

# 36 Axing the Axis



Defense stamps and war bonds were a way to lend the government money. You bought a stamp and stuck it in a book. A bookful of stamps added up to a bond. The government used your loan for war expenses; later you got the money back with interest. Here, Boy Scouts appeal to a large crowd during a parade in Ashland, Kentucky, in 1942.

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This poster of Rosie the Riveter doing war work later symbolized women's empowerment.

"We have reached the end of the beginning," said Churchill, early in 1943. He was right.

The beginning was horrible. The Germans had perfected their *blitzkrieg* (that lightning attack with planes, tanks, and armies all charging together). The Japanese used the same tactic, and mowed down everyone in their way. The Allies were losing the war. The Axis seemed invincible. Then things began to change. This is what happened:

- In February 1943, Japan pulled out of Guadalcanal.
- That same month, we cracked the Nazi naval code, *Triton*. Now we knew where their submarines were. The Atlantic was full of U-boats,

Russian troops, in winter camouflage, advance. The Red Army pushed the Germans back from Moscow through the winter snows of 1941–1942.



## WAR, PEACE, AND ALL THAT JAZZ



but we began sinking them. The German U-boat admiral couldn't figure out what was happening.

- We realized that the Germans must have broken our naval code. That would explain why they always seemed to know where our convoys were going. We changed our code. More ships made it to Europe. We began winning the war of the Atlantic.

- The Russians trapped a German army at Stalingrad. Then they laid siege to that army. They starved them. Finally, the German army surrendered. Then the Russians went on the offensive. They headed for Germany. Hitler hadn't planned on that.

- America's factories reached high gear. We began turning out guns, ships, tanks, planes, and other military equipment at an incredible rate—faster than anyone had believed possible. Picture this: a flat, sandy, empty field at a place called Willow Run (in Michigan). Now picture the same field, six months after Pearl Harbor. What you see is a vast building, half a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. Someone described it as the “most enormous room in the history of man.” Steel, rubber, and other raw materials are fed into one end of the room; airplanes emerge from the other end—almost 9,000 airplanes the first year. It is not surprising that many historians say the Second World War was won in America's factories and laboratories.

- In 1943, the Russians were fighting the Axis alone on the European continent. Stalin was crying for help. He asked his allies to land forces in Europe and take some pressure off his troops. He asked for a second front. American and British leaders agreed, and made plans for a joint landing. Its code



American women threw themselves into the war effort. *Left:* polishing airplane nose cones at Willow Run. *Above:* Eastine Cowner, a former waitress, works as a scaler on the construction of the Liberty Ship S.S. *George Washington Carver* at the Kaiser shipyards in Richmond, California, 1943. Her job was to “scale,” or clean and scrape off excess metal from the welded joints. Women also did many other non-military jobs usually held by men in peacetime—delivering mail, driving buses, and so on.

A **front** is a “battle line.” Stalin's front was in Russia and eastern Europe. He wanted the Allies to launch a western front, so that the Germans would have to fight on two sides at once.

**Convoys** were “groups of ships.” Ships carrying troops or supplies traveled together with destroyers for protection against submarines.



“The venture [in North Africa] was new,” said General Eisenhower (above, right, with General Patton). “Up to that moment no government had ever attempted to carry out an overseas expedition involving a journey of thousands of miles from its bases and terminating in a major attack.” Right: U.S. troops in North Africa.



In 1942, when Rommel (on the right, in Tripoli) reported to Hitler and Hermann Göring that Britain was dropping American shells on his men, Göring said, “Impossible. All the Americans can make are razor blades and refrigerators.” Rommel replied, “I wish, Herr Reichsmarschall, that we had similar razor blades!”

name was *Operation Torch*.

But when the landing came, it was in North Africa, not Europe. That wasn't exactly what Stalin wanted, but it did help. North Africa was a good place to begin our offensive. It had been 23 years since we fought in World War I, and our troops needed combat experience. North Africa became a war school for us, with General Dwight D. Eisenhower in charge.

The Nazi forces there were led by General Erwin Rommel, who was known as the “desert fox.” Rommel was intelligent, wily, and tough. His Afrika Korps had been destroying British troops. Then the British went on the offensive, heading west from Egypt. (Massive supplies helped.) Combined Allied forces headed east from Morocco and Algiers. A small French force came north from Chad. Rommel was caught in a pincer. We had managed to outfox the fox. We drove the Axis from North Africa. The Germans no longer controlled the Mediterranean Sea.

- We were now bombing Germany from the air day and night, but we needed to do more than that. We had to invade and help destroy Hitler's forces. Should we land in France and push east to Germany? Should we land in Italy and move north? Should we go through Greece? Finally, it was decided. We would start on the Mediterranean island of Sicily and go on to Italy. Look at the map at the back of this book and you'll see why Sicily was important.

- The invasion of Sicily was given the code name *Husky*. We landed by sea and air and captured the island. Amphibious ducks were used for the first time. But there was a snafu: we let an Axis army escape to Italy.

## WAR, PEACE, AND ALL THAT JAZZ

- The Italian people were now fed up with war. Our bombs were blasting Rome. Things hadn't worked out as some Italians thought they would. Their morale collapsed. They kicked Mussolini out of power. Their army went home. They got out of the war. Because of that, we thought Italy would be easy to capture. It wasn't. More snafus. The German army moved into the mountainous Italian peninsula and captured the mountaintops. Picture the enemy shooting down at you as you attempt to climb. That's what happened. The Germans were on the heights. Our soldiers faced ferocious fire. Italy was a bloody standoff.

- Planning began for *Operation Overlord*—code name for the invasion of France. It was to be the largest amphibious invasion in all of history. The Nazis knew it was coming, so they began planning to defeat it. We assembled men and materials in England. The Germans readied their defenses. They laid explosive mines all along the coast, layers and layers of mines. Then they put steel and concrete barriers in the water and on the beaches. They added barbed wire, huge steel spikes, and more mines on the beaches. They built rooms of thick concrete—called “bunkers”—and filled them with heavy antitank guns, versatile medium-size guns, deadly flamethrowers, and machine guns. They called all this the *Atlantic Wall*.

They fortified the whole coastline—from the Netherlands to the west coast of France—although they were sure they knew the exact spot where the landing would be made. Everyone knew. Look at the map on page 166, and see if you can figure it out, too.

The best route is obvious: from Dover, England, to the Pas de Calais (pah-duh-KAL-ay) in France. It is the shortest distance across the treacherous English Channel, it has gentle beaches, and it is the best place to land if you are heading for Germany's heartland. German intelligence officers decoded Allied messages that told of invasion plans for Calais. German pilots bombing England brought back photographs of tanks and trucks lined up near Dover. Spies reported on plans for a second invasion, on the same day, into Norway.

The messages were all fakes. The tanks and trucks were big balloons, designed to look real from aerial photographs. We weren't going to land at Pas de Calais. We weren't planning a Norway invasion. The German spies were double agents working secretly for us.



**June 1944: Italian civilians cheer wildly as U.S. 5th Army troops and armored vehicles begin their triumphal march into Rome. Behind them looms one of Rome's great sights, the Victor Emmanuel monument, spared by Allied bombing.**

**Below: Rommel's ferocious Atlantic Wall on the beach at Pas de Calais, a regional district in France. It's leading city is Calais, an industrial port. Arras, another historic city, is its capital.**

