A Brief History of the U.S. Army in World War II

The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II

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Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

A Brief History of the U.S. Army in World War II highlights the major ground force campaigns during the six years of the war, offers suggestions for further reading, and provides Americans an opportunity to learn about the Army's role in World War II. This brochure was prepared at the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Wayne M. Dzwonchyk (Europe) and John Ray Skates (Pacific). I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

M. P. W. Stone
Secretary of the Army

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World War I left unresolved the question of who would dominate Europe. The tremendous dislocations caused by the war laid the groundwork for the collapse of democratic institutions there and set the stage for a second German attempt at conquest. A worldwide depression that began in 1929 destroyed the fragile democratic regime in Germany. In 1933 Adolf Hitler led to power the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party, a mass movement that was virulently nationalistic, antidemocratic, and anti-Semitic. He ended parliamentary government, assumed dictatorial powers, and proclaimed the Third Reich. The Nazi government increased the strength of the German armed forces and sought to overturn the Versailles Treaty, to recover German territory lost at the peace settlement, and to return to the so-called Fatherland German-speaking minorities within the borders of surrounding countries.

The ultimate goal of Hitler's policy was to secure "living space" for the German "master race" in eastern Europe. A gambler by instinct, Hitler relied on diplomatic bluff and military innovation to overcome Germany's weaknesses. He played skillfully on the divisions among the European powers to gain many of his aims without war. With the Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini he announced a Rome-Berlin alliance (the Axis) in 1935. Meanwhile, in the Far East, the Japanese—the only Asian industrial power—coveted the natural resources of China and Southeast Asia, but found their expansion blocked by European colonial powers or by the United States. Having seized Manchuria in 1931, they began a war against China in 1937. The League of Nations failed to counter effectively Japanese aggression in Manchuria and an Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Soon Germany, Italy, and Japan became allies, facing Western democratic governments that wanted to avoid another war and the Soviet Union whose Communist government was widely distrusted.

The people of the United States, having rejected the Versailles Treaty and the Covenant of the League of Nations after World War I, remained largely indifferent to most international concerns. They firmly discounted the likelihood of American involvement in an-

other major war, except perhaps with Japan. Isolationist strength in Congress led to the passage of the Neutrality Act of 1937, making it unlawful for the United States to trade with belligerents. American policy aimed at continental defense and designated the Navy as the first line of such defense. The Army's role was to serve as the nucleus of a mass mobilization that would defeat any invaders who managed to fight their way past the Navy and the nation's powerful coastal defense installations. The National Defense Act of 1920 allowed an Army of 280,000, the largest in peacetime history, but until 1939 Congress never appropriated funds to pay for much more than half of that strength. Most of the funds available for new equipment went to the fledgling air corps. Throughout most of the interwar period, the Army was tiny and insular, filled with hard-bitten, long-serving volunteers scattered in small garrisons throughout the continental United States, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Panama.

Yet some innovative thinking and preparation for the future took place in the interwar Army. Experiments with armored vehicles and motorization, air-ground cooperation, and the aerial transport of troops came to nothing for lack of resources and of consistent high-level support. The Army did, however, develop an interest in amphibious warfare and in related techniques that were then being pioneered by the U.S. Marine Corps. By the outbreak of war the Signal Corps was a leader in improving radio communications, and American artillery practiced the most sophisticated fire-direction and -control techniques in the world. In addition, war plans for various contingencies had been drawn up, as had industrial and manpower mobilization plans. During the early 1930s Col. George C. Marshall, assistant commandant of the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, had earmarked a number of younger officers for leadership positions. Despite such preparations, the Army as a whole was unready for the war that broke out in Europe on 1 September 1939.

The Outbreak of War

During March 1938 German troops had occupied Austria, incorporating it into the Reich. In September Hitler announced that the "oppression" of ethnic Germans living in Czechoslovakia was intolerable and that war was near. England and France met with Hitler (the Munich Pact) and compelled Czechoslovakia to cede its frontier districts to Germany in order to secure "peace in our time." Peace, however, was only an illusion. During March 1939 Hitler seized the rest of Czechoslovakia by force of arms and then turned

his attention to Poland. Although Britain and France had guaranteed the integrity of Poland, Hitler and Josef Stalin, dictator of the Soviet Union, signed a secret, mutual nonaggression pact in August 1939. With the pact Stalin bought time to build up his strength at the expense of Britain and France, and Hitler gained a free hand to deal with Poland. When Hitler's army invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, World War II began.

While German forces overran western Poland, Soviet troops entered from the east to claim their portion of that country. France and Britain declared war on Germany and mobilized their forces. The subsequent period of deceptive inactivity, lasting until spring, became known as the Phony War. Nothing happened to indicate that World War II would differ significantly in style or tempo from World War I.

But the years since 1918 had brought important developments in the use of tanks. A number of students of war—the British Sir Basil Liddell Hart and J. F. C. Fuller, the Frenchman Charles de Gaulle, the American George S. Patton, and the Germans Oswald Lutz and Heinz Guderian—believed that armored vehicles held the key to restoring decision to the battlefield. But only the Germans conceived the idea of massing tanks in division-size units, with infantry, artillery, engineers, and other supporting arms mechanized and all moving at the same pace. Moreover, only Lutz and Guderian received the enthusiastic support of their government.

In the spring of 1940 their theories were put to the test as German forces struck against Norway and Denmark in April; invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg in May; and late in the same month broke through a hilly, wooded district in France. Their columns sliced through to the English Channel, cutting off British and French troops in northern France and Belgium. The French Army, plagued by low morale, divided command, and primitive communications, fell apart. The British evacuated their forces from Dunkerque with the loss of most of their equipment. The Germans entered Paris on 14 June, and the French government, defeatist and deeply divided politically, sued for an armistice. The success of the German *Blitzkrieg* forced the remaining combatants to rethink their doctrine and restructure their armies.

With his forces occupying northern France and with a puppet French government established in the south, Hitler launched the *Luftwaffe* against the airfields and cities of England to pave the way for an invasion. Britain's survival hung by a thread. From July to October 1940, while German landing barges and invasion forces waited on the Channel coasts, the Royal Air Force, greatly outnumbered,

drove the *Luftwaffe* from the daytime skies in the legendary Battle of Britain. At sea the British Navy, with increasing American cooperation, fought a desperate battle against German submarine packs to keep the North Atlantic open. British pugnacity finally forced Hitler to abandon all plans to invade England.

In February Hitler sent troops under Lt. Gen. Erwin Rommel to aid the Italians who were fighting against the British in North Africa. German forces coming to the aid of the Italians in the Balkans routed a British expedition in Greece, and German paratroopers seized the important island of Crete. Then, in June 1944, Hitler turned against his supposed ally, the Soviet Union, with the full might of the German armed forces.

Armored spearheads thrust deep into Soviet territory, driving toward Leningrad, Moscow, and the Ukraine and cutting off entire Soviet armies. Despite tremendous losses, Russian military forces withdrew farther into the country and continued to resist. Nazi expectations of a quick victory evaporated, and the onset of winter caught the Germans unprepared. Thirty miles short of Moscow their advance ground to a halt, and the Soviets launched massive counterattacks.

The Germans withstood the counterattacks and resumed their offensive the following spring. The Soviets, now locked in a titanic death struggle, faced the bulk of the German land forces—over two hundred divisions. The front stretched for 2,000 miles, from the Arctic Circle to the Black Sea. Soon casualties ran into the millions. Waging war with the implacable ruthlessness of totalitarian regimes, both sides committed wholesale atrocities—mistreatment of prisoners of war, enslavement of civilian populations, and, in the case of the Jews, outright genocide.

In the United States preparations for war moved slowly. General George C. Marshall took over as Chief of Staff in 1939, but the Army remained hard pressed simply to carry out its mission of defending the continental United States. Defending overseas possessions like the Philippines seemed a hopeless task. In early 1939, prompted by fears that a hostile power might be able to establish air bases in the Western Hemisphere, thus exposing the Panama Canal or continental United States to aerial attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched a limited preparedness campaign. The power of the Army Air Corps increased; Army and Navy leaders drafted a new series of war plans to deal with the threatening international situation. The focus of military policy changed from continental to hemisphere defense.

After the outbreak of war in Europe the President proclaimed a limited emergency and authorized increases in the size of the Regu-

lar Army and the National Guard. Congress amended the Neutrality Act to permit munitions sales to the French and British, and large orders from them stimulated retooling and laid the basis for the expansion of war production in the future. The Army concentrated on equipping its regular forces as quickly as possible and in 1940 held the first large-scale corps and army maneuvers in American history. The rapid defeat of France and the possible collapse of Britain dramatically accelerated defense preparations. Roosevelt directed the transfer of large stocks of World War I munitions to France and Britain in the spring of 1940 and went further in September when he agreed to the transfer of fifty over-age destroyers to Britain in exchange for bases in the Atlantic and Caribbean. In March 1941 Congress repealed some provisions of the Neutrality Act. Passage of the Lend-Lease Act, which gave the President authority to sell, transfer, or lease war goods to the government of any country whose

defenses he deemed vital to the defense of the United States, spelled the virtual end of neutrality. The President proclaimed that the United States would become the "arsenal of democracy." In the spring of 1941 American and British military representatives held their first combined staff conferences to discuss strategy in the event of active U.S. participation in the war, which seemed increasingly likely to include Japan as well as Germany. The staffs agreed that if the United States entered the war the Allies should concentrate on the defeat of Germany first. The President authorized active naval patrols in the western half of the Atlantic, and in July, American troops took the place of British forces guarding Iceland.

Meanwhile, General Marshall and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson made plans to expand the Army to 1.5 million men. On 27 August 1940, Congress approved inducting the National Guard into federal service and calling up the reserves. A few weeks later the lawmakers passed the Selective Service and Training Act, the first peacetime draft in American history. By mid-1941 the Army had achieved its planned strength, with 27 infantry, 5 armored, and 2 cavalry divisions; 35 air groups; and a host of support units. But it remained far from ready to deploy overseas against well-equipped, experienced, and determined foes.

The United States Enters the War

On 7 December 1941, while German armies were freezing before Moscow, Japan suddenly pushed the United States into the struggle by attacking the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Four days later Hitler declared war on the United States. President Roosevelt called on Congress for immediate and massive expansion of the armed forces. Twenty years of neglect and indifference, however, could not be overcome in a few days.

Helpless as American garrisons in the Pacific fell to the Japanese in the spring of 1942, military leaders in Washington worked feverishly to create a headquarters that could direct a distant war effort and to turn the fledgling ground and air units into viable, balanced fighting forces. In early 1942 the Joint Chiefs of Staff emerged as a committee of the nation's military leaders to advise the President and to coordinate strategy with the British. In March the War Department General Staff was reorganized and the Army divided into three major commands: the Air Forces, Ground Forces, and Service Forces. Thirty-seven Army divisions were in some state of training, but only one was fully trained, equipped, and deployable by January

1942. Army planners of the time estimated that victory would require an Army of nearly 9 million men, organized into 215 combat divisions, estimates that proved accurate regarding overall manpower but too ambitious for the 90 divisions that eventually were established and supported on far-flung battlefields.

Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair, head of Army Ground Forces and an ardent advocate of mobile war, oversaw the development of armored and airborne divisions. He directed the restructuring of existing organizations as well, turning the old World War I "square" division based on four infantry regiments into a lighter, more maneuverable triangular division with three infantry regiments. A serious and continuing shortage of Allied shipping space placed absolute limits on the size and capabilities of Army units. New tables of organization stressed leanness and mobility, sometimes at the expense of fighting power and endurance. Billeting, training areas, and equipment were all in short supply. American industry had to support the nation's Allies as well as its own military expansion. Britain needed large amounts of munitions and equipment; and lend-lease aid, including tens of thousands of trucks and other vehicles and equipment, played

an important part in mechanizing the Soviet Army. Amphibious warfare required large numbers of landing craft and support vessels, yet to be built. The first U.S. troops arrived in the British Isles in January 1942, but nearly a year passed before they went into action against the Axis. Meanwhile, air power provided virtually the only means for the Allies to strike at Germany. The Royal Air Force began its air offensive against Germany in May 1942, and on 4 July the first American crews participated in air raids against the Continent.

In early 1942 British and American leaders reaffirmed the priority of the European theater. General Marshall argued for an immediate buildup of American forces in Great Britain, a possible diversionary attack on the Continent in the fall, and a definite full-scale invasion in 1943. The British greeted this program with caution. Remembering the enormous casualties of World War I, they preferred to strike at German power in the Mediterranean, rather than risk a direct confrontation in haste. Although acknowledging the eventual necessity for an invasion of France, they hoped to defer it until much later. Instead, Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill suggested Anglo-American landings in North Africa, bringing the French armies in France's colonies there back into the war on the side of the Allies and aiding the British in their fight against the Italians and the forces of German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Months of lively debate followed, but ultimately President Roosevelt directed General Marshall to plan and carry out amphibious landings on the coast of North Africa before the end of 1942.

The North African Campaign

Marshall ordered Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, then in England, to take command of the invasion. Meeting the November deadline required improvisation of every kind Army troops were hurriedly trained in amphibious warfare. Technicians modified commercial vessels to serve as landing ships. While General Eisenhower monitored operations from Gibraltar, American forces, convoyed directly from the United States, landed along the Atlantic coast of French Morocco, near Casablanca. Meanwhile, American and British troops sailing from England landed in Algeria. Despite efforts to win support among French military officers in North Africa, some fighting occurred. Nevertheless negotiations soon led to a cease-fire, and French units joined the Allied forces.

While the Allies tightened their grip on Morocco and Algeria, their troops raced to reach strategic positions in neighboring Tunisia. A

month earlier the British in Egypt under Lt. Gen. Sir Bernard L. Montgomery had mounted a powerful attack on the Germans at El Alamein, sending Rommel and his *German-Italian Panzer Army* reeling back into Libya. If strong Allied forces could reach the coast of Tunisia, Rommel would be trapped between them and Montgomery's troops.

Awake to the threat, the Germans poured troops into Tunisia by air and sea, brushing aside weak French forces there. Axis air power, based in Sicily, Sardinia, and Italy, pounded the advancing Allied columns. As torrential December rains turned the countryside into a quagmire, the Allies lost the race. Instead of catching Rommel, they faced a protracted struggle. While his forces dug in along the southern border of Tunisia opposite Montgomery, a second powerful Axis force, the *Fifth Panzer Army*, barred the way to the Tunisian coast.

A chain of mountains separates coastal Tunisia from the arid interior. In a plain between two arms of the mountains and behind the passes in the west lay important Allied airfields and supply dumps. On 14 February 1943, the Axis commanders sent German and Italian forces through the passes, hoping to penetrate the American positions and either envelop the British in the north or seize Allied supply de-

pots. German forces quickly cut off and overwhelmed two battalions of American infantry positioned too far apart for mutual support, and the experienced *panzers* beat back counterattacks by American reserves, including elements of the U.S. 1st Armored Division. U.S. troops began evacuating airfields and supply depots on the plain and falling back to the western arm of the mountains. Dug in around the oasis town of Sbeitla, American infantry and armor managed to hold off the Germans through 16 February, but defenses there began to disintegrate during the night, and the town lay empty by midday on the 17th. From the oasis, roads led back to two passes, the Sbiba and the Kasserine. By 21 February the Germans had pushed through both and were poised to seize road junctions leading to the British rear.

Rommel and other German commanders, however, could not agree on how to exploit their success. Meanwhile Allied reinforcements rushed to the critical area. The 1st Armored Division turned back German probes toward Tebessa, and British armor met a more powerful thrust toward Thala, where four battalions of field artillery from the U.S. 9th Infantry Division arrived just in time to bolster sagging defenses. On the night of 22 February the Germans began to pull back. A few days later Allied forces returned to the passes. The first American battle with German forces had cost more than 6,000 U.S. casualties, including 300 dead and two-thirds of the tank strength of the 1st Armored Division.

In March, after the British repulsed another German attack, the Allies resumed the offensive. The U.S. II Corps, now under the command of Maj. Gen. George S. Patton, attacked in coordination with an assault on the German line by Montgomery's troops. American and British forces in the south met on 7 April as they squeezed Axis forces into the northeastern tip of the country. The final drive to clear Tunisia began on 19 April. On 7 May British armor entered Tunis, and American infantry entered Bizerte. Six days later the last Axis resistance in Africa ended with the surrender of over 275,000 prisoners of war.

The U.S. Army learned bitter lessons about the inadequacy of its training, equipment, and leadership in the North African campaign. Army Ground Forces acted quickly to ensure that American soldiers would receive more realistic combat training. Higher commanders realized that they could not interfere with their subordinates by dictating in detail the positions of their units. Troops had to be committed in division-size, combined arms teams, not in driblets. The problem posed by American tanks, outgunned by the more heavily armed and armored German panzers, took far longer to correct. But the artillery established itself as the Army's most proficient arm.

Sicily and Italy

Meeting in Casablanca in January 1943, President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided that the large Italian island of Sicily would be their next target. Montgomery's British forces landed on the southeast coast, while Patton's newly activated Seventh Army landed on the southwest, with the mission of seizing airfields and protecting the flank of the British drive. Airborne troops spearheading the attacks scattered wide of their targets but managed to disrupt enemy communications. Hours after the initial landings on 9 July, German armor struck the American beaches. Naval gunfire, infantry counterattacks, and the direct fire of field artillery landing at the critical juncture broke up the German formations. But two attempts to reinforce the beaches with parachute and glider-borne troops ended in disaster when Allied antiaircraft batteries mistook the transport planes for enemy aircraft and opened fire, causing severe losses.

Meanwhile, the Germans solidly blocked the British drive on the Sicilian capital, Messina. General Sir Harold R. L. G. Alexander, Allied ground commander, ordered Patton to push toward Palermo, at the western tip of the island. Once in Palermo, since the British drive was still stalled, his forces attacked Messina from the north. Patton used a series of small amphibious end runs to outflank German positions on the northern coastal road. American and British troops arrived in Messina on 17 August, just as the last Axis troops evacuated Sicily.

In late July the Allies decided to follow up their success in Sicily with an invasion of Italy. Having lost hope of victory, the *Italian High Command*, backed by the king, opened secret negotiations with the Allies. The Germans, suspecting that Italy was about to desert the Axis, rushed in additional troops.

The Germans swiftly disarmed the Italian Army and took over its defensive positions. A British fleet sailed into the harbor of Taranto and disembarked troops onto the docks, while the U.S. Fifth Army under Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark landed on the beaches near Salerno on 9 September. The Germans reacted in strength. For four days vigorous attacks by German armor threatened the beaches. But on 16 September American and British forces made contact, and two weeks later American troops entered Naples, the largest city south of Rome. Allied plans called for a continued advance to tie down German troops and prevent their transfer to France or Russia, while Hitler decided to hold as much of Italy as possible.