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

By Kenneth T. Jackson, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.06.17

The last in a four-part series.

The story of June 6, 1944 – also known as D-Day – has been told many times. D-Day was an invasion by Allied forces from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain onto a German-held beach in France. It was the largest seaborne invasion in history, and it started the process of liberating Europe from Nazi control and putting an end to World War II.
Eisenhower's crucial role

General Dwight D. Eisenhower was in charge of the invasion. He did four things that will distinguish him forever. First, he made a decision on June 5 to go forward with the invasion despite a terrible weather forecast. By contrast, the German commander in charge of protecting the beaches decided that the weather would be so awful that he could safely go back to Germany to visit his wife and son.

Second, he took personal responsibility for possible failure. He prepared a statement for release to the press in case the invasion force was hurled back into the sea, which said that his soldiers and sailors had done everything expected of them and that the failure was his fault alone. This message never had to be released.

Third, Eisenhower visited the airfields where many thousands of Americans were getting ready to be dropped behind German lines. Eisenhower knew that hundreds of them, maybe more, would be killed the next day. He walked informally among the young men, chatting about their hometowns and recognizing the dangers they would face.

Finally, as the thousands of ships set out on the short voyage to Normandy, General Eisenhower read a personal message to the troops. It read:

"You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe and security for ourselves in a free world."

The end of the war

The D-Day landings were successful. In the coming months, Allies pulverized the once-unbeatable German war machine. Adolf Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945. All resistance ceased within the week. Upon accepting the surrender of Nazi officials, General Eisenhower sent to his superiors a succinct message: "The mission of this Allied force was accomplished at 0241 hours, May 7th, 1945."
Although Japan had brave and devoted soldiers, fine airplanes and world-class sailors, it never had a chance against the United States. It did not have enough of anything to compete with a continental nation with almost infinite resources. 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 aircraft into U.S. ships. They died in glory, but they were too few and too late.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had led the country when it was attacked by Japan in 1941 and who brought the United States into World War II, died in April 1945. His successor, Harry S. Truman, ordered atomic bombs to be dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. By then, the Japanese had to realize that further resistance was madness. On August 14, 1945, Truman announced over the radio that the war was over. On September 2, 1945, representatives of the Japanese government officially surrendered. World War II had ended.

The war in retrospect

In many ways, the United States was the big winner in World War II. Relative to Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union, its battle deaths were relatively few in number. Its great cities, like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles, were never occupied by enemy armies or bombed. Its factories and steel mills, farms, stores and schools were unscathed by the conflict. The U.S. government emerged from the war more confident than ever, with a military superior to any 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 one in America who had lived as an adult through the Great Depression and the years of war that followed it would claim that the experience had been easy. It had been achieved with enormous sacrifice and cost. Indeed, those years of deprivation, fear and longing would always be as central to their lives as they were to the 20th century.

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