American B-17 heavy bombers take off from an airfield in Britain, October 19, 1942. The B-17 was nicknamed the "Flying Fortress" because of its many machine-gun mounts. Photo: Planet News Archive/SSPL/Getty Images

The third in a four-part series

The tanks, artillery, ships and trucks churned out by the United States at the beginning of World War II would be useful only if enough brave men could be found to take them into harm's way. In this respect, the United States proved to be exceptionally fruitful. After the Japanese attack on the American naval base Pearl Harbor, recruitment centers across the nation were swamped with volunteers who were anxious to take a swing at the Japanese. Even so, by 1943 Washington had resorted to a draft of all able-bodied males between 18 and
40. The Marine Corps expanded from one division to five, while the Navy put more than a thousand ships to sea. The Army was the largest of all the services, and its basic training facilities became small cities in their own right. By 1945, about 16 million Americans had served in uniform, not including the mariners of the Merchant Marine. The Merchant Marine is the fleet of ships that delivers troops and equipment during wartime.

The Allied powers — the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union — continued their fight against the Axis Powers — Germany, Italy and Japan — and the war continued. As millions of people joined the armed forces, separation and longing became common feelings. The songs of the time — like "Till We Meet Again" and "I'll Be Seeing You, in All the Old Familiar Places" — reflected the feelings of loneliness that were felt in every town and by almost every family. Eventually, most soldiers and Marines were shipped overseas. They got their last view of America from the ports of embarkation — New York on the East Coast and San Francisco on the West. But before leaving, they typically spent a week or 10 days at a final staging area where they received required vaccines and made out their last wills and testaments.

**American Troops On The Way**

That last period in the United States often offered the opportunity for a few days of liberty. There was no chance for a trip home — trains were jammed and overloaded. But the port of embarkation, especially Manhattan, was another story. There, among the bright lights, nightclubs and restaurants of the largest city in the world, they drank and laughed and at least pretended to be confident and happy.

The next step was to board a troopship. Quarters were tight, pleasures were few and danger was constant, especially in the Atlantic Ocean, where German submarines — called U-boats — lurked beneath the surface. The most common way to get to Europe was in a group of about 50 or 60 similar ships. Mercifully, the Allied navies gained superiority over the Nazi submarines before most American soldiers crossed the ocean. Only 8,000 men were lost out of 4 million who made the journey aboard the defenseless cargo vessels.
Allied Forces Gain Ground Against Germany And Japan

By late 1942, the tide had turned against the Axis Powers. In June, the U.S. Navy won its greatest victory ever in the Battle of Midway, in which an outnumbered American force inflicted devastating losses on the then-superior Japanese fleet. By September, American Marines were beginning an island-hopping campaign that required them to fight their way across the Pacific. The good news, however, was that after the Battle of Midway, the Japanese were no longer able to undertake offensive operations. It was just a matter of time before the Japanese were crushed by American air and naval superiority.

The German army was another matter. Generally regarded as the finest fighting force in the war, it had superbly trained and battle-hardened soldiers, sophisticated weapons and brilliant tactical leaders. Only an enormous sacrifice by many nations could bring it down. But it happened. In the fall of 1942, the British Eighth Army counterattacked German forces in Africa and sent them scurrying home to Germany. Meanwhile, the Americans who had landed in Morocco and Algeria trapped thousands of Nazi soldiers who could not escape across the Mediterranean Sea. In 1943, a combined Anglo-American force invaded Sicily and then Italy, ultimately knocking Italy out of the war. And in perhaps the most devastating battle of all time, at Stalingrad between August 1942 and February 1943, the proud German Sixth Army, which had devastated France, was systematically annihilated by Russia’s vengeful Red Army. Thereafter, Hitler’s troops were rarely able to attack. Instead, they were destroyed by enormous forces coordinated by the Big Three — Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin.

Allies Prepare For Invasion Of Normandy

In 1943, General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and probably the most important officer on the Allied side in the war, made a recommendation to FDR. He suggested that Dwight D. Eisenhower be made Supreme Commander of the Allied crusade in Europe.

So it fell to Eisenhower, then an obscure Kansan, to take charge of the greatest invasion in history. He had been only a lieutenant colonel when the war began in 1939. But his good judgment, hard work and devotion to duty were recognized early on by Marshall, who quickly promoted him officer over dozens of senior generals. By the early months of 1944, Eisenhower was in charge of all American
and Allied ground, sea and air forces in Europe. His mission was to assault the Nazi Atlantic Wall, a network of artillery, beach hazards and pillboxes that were designed to slaughter anyone foolish enough to come out of the water.

Kenneth T. Jackson is the Jacques Barzun Professor in History and the Social Sciences and director of the Herbert H. Lehman Center for American History at Columbia University. His publications include "Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States" (1987), "Empire City: New York through the Centuries" (2002) and "The Encyclopedia of New York City" (2nd ed., 2010).