

WWII - A Brief Timeline

1939 - 1945

September 1, 1939

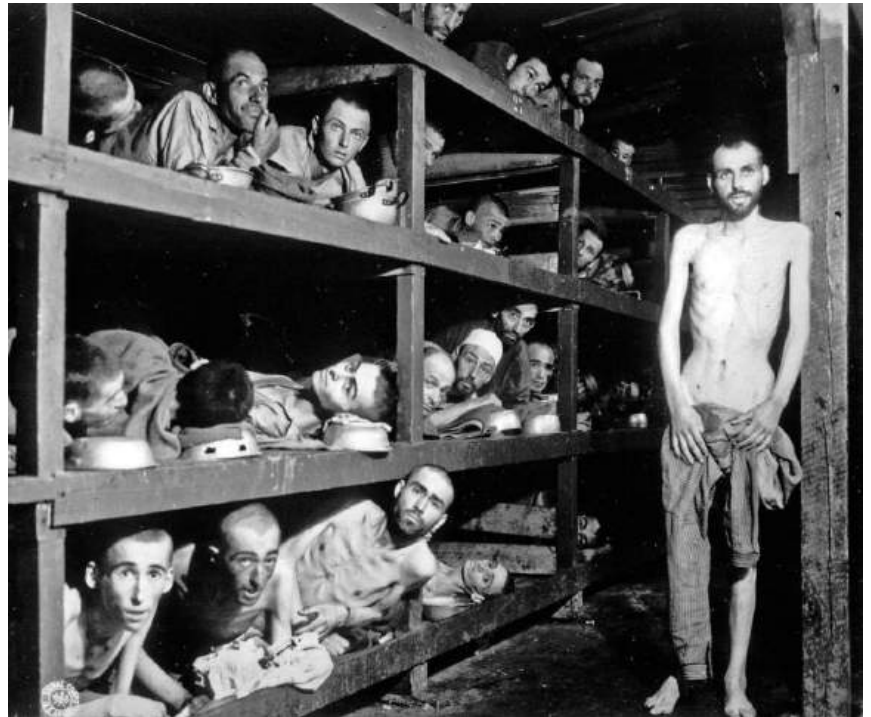
Hitler invades Poland

Hitler argued that the “Polish Corridor” actually belonged to Germany as it became part of Poland after the Versailles Treaty of WWI.

September 3, 1939

Britain and France declare war on Germany

Britain, France and Poland were allies and obligated to defend each other under the Treaty of Versailles.



November 30, 1939

Soviet Union invades Finland

The Winter War, aka First Soviet-Finnish War, ended after three and half months with the Moscow Peace Treaty. The Soviet Union claimed the invasion was in the defense of the Soviet city of Leningrad about 20 miles from the Finnish border, although Finland’s identity as an independent country or part of Russia had been fought over since 1808. Ultimately, Finland gave the USSR nine percent of its territory, but the Soviets incurred heavy personnel losses and were condemned by the League of Nations. The relatively poor performance by the Soviet Red Army emboldened Hitler to begin Operation Barbarossa in 1941.

Sept 1939-May 1945

Battle of the Atlantic

The war’s longest nonstop military campaign, it was marked by German U-boat (submarine) “wolf packs” sinking merchant ships bringing supplies from the U.S. to Britain as well as Allied escort warships. Between 1939-1945, 2,700 Allied merchant ships were sunk by German U-boats and aircraft in the Atlantic, and off America’s East Coast. U.S. escort destroyer ships entered the Battle of the Atlantic in 1943 with new technologies such as radar, which allowed them to detect U-boats on the surface, submerged, day or night, and in any weather. When the U.S. captured a U-505 German submarine, they found an Enigma code machine and books, which allowed the Allies to crack German codes and significantly improve their tactics against the U-boats. More than 130,000 Allied sailors lost their lives in the Battle of Atlantic; 28,000 of 40,000 U-boat sailors were killed. Allied control of the Atlantic allowed for the successful D-Day invasion, which eventually ended the war in Europe.

April 9, 1940

Germany Overruns Denmark and Norway

Aided by Norway’s pro-fascist former foreign minister Vikkun Quisling, Germans forces overran Norwegian ports and took control from Narvik to Oslo. In Denmark, King Christian X, convinced his

army could not fight off a German invasion, surrendered almost immediately. The term “quisling” has become a synonym for “traitor.”

May, 1940

Blitzkrieg – German attacks at Battle of the Netherlands, Battle of Belgium, and Battle of France

A military tactic of surprise attacks used rapid, overwhelming force with motorized armored vehicles, coordinated with close air support, and in these battles, parachute raids.

May 13, 1940

Prime Minister of the U.K. Neville Chamberlain resigns

Chamberlain tried to negotiate peace with Hitler by signing the Munich Agreement in 1938, assuring that the German-speaking Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia would become part of Nazi Germany without British interference. When Hitler invaded the Netherlands, Belgium and France, Chamberlain lost support in Parliament. Winston Churchill was voted in as the new prime minister.

May 25 – June 4, 1940

Dunkirk evacuation aka Operation Dynamo

Because of Hitler’s invasion, a majority of the British Army, and soldiers of the French and Belgium armies were trapped near Dunkirk on the coast of France and Belgium. The area was under constant attack from both land and air. Churchill ordered the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force to evacuate as many soldiers as possible by any means possible. The shallow water near the beach meant that men had to be ferried out to large destroyers, mine sweepers and merchant vessels. The evacuation was slow and dangerous. A call went out to the civilian population, and soon, hundreds of privately owned, small boats joined the effort. In the two weeks of the operation, 338,226 troops were rescued by 933 naval ships and/or small boats. For every seven soldiers who escaped through Dunkirk, one other became a German prisoner of war.

June 10, 1940

Italy Enters War as Germany’s Ally

Italian Fascism and German Nazism both called for national regeneration under one powerful leader and compliance by the masses under the threat of repression. Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler were personal friends. The “Pact of Friendship and Alliance,” referred to by Mussolini as the “Pact of Steel” was signed in 1939 and included a joint military and economic policy.

June 22, 1940

France signs an armistice (cease-fire agreement) with Germany

After Germany took control of Paris, the Nazis installed an occupation government of approved German and French officials. The French government of Philippe Pétain moved to Vichy during the occupation. Many French people opposed the Nazi regime and formed underground resistance groups to spy for the Allies and provide intelligence such as German troop strengths and movements, and information about supplies loaded onto German ships at French harbors.

July– October 1940

Battle of Britain

The first major military campaign in history fought entirely in the air, it pitted the German Luftwaffe against the Royal Air Force (RAF) and sent English citizens to hide in underground bomb shelters,

notably the great London transportation matrix, the Tube. Hitler's aim was a lead-up to invade Britain. In the 12-week battle, 2,662 German pilots died and more than 6,000 were captured or wounded. The RAF lost 537 pilots. Hitler recognized the futility of the battle and postponed the invasion of Britain.

September 27, 1940

Germany, Italy and Japan sign the Tripartite Pact

The agreement said that Germany and Italy would lead a new order in Europe, and Japan would lead a new world order in Greater East Asia. It did not obligate the countries to fight for each other.

December 1940

British rout Italians in North Africa

The British strategy in North Africa was to protect the trade and shipping routes in the Suez Canal.

June-December 1941

Operation Barbarossa, Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia

Adolf Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union was the largest invasion force in history with 3.5 million German and Axis troops, 3,400 tanks along an 1,800-mile front and 2,700 Luftwaffe aircraft. The Germans found the Red Army in disarray and made great gains. Hundreds of thousands of Russians were killed or captured. Soviet resistance increased. After months of hard battle, Hitler's army was depleted and exhausted and many were frozen in the intense deep snow. The Germans retreated from their advance on Moscow and the Soviets launched a fierce counter-attack.

September 1941 – January 1942

Siege of Leningrad, Russia

This 900-day siege by the Germans saw about 700,000 Russians die due to bombardment, cold and starvation. The Germans surrounded the city and cut supplies and power stations. The Russians set-up a blockade, built a 200-mile road out of the city in 27 days, and re-took a rail line. Some food supplies trickled in, but the 2.5 million population fell to fewer than one million. The Red Army winter offensive drove the Germans away from Leningrad, ending the siege. The people of Leningrad never surrendered.

Dec 7, 1941

Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

The surprise attack by the Empire of Japan on the U.S. Pacific Fleet caused 3,435 casualties and loss or damage to 188 planes, 8 battleships, 3 light cruisers and four other vessels. The Japanese lost fewer than 100 personnel, 29 planes and five midget submarines. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who devised the attack plan, said, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve." The attack at Pearl Harbor turned U.S. public opinion and America entered the war in both the Pacific and Europe.

Dec. 8, 1941

U.S. and Britain declare war on Japan

In his address to the Congress asking for a declaration of war, President Theodore Roosevelt noted that December 7 was "a date which will live in infamy," and said "With confidence in our armed forces – with the unbounding determination of our people – will gain the inevitable triumph – so help us God."

January 20, 1942

Wannsee Conference formalizes the Holocaust

Nazi leaders met to create a blue print for the systematic extermination of the Jewish people and others such as gypsies, homosexuals, and the mentally and physically disabled. The plan included forced labor camps, then execution when they were no longer able to work. The “final solution” was carried out at camps established at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Chelmno, Sobibor, Belzec and Treblinka. Ultimately, the Nazis murdered more than four million Jews and hundreds of thousands of “undesirables.”

March 10, 1942

Doolittle Raid aka Tokyo Raid

The first air bombing by U.S. Navy pilots over Japan led to minor damage but showed that the Japanese mainland was vulnerable to American air attacks. In the U.S., the raid raised morale. In Japan, it raised fear and doubt about the ability of military leaders to defend the home islands, but the bombing and strafing of civilians also steered Japanese resolve to gain retribution, which was used for propaganda purposes.

Spring, 1942

Bataan Death March, Luzon, Philippines

American and Filipino forces were quickly defeated by Japanese army troops and were forced to abandon a large portion of their supplies during the retreat. The troops immediately went on half rations; by the end of the fighting four months later, they were on quarter rations. As a result, the 10,000 American and 65,000 Filipino soldiers who entered Japanese captivity in April 1942 were already suffering from malnutrition and disease. The Japanese intended for the POWs to march for five to ten days along a 65-mile trek from the Bataan peninsula to a railhead inland, where they would be taken to a POW camp. Along the way, they were beaten, denied water, and killed. Several thousand Filipino and several hundred Americans died on the Bataan Death March, with as many as 30,000 dying of disease within weeks of entering captivity.

At the Clark Veterans Cemetery in Angeles City, Philippines, 8,956 American soldiers from WWII and the Vietnam War are buried. The American Battle Monuments Commission maintains this hallowed site, along with 25 other American military cemeteries and 32 monuments overseas.

June 1942

Battle of Midway, 1,300 miles northwest of Oahu, Hawaii

Japanese Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto believed an all-out naval battle with the Americans was the only way for Japan to gain control of the Pacific. Admiral Chester Nimitz, the U.S. Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific fleet, had hints the Japanese were planning an attack through de-coded messages that had been intercepted from the Imperial Japanese Navy. The Japanese attacked and destroyed the U.S. base at Midway. The Americans counter-attacked. The U.S.S. Yorktown was attacked and sunk. The U.S. Navy intensified attacks at Midway Atoll, compelling the Japanese to abandon the battle and return to Japan. The Japanese lost 4,800 men and suffered a significant loss of their fleet; the U.S. lost about 307 men and many fewer ships. The U.S. victory and subsequent naval battles such as the Guadalcanal Campaign, halted the Japanese expansion throughout the Pacific.

August 1942 – February 1943

Battle of Guadalcanal

Fought for six intense months between Allied and Japanese forces on and around Guadalcanal in the Solomon Island group in the South Pacific, this brutal conflict eventually ended the Empire of Japan's strategic advantage to disrupt Allied supply lines. The battle required superb coordination of Allied naval, air and ground forces. Casualties were high: the Japanese lost 24,000 men; the Americans sustained 1,600 killed, 4,200 wounded, and several thousand dead from malaria and other tropical diseases. Each side lost 24 warships.

September 17, 1942

The Manhattan Project

A secret mission to build an atomic bomb is launched. Dr. Albert Einstein and Dr. Leo Szilard advised President Franklin D. Roosevelt to develop a weapon relying upon atomic fission. They feared Nazi Germany had or would initiate such a weapon. Physicist Dr. Robert J. Oppenheimer was appointed to coordinate scientific research and to build huge secret facilities at Oak Ridge, TN and Los Alamos, NM.

November 1942

Operation Torch, North Africa

This Allied invasion of French North Africa aimed at removing the Axis powers from the African continent and protecting the British trade route through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea. It was the largest amphibious operation conducted to that point during the war and the first big success of the war for the Allied powers.

After the victory, British forces led by General Montgomery were to the east of Tunisia and the U.S. forces led by Gen. George S. Patton were located to the west effectively sandwiching German General Rommel in Tunisia. This would allow the Allies to eventually defeat Rommel in the Battle of Tunisia in mid-1943 and give the Allies a solid base to invade Sicily and Italy.

August 21, 1942 – February 2, 1943

Battle of Stalingrad

A turning point in WWII, Germany and her allies fought the Soviet Union in what is considered the bloodiest battle in human history. Combined casualties were estimated at more than 1.5 million soldiers and civilians. The Soviets won, pushing the Germans toward the west and allowing the Soviet advance on Berlin. Indirectly, it resulted in Soviet domination of East Europe and the creation of proxy socialist republics from the end of WWII until the end of the Cold War.

May 12, 1943

Axis surrenders in N. Africa

The success of Operation Torch led to the Tunisia Campaign and the eventual surrender of approximately 110,000 German and 40,000 Italian troops. The Nazis had threatened the lives of any relative of soldiers who surrendered, and the men themselves who would be punished after the war. Documents suggest, however, that noncommissioned officers leading platoons encouraged their men to surrender. A significant amount of military equipment, such as armored cars, trucks, tanks, and hundreds of guns were confiscated by the Allied troops.

At the North Africa American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunisia, 2,841 American soldiers are buried and another 3,724 are memorialized (remains missing.) It is maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission, and is the only American military cemetery in North Africa.

July, 1943

Allies invade Sicily, code name Operation Husky

The Allies took the island of Sicily from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany as the beginning of the Italian Campaign. The invasion began as a large amphibious and airborne operation, followed by a six-week land campaign. Several successful diversionary tactics such as Operation Mincemeat helped disguise the Allied invasion. Hitler diverted one-fifth of the entire Germany army from east Europe to southern Europe. Italy surrendered to the Allies on September 3, 1943.

November 28 – December 1, 1943

The Tehran Conference brought together President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Winston S. Churchill, and General Secretary of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin. They committed to Operation Overlord, the invasion of France and the liberation of Western Europe to begin in spring, 1944.

June 5, 1944

Rome liberated

British and American troops broke through the German “Gustav Line.” But in a bid to have U.S. troops capture the city, the American general disobeyed orders to cut off the German line of retreat, thereby allowing German troops to escape capture. The news of the liberation of Rome was over-shadowed by the D-Day invasion at Normandy.

June 6, 1944

D-Day – Operation Overlord

The largest air, land and sea operation undertaken before or since June 6, 1944, D-Day launched the Battle of Normandy and resulted in Allied liberation of Western Europe from Nazi Germany’s control. More than 156,000 American, British and Canadian troops, 5,000 ships, and 11,000 airplanes fought along a 50-foot stretch of the German-fortified coast in France’s Normandy region. General Dwight Eisenhower was appointed commander of Operation Overlord. In the months and weeks leading up to the invasion, the Allies carried out a massive deception operation to mislead the Germans to believe the invasion would begin in Norway and elsewhere.

At the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer in France, 9,375 American military personnel are buried. Another 1,557 are memorialized (remains missing.) It is one of 26 such American military cemeteries and 32 monuments overseas maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

August 15 – September 14, 1944

Operation Dragoon

Originally considered as part of the D-Day invasion strategy and codenamed “Operation Anvil,” this invasion of southern France was meant to support the operation at Normandy by providing a pincer that would trap German troops. But shipping capacity to supply a concurrent invasion and disagreement about strategy among the Allied leaders Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin canceled the original plan. After the invasion at Normandy was successful and resources could be shifted, the plan

was resurrected as Operation Dragoon. The Allies landed 94,000 men via landing craft and more than 9,000 paratroopers parachuted in to secure the French ports of Marseille and Toulon. The Allies suffered 395 casualties. A new supply route was opened for the Allies and the Germans retreated north to the Vosges mountains on the German border, committing numerous war crimes against civilians as they withdrew.

August 25, 1944

Paris liberated

Paris, known as the City of Lights, was the hub of national administration and politics, the center of the railroad system, communications lines and highways. After four years of Nazi occupation, and following a week of guerilla combat between Resistance fighters and German troops, the Free French Army rolled through the city supported by the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division. The following day, the German military governor and commander of city's German garrison, formally surrendered to the Allies.

April – May, 1945

Battle of Berlin

The final destruction of Hitler's stronghold in Europe occurred when Joseph Stalin was in a hurry to capture Berlin before the Americans. Stalin split his forces between two competitive commanders anxious to be credited with the fall of Berlin. Their tactics resulted in much death and bloodshed, and once they reached Berlin, reports suggest that as many as 100,000 German women were raped.

December 1944-January 1945

Battle of the Bulge

Fought in the Ardennes Forest between German and Allied Forces, almost one million soldiers were involved in this battle. It was the single bloodiest battle fought by the Americans with 80,000 troops either killed, maimed, or captured. Hitler was a fugitive and many thought WWII was near over. But Hitler intended to reverse the gains made by Allied troops when they landed in France on D-Day. He launched an attack in the Ardennes Forest where the Germans broke through the American line. Allied losses were huge as they were outnumbered ten to one by German soldiers. Allied soldiers were massacred by Germans disguised in American uniforms. The terrible losses prompted Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to send reinforcements. With help from Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army and the 2nd US Armored Division, the Germans were eventually pushed back to their initial point. The Germans lost more than 100,000 men, and didn't have troops to replace them.

April 28, 1945

Mussolini captured and executed

Benito Mussolini, the Fascist dictator of Italy, joined the side of Hitler's Nazi Germany in 1940. By the autumn of 1943, he saw many military failures and was reduced to being the leader of a German puppet state in northern Italy after the successful advances of Allied forces. By 1945, with Allies breaking through the last of German defenses, Mussolini fled Milan with his mistress for Switzerland. They were captured by local partisans near Lake Como, and he was shot.

April 30, 1945

Hitler commits suicide

As the Battle of Berlin was ending, and with Nazi Germany on the verge of military collapse, Adolf Hitler died of a self-inflicted gunshot. Eva Braun, his mistress and wife of one day, committed suicide by cyanide. Their bodies were brought out of their bunker, doused in petrol, and cremated. Hitler was 56 years old and responsible for the deaths of an estimated 70-85 million people, or about 3 percent of the global population at that time.

April – June 1945

Battle of Okinawa

One of the largest sea-land-and air battles in history, it was also the last major battle of the Pacific campaign. Americans intended to capture Okinawa Islands as part of a three-point plan to win the war in the Far East. The strategy included destroying the remaining Japanese merchant fleet, and taking control of four airfields on the Islands to launch bombing raids on Japan's industrial hubs. Fighting was intense with Japanese frontal assaults at the Machinato line and the Shuri line as well as aerial attacks by Kamikaze suicide pilots. When the Americans secured Okinawa, the Japanese commander, General Mitsuru Ushijima, committed suicide. More than 100,000 Okinawan citizens perished, and there were more than 72,000 American fatalities, 107,000 Japanese fatalities, and 7,400 taken prisoner.

May 7, 1945

Unconditional surrender of all German forces

British Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery accepted the unconditional surrender of all the German Forces at a signing event in the Netherlands.

May 8, 1945

V.E. – Victory in Europe Day

Marking the end of war in Europe, the public holiday is known as VE Day in the U.S, U.K. and Israel. It is also called Victory Over Fascism Day, Liberation Day, or Victory Day. Because war in the Pacific was on-going, President Harry S. Truman noted it was “a victory only half won.”

June 26, 1945

Establishment of the United Nations

Founded by 51 countries, the mission is to maintain international peace and security, develop friendly relations among nations, promote social progress, better living standards and human rights. Its forerunner, the League of Nations, was primarily founded as a powerful military alliance. The League of Nations was disbanded in 1946 after the United Nations was formed.

July 5, 1945

Churchill loses election

Winston Churchill served as prime minister from 1940 to 1945 and was well-regarded as a war-time leader. The General Election for control of the U.K. Parliament presented voters with the question of how Churchill and his Conservative majority would govern in a post-war economic and social environment. Ultimately, they gave Clement Atlee and his Labour Party the majority to lead the country through a period of re-construction. Churchill was returned to serve as prime minister from 1951-1955 amid the developing Cold War with the Soviet Union, when he warned of an “iron curtain” of Soviet influence. In declining health, he resigned as prime minister, although he continued to serve as a Member of Parliament (MP) until 1964. He died in 1965.

July 17-August 2, 1945

Potsdam Conference

Leaders of the Big Three – U.S., Britain, and Soviet Union affirmed the new borders of Axis countries and their supporters that were drafted at the Yalta Conference, defined economic reorganization and reparations, and defined terms of surrender for Japan.

August 6, August 9, 1945

U.S. Atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan

The Potsdam Conference presented Japan with an ultimatum for surrender. The Japanese government ignored it. President Harry S. Truman made the decision to drop the atomic bombs believing that Hiroshima featured significant military targets and that the psychological effect would be so dramatic that the Japanese would quickly surrender, thereby eliminating an invasion of Japan with hundreds of thousand of American and millions of Japanese casualties. The B-29 bomber Enola Gay dropped a fission U-235 bomb on Hiroshima. The city was instantly devastated; about 70,000 died immediately and another 70,000 died within the year from injuries, burns and radiation. When the Japanese did not respond with surrender, an implosion-type plutonium 239 bomb was dropped over Nagasaki. Again, the effects were devastating.

August 15 – September 2, 1945

Japan Surrenders

After the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima, and with no surrender by the Japanese, the Soviets abandoned their Neutrality Pact with Japan and launched the Soviet Manchurian Offensive. The offensive placed one million Soviet soldiers on Japanese-occupied Manchuria in northern China. Japanese leaders were split on whether to surrender or to keep fighting. When the Americans dropped a second bomb, this time on Nagasaki, Japanese Emperor Hirohito committed decisively for peace. The formal surrender ceremony took place on board the battleship U.S.S. Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

November 20, 1945- April 4, 1949

The Nuremberg Trials prosecuted the military, political and economic leadership of the defeated Nazi Third Reich. Sentences for major war criminals ranged from a sentence to death, to life in prison, to ten to twenty years in prison. The Nuremberg Trials established a precedent of individual accountability under international law for wars of aggressions and crimes against humanity. It was the precursor to today's International Criminal Court.

June 5, 1947-December 31, 1951

The Marshall Plan was a massive economic recovery aid program funded primarily by American taxpayers and businesses who invested about \$13 billion into the project. It eliminated tariffs and trade barriers and established initiatives to facilitate global commerce such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Participating countries made significant economic progress. The Soviet Union chose not to participate and did not allow countries it occupied to participate.

Compiled by Christine Burt, Executive Director, American Battle Monuments Foundation
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