The story of June 6, 1944 – also known as D-Day – has been told many times. D-Day was an invasion by the U.S., Canada, and 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, who was in charge of the invasion, did four things that will distinguish him forever. First, he made a decision on June 5 that only he could make — to go forward with the invasion despite a terrible weather forecast. By contrast, the German commander in charge of the Atlantic Wall 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, preparing a statement for release to the press in case the invasion force was hurled back into the sea. In such a circumstance, General Eisenhower reported that his soldiers and sailors had done everything he or anyone else could have expected, and that his withdrawal from the beachhead was his fault alone. As it happened, his message never had to be released.

Third, Eisenhower visited the airfields where many thousands of American paratroopers were making final preparations to be dropped into the midnight darkness behind German lines. With parachutes on their backs, they had blackened their faces and wore heavy camouflage as they stood in groups waiting to board their aircraft. Eisenhower – also known as Ike – knew that hundreds of them, maybe more, would be killed the next day. He walked informally among the young men, many of them only teenagers, chatting about their hometowns and recognizing the perils they would all soon be facing.

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

"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 destroyed the once-unbeatable German war machine. The Russian Red Army hit northeastern Europe from the east, British and American bombers rained destruction on
German cities and Allied forces trapped Germans. 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 the Japanese had brave and devoted soldiers, fine airplanes and world-class sailors, Japan 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 Tarawa, at Iwo Jima and at Okinawa, the Japanese fought almost to the last man, but it was no use. In desperation, they created an elite force of suicide pilots, called kamikaze, who took off with only enough fuel for a one-way trip. 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. When his successor, Harry S. Truman, ordered atomic bombs to be dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945, the Japanese came 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 signed the formal instrument of surrender. World War II had ended.

The war in retrospect

In many respects, 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. Washington 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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