

GUEST ESSAY

V-E Day legacy on LI, 80 years later

The end of the war shaped the region's character, development and economy

BY JASON HALLOREN

Guest essay

Joy was tempered across Long Island when, 80 years ago on May 7, the Allies announced the end of World War II in Europe. It happened inside a commandeered schoolhouse in Reims, France, as Nazi generals signed surrender documents.

Back at Long Island's Mitchel Field, long-range transport planes continued to land, bringing wounded Americans back to the United States. At the Brooklyn Navy Yard, work continued unabated on the construction and repair of warships. A wary eye was kept on the Atlantic waters off Long Island for Nazi U-boats whose commanders either didn't get the word or had no intention of surrendering. At the Grumman and Republic defense plants, production lines continued producing fighters every hour.

Despite spontaneous celebrations that erupted throughout

the United States and Long Island, everyone understood the war would not be over until Imperial Japan, now alone and without allies, surrendered. Judging from chilling casualty rates from Iwo Jima, where nearly 7,000 U.S. Marines died taking an island of just 8 square miles, grim Pentagon studies predicted an invasion of Japan would leave at least a quarter million Americans dead. Projected Japanese deaths were, at a minimum, 5 million.

While controversial even now, two atomic bomb strikes four months after the Nazi surrender would compel the Japanese emperor to tell his subjects that they would need to "endure the unendurable." World War II was over.

For Long Island, the war's end was a historic turning point in its character, development, economy, and self-concept. Defense contracts were canceled literally overnight. Thousands of women who had found economic independence on



German Chief of the Operations Staff Alfred Jodl, center, signs the unconditional surrender document imposed by the Allies at General Eisenhower's headquarters in Reims, France, on May 7, 1945.

those factory floors were quickly dismissed.

With converted ocean liners bringing home to New York thousands of GIs within weeks of the Nazi collapse, many of them looked forward to a post-war life that included the promise of a career, a family, a car, and a home. From their tenements in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Hell's Kitchen, they now looked east to Long Island. Initial political opposition to proposed mass-produced housing on open farmland collapsed as many veterans in uniform crowded the steps of Hemp-

stead Town Hall. What would be called Levittown was soon approved and the Island's suburban transformation began.

Also settling on Long Island were many Europeans seeking solace and a new start, including Holocaust survivors who would not reveal their experiences for decades and refugees from Eastern Europe escaping the growing shadow of Communist rule.

The arrival of the Cold War shortly after jointly defeating the Nazis brought the Soviet Union and United States to the brink of nuclear conflict. That

threat compelled the Pentagon to place a ring of Nike missiles across Long Island to protect the New York metro area from possible Russian bombers. Westhampton would house a squadron of F-102 interceptors commanded by WW II ace Colonel Francis Gabreski. Grumman and Republic would recall many employees to work on fighters that would be on America's front line for decades.

Today, 80 years after that historic surrender in Europe, the aging children of those who fought in World War II wonder what to do with the patches, medals, fading photos, and tattered uniforms left in their care. Perhaps their best use would be to remind a new generation of Long Islanders of the enormous debt we owe those we will never meet but must always remember.

■ **THIS GUEST ESSAY** reflects the views of Jason Halloran, a retired colonel in the U.S. Army, past deputy commandant of



West Point, and trustee of the Museum of American Armor in Old Bethpage.

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