WWII Part Four: D-Day and the War's End

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The landing of the Allied troops in Normandy, France, June 1944. Photo12/UIG via Getty Images

The last in a four-part series.

The story of June 6, 1944, has been told many times. This date is also known as D-Day. D-Day was the day of the invasion that began the end of World War II. The Allied forces of the United States, Canada and Britain stormed a French beach that the Germans were controlling. It was the largest invasion onto a beach in history.
Eisenhower's crucial role

General Dwight D. Eisenhower was in charge of the invasion. He did four especially remarkable things that set him apart. First, he decided to go forward with the invasion even though there was a bad weather forecast. The German commander in charge of protecting the beaches had decided that the weather would be so awful that he could safely go back to Germany.

Second, he prepared a statement in case the invasion failed. In the message Eisenhower blamed himself instead of anyone else. This message never had to be released.

Third, Eisenhower visited the soldiers on the day before the invasion. He knew that many would be killed the next day. He walked informally among the young men, chatting about their hometowns and recognizing the dangers they would soon face.

Finally, Eisenhower read a message to the troops as they set out across the English Channel. It encouraged them and emphasized the significance of their mission.

The end of the war

The D-Day landings were successful. In the coming months, Allies pulverized the once-unbeatable Germany. Adolf Hitler killed himself in his bunker in April 1945. Germany surrendered within a week.

Japan had brave and devoted soldiers, fine airplanes and world-class sailors, but it never had a chance against the United States. It did not have enough of anything to compete with a huge nation with almost never-ending supplies. At many battles, the Japanese fought almost to the last man. It was no use. In desperation, they created an elite force of pilots, called kamikaze. Their mission was to crash their planes into U.S. ships. They died in glory, but they were too few and too late.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt had been president the entire duration of the war. He died in April 1945, and Harry S. Truman took his place. Truman ordered atomic bombs to be dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August.
1945. By then, Japan realized that further fighting was madness. On August 14, 1945, Truman announced over the radio that the war was over. On September 2, 1945, the Japanese government surrendered. World War II had ended.

The war in retrospect

In many ways the United States was the big winner in World War II. It had fewer battle deaths than the other countries involved. Its cities were never occupied by enemy armies or bombed. Washington emerged from the war more confident than ever. The U.S. had the strongest military in the world. By every measure, the United States led the world in 1945, and it was about to begin two generations of prosperity unmatched in history.

But no adult in America who had lived through the Great Depression and World War II would claim that it had been easy. It required enormous sacrifice. Those years of deprivation, fear and longing would always be central to their lives.

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