

VE Day Marked End of Long Road for World War II Troops

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WASHINGTON, May 5, 2015 – When President Harry S Truman, British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin simultaneously announced that Nazi Germany had surrendered on May 8, 1945, the joy Americans felt was tempered by where they were.

The war that began with Germany invading Poland Sept. 1, 1939, ended with the total defeat of the Nazi menace and the unconditional surrender of the German military.

In New York, London and Moscow the eruption of joy was instantaneous. Men and women rushed to the streets to hug and kiss and dance. The war against Nazi Germany was over. The killing had stopped. A great evil ended.

The End of a Long Road

On the front lines deep in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, the celebration was more muted, with soldiers gradually realizing they were not going to be shot at anymore and were going to go home.

Their joy was further tempered because, while Germany was defeated, Japan fought on. The soldiers realized their divisions, brigades and units would be part of the invasion of Japan.

In the Pacific, there was a brief acknowledgement that the European battle was over, but it didn't really matter to the soldiers and Marines who were still attacking Japanese positions on Okinawa or to the sailors who were fending off kamikaze attacks on ships off the island.

VE Day signified the end of a long road. Just between June 1944 and May 8, 1945, there were 552,117 U.S. casualties in the European theater of operations. Of those, 104,812 were killed in action.

In January 1945, many believed the war in Europe would last much longer.

In January, U.S. Army soldiers were still battling against German forces that had launched the Battle of the Bulge. That battle was the largest the U.S. Army ever fought and out of the 90,000 casualties around 19,000 soldiers were killed.

Events accelerated from there.

The War Moves into Germany

Bombing missions continued over Germany and every B-17 or B-24 lost over the Reich meant a loss of 10 Americans. On the ground, Allied troops mopped up German resistance on the west bank of the Rhine River.

On March 7, 1945, soldiers from the 9th Armored Division secured the Ludendorff Bridge over the Rhine River in Remagen, Germany. The U.S. 1st Army vaulted the water barrier and struck deep into Germany. The 3rd Army also crossed the river and moved on. On March 22, U.S. and British forces launch a massive operation over the Rhine in Oppenheim.

On April 2, U.S. forces surrounded 600,000 Germans in the Ruhr Pocket. Throughout the month, American forces begin discovering the consequences of the Nazi ideology as they liberated death camps like Buchenwald, Ohrdruf and Dachau.

On April 12, Americans were shocked by the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Harry S Truman was sworn in and vowed to continue Roosevelt's policies.

On April 21, Soviet forces began their assault on the German capital of Berlin.

With the Soviets closing in, Hitler committed suicide on April 30 and turns power over to Admiral Karl Donitz.

Surrender

On May 2, German forces in Berlin surrendered to the Soviets.

On May 7, formal negotiations for Germany's surrender began at the Supreme headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force headquarters in Rheims, France, and the Germans surrender unconditionally the next day.

At the conclusion of the surrender, the allied staff attempted to write a message for General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower to send to allied leaders. He opted for "The mission of this Allied Force was fulfilled at 0241, May 7th, 1945."