On August 31, 1939, passengers on the Soo Locks’ tour boat *Bide-a-Wee*—moving through the Canadian canal on a quiet Sunday afternoon—were surprised to see soldiers on the walls of the lock. Some of the men had bayonets fixed on their rifles. Canada, through its ties to Great Britain, had become involved in the escalating war in Europe and was assuming a defensive posture to protect shipping in the Sault. Five days later, there would be soldiers at the American locks, too.
Fortunately for the U.S. Army, there was already a military presence in Sault Ste. Marie at Fort Brady: a complex of brick buildings on a bluff overlooking the river. The fort had moved to this location in the 1890s from the riverbank where, beginning in the 1820s, it had protected the fur trade and then, as that line of business died out, the locks. Through the years, the fort had stood nearly empty on numerous occasions, such as the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and the Mexican Revolution. But it had always been repopulated when hostilities ceased. In the summer of 1939, there were four companies of the 2nd Infantry present.

Twenty men were put on guard at the locks 24 hours a day. For the next two years, these soldiers would work in shifts to monitor the railroad bridge, the approaches to the locks, and the night sky. High fences were erected, and automobiles were subject to searches before being allowed into Government Park at the locks or Brady Field just downriver.

There was a security procedure in place, as well, for ships that passed through the locks. Paul Chandler, a journalist for Associated Press who had grown up in Sault Ste. Marie, noted that ship cargoes had to be thoroughly inspected, and there was a special yellow flag flown on lake freighters, indicating that this had been done. Even pleasure boats were boarded and examined by the United States Coast Guard.

When the 61st Anti-Aircraft Coast Artillery arrived in September 1939, they brought with them five-foot-wide spotlights. It was said the lights were so bright that a sailor on the deck of a ship out in Whitefish Bay, 30 miles to the north, could read a paper by the glow.

Thirty-caliber machine guns were placed on Coast Guard picket boats, and the Army and the Coast Guard were stationed at the Neebish Rock Cut, also a vulnerable spot. Blasted out of rock, the passage was used for downbound vessels, and its destruction would create a bottleneck. According to Bernie Arbic in his book “City of the Rapids,” there were also gun emplacements in three high spots on Sugar Island, just south of the Sault.

For almost two years, these measures were deemed sufficient to protect the locks. Then, in the fall of 1940, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) looked more closely at the situation. They theorized that the German Luftwaffe could fly the Great Circle Route from occupied Norway and then approach the locks to either bomb
them or to drop parachute troops to wreak havoc from the ground. Another theory held that submarines or surface ships could enter Canada’s Hudson Bay, approximately 400 miles away, and mount an attack from there.

Prompted by the FBI’s analysis, the Army re-examined its efforts and placed the problem of coordinating American and Canadian defense before the Permanent Joint Board on Defense. The board decided that each country should have its own person in charge of defenses, but that these two people should work together on a plan.

On March 15, 1941—still nine months before America’s entry into the war—President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing the Military District of Sault Ste. Marie. Colonel Fred Cruse was chosen by the Army to head up this command. Having previously been in charge of the security guard for the Panama Canal, he was well-suited for this task. In April, he met with his peer on the Canadian side to set a plan in motion.

In May, the Army replaced the 2nd Infantry guarding the locks with the 702nd Military Police Battalion. When the snow fell, some of the new MPs also received special training in cross-country skiing to be able to patrol the back country.

**Bridge Collapse Points to Need**

In the fall of 1941, an event occurred that underscored the critical importance of the locks.

At that point in Sault history, there were four functioning locks on the American side (and one on the Canadian side) of the river to keep the freight moving. The two newest locks—the Davis, built in 1914, and the Sabin, built in 1919—were side by side to the north, closest to the rapids of the St. Marys River. They handled the freighters, including those that transported 90 percent of the raw materials for the war effort to mills in the lower Great Lakes. The older Weitzel and Poe locks—built in the 19th century—were frequented by fishing and pleasure boats. When a jackknife railroad bridge over the river failed in October of that year—hurling a locomotive into the river, killing two men, and blocking the approach to the two newer locks for several days—it drove home the point that an enemy could cripple the region’s shipping system with a single, well-placed bomb.

A bill containing funding to replace the Weitzel Lock was rushed through Congress and signed on March 11, 1942. The deadline for completion was 1944, which required an unprecedented pace of building. (Previous and later locks took an average of 10 years to complete.) But the lock was done even sooner: just 14 months after ground was broken in September 1942.

The Corps of Engineers designed the new lock—named after General Douglas MacArthur—with thick concrete walls built to withstand any blast and to blow inward rather than outward. The new lock measured 820 feet long by 80 feet wide by 30 feet deep, to correspond with the size of the locks in the Welland Canal and along the St. Lawrence River.

**More Troops Arrive**

Three months after the U.S. entered the war, more soldiers began arriving in Sault Ste. Marie, including a unit of black soldiers who completed a searchlight crew.

In April 1942, a unit of the 399th Barrage Balloon Battalion came to operate and maintain a fleet of what...
came to be described as “silver sausages.” The balloons, positioned close together in the Sault skies in an effort to deter a bomb drop on the locks, were serviced in the Pullar Ice Arena on the waterfront. An inflated balloon just about filled the space.

Besides the barrage balloons, April also brought the creation of a Vital Defense Area that included most of Chippewa County. (Later, this area was expanded to a Central Air Defense Zone, stretching 150 miles inland on the American side. Canada also established such a zone.)

In May 1942, Canada organized a ground observer aircraft warning system between the Sault and Hudson Bay. In June of that year, a system of volunteer spotters was added in the United States, with the operations center located at Fort Brady. Some places were staffed 24 hours a day. An Evening News article noted that there were 8,667 volunteers—including homemakers, students, miners, business owners, and public employees—who maintained a constant watch north of the line between Bay City and Muskegon for enemy aircraft.

U.S. Army troops were allowed to put up radar stations at Kapuskasing, Cochrane, Hearst, Armstrong, and Nakina, Ontario. Housing and other facilities for 2,000 American anti-aircraft and barrage troops were also erected on the Canadian side of the river.

During this same month, emergency landing fields were built in the Michigan communities of Kinross and Raco at the cost of about $5 million each.

Soldiers and Civilians Adapt

In early 1943, at the peak of the effort to protect the locks, there were more than 12,000 troops in the city—nearly doubling the population of Sault Ste. Marie at the time. These included infantry, anti-aircraft units, military police, barrage balloon operators, ordnance units, chemical corps, Navy and Army intelligence officials, and the Women’s Army Corps.

Not surprisingly, there was a severe shortage of housing. Troops were temporarily billeted in many public buildings, and residents benefited from contracts to rapidly put up base housing. (Much of this housing was located south of

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In an April 19, 1942 Evening News article titled “Death Lurks Near Fallen Balloons,” Army Captain Edward Robinson advised residents to “keep away [from them] as you would from a mad dog. I cannot too strongly stress the danger, especially for civilians, which accompanies the handling of the balloons, both while they are being prepared for ascent, or in the event one of them should collapse and fall within the city.”

Robinson went on to explain that the balloons were filled with hydrogen, which was highly flammable. Additionally, if a balloon’s cables should sever a power line, the line could electrocute someone passing by on the ground.

In an oral history about the war, one interviewee shared her experience as a young girl standing in her father’s grocery store when a balloon tethered across the street exploded. The force of the explosion blew out the windows of the store and threw her up against the wall. The girl was uninjured and the Army compensated the family for damages.

On occasion, windstorms pulled the balloons from their moorings. Sometimes they were found miles away. In one case, a balloon landed in town on the Johnson Street home of music teacher Sadie Kelly. The balloon damaged a chimney as it settled over the roof.

ENCOUNTERS WITH BARRAGE BALLOONS

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the fort and was later used as Army Camp Lucas from 1950 to 1960.

Many people extended themselves to the troops, supplying services and assistance with confidence that their kindness would be repaid when veterans came back after the war as tourists.

Emergency drills were held regularly, with civilians and soldiers alike participating, and occasionally the military units paraded down the Sault’s main streets.

**Draw Down Begins Early**

Just when the townspeople had gotten used to having the military in their businesses and their backyards (where anti-aircraft weapons were sometimes positioned), the buildup was reversed. The War Department ordered that the Sault contingent be reduced to 2,500 officers and men by September 1, 1943. In January 1944, the aircraft-warning installations and anti-aircraft emplacements were also abandoned. By the end of that year, there was only one company of men left at Fort Brady.

Why were the troops withdrawn before the war even ended? The military’s operations division decided that, even if the locks were attacked, any damage could be repaired quickly and would not tie up traffic for long. The design and construction of the MacArthur Lock in record time reinforced this opinion.

When peace was declared in Europe, a sigh of relief was breathed in Sault Ste. Marie. Though war raged on in the Far East, the Japanese were never viewed as much of a threat to sabotage the locks—so distant from their homeland. (An August 16, 1945 article in the Sault paper revealed that three unmanned Japanese bombs, attached to balloons, did make it to Michigan. The nearest was spotted southeast of DeTour Village, about 40 miles south of the locks. None of the devices ever exploded.)

**Remnants of the War**

Judging Fort Brady to have outlived its usefulness, the Army reassigned its remaining personnel and closed the military installation in October 1945. But local and state officials were quick to see the potential of the site. In just three months’ time, the buildings were adapted for use as the Soo branch of the Michigan College of Mining and Technology (Michigan Technological University). In 1970, the institution was granted its autonomy under the name Lake Superior State College. In 1987, it attained university status.

After the war, the two oldest locks—the Davis and the Sabin—slowly became obsolete; they were closed to all traffic a few years ago. The MacArthur Lock—built to last in the 1940s—still exists, but is limited by its size to serving the smaller “salties,” or seagoing vessels. Today, about 80 percent of the canal’s traffic travels through the Poe Lock, which was rebuilt in 1969 to accommodate the 1,000-foot “lakers.”

While security at the locks was relaxed slightly after World War II, the days of people being able to walk across the gates and right up to the lock walls never returned. Fences erected during the war still separate the public areas of the park from the locks themselves.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, security in Sault Ste. Marie was tightened even more. Procedures were adopted to screen visitors to the locks, and the guards were armed as a further deterrence.

On one day each year, however, the public is allowed more access to the facility. Visitors attending Engineers’ Day, scheduled on the last Friday in June, then grasp a little of what it was like before World War II came to the Sault.

**Deidre Stevens** is a freelance writer and historian who spends her summers sailing for Soo Locks Boat Tours.