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Remembering Victory in Europe — V-E Day, May 1945



COURTESY OF 1ST DIVISION MUSEUM AT CANTIGNY PARK, WHEATON
Col. Gen. Gustaf Jodl, German Chief of Staff under the Donitz regime, (center with back to camera) signs the unconditional surrender document in the War Room, SHAEF, Reims, France, on May 7, 1945.

Mission accomplished

Allied forces accept surrender of Nazis to end World War II in Europe

By PAUL HERBERT
Executive Director of the First Division
Museum at Cantigny Park

"The Mission of this Allied Force was fulfilled at 0241, local time, May 7th, 1945, Eisenhower."

With that simple statement, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, announced the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II in Europe.

The 1st Infantry Division, whose history we present at Cantigny Park in Wheaton, played a significant role in achieving the victory.

There is much we should recall about that moment 70 years ago.

The Nazi surrender took place in Reims, France, on May 7. There was an immediate cease-fire, but the surrender did not take effect until just before midnight on May 8. This allowed time to get the word to units of both sides and to allow Allied forces to conclude operations in favorable positions.

A formal surrender ceremony took place in Berlin on May 9. In Russia, therefore, V-E Day is marked as May 9.

Adolf Hitler did not surrender. He and his wife of a single day, Eva Braun, committed suicide on April 30 in his bunker under the Reich Chancellery in the center of Berlin as Soviet forces closed in.

Hitler designated Adm. Karl Donitz, commander of the German navy, as his successor because of all Hitler's henchmen, he considered Donitz the most reliable Nazi. Donitz managed the unconditional surrender of all German forces and then joined other top Nazis in prison. He was tried at Nuremberg and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for war crimes.

Most German forces fought on the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union. In 1945, the Soviet front against Germany consisted of some 7 million troops in at least 35 armies and



An African-American rifle platoon in March 1945.

COURTESY OF 1ST DIVISION MUSEUM AT CANTIGNY PARK, WHEATON

ran 800 miles from Finland to the Black Sea.

Soviet forces began a massive offensive on Jan. 12, 1945, that did not stop until it reached Berlin.

Germany deployed about 2 million soldiers against the Soviets, compared to some 700,000 on her western front.

The Soviet campaign to take Berlin, from April 14 to May 7, 1945, included 2.5 million soldiers; 6,250 tanks and combat vehicles; and 41,600 artillery pieces. It would result in more than 360,000 casualties.

Nevertheless, the U.S. and western Allied efforts were decisive. They fought Japan; cleared the Atlantic of German submarines; cleared the Mediterranean of all Axis forces; stifled Germany with strategic bombing that destroyed the German air force; and landed in Normandy, France, in June, 1944, forcing Germany into an unwinnable two-front war.

At the same time, American industry supplied vital Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union. From October 1941 to

June 1944, the Soviets received nearly 11,000 aircraft, 4,900 tanks and 263,000 other vehicles — enough to outfit 18 American armor divisions. American-built trucks, locomotives, rolling stock and aircraft carried half of all Soviet military supplies during its last offensives.

The Allied ground campaigns against Germany were smaller but by no means trivial. The Western Allies were continuously on the offensive from January to May 1945.

The record of the 1st Infantry Division illustrates this reality. After its heroic stand in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, the Big Red One counterattacked through the West Wall fortifications on the German border in January 1945; defended the Roer River line for most of February; attacked across the Roer to seize Bonn, Germany, cross the Rhine River at Remagen, and expand the Remagen bridgehead in March; attacked north to help surround German forces in the Ruhr pocket in March and

April; attacked to clear the Harz Mountains of enemy forces in April; marched 150 miles to the Czech border on April 30; and, on May 5, attacked to seize Karlsbad, Czechoslovakia. They were doing so when word of the surrender reached them on May 7.

This fighting was just as hard and dangerous as any.

Our memory of the war rests on the iconic battles of 1944: the Normandy landings and the Battle of the Bulge. These obscure the earlier Mediterranean campaigns and diminish the following campaigns within Germany.

U.S. Army battle casualties in Europe in June 1944, when Rome fell and the Allies landed in Normandy, totaled 39,000, of which 9,000 were killed in action. This compares with 69,000 total casualties in January 1945, of which 10,000 were killed in action; and with 41,000 total casualties and 8,000 dead in April 1945, the last full month of the war.

Such strong German resistance is difficult to explain.

After the failed assassination attempt against Hitler in July 1944, the Nazi regime imposed a reign of terror against defeatist behavior. Widespread knowledge of Nazi crimes, memories of the Versailles Treaty after World War I and the Allied commitment to unconditional surrender made some Germans fear a brutal peace and occupation.

Allied strategic bombing may have stimulated defiance. Top Nazi political and military leaders were lavishly bribed. Some Germans still believed in Hitler's ability to work a miracle.

After Hitler's suicide, Donitz prolonged the war to allow as many Germans as possible to get away from the Soviets and surrender to the western Allies.

Because of the heavy casualties in Europe and the Pacific in 1945, the United States nearly ran out of people for its military, forcing the U.S. Army to ease racial segregation. By February 1945, the need for infantry replacements was so great that African-Americans

in support units were asked to volunteer for retraining as infantry. More than 2,500 agreed — many were then demoted to private and private first class, the ranks of the riflemen they would become.

After a few weeks training, the new replacements were sent by platoons (under white officers) to front-line divisions who could reject them — and some did. Not the 1st Infantry Division. The assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. George Taylor, personally welcomed all three platoons and briefed them on the division's history and standards before they each joined one of the three infantry regiments.

All three platoons performed well. In the 26th Infantry, the black platoon was continuously engaged from March 12 to May 8. It soon showed an "increase in confidence and training ... (and took its) ... full share of this almost continuous fighting and maneuvering."

The platoon assigned to the 16th Infantry had 30 men wounded and nine killed in action. White platoons "like[d] to fight beside them because they laid a large volume of fire on the enemy."

The platoon with the 18th Infantry was employed "in an identical manner to any other rifle platoon" and its record "was very satisfactory ... (it) can most certainly be considered a battle success."

As Allied troops moved into Germany, their discovery of Nazi concentration camps offered undeniable proof of the Holocaust. Eisenhower visited one such camp near Ohrdruf, Germany, on April 12, 1945. Newsreels and magazines spread the horrible images at home, encouraging public support for the international tribunal that would try the top Nazis at Nuremberg.

On May 6, 1945, units of the 1st Infantry Division liberated small camps at Zwodau and Falkenau an der Eger in

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Victory: V-E Day brought end to Hitler's vision

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Czechoslovakia. Zwodau was a slave labor camp housing some 1,000 starving women prisoners.

At Falkenau, only about 60 male prisoners survived. Here, Cpl. Samuel Fuller of the 16th Infantry Regiment, later a renowned film director, made his first film: a 16 mm black-and-white documentary of the leading citizens of Falkenau being compelled to dress and properly bury the emaciated corpses in the camp.

As the war ended, U.S. soldiers had to care for millions of civilians, many of whom were stateless persons expelled from their homes by the Nazis or Soviets. The numbers were staggering. The Allies captured some 7 million German soldiers. They also aided approximately 6 million non-German forced laborers; 2 million freed Allied prisoners of the Germans; 3 million eastern Europeans fleeing the Soviets; 1 million concentration camp survivors; and an unknown number of wounded German soldiers recovering in military hospitals.

The displaced individuals alone represented some 52 nationalities housed in more than 900 camps. The demand for transportation, construction, food, water, medicine, sanitation supplies and so on was insatiable. One commander in the 1st Division, alarmed at the wear and tear on his trucks, protested that the passenger load for each truck should be limited to 50 people.

Heavy on GIs' minds was concern they might be shipped from Europe to fight against Japan. The headquarters of the U.S. First Army did move to the Pacific Theater and many other smaller units did as well.

The Manhattan Project, of course, was completely secret and no one knew whether the atomic bomb would work. Therefore, Allied military planners envisioned an invasion of Japan for 1946 that would call for a landing force of 29 U.S. divisions (compared to 11 Allied divisions that landed in Normandy). This huge and hugely unpopular shift from Europe to the Pacific did not take place because the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August forced the Japanese to surrender in September 1945.

World War II was a global disaster. Roughly 60 million people died as a direct result of the war — 25 million Soviets (16 million of them civilians); 15 million Chinese; 6 million Poles; 3 million Japanese; 9 million Germans; and many other nationalities.

The U.S. suffered more than 500,000 military deaths, as did the United Kingdom. The United States emerged undamaged within our territory and became the leading power for decades, but the world faced problems of unprecedented magnitude sufficient to intimidate the fledgling United

Nations: ruined cities, collapsing empires and colonial governments, civil wars, new dictatorships, atomic weapons.

This is not to say that the war should not have been fought. V-E Day meant the end of Hitler's vision of a global empire based on racial superiority, slavery, dictatorship and genocide.

Hitler believed in *Weltherrschaft* — Germany's right to conquer the globe. He and his criminal regime planned a series of wars of conquest: the Sudetenland, Poland, France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and so on.

World domination was to be complete by 1950. Within Europe, Hitler intended to annex Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. He would make puppet states of Great Britain, southern France, Spain and Portugal. The Tyrol region of Italy, northern Yugoslavia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania would be

part of the German empire, as would Poland and the Soviet Union east to the Ural Mountains.

All of this would be renamed "Germania" and ruled from Berlin. Africa would be divided among Italy, Germany and a pro-Nazi Afrikaner government. His ally Japan would conquer the Pacific, China, the far eastern USSR and the western U.S. and Canada. They would divide South America.

Within Germania, population control would begin with the extermination of the mentally and physically handicapped and all Jews, among other unwanted groups. Racial purity would be achieved with racial qualifications for marriage and the forced sterilization of the unqualified. Racially acceptable children in the occupied lands would be kidnapped and returned to Germany to be raised by Nazi couples.

Women's rights would be suppressed in order to maximize the birthrate, set by projections of future army

divisions. Men of the elite SS were to have multiple wives. German veterans who married would be given farm lands in the east and the former occupants would be expelled, enslaved and exterminated.

Hitler and the Nazis implemented these plans before and during the war. He believed in his vision to his death.

In Asia, a Japanese vision was only less horrific by degrees. Even a war as damaging as World War II was not worse than a future under the Axis powers.

V-E Day ended Hitler's vision and we should be forever grateful to the GIs, sailors, Marines and airmen who bore the heaviest cost of the victory. It did not end the potential for similar visions to arise again from values not just different from ours but antithetical to ours.

Our memory of V-E Day should rekindle our commitment to our country's best ideals and to a vision of the same for all people.