

Battle of Britain

July 1940, the German war machine had overrun France and was now poised at the English Channel. Britain anticipated that they would be the next to be invaded. The German army and the Luftwaffe had made short work of Poland, before turning their attention north and then west. The British Norwegian Campaign had ended ignominiously while the British Expeditionary Force had been whipped in France. The successful evacuation of over 335,000 British and French soldiers from Dunkirk hid the apparent failure against the Blitzkrieg. The Germans appeared unbeatable.

With the Germans almost at their doorstep, all England looked to the Royal Air Force. Both the English and the Germans realized that before the German armies could invade, the RAF would have to be eliminated. With this in mind, the Luftwaffe first probed for weaknesses by attacking targets in southern England and shipping. This was followed by attacks against RAF airfields and radar stations.

The RAF, already badly weakened through having sent squadrons to France, was suffering heavily in the daily attacks on their airfields. Although fighting valiantly, losses of men and machines mounted, nearing a critical level. Relief came from an unexpected source. A German bomber accidentally bombed London prompting the RAF to attack Berlin. Hitler was incensed, ordering that the Luftwaffe now turn their attention to leveling London.

With the Luftwaffe's attention now turned to London and other British cities, the heat was still not off the RAF. The elimination of Britain's still developing war industry could have dealt Britain a grave blow. Day after day the Luftwaffe came to bomb the docks, factories and infrastructure of the last bastion in Europe. Daily the RAF met the challenge. The stalwart defense during the day forced the Luftwaffe to attack at night. By the end of October, the Luftwaffe had exhausted itself. With it went the last chance of an invasion of Britain by the German army.

Joining the British and Canadians, were pilots from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, from Czechoslovakia, France and Poland, and from the United States. It was an international effort to defend democracy. Few of them recognized the significance of their actions at the time.

The significance of the Battle of Britain is more than just a matter of Aircraft kills and medals. It was the first time that air power saved a nation. Not only was it a military victory, but it also gave a somber nation hope for the future. For Canada, the leadership provided by these experienced fliers was to be instrumental in the development of the Royal Canadian Air Force. The Battle of Britain was also the first occasion in which Canadian airmen flew in Canadian units in a sustained battle.

The Battle of Stalingrad

The significance of the Battle of Stalingrad was immense. It marked the turning point in the Second World War against Nazi Germany and its allies. It was a major victory for the Soviet Union and marked the end of the German advance on the Eastern Front. Additionally the battle is known for its fierce fighting, heavy casualties (both soldiers and civilians), and the complete destruction of the German 6th Army. It was one of the bloodiest battles in the history of modern warfare.

The Battle for Stalingrad began in the summer of 1942. The city itself was an important transportation point on the Volga River and stood in the way of the German plan to capture the Russian oilfields of the Caucasus. Additionally the city was named after the supreme commander of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, and both sides wanted to control it at all costs. Defeat for either side would mean a crippling, perhaps fatal, blow to morale.

From the middle of July 1942 until the beginning of November 1942 the Germans were able to capture 90% of the city supported by heavy aerial bombing from the Luftwaffe. The heavy bombing reduced much of the city into rubble and fierce house to house fighting characterized much of the battle. The battle centered on a massive grain silo, the train station, a giant department store, and Mamayev Kurgan hill overlooking the city. The Russian Army hung on to a small part of Stalingrad on the west bank of the Volga River.

In November of 1942 the Russian Army launched a surprise counteroffensive called Operation Uranus in order to trap the German 6th army. They attacked the weakly defended German flanks simultaneously in a pincer movement and were able to surround the German forces in Stalingrad. The Germans trapped in the Stalingrad Pocket called it the *Kessel*, or the Cauldron. Hitler refused to allow the 6th Army to retreat from the city and was reassured by the commander of the German Luftwaffe (Air Force), Herman Goering, that the Sixth Army could be re-supplied through the air. The hastily assembled Army Group Don consisting of 3 panzer divisions led by General von Manstein attempted to rescue the surrounded 6th Army in Stalingrad. They came within 30 miles of Stalingrad on December 20th but that is the farthest that they would get. The re-supply efforts were not effective and remaining elements of the Sixth Army were either destroyed or became prisoners of war.

Casualties

Germany: 750,000 killed, wounded or missing; 108,000+ captured
900 aircraft; 4,300 tanks

Soviet Union: 1,129,000 killed, wounded, missing or captured 1,000 to 40,000
civilians killed 2,769 aircraft; 4,340 tanks

D-Day

At the beginning of World War 2, Germany invaded Poland, causing France, Great Britain and Canada to declare war on Germany. By the spring of 1940, the German army was ready to invade France, defended by not only the French military, but also a sizable British force as well. Within six weeks, the Germans defeated the Allies and seized control of France.

By 1944, the Germans knew that the Allies, also now including the United States, among others, would attempt an invasion of France to liberate Europe from Germany. The Allied forces, based in Britain, decided to begin the invasion by landing a huge army at a place called Normandy Beach, which is located on the northwest coast of France. Code-named "Operation Overlord", and commanded by American General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Allies landed on June 6, 1944 at five beaches in the Normandy area with the code names of: Utah Beach, Omaha Beach, Gold Beach, Juno Beach and Sword Beach.

Prior to the actual amphibious invasion, Allied planes pounded the Nazi defenders and dropped thousands of paratroopers behind German lines the night before the seaborne landings. On the evening of June 5, 1944, more than 150,000 men, a fleet of 5,000 ships and landing craft, 50,000 vehicles, and 11,000 planes sat in southern England, poised to attack secretly across the English Channel along the Normandy coast of France. This force was the largest armada in history and represented years of training, planning, and supplying. Because of the highly intricate Allied deception plans, Hitler and his staff believed that the Allies would be attacking at the Pas-de-Calais. In the early morning of June 6, thousands of Allied paratroopers landed behind enemy lines, securing key roads and bridges on the flanks of the invasion area. As the sun rose on the Normandy coastline, the Allies began their amphibious landings, traveling to the beaches in small landing craft lowered from the decks of larger ships anchored in the Channel. The attack on four of the beaches went according to plan. But at Omaha Beach between Utah and Gold, the bravery and determination of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division was tested in one of the fiercest battles of the war. Surrounded at both ends by cliffs that rose wall-like from the sea, Omaha was only four miles long. To repel the Allies at the water's edge, the Germans built a fortress atop the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc overlooking Omaha from the west. They dug trenches and guns into the 150-foot bluffs lining the beach and along five ravines leading off it. As Allied troops waded into the surf, many were cut down as the doors of their landing craft opened. The survivors had to cross more than 300 yards across a tidal flat strewn with man-made obstacles. Winds and currents pushed landing craft into clumps as the men moved ashore. As a result, soldiers ran onto the beach in groups and became easy targets. Of the more than 9,000 Allied casualties on D-Day, Omaha accounted for about one-third. Allied planners had hoped that the forces at Omaha would advance 5 to 10 miles after 24 hours of fighting. Stiff German resistance, however, stopped the invaders cold on the beach. Progress inland was excruciatingly slow and painful. The Allied forces reached their

first day goal only after more than two days of bloody fighting. Although many died, the Allies eventually took control of the beach and fought their way inland. 156,000 American, British and Canadian troops met heavy resistance from the German forces defending the area, but were able to punch inland, securing safe landing zones for reinforcements. The German failure to successfully defend the Normandy area from the Allied liberation forces in essence doomed Hitler's dream of a Nazi controlled "Fortress Europe" and marked the beginning of the end for Germany.

Battle of the Bulge

In late 1944, in the wake of the allied forces' successful D-Day invasion of Normandy, France, it seemed as if the Second World War was all but over. But on December 16, with the onset of winter, the German army launched a counteroffensive that was intended to cut through the Allied forces in a manner that would turn the tide of the war in Hitler's favor. The battle that ensued is known historically as The Battle of the Bulge. The courage and fortitude of the American Soldier was tested against great adversity. Nevertheless, the quality of his response ultimately meant the victory of freedom over tyranny.

Early on the misty winter morning of 16 December 1944, over 200,000 German troops and nearly 1,000 tanks launched Adolf Hitler's last bid to reverse the ebb in his fortunes that had begun when Allied troops landed in France on D-day. Seeking to drive to the English Channel coast and split the Allied armies as they had done in May 1940, the Germans struck in the Ardennes Forest, a seventy-five-mile stretch of the front characterized by dense woods and few roads, held by four inexperienced and battle-worn American divisions stationed there for rest and seasoning.

After a day of hard fighting, the Germans broke through the American front, surrounding most of an infantry division, seizing key crossroads, and advancing their spearheads toward the Meuse River, creating the projection that gave the battle its name.

The supreme Allied commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower rushed reinforcements to hold the shoulders of the German penetration. Within days, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr. had turned his Third U.S. Army to the north and was counterattacking against the German flank. But the story of the battle of the Bulge is above all the story of American soldiers. Often isolated and unaware of the overall picture, they did their part to slow the Nazi advance, whether by delaying armored spearheads with obstinate defenses of vital crossroads, moving or burning critical gasoline stocks to keep them from the fuel-hungry German tanks, or coming up with questions on arcane Americana to stump possible Nazi infiltrators.

At the critical road junctions of St. Vith and Bastogne, American tankers and paratroopers fought off repeated attacks, and when the acting commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Bastogne was summoned by his German adversary to surrender, he simply responded, "Nuts!"

Within days, Patton's Third Army had relieved Bastogne, and to the north, the 2d U.S. Armored Division stopped enemy tanks short of the Meuse on Christmas Day. Through January, American troops, often wading through deep snow drifts, attacked the sides of the shrinking bulge until they had restored the front and set the stage for the final drive to victory. Never again would Hitler be able to launch an offensive in the West on such a scale. An admiring British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill stated, "This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory." Indeed, in terms of participation and losses, the battle of the Bulge is arguably the greatest battle in American military history.