

Native Nebraskan’s ‘Higgins boats,’ with their unique design, carried troops ashore on D-Day and throughout WWII



U.S. reinforcements arrive on the beaches of Normandy from a Coast Guard landing barge — better known as a Higgins boat — on June 23, 1944. The soldiers were to support fighting units that had secured the beachhead.

# THE BOAT THAT WON THE WAR

By DAVID HENDEE • WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

**A**DOLF HITLER CALLED HIM THE “NEW NOAH.” • Gen. Dwight Eisenhower said he was “the man who won the war for us.” • Everyone else called him “Mr. Higgins.” • Andrew Jackson Higgins was the native Nebraskan who designed and mass-produced the landing craft that carried American troops ashore in the Pacific and European theaters of World War II. Ramp-fronted “Higgins boats” most famously landed troops during the amphibious invasion of Normandy on D-Day in 1944.



ANDREW JACKSON HIGGINS

Creighton bestowed an honorary degree on him in 1943.

In 1987, a U.S. Navy fleet oiler was named in Higgins’ honor.

The Andrew Jackson Higgins National Memorial at Pawnee Park in Columbus features a full-size steel waterline replica of a Higgins boat.

A seven-mile segment of U.S. Highway 81 south of Columbus is designated as Andrew Jackson Higgins Expressway.

Historians say the maverick boat builder was a flamboyant, outspoken, brash, hot-tempered Irishman with a big imagination and the ability to turn wild ideas into reality. Red tape was for shredding, obstacles were for barreling through and bourbon was for drinking.

“He was a legendary character,” said Kimberly Guise, curator at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, where a replica Higgins boat, video and artifacts tell the story of Higgins and his boat-building company.

Without Higgins’ famous landing crafts, the U.S. strategy during WWII would have been much different — and winning the global conflict much more difficult, Guise said. The Higgins boat participated in every major invasion of the war, including North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Normandy and the islands of the Pacific, including Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan, Tinian, Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

Born in Columbus in 1886, Higgins spent his early years along the Loup and Platte Rivers near the city.

Higgins’ entrepreneurial spirit flashed early. As a youngster, he started a lawn-mowing business, hired other boys and tried to corner the market on lawn services in Columbus, said Lt. Col. Jerry Meyer, Nebraska National Guard historian. Meyer was a high school teacher in Columbus when he spearheaded the Higgins National Memorial in a Columbus park.

Higgins’ father, John, was a lawyer, judge and newspaperman who died in a fall down a flight of stairs. His mother, Annie, and the couple’s six children then moved to Omaha in the early 1890s.

At age 12, Higgins built his first vessel — an ice boat on runners — in the basement of the family’s Omaha home. He neglected, however, to plan how to get it out of the house, so he and a friend cut through a wall to get the boat out a door.

Meyer said Higgins was fueled with independence and self-assurance. His high school years at Omaha High School (now Central High) and Creighton Prep were marked by conflict with teachers and principals. Creighton Prep tossed him out for brawling.

“Andrew Jackson Higgins would be one of those kids that teachers can’t wait to unleash on the world,” Meyer said. “For all the trouble he caused in school, he would be right most of the time. These kids may not go to college, but they make things happen. He was a guy like that.”

As a teenager, Higgins joined the Nebraska National Guard and served as an infantry officer in the Millard Rifles. William Jennings Bryan, the famed Nebraska political leader who would be the Democratic presidential nominee three times, was his brigade commander.

Meyer said the military experience paid dividends for Higgins years later. “He understood the military,” Meyer said. “It was easy for him to hobnob with

generals. He knew how things get done.”

Higgins moved to the Gulf Coast in 1906 to get into the timber business. To reach stands of hardwood trees deep in the coastal swamps, he developed a shallow-draft boat with a propeller set in a tunnel to protect it from stumps and debris.

By the late 1930s, Higgins Industries in New Orleans was manufacturing shallow-water boats for oil and gas exploration. The U.S. Navy needed small boats that could carry troops from ships to open beaches. Higgins adapted his Eureka boat to meet military specifications for a landing craft, including the innovative front ramp, a design U.S. Marines had seen in China.

By 1941, before America’s entry into WWII, Higgins was producing landing craft designed to land troops in Europe. He also made a prewar journey to the Philippines to stock up on mahogany, a primary material for his boats. Meyer said Higgins realized that steel would be in short supply if war broke out and he would need wood for producing vessels.

Higgins’ designs won him huge government contracts and his business expanded dramatically. In 1938, he operated a single boatyard employing fewer than 75 workers. By late 1943, his seven plants employed more than 25,000 workers.

Guise said Higgins’ workforce was the first in New Orleans to be racially integrated. His employees included whites, blacks, men, women, senior citizens and people with disabilities. All were paid equal wages according to their jobs.

Their loyalty to the man they called “Mr. Higgins” was extraordinary, Guise said.

Higgins’ workers shattered production records, turning out more than 20,000 boats — 12,500 of them the model used at Normandy — by the end of the war.

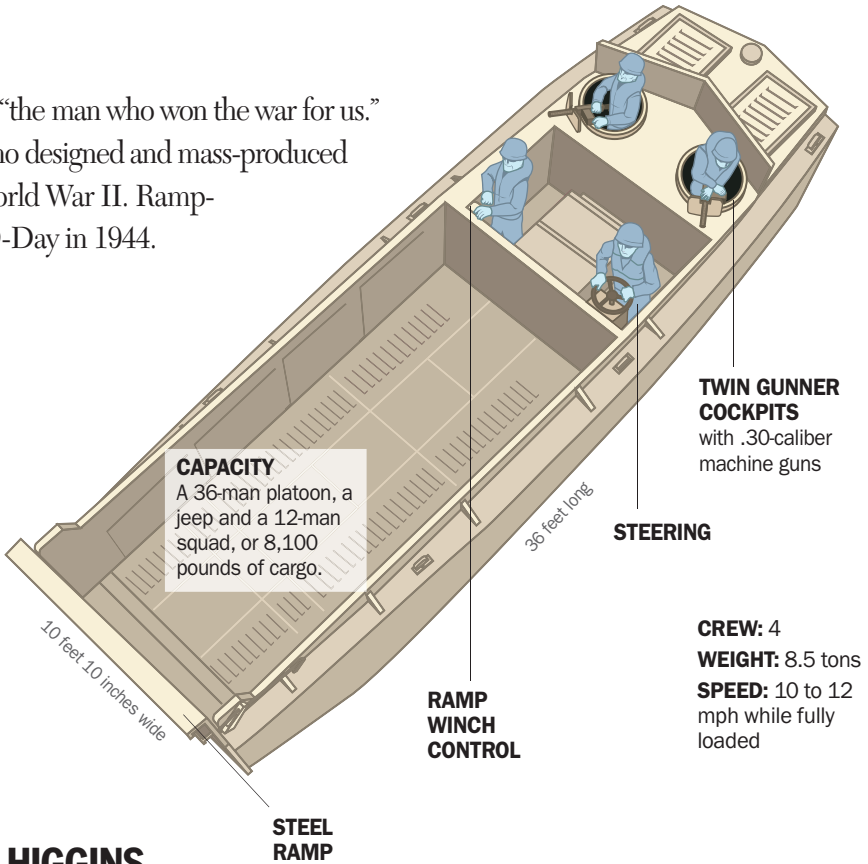
“Not one of them was exactly the same,” Meyer said. “Higgins and his engineers were constantly changing and improving features as the boats went down the production line.”

Factories across the nation aided in the production. Omaha Steel Works, for example, produced a Higgins design for a larger mechanized landing craft.

Guise said Higgins’ name is forever linked to his landing craft. Men did not come ashore in LCVPs (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel), they traveled in “Higgins boats.” His achievements earned him and his company countless accolades from the military and federal government. He held about 30 patents for amphibious landing craft and vehicles.

During the postwar years, he designed and built pop-up campers and commercial and pleasure craft, yet struggled to stay in business. Higgins died in 1952. He is buried in Metairie Cemetery outside of New Orleans.

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**HIGGINS BOAT LCVP**  
(Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel)

During the 1930s, Higgins Industries perfected a work boat, dubbed the “Eureka” model, designed for the swamps and marshes of the Gulf Coast. The shallow-draft boat could operate in just 18 inches of water, running through vegetation and over logs without fouling its propeller. It also could run up on shore and extract itself without damage. When a bow ramp was added at the request of the Marine Corps, the design was complete.

## ESSENTIAL PART FOR AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS

A deep vee hull forward led to a reverse-curve section about midship and two flat planning sections aft, flanking a semi-tunnel that protected the propeller and shaft. Aerated water flowing under the forefoot of the boat created less friction while moving and allowed for faster speeds and maneuverability.

The solid block of pine at the bow was the strongest part of the boat and its shallow draft enabled it to run up onto the shoreline without damaging the hull.

The steel ramp at the front could be lowered quickly to swiftly disembark men and supplies.

Then, the boat would reverse itself off the beach and head back out to the supply ship for another load within three to four minutes.

MATT HANEY/THE WORLD-HERALD