

REMEMBERING V-E DAY

Eighty years ago this month, the European chapter of the Second World War came to an end. On May 7 and 8 the Allies formally accepted the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. The gut-wrenching war in Europe had come to an end, and the horrors of the holocaust had been exposed. Today, I'd like to talk briefly about how the war in Europe was won, and to remember the personal sacrifices that made this victory possible. As I mentioned at our last Veterans Day Ceremony, my Dad was a participant throughout.

Last Memorial Day we remembered the 80th Anniversary of D-Day when Allied forces launched a massive invasion on the Normandy coasts of France. More than 156,000 troops, including 57,000 Americans, successfully stormed five well-fortified and fiercely defended Normandy beaches. Another 23,000 Americans parachuted behind enemy lines.

This was the largest naval, air and land operation in history. Less than a week later, the beaches were fully secured, and over 325,000 Allied troops, more than 50,000 vehicles and some 100,000 tons of equipment had been landed. Historians often refer to D-Day as the beginning of the end of World War II. But there was much heavy fighting left ahead before the Allied Armies could breach the Siegfried Line and take the war into the Nazi Homeland. It started in the hedgerows of Normandy, when, for six

weeks, the allies fought to break through the fortified hedges into open territory. Operation Cobra, the break-out, began on July 25, and the allies spilled out into northern France. By August 1944, Paris and most of France had been liberated.

Meanwhile, on August 15, the Allies launched Operation Dragoon, a second amphibious landing in southern France. It quickly put 600,000 Allied personnel on France's Mediterranean coast. They made rapid progress against the 300,000 German defenders. About half of the Germans were made casualties or were captured. The rest fled into the Vosges Mountains. Because of its relatively easy gains, Operation Dragoon was quickly dubbed the Champagne Campaign.

In any case, the pace of the Allied advance through France was much quicker than expected. By early September 1944 four Allied army groups were closing in on the German border. Many thought that the war in Europe would be over by the end of the year. There was even optimistic talk about being home for Christmas. But that just didn't happen.

The last months of 1944 got very nasty for the Allied forces as we fought to breach the reinforced Siegfried Line, the fortified defenses along Germany's western border. First, the ill-fated parachute attack named Operation Market Garden (Think, a Bridge too Far) was launched into the Netherlands on September 17 in search of a Rhine River crossing. A ground attack was supposed to link up with

them. Despite repeated acts of courage and valor, the Market Garden forces were outfought by the Germans and defeated with heavy losses.

In October, the U.S. Army launched its toughest urban battle of the war in the city of Aachen, a German stronghold on the border with Belgium. After five weeks of bitter street fighting and house-to-house combat with heavy losses on both sides, the German commandant finally agreed to surrender. It was the first German city to fall to the Allies. But it came with a big price in Allied casualties and a big delay in the Allied attempt to break out into the German Homeland.

Then there was the four-month battle in the Hurtgen Forest, a place few Americans have ever heard of. In late 1944, the Allies probed the Siegfried Line defenses in the Forest with little success and many casualties.

If this wasn't enough, on December 16, 1944, the German military launched a massive and carefully prepared attack, which became known as the Battle of the Bulge. The Wehrmacht surged through the Ardennes Mountains into Belgium, routing many American units along the way. Overall, the Germans were outnumbered and less well equipped than the Allies they faced, but they caught the unprepared Americans totally by surprise. Initially, the German forces made major advances but were quickly contained as the Allied forces regrouped and reinforced. The 101st Airborne Division held onto the

Bastogne crossroads, and on January 3rd, 1945, the Allies began their counterattacks. Two weeks later, the battle concluded with a decisive Allied victory.

Both sides paid a heavy price in casualties, but Germany could not afford theirs; they were running out of equipment and manpower. For the record, the "Bulge" was the largest and bloodiest single battle fought by the United States in World War II, and the third-deadliest military campaign in American history.

In addition, by 1945 the Allies had almost established complete air superiority over Germany. The German Luftwaffe was essentially swept from the skies. Allied aviation could conduct both strategic bombing against German factories and cities and tactical bombing and strafing in support of its units on the ground, virtually without challenge from the air.

The War in the European Theater was rapidly coming to a close. The Battle of the Bulge left the German army on the Western front incapable of launching a major offensive.

They could only obstruct, harass, and mostly just retreat. The breaching of the Siegfried Line by our GIs and capture of an intact bridge over the Rhine at Remagen opened Nazi Germany's Western borders to Allied attacks at the same time as the Soviet Red Army pushed relentlessly into its Eastern regions. The Red Army took Berlin, the capital of the Third Reich, on May 2, 1945. A week later, the Third Reich capitulated, and the Allies formally accepted the

unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany.

So, eighty years ago this month, World War II in Europe had come to its end. But at what price? According to official records, between D-Day in Normandy and V-E Day on May 8, there were 552,117 U.S. (more than a half million) casualties. Of those, 104,812 were killed in action. These are sobering numbers. We should remember them in our ceremony today.

As Allied Commander, General Dwight D Eisenhower said in his V-E Day message to his troops:

“The route you have traveled through hundreds of miles is marked by the graves of former comrades. From them the ultimate sacrifice has been exacted. The blood of many nations – American, British, Canadian, French, Polish and many others – has helped to gain the victory. Each of the fallen died as a member of the team to which you belong, bound together by a common love of liberty and a refusal to submit to enslavement.

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