

The Birmingham District's Bays 1, 2, 3, and 3A, along with the old corporate office building that more recently housed Birmingham District operations, each played a significant role in O'Neal's history. But after sitting idle for some time, and being in need of repairs that were simply not economic ally feasible, these buildings are now themselves...history.



# HISTORY

The year was 1942. The United States had just entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of the previous year. And Southern Steel Works was breaking ground on a new facility across the street from O'Neal's current corporate office in Birmingham.

Southern Steel Works, of course, was the name that O'Neal Steel was known by until 1949. And that name was on the verge of becoming very important to the nation's war effort.

At the same time that company founder **Kirkman O'Neal** was preparing to move operations from the West End community to 41st Street in



**KIRKMAN O'NEAL** (second from left) and Southern Steel enjoyed a very productive relationship with the U.S. military during WWII.

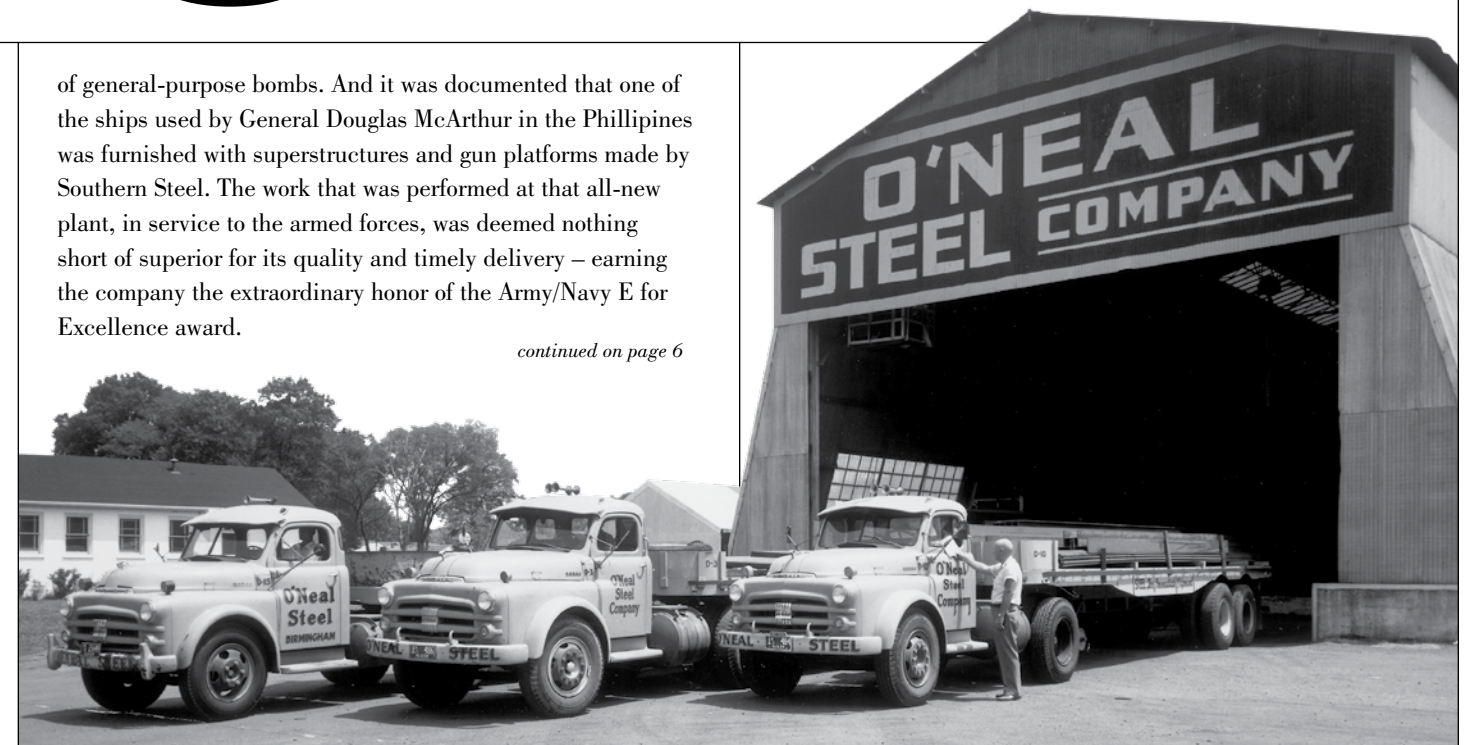
North Birmingham, he was also working hard to secure the company's first and most historic government contract through the Defense Department. His perseverance paid off in a big way when Southern Steel was hired to produce general-purpose bombs and superstructures for ships.

Never mind the fact that the new plant was not yet built. True to Kirkman's entrepreneurial spirit (where there's a will, there's a way), he quickly responded in order to help meet the war munitions

needs for our country by completing the facility in record time. The company went on to become the nation's largest producer

of general-purpose bombs. And it was documented that one of the ships used by General Douglas MacArthur in the Phillipines was furnished with superstructures and gun platforms made by Southern Steel. The work that was performed at that all-new plant, in service to the armed forces, was deemed nothing short of superior for its quality and timely delivery – earning the company the extraordinary honor of the Army/Navy E for Excellence award.

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# Thanks to the price of scrap, all the old buildings were removed at minimal cost to the company.



The area in which that work was done was composed of the buildings that came to be known as Bays 1, 2, 3, and 3A. At the peak of production, about 1,300 employees were working there in three shifts a day. Manufacturing on behalf of the military continued until V-J Day on August 15, 1945,

which marked the end of war operations in the Pacific. That was also the day that Southern Steel began to refocus its business on commercial trade. What had been a model of efficiency as a manufacturing facility was quickly converted to a fabricating plant that served a wide range of customers from Birmingham's broad industrial base and beyond. It wasn't long before the company also began functioning as a service center as well as a fabricator. Warehouse operations started in Bay 1 and expanded into Bays 2 and 3 over time as the service center business grew. And it was in those buildings that the company's first stacker system for its growing inventory was put into service.

It was also about that time that, adjacent to the plant, the brick building that became the company's headquarters was built. As former O'Neal President **Jack Blackwell** recalls, the building eventually provided office space for virtually all sales, operations, and administrative personnel. Then in 1976, the current corporate office was built across the street. Birmingham Operations and a few corporate functions continued to use the old office building until last year when it was vacated. Repairs to the outdated facility were deemed too expensive compared to other alternatives, so Birmingham District employees moved to the corporate office.

Through the years, O'Neal Steel (the name was officially changed in 1949) has greatly expanded, updated, and diversified its Birmingham operation – not to mention expanding geographically across the nation. Business is constantly evolving. New technology and systems are employed throughout the plant. Continuous improvement is the focus. And, for nearly a decade, the Birmingham District has been utilizing the industry's most advanced, automated storage and retrieval system for inventory. All that said, Bays 1, 2, 3, and 3A essentially became obsolete, so they were vacated several years ago.

This fall, as a matter of safety, economics, and progress,

the decision was made to demolish those four bays and the old office building. As Chairman **Craft O'Neal** explained, "The removal of these structures will increase loading productivity and flexibility, and give better access to the back side of the plant. Due to the current price of scrap, we were able to locate a company that removed all of the structures in return for the scrap generated from the project, which means that all the work was done at minimal cost to our company."

The process of removing the old buildings was clean,

quick, and methodical. Everything was dismantled piece by piece. There was never the mess or disturbance of a wrecking ball or more traditional demolition equipment. The contractor had a buyer or a specific use for virtually everything that was hauled away. So, in a sense, these buildings will live on in more modern applications.

"It is sad that the old structures will no longer greet us on a daily basis," said Craft, "but I'm certain both my grandfather and father would be happy with our progress." 🍌

## About 1,300 employees worked in three shifts at the plant that was built in 1942 to manufacture general-purpose bombs and superstructures for ships that were widely used in the Pacific during World War II.

