

# Was Badger Important in WWII?

## Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Everyone knows how important the Badger Ordnance Plant (BOW) was to Allied success in WWII, right? And during Vietnam, it re-activated but was smaller and perhaps less crucial to that war effort, right? Well, think again! The opposite may be true in both cases!

Thanks to a piece by Michael Goc, published in a recent issue of the new Badger Ordnance News, we can get a different perspective on these matters. That publication is sponsored by the Badger History Group, dedicated to preservation of the history and memorabilia of the Badger plant.

### An Overview

First, a review: America was suddenly jerked into war with both Japan and Germany on Dec. 7, 1941. In a burst of patriotism that ought to be a shining example for today's politically fractured legislative branch, the country's leaders set aside petty obstructionism and rapidly prepared to meet the challenge of the Axis powers.

The sleeping giant, militarily weak and puny both in military power and industrial defense, now rose and began to flex its muscles.

One area deemed weak was the nation's productive capacity of explosive materials, especially in light of predictions of probably a decade of war with Japan. New industries had specific requirements as to location near water, on flat ground, etc., and unfortunately for its farmers, the fertile Sauk Prairie was deemed ideal for a new ordnance plant, which rose with breath-taking speed.

### Badger Ordnance Works (BOW)

That speed, however, was not enough to be of significance in WWII. According to Goc, "Had BOW not been built at all, or had it not produced any propellant for World War, the loss would have been relatively small and made up for at other ordnance works."

This comes as a shock to the conventional wisdom that Badger was significant in that War. Goc quickly notes, however that 'without Badger, renamed the Badger Army Ammunition Plant (BAAP), the United States could not have fought in Vietnam.'

### Badger Army Ammunition Plant (BAAP)

In an unfortunate historical lapse, a war which occurred between WWII and the Vietnam war is rarely chronicled in the history books, though there are many veterans today who served honorably. This is, of course, the Korean War. Badger was re-activated then under the management of the Olin Corporation as BAAP.

The plant was converted to production of ball powder in 1955, by which the Korean War was winding down. Goc says that again, Badger made little contribution to the Korean War., which in effect had reached an uneasy cease-fire in 1953.

When President Johnson authorized more military action in Vietnam, the new M16 rifles required cartridges loaded with ball powder, and fired at a much faster rate than the older M1 rifle. Here the Badger production by 1966 became significant. Badger production now included firepower for helicopters, artillery, and battleships,

BAAP produced its first trial ball powder in 1966, and Goc reports that “Rocket powder and smokeless began production in 1967. With three production areas running, plus two acid plants, output soared.

Long before the end of operations in 1975, output surpassed that of either WWII or Korea.” In August 1969, the work force peaked at 5,632, approaching the work force at the end of WWII. The lines were shut down in 1975 when we lost Saigon and Vietnam.

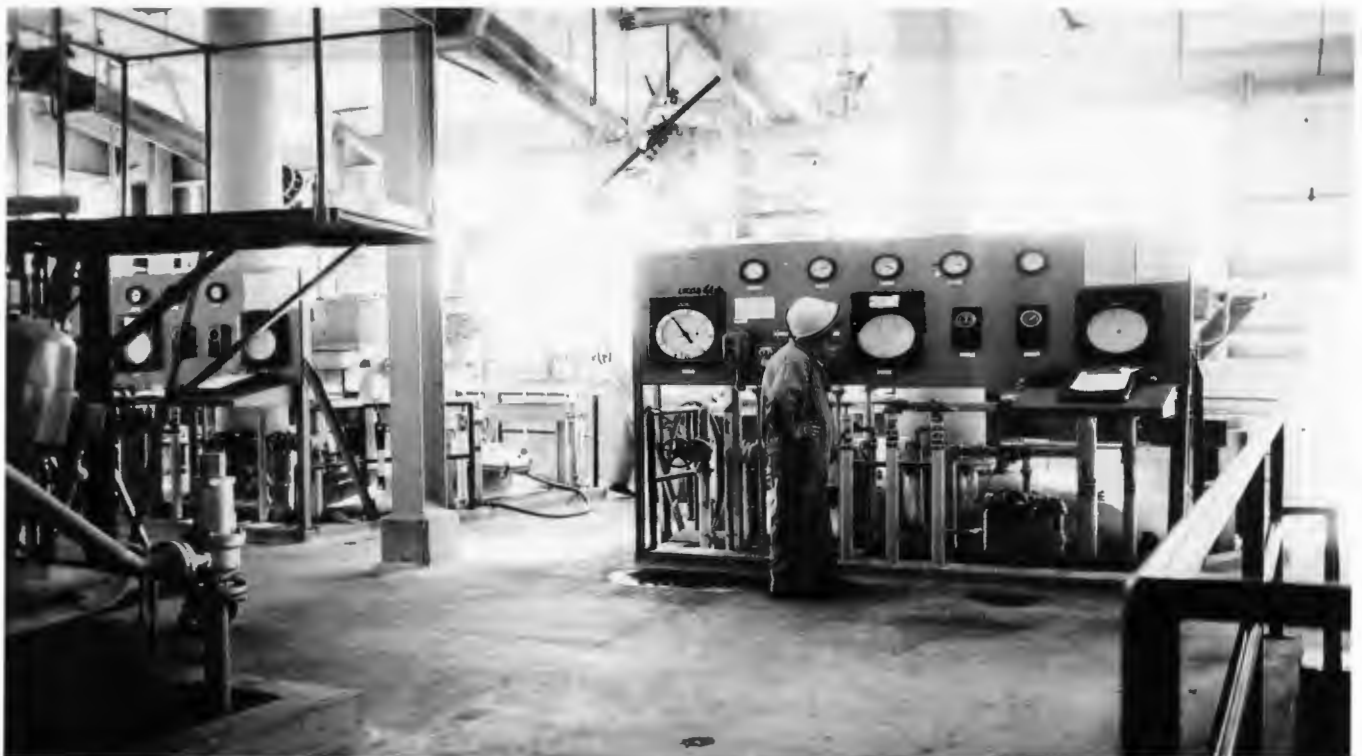
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Armament production is dangerous work, but the major event of that nature occurred in 1970, when “eight tons of powder in a drying house exploded in a flash that was visible over the bluffs fifteen miles away in Wisconsin Dells”.

A subsequent explosion in 1971 killed John F. Mitchell and wounded two other men. Another man was killed in a different explosion. Overall, the Badger safety record was good considering the dangerous nature of production and storage.

In his usual precise and informative style, Goc has summed up the importance of Badger, particularly in regard to the Vietnam conflict rather than WWII or Korea. The Badger history Group is fortunate to have him as a spokesman.

They are preserving the history of the Badger operation, so important not only to Sauk County but to the nation. Research volunteers are needed to catalog files of historical records, and the group can be contacted at [bhg-arch@tds.net](mailto:bhg-arch@tds.net).



***Control station in a ball powder hardening house where nitrocellulose and a mix of chemicals were pumped into a “still” where grains of powder began to form. (Courtesy, Badger History Group)***