

80 years later: Remembering D-Day and the fall of the Atlantic Wall

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By the summer of 1944, the goose-stepping boot of Nazi Germany was squarely secured on the necks of the capitulating Western European nations. The Nazi war machine had rolled across the continent, blasting, and bombing its will on weaker foes. Not stopping until it claimed nation after nation in the name of the Fatherland. The Chancellor of Germany, Adolph Hitler, consciously, purposely, and effectively worked his way to Dictator of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, otherwise known as the Nazi Party.

His vision was to rule the world, taken by the force of his military might, and in the process, purge Germany of both Jews and Communists, both of which he held in disdain. From the beginning, the September 1939 invasion and conquest of Poland, the Nazi's military might appeared formidable enough to accomplish Fuehrer's vision of being the Monarch of Europe, and eventually – the world.

Nothing short of an allied invasion could dislodge the concrete tentacles so literally entrenched deep in French, Belgian, and German soils. The Atlantic Wall, a 2,400-mile fortification of concrete bunkers, gun

turrets, and land mines, was the immediate object in the Allies way.

America, to this point, had held herself out of the European fray in efforts to remain neutral as the result of the Neutrality Act of 1939, an Act that prevented the United States from entering the war. Although, while not sending troops, the U.S. was able to help support the war effort for Great Britain and France through supplies of war implements on a 'Cash and carry' basis. Meaning the U.S. would assist their allies if the allies 'purchased' the equipment as the Neutrality Act allowed and called for.

However, the events of Sunday, December 7th, 1941, changed everything. As President Roosevelt tagged it, "A Day that will live in infamy," the attack by the Japanese Imperial forces on the placid, sleepy military installation of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, drew the U.S. into the war that it was hoping to avoid. On December 11th, four days after the declaration of war by the U.S. on the Japanese Empire, both Italy and Germany declared war on the U.S., thereby completing the triad Axis of Power, conspiring to rule the universe. Three nations at war with the world; enter the United States.

With the Neutrality Act in the rearview mirror and a Congressional declaration of war, the U.S. military establishment began mobilizing troops, equipment, and financing for a massive war effort that would be spread across the globe on several fronts.

On the Pacific front, the SPTO (South Pacific Theater of Operations) America began island-hopping campaigns with forces of the Army, Marines, and Naval air, land, and sea assets, to reclaim, or redeem, properties and territories that had been invaded and occupied by the Imperial forces of Japan.

Island by island, working its way from the South Pacific, to the ultimate targets of Iwo Jima, Okinawa and ultimately Japan itself, the American Army, led by General Douglas MacArthur, and the U.S. Navy, led by Admiral Chester Nimitz, rolled out campaigns that included invasions of the properties by landing forces on the beaches, to take the properties acre, by acre.

On the Atlantic front, known as the ETO (the European Theater of Operations) bombing missions using B-17 and B-24 bombers were launched from air bases in England, across the channel to targets in France, and eventually, Germany herself. As bombing missions increased, taking out German manufacturing factories and plants manufacturing war implements, a certain vulnerability began to reveal itself to the leadership of the self-proclaimed Third World Empire, known to themselves as The Third Reich. At one point, there was an air of arrogant invincibility, postured by German military leaders. Their noses in the air pompousness puffing about the ultimate and impending crush of the American, and her allies' grip on the world.

Enter Operation Overlord.

Amassing troops, ships, tanks, planes, gliders, and other war apparatus in England, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the ETO, had his staff prepare a plan for the invasion of Europe. 'Operation Overlord' was the code name for the campaign to liberate Europe from the death grip of Adolph Hitler, the Nazi Party and the self-proclaimed Third Reich.

On the morning of June 5th, 1944, the anticipation grew among the troops, sailors, and airmen; was this the day to land in France? Was this the day that they had spent months training for, spent thousands on being equipped for, and spent hours praying for divine help for? No, frustratingly and relieving at the same time, it was not just yet. Weather across the channel created a shipping hazard with high winds and waves. Seasickness on the English Channel waters was prolific in normal weather, but the swells this day would have defeated the warriors before they arrived at the shores of Normandy.

June 6th, 1944, at 6:30 am, the command went forth to begin the largest invasion force the world had ever seen in earthly history. The British and Canadian forces aimed their landing craft at three separate beaches along the Normandy shores; named Juno, Gold, and Sword. In the meantime, American forces pointed their crafts toward Omaha and Utah beaches. The American forces lost over 2,000 troops on Omaha Beach alone. Statistically, 156,000 troops landed on the beaches, most of that total was comprised of American forces.

As the liberating armies continued to move inland and take territory back, little by little, the landings on the beaches of Normandy continued for 30 more days bringing men, ammunition, and additional supplies, until June 30, 1944, the 'Official' ending date of the D-Day invasion.

Eighty years have elapsed since those terrifying moments in the early hours of June 6th, 1944. Many of the men who braved those beaches, with the heavy enemy resistance, have since passed away, but the history and the memories have not. This year we celebrate the bravery, the tenacity, and the sheer guts 80 years after they demonstrated those traits on a sandy beach, so far away in miles, but so close in remembrance.

About Marc Knutson

Marc Knutson is a freelance journalist who lives in Scappoose Or. He is a Vietnam veteran and has written articles on assignments in Iraq and Kosovo. He holds a master's degree in communications from Gonzaga University, and an Undergrad degree in Business Administration: Management and Communications, from Corban, University, Salem Oregon. He is a die-hard Ducks fan and doesn't understand how people can become Huskies.