled over a cliff on Okinawa, stacking up in a ravine like so many smashed toys. (Mustangs were cheap then; only $51,000 apiece new.) In time rumors arose that a general was coming to investigate, Cunningham recalls, and with every such report bulldozers arrived. Among the supplies thus bulldozed underground were hundreds of crates of equipment for three field hospital units. Before the burial he and his buddies rooted through the crates for useful items, salvaging scissors, pajamas, bathrobes and dental chairs.

Refrigerators were practically a dime a dozen. Cunningham bought his "for a bottle of bonded booze, delivered by the Seabees. When I got back to the States," he says, "I had a hell of a time buying a refrigerator.

"The thing that irked me the most was the thousands of units of blood that had to be thrown away," he adds. "We knew the people back in the States had donated it all. But a good argument was made that to bring it all back cost triple."

Even with thousands of tons of matériel tumbling into oblivion, a great deal of stuff ended up having to be processed through official channels. "The truth is that the Army and Navy are saving, storing and guarding a fearsome lot of junk that any Missouri farmer would dump into the nearest creek," a correspondent for *Time* reported after a close examination of the Pacific bases.

With $34 billion worth of inventory, it was time to get selling. And so we did. The U.S. State Department sold off entire bases—from buildings to the broomsticks inside—in "bulk sales" to friendly foreign governments. The Philippines and Nationalist China bought all the equipment remaining on a long list of Pacific islands. Scrap metal in mountainous quantities went "as is, where is," to contractors like Massey Supply Company, which was run by two brothers in Missouri who had already begun selling surplus boots, scrap canvas and

rope. One of the owners, Warren Dean, explains that the Navy, in a hurry to clean up old island bases, gave the Deans 18 months to load up to 141,000 tons of scrap metal, charging them only a dollar per ton. "It sounded pretty good," Dean says, "but everything was 8,000 miles from a steel mill, out in the middle of the ocean." Salvage expenses were hard to predict, too. It cost the Deans $40,000 just to fumigate a shipload of scrap bound for Houston from Guam. Agricultural inspectors had found giant African snails lurking among the load and wanted to take no chances.

Cavalry boots from World War I

The search for surplus to sell (or buy) turned up dusty surprises, like some spare wagon parts bought for the Mexican-American War, which ended in 1848. Tarashinsky Merchandise of Brooklyn, New York, wound up with 150,000 saddles and 90,000 pairs of cavalry boots left over from World War I.

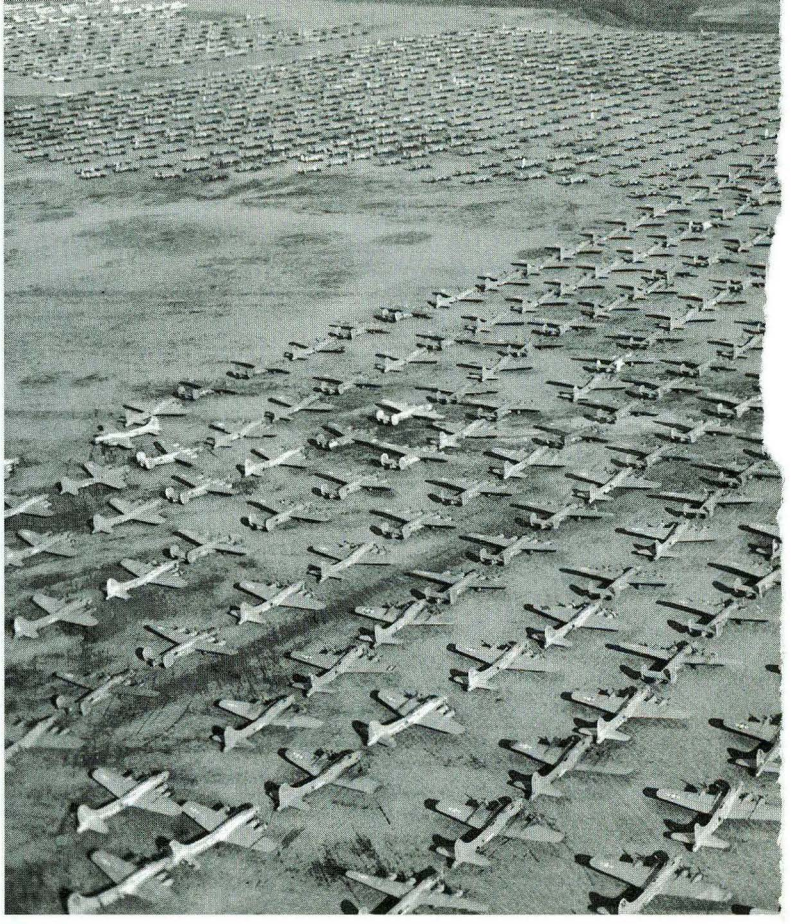
Still, the best selling strategies were not always clear. One group of deep thinkers wanted everything priced for as much as the government could get, even if it took years (or decades) to sell the stuff; another group wanted everything marked down to move, with veterans having first dibs on the bargains. Still others plumped for scrapping or burying most of it—so as not to wipe out the demand for new equipment.

All three groups found something to like in the Surplus Property Act, a wide-angle law that set no fewer than 20 aims and requirements that all surplus administrators must meet. They were to promote family farms, for instance, as well as veteran-owned businesses, foreign trade, full employment, an economical transportation system and many other things. They were to avoid excessive profits, speculation, monopolies and various other mutually incompatible targets.

Five agencies started into the surplus pile, but one, by far the largest, called the War Assets Administration, wound up selling most of the domestic surplus. The WAA's first four chiefs swiftly got out from under, making way in 1946 for a human tornado named Maj. Gen. Robert (Bigjohn) Littlejohn. If anybody could win the war on surplus, people thought, it was Littlejohn. He had been a standout tackle and heavyweight wrestler at West Point, a World War I machine-gunner and, from 1942 through 1945, the Army's chief supply officer for the entire European Theater. "There ain't no hold that can't be broke," Littlejohn liked to say—at least in the early days. Soon this barrel-like man was raging against inventory that arrived in deluges and sold in trickles. He banged desks, he yelled at his managers, he overturned chairs.

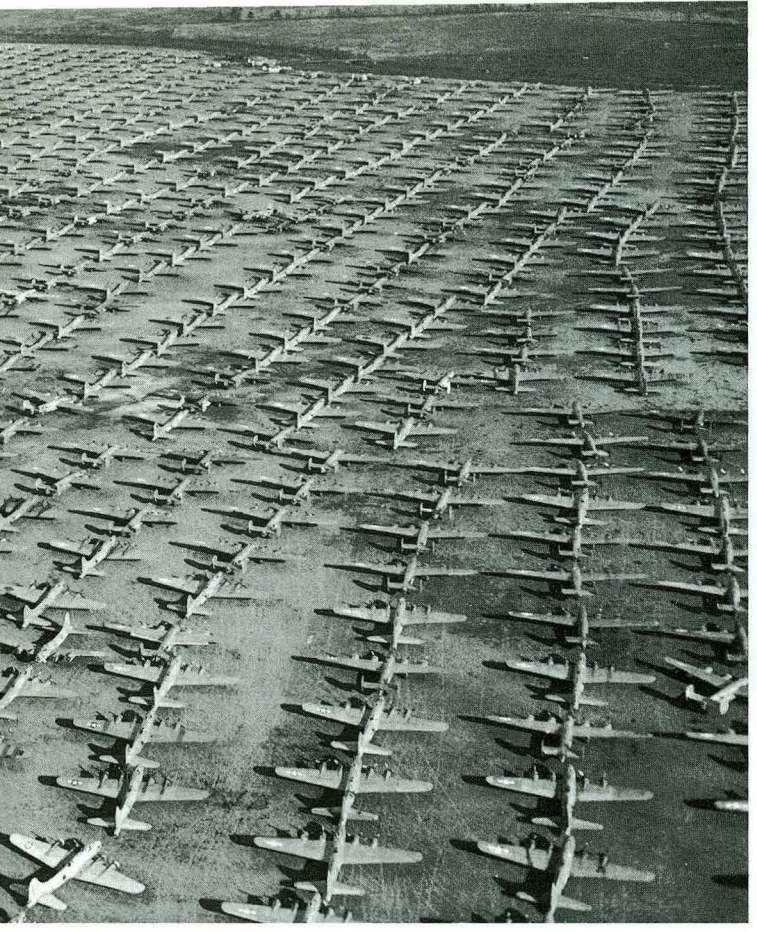
Fusillades of criticism did not help his disposition. An outraged Washington newspaper reported that a former Army officer found a way to buy $400,000 worth of surplus textiles from the WAA at the right price, but a disabled veteran couldn't even get approval to buy a typewriter. "Government Property Rots on Okinawa While Those Who Fought There Cannot Get Supplies They Need to Set Up in Business," blared a typical headline in a New York paper. A *Washington Post* headline complained: "Army Makes 60 Veterans Wait All Night in Rain for WAA Sale." Veterans deluged sales offices with requests for the purchase preferences allowed by law. A sale of staff Army cars by the WAA drew 200 veterans' requests for every car available.

The WAA had 4,000 barrage balloons to sell, each the



By late 1945, bombers like these Flying Fortresses and twin-ruddered Liberators were being sold off not one at a time but by airfield lots.

One fortunate old warrior, minus engines, wound up as a gas station in Fort Worth. A few planes got pressed into service as diners.



size of a house. Nobody wanted them. But then employees pulled one out of storage and inflated it as a promotional gimmick to advertise a new WAA sales office in Washington. The tether rope broke and the balloon blundered across the East Coast airways, briefly shutting down air traffic and alerting large numbers of people to the adventure of owning their own balloon. Alas, before the WAA could capitalize on the opportunity, the aviation authorities called up and banned the sales, declaring the balloons a safety hazard.

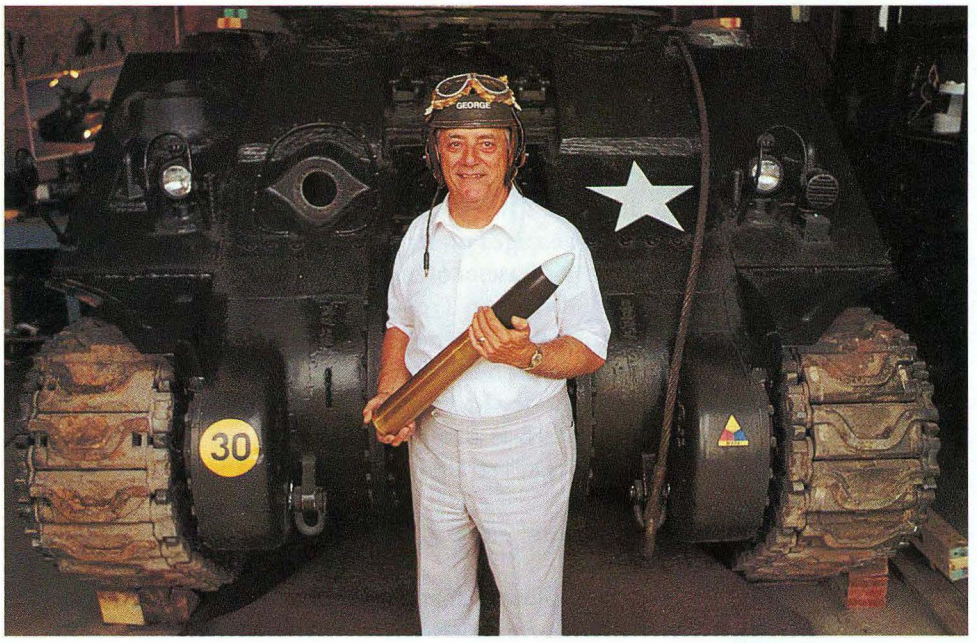
Unable to sell 17,000 homing pigeons at three Army camps, the WAA offered free birds to anyone who would send in a cage and promise to hold any female pigeons through at least three nesting cycles—so they wouldn't return to camp. Children's publishers promoted the giveaway, but some forgot to mention that cages should be addressed to the Army camps holding pigeons. Homemade cages poured into Washington, piled up in the agency's basement and overflowed into an outdoor storage site at the Treasury Department. Even when goods sold, the WAA had trouble. By mid-1946 it had accumulated $10 million in mystery checks with no idea what the money had been sent in for. The General Accounting Office threatened to shut the doors if the agency couldn't straighten out the situation.

"Army-Navy" stores from coast to coast

Littlejohn plowed ahead and the balance finally began to tip. Some goods were in strong demand already. After the Pittsburgh office of the WAA advertised 400 chests full of tools at a big discount, waves of desperate civilians showed up. Some stormed the building despite the arrival of police. The Dean brothers of Missouri had moved on to discover a bull market for Army khakis that they tagged at $2, one-quarter of the retail price of new pants in 1946. "Number-one chino was hard to come by then," says Warren Dean. "People would come in and buy a dozen pairs of pants at a time." This was the beginning of a boom in small "war surplus" stores, often called "Army-Navy" stores, many of which have lasted until today. Veterans flooded into them for cheap, durable gear. Hundreds of thousands of foul-weather jackets, pup tents, entrenching tools, G.I. blankets and rubber rafts found buyers this way. My Minnesota father-in-law used to comb Army-Navy stores looking for high-quality cold-weather gear for ice-fishing trips.

Americans were starving not just for jackets and denim pants, but for high-tech items like binoculars. "When the war started," recalls Norman Edmund, founder of the Edmund Scientific Company, "the government requisitioned all binoculars in good condition from private hands." With the coming of peace and surplus everything, Edmund's business—selling binocular kits—tripled. "One week I ended up buying seven trailer loads of optics," Edmund says. "I had to store them all over town, using one-car or two-car garages. I ended up renting space in 35 garages." Edmund even snapped up old bombsights; research labs bought them to cannibalize for the precision gears. Schools bought lenses for performing physics experiments.

Across the country, surplus found its way into other niches besides Army-Navy stores. Homeowners as well as service stations bought stainless-steel oxygen tanks to store compressed air on vehicles, providing a quick way to reinflate a flat tire. Even those unwanted barrage balloons finally found a use. Cut into pieces, the neoprene-coated cloth made durable tents, tarps and raincoats.



George Rabuse, 66, a retired Minnesota inventor, holds a 75-millimeter shell from the cannon of a M4A4 Sherman tank that he bought five years ago. Since then, he has been restoring it—with help from neighborhood kibbitzers.

One alert government employee grew suspicious at a sudden wave of requests for 235,000 airman's desalination kits at 40 cents each, ostensibly bought for the plastic bag inside. An assay revealed five ounces of pure silver in each kit, worth more than $1 million at 1947 prices.

A think tank at the WAA suggested converting helmets into wall lamps and flag cases into quivers for bow-and-arrow enthusiasts. In 1945 *Popular Science* noted that "airplane connecting rods need only a little imagination to be converted into beautiful, modern andirons." It also solicited ideas in a contest for its readers. Some entries—like using flamethrowers for clearing brush—would have failed any consumer-safety test, but most suggestions were inspired by a severe shortage of civilian goods. The contest winner proposed to equip an entire civilian airfield with military surplus. Another reader suggested converting a B-29 bomber into a diner; in fact, a diner later opened in Louisville, Kentucky, using the body of a C-54 transport.

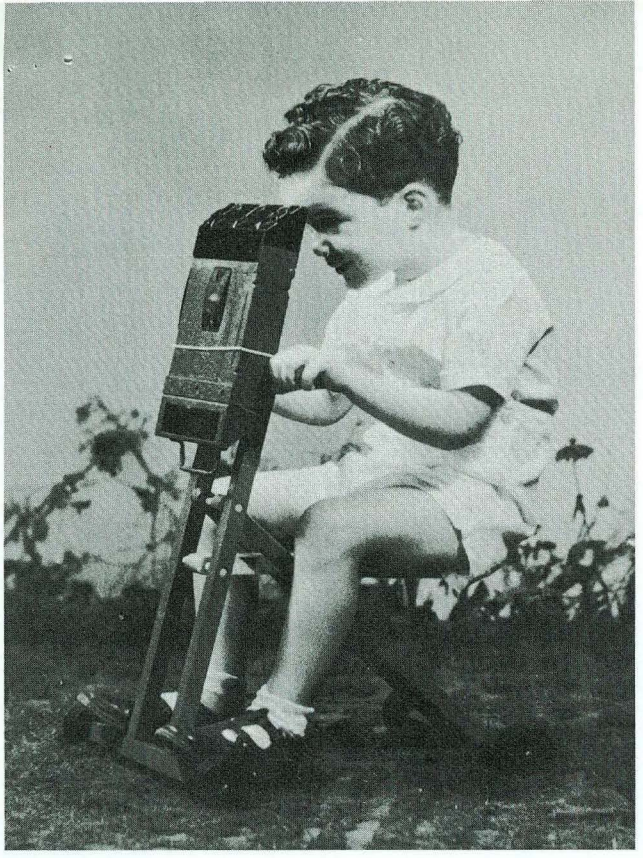
Prefab Quonset huts had all sorts of reincarnations. As a dairy barn in Michigan, for instance, and a movie theater in Colorado. The University of Michigan used nine surplus tank-cars and a barrage balloon to build a supersonic wind tunnel. With Army-surplus electronic instruments, high school students in El Cerrito, California, built a million-electron-volt cyclotron. Gas masks, aircraft tubing and tank periscopes reappeared as parts in children's toys (p. 62). Farm families bought air-raid sirens to summon fathers to supper, and stored corn in cribs made from surplus steel landing mats.

It was not just a matter of asking for bids from surplus dealers, though. Much of the stuff threatened to be the death of the salesmen involved. Faced with 194,000 giant parachute flares, each capable of providing more than a half-million candlepower for two minutes, the WAA ingeniously printed up and sent out thousands of brochures, including mailings to traveling circuses, foreign embassies and freight airlines. Eddie Tarashinsky recalls hours of brainstorming about what to do with what he calls the "dogs," like the gas masks for horses left over from World War I. His family's wholesale surplus company, Tarashinsky Merchandise, is one of only a handful of big surplus outfits that still survive from the postwar boom era. "Nobody would take the quantities we needed to sell," he says. Confronted with thousands of extra pairs of drawstring pants, the company cut them in half and made two bags out of each pair.

"We needed three things in the business then," he says. "The money of Donald Trump and three other multimillionaires. A warehouse the size of Central Park. And lots of patience. We never had all three at once."

According to Robert Jenkins, president of the Military Vehicle Preservation Association, about 10,000 World War II vehicles, mostly Jeeps (SMITHSONIAN, November 1992), are still running. But even armored vehicles got sold into peacetime servitude. Light tanks pulled stumps in Iowa. Clem Neuheisel of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, modified a half-track to haul a fertilizer hopper through muddy fields. A few Sherman tanks found jobs as snowplows and hazardous-duty firefighting vehicles. Some of them came from the incredible armory of Walter Ising, an Illinois metal dealer who bought 536 Shermans from the Rock Island Arsenal in 1958 at $590 each and dismantled the 35-ton vehicles for salable parts.

I located a retired inventor named George Rabuse (above) who bought a Sherman M4A4 in 1990. The tank, an extremely rare 30-cylinder model, had sat in an Argentine scrap dealer's warehouse for more than 35 years. Rabuse's tank is in Minnesota now, under restoration in an oversize garage behind the home of one of



Sales ingenuity reached some kind of apogee with an attempt to adapt tank periscopes to kiddie-cars.

his sons. Rabuse is busy restoring it both inside and out, to the extent of acquiring every single piece of the regulation equipment, down to tow cables, fire extinguishers, helmets, first-aid box and 25 spare prisms for the tank's periscope. Having spent five years so far on his tank, Rabuse is loathe to commit himself to the "magic day" when it will run on its own again. But the crowd is sure to be large, he says. A network of tank enthusiasts now stops by on Thursday-evening work sessions to swap stories about WWII tank battles, in which the underpowered, thin-skinned Shermans usually took a beating.

When they think of WWII surplus, most people think of vast fields of airplanes in Arizona—and for good reason. They probably have in mind the much photographed Storage Depot 41 at Kingman, Arizona, though it was only one of many storage depots for surplus planes, and not the largest, either.

At Kingman and elsewhere, the WAA offered flyable models at cut-rate prices. In the late 1940s, Lockheed P-38 Lightnings went for $1,250. A few fighter planes were converted into air-racing models. Hollywood pilot Paul Mantz bought 475 surplus planes for $55,000, including 228 B-24 Liberator bombers and a transcontinental-record-setting P-51 Mustang. He saved a few for rental to filmmakers and sold the remainder for scrap at a profit. Two B-29s did high-altitude research work for California physicists; another served as a TV station for a 1948 experiment in wide-area broadcasting. Rugged B-17s often turned up as crash-test airplanes for the military, and some as water-bombers for the Forest Service. One Flying Fortress ended up delivering telephone poles on remote South American landing strips; the poles were loaded and unloaded through a hole in the tail cone. Crop-dusting companies favored the Stearman biplane, the famous "Yellow Peril" of preliminary flight training in both the Navy and the Air Force.

In all, the WAA sold at least 31,000 planes approved for flight. Many more than that were grounded, either for safety or from just plain lack of usefulness. Combat-plane fuel consumption alone was enough to scare off most buyers. A single-engine Mustang got 3.5 miles to the gallon. Flying a fighter or bomber, one WAA official said, was "just like dipping up gasoline and throwing it out of the window." The government cut prices to the bone and beyond to find a home for as many nonflying models as possible. Educational organizations of all types—even prison schools and Boy Scout troops—could buy grounded aircraft at fractions of pennies on the dollar. A B-29 Superfortress cost $509,465 to build in 1945; how about a used one for $350? Or a P-38 Lightning, its price then down to $150? By mid-1946 schools had bought nearly a thousand planes off the Army's bargain rack, chiefly for training mechanics. The government gave away hundreds more to cities and veterans' posts for war memorials. Don Lopez, now a senior adviser to the director of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, remembers that dozens of historic warplanes accumulated in a former Douglas Aircraft factory in Chicago. One was the *Enola Gay*.

Finally the Army Air Force was left with only 30,000 World War II planes to sell for scrap. Sales proceeded, not by a few hundred planes at a time, and not even by whole airfields at a time, but by *groups* of airfields. The largest sale involved 21,800 tactical planes, at five airfields, sold for scrap—for a return of two-tenths of a cent on the purchase dollar. Some of them included the original Norden bombsight, one of the top-security secrets of World War II. Salvors in Virginia and Arizona used giant guillotine-like blades to slice planes into pieces small enough for aluminum smelters. Wanting to save time, the troops at the Landsberg Army Air Ammunition Depot blew up B-26 bombers into manageable chunks using surplus TNT. Warren Dean's salvage company cut up and fed several Douglas DC-3 transports into its portable smelter, producing shiny 900-pound ingots. "Years later I heard these planes were bringing a quarter-million dollars each," Dean says. "It was one of those times where somebody has to hold your hand to keep you from slitting your wrists."

In the end, the victory over aircraft surplus was so thorough that in 1950, during the Korean War, the government had to go back to its buyers, checkbook in hand. Paul Poberezny, then a first lieutenant in the Air

Force, remembers scouting surplus shops in Wisconsin to buy back thousands of throat mikes and "Mae Wests"—life-vests. The Air Force had plenty of heavy bombers for Korean airstrikes—1,500 having been shrouded in plastic on the Arizona desert—but was short on replacement parts. So it turned to Bernard Bachman of Rochester, New York, who had stockpiled $100 million worth of B-29 supplies. And the U.S. Army even had to buy some of its vehicles back from the Germans, at the cost of some embarrassment.

Large vessels have individual fame and individual fates. The Navy resorted to atomic bombs to sink the surplus battleship *Arkansas* and carrier *Saratoga*, along with other ships, as part of a series of 1946 radiation tests; Argentina bought the cruiser *Phoenix* out of the surplus fleet in 1951 and recommissioned her the *General Belgrano*. The British Navy torpedoed and sank her during the Falklands War.

Some ships and planes are still at work. Hundreds of Liberty ships, too slow for competitive trade routes, were nevertheless dispersed throughout the world. Says Capt. Jim Nolan, a marine consultant and restoration specialist, "We sold them at a very nominal rate, practically providing a subsidized fleet to developing countries."

Hundreds of C-47 transports are still about, mostly in airport back lots around the world. But if you ever see a C-47 fuselage tooling down the highway on trailer wheels behind a truck, with a set of wings following close behind, there's a good chance the plane is on its way to a second career at Basler Turbo Conversions of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Basler has carved a good business out of buying up well-preserved models, lengthening the fuselage, strengthening the airframe and mounting high-efficiency turboprop engines. The firm has converted twenty-five C-47s in the past five years and has orders for many more. According to president Warren Basler, the six-month-long process transforms the old plane into a modern transport suited for rough duty anywhere around the world. "It makes a fantastic combination," he says. "The airframe is virtually indestructible, and the engine is so reliable and vibration-free. This airplane will see its 100th birthday for sure."

Things went swimmingly in civilian life for the DUKW. The amphibious truck, sold to the Christian Fellowship of Trenton, New Jersey, spent years faithfully ferrying groups of schoolchildren across the Delaware River.