

May 11, 1943 was indicative of the how much World War II had “scaled up” by this point. On this date, 75 years ago, the Pacific war expanded from the equator to the Bering Sea, Allied forces handed Germany their first major defeat and in America, people were becoming aware that no one would be untouched by the war.

Although few in America knew that German submarines were sinking cargo ships in sight of our coastal cities, our geographic isolation from air-attack allowed the partnership between the military and our huge industrial base to begin bearing fruit. Factories that produced lipstick tubes were now producing rifle cartridges. Auto makers rolled tanks off their assembly lines and later, Ford would crank out hundreds of B-24 bombers. In 1937, the Hormel company invented a food that World War II would make world-famous. As a shelf-stable, transportable field ration, the military purchased over 150 million pounds of Spam, which fed the allied armies and later became a part of the local cuisine (particularly in the Pacific) wherever U.S. troops were quartered.

Families grew “victory gardens” to supplement their food rations and children collected scrap metal for the war effort. Women joined the workforce in numbers unimagined before the exigency of the war, performing jobs most people believed could only be accomplished by men and proved to men what women already knew - “We can do it!” They could, but they were expected to return to their “appropriate” station in life when our men returned from the war. Incredibly, in such southern bastions as Mobile, Alabama, skilled African-American workers began building ships alongside whites in a temporary suspension of segregation laws that would require 20 years of postwar struggle to finally eliminate. Americans labored, Americans were drafted in staggering numbers and Americans fought now on two fronts. Americans also paid for the war. World War II was largely financed, not by the confiscation of taxes, but by average people who voluntarily loaned their life-savings to the Treasury through the purchase of war bonds – that is, all except for service members who had a mandatory deduction of \$6.25 from their monthly pay to purchase an \$18.75 war bond every three months. Many would quip, “We’re fighting, suffering, dying and they want us to pay for the war!”

In the European theater, all German resistance in North Africa ended 75 years ago today. Having come back from a bitter defeat at the Kasserine Pass, American armored, infantry and air forces gained the necessary experience to partner with the British 8th Army, who checked the onslaught of the Afrika Korps before we got there, in all suffering 12 times as many casualties as America did. The allied force squeezed the German Army into a seaside pocket in Tunisia and Germany evacuated those they could, leaving behind 275,000 POW’s. The Allied victory in North Africa denied the Third Reich the oil-rich Middle East and provided General Patton with two now-veteran American Infantry Divisions for our part of the coming Sicilian campaign.

The campaigns of the early European war were largely Churchill’s strategy but the Pacific Island war was essentially an American show and it was getting big – very big. On this date, 75 years ago, Canadian and U.S. Army troops invaded the Aleutian Island of Attu which was captured by Japan as a feint during the Battle of Midway. Suffering 1,600 casualties and 1800 cold-related injuries, the 7th Infantry Division wrested Attu from the Japanese who, as they would throughout the Pacific war, fought to the last man. From the bitter cold of the Arctic to the malarial jungles of the Solomons and New Guinea, the Allies began chipping away at the Japanese outer defenses and slowly reducing their still-enormous Naval and Air capability.

Admiral Isoruko Yamamoto, who presaged the defeats in the Solomons and the explosive American war production, angered the younger fanatics in the Japanese military despite his enormous initial victories. Hated in Japan and America, Yamamoto had become the target of death threats and for his

protection, lived in an air-conditioned stateroom aboard the giant battleship Musashi - at anchor because it consumed too much scarce fuel. American intelligence learned that Yamamoto would be flying to the Solomons on 18 April 1943 to inspect troops. The Army Air Force “took a shot” and sent a squadron of twin-engine P-38 fighters to intercept his plane over Bougainville. Their mission was successful. Admiral Yamamoto’s body was found on Bougainville, in his seat amid the wreckage of his aircraft, with his hand on his sword.

American Pacific strategy was by now, established. Navy carriers and submarines sortied to destroy the Japanese Navy and interrupt their troop and supply chain. The Army, under Douglas MacArthur would attack northward through New Guinea to surround and neutralize the big Japanese base at Rabaul before making good on his promise to return the Philippines. The Marine Corps had the job of penetrating Japanese outer defensive lines in the Solomons, the Gilberts and the Marshalls. The ultimate goal was to capture the Marianas, placing Curtis LeMay’s B-29 bombers in range of the Japanese mainland. US Army Air Forces bombers would pound Japanese cities to ashes but even that proved insufficient to coax Japan into surrendering. Invasion was deemed inevitable. 75 years ago, unknown to LeMay and most of America, a mountaintop facility in New Mexico, known only as “Site Y,” was nearing completion. At a laboratory at Site Y, now known as Los Alamos, the finest scientific minds in America gathered in absolute secrecy to produce a weapon that ended the Pacific war three months before the first planned invasion of Japan. “The Bomb” saved millions of American and Japanese lives that would have perished in the conquest of Japan - only to threaten every human life since. Yet despite it, three generations have come since the “GI Generation” and we still strive towards the same dream of those who lived through World War II: A world without war.

(Photos from Wiki-Commons. The blue medal is the American Campaign Medal, awarded to all military personnel serving in the United States during the war years. The yellow medal is the Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal and the green, the European, African, Middle-Eastern Campaign Medal – awarded to all personnel serving in these respective theaters of WWII.)