

# WORLD WAR II

A talk by John Shirley, Livermore, CA

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**Overview:** WW II was the largest single event in world human history. It was fought on all of our continents but one, and in all of our oceans and many of our seas.

About 60-65 million people died during the war years. It caused great areas of destruction Europe and Asia.

**Aftermath:** We have been greatly affected by the war. It ushered in the Atomic Age, and we are still greatly threatened by nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear terrorism. There was an incredible acceleration of science, technology, engineering, and medicine because of WWII, both by the Allies and their enemies. The A-bomb required major progress in theoretical physics, metallurgy, and isotope separation. There were massive breakthroughs in radar, aeronautics, jet engines, rocketry, submarines, amphibious crafts, communications, navigation, electronics, analog and digital computers, computer algorithms, cryptography, polymers, such as nylon, and pharmaceuticals, such as penicillin. Radar technology soon led to magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).



The two great powers at the end of the war were engaged in a great arms race known as the Cold War that cost the US some four to five trillion dollars.

WWII ended the colonial system, and brought forth 150 new nations. 45 nations signed the UN Charter. Now over 200 nations are members, and there are great geopolitical, economic, and military implications resulting from the end of the colonial system.

We started the war as a militarily weak, isolated country, and ended the war as a strong military and industrial power, and remain so today.

**American buildup:** When WW II started, our army was the 18th largest in the world. Even Greece and Brazil had larger armies. In 1939 we had 189,000 men in the army and Air Corps, 125,000 in the navy, and 20,000 marines.

We were very reluctant to get into another war, and made no effort to arm our nation until Sept and Oct. 1940. Only then did we federalize the National Guard and institute the draft. 50,000,000 registered for the draft. 17,000,000 were called up, 7,000,000 were rejected and 10,000,000 were drafted, including me. Six million men and women volunteered for service.

We started building our forces in Oct. 1940, and after the attack on Pearl Harbor and war was declared we had 1.5 million men in the ground forces and Air Corps, 300,000 in the navy, and 50,000 marines.

We reached our peak strength in 1945 with 12,500,000 million in uniform. 5 million of these were in the ground forces, 3.5 million in the Air Corps, 2.5 million in the navy, 200,000 in the Coast Guard, and about the same number in our Merchant Marine.

In 1945 the U.S. had a population of about 135,000,000. Now we have 300,000,000. If we had a proportionate military today we would have about 26,000,000 in uniform. Instead we have only about 2,000,000.

The average length of service was 33 months. 11,000,000 served overseas for an average length of 18 months.

We had 300,000 killed or died of wounds in action, and another 100,000 died of illness, non-combat wounds and other causes. 700,000 were wounded.

**The "Greatest Generation":** The WW II generation has been called the "greatest generation". I don't particularly like that characterization. We did what we had to do, but I know that other generations would have done just as well, maybe better. A real fine generation was my father's.

My father and many others served in WW I, returned from the war and built a great industrial nation. They raised their families in the Great Depression of the 1930's, and then had to do one of the hardest things of all -- sending their sons and daughters off to war, knowing many would be killed or wounded.

**U.S. War Mobilization:** Most American people not called to military service spent the war years producing food and war material.

In the five war years, our nation produced 324,000 planes of all types, 28,000 naval vessels and landing craft, 5000 cargo vessels, 2.5 million trucks, a million jeeps, over 88,000 tanks, and 257,000 artillery pieces. We produced 47,000,000 rounds of artillery ammunitions. By the end of the war we had in service 22 large fleet aircraft carriers, 141 jeep escort carriers, 8 Battleships, 48 cruisers, 349 destroyers, 420 convoy escorts, and 203 submarines.

In 1943, just one year, we produced 86,000 airplanes, 45,000 tanks, 648,000 trucks, and 18,000 naval vessels and landing craft of all types.

Another amazing statistic: during the war years we produced 70% of the world's crude oil.

We organized, armed, trained, and deployed 69 infantry divisions, 20 armored divisions, five airborne divisions, six marine divisions, a tremendous air force, and great two-ocean navy.

To give you an idea of the magnitude of the army buildup, one infantry division had about 18,000 men and consisted of three regiments of infantry with about 3,000 men each, four battalions of artillery, a tank battalion, an antitank battalion, an anti-aircraft battalion, an engineering battalion, a medical battalion, an ordinance company, a signal company, a quartermaster company, a headquarters company, and a band. We had 69 of these infantry

divisions. Armored divisions had more tanks and less infantry -- airborne division had parachutist and glider infantry. The marines were amphibious with light tanks and artillery.

We also rearmed and supplied the war needs of the 12 French army divisions and three Polish army divisions. We sent massive supplies to all our allies. All were important winning the war. We sent 10,000 fighter planes to Russia, tens of thousands of trucks and jeeps, massive supplies of food and supplies to help Russia defeat the German invaders.

It was very important to help Russia all we could. Eight out of every ten German soldiers killed in the war were killed by Russians, and the Russians suffered more than 20 million dead.

By the end of the war, we were producing more than half of all the manufactured goods in the world. We were truly the **Arsenal of Democracy**.

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With this as introduction, John Shirley normally takes another 15 minutes to describe his first day of combat -- the breakout at bloody Anzio beachhead. Many audiences have responded with a standing ovation.

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I have a copy of John's beautifully written personal account of the war, which I highly recommend. It is called "I Remember, Stories of a Combat Infantryman in Italy, France, and Germany." He makes it available at his cost, \$12.50 including shipping and handling. To order, send a check to John Shirley, 4318 Drake Way, Livermore, CA 94550. Or you can order this five star book from Amazon Books.