

World War II: Historical Overview for US and Virginia

Quick Facts

- World War II, or the Second World War, took place between 1939 and 1945. The opposing sides are today referred to as the Allies and the Axis. Even more so than the Great War, it was a truly global conflict, with many nations involved on both sides.
- The principal belligerents were the German Reich, the Empire of Japan, and the Kingdom of Italy on the Axis side, opposed by the Republic of France, the United Kingdom of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America.
- Prior to US entry into the war, American volunteers fought against Japan in China, and against Germany as British aviators.
- Also prior to US entry into the war, the US initiated the Lend-Lease program, supplying the Allies with vast quantities of weapons, equipment, and food.
- The United States entered the war following the December 7th, 1941, surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor by Imperial Japan, an event that President Franklin Roosevelt famously described as “a day that will live in infamy.”
- The war took place on two fronts for the United States; the Pacific theater of operations, against Japan, and the European theater of operations, against Germany and Italy.
- Combat in the European theater for US soldiers ranged from North Africa, to Sicily, to Italy, to France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany itself.
- Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945. The war came to an end with the surrender of Japan (following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) on August 15, 1945.
- Approximately 300,000 Virginians served in the US military during World War II.
- The US suffered 416,000 military deaths during World War II. Of that number, 11,444 were Virginians.
- An additional 671,000 Americans were wounded during the war.

- For extraordinary bravery in combat, 464 US military personnel were awarded the Medal of Honor. 9 were Virginians.
- 358,000 American women served in the military in World War
- In 2016, 620,000 American WWII veterans were estimated to still be living, out of around 16 million who served.
- Three of the Virginians profiled in our exhibit are known to still be alive; Evelyn Marshall, Russell Scott, and Joseph Keller.
- The 29th Division was once again one of the most prominent military units consisting primarily of Virginians, though Virginians served in many units and all branches in every theater.
- In particular, Company A of the 116th Regiment of the 29th Division suffered notably heavy casualties on D-Day. Many in the company hailed from Bedford, Virginia, and as a result, that community suffered the heaviest proportionate losses of anywhere in the nation on D-Day. Today, the National D-Day Memorial is located in Bedford.
- Virginia played host to some of the nation's key military installations during World War II, reopening some bases that dated back to World War I, and creating new bases as well. The Pentagon in Arlington was created during the war to host the Department of War.
- Several notable American military leaders in World War II, such as George S. Patton, George C. Marshall, and Douglas MacArthur, had Virginia roots and connections.
- Quantico Marine Corps Base, established in World War I, vastly expanded during World War II.
- Newport News, Hampton Roads, and Norfolk contained some of the most crucial US naval shipyards and embarkation facilities.
- At the Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation, nearly ten percent of all US soldiers who fought in World War II traveled to Europe via the port.
- Norfolk Naval Shipyard built 6,850 ships for the US Navy throughout World War II.
- Newport News Shipbuilding assembled aircraft carriers, cruisers, and 186 Liberty ships during World War II.
- During the war, German U-boats sank numerous merchant vessels off the East Coast of the United States, including multiple ships sunk in the Chesapeake Bay and the Hampton Roads area.

Second World War 1939-1941

World War II began in Europe, on September 1, 1939, when the German Reich invaded Poland. The seeds of the war had been sown with the end of World War I and the resulting Treaty of Versailles, which left Germany feeling humiliated and betrayed; wartime propaganda about the German military's success left many Germans feeling that their leadership, not their military, had lost the war. Italy, an Allied power during World War I, fell into economic crisis immediately following the war's end, and felt that the conflict had not been worth the cost. In both cases, the post-war feelings of resentment and uncertainty led to fascists taking power in those countries. The new governments led by Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini began aggressively building up their militaries and seeking to expand their territory throughout the 1930s. In Asia, the Empire of Japan was seeking to do the same, and in 1937 invaded China, though Japan would not enter World War II proper until 1941.

After defeating Poland, Germany turned its attention to its main rival on land, France, and in 1940, invaded France, surprising the French military by advancing through the Ardennes forest country to outflank France's main defensive positions. In a matter of weeks, France was defeated, and British forces in France were forced to evacuate to Britain by way of Dunkirk. This left Germany and their Italian allies as the dominant powers in mainland Europe.

Throughout the remainder of 1940 and 1941, Germany attempted to batter Britain into submission via air power, but was brought up short by determined British opposition. Eventually abandoning any thought of an invasion of Britain, in 1941 Germany changed its focus towards the east, against its only major rival on land remaining; Soviet Russia. In late 1941, Germany invaded Russia; despite the element of surprise and early victories, the German advance ground to a halt before the gates of Moscow. German and Russian forces would continue engaging in massive, brutal ground combat in the eastern front for the remainder of the war.

The entry of the United States into the war was brought about by the actions of Imperial Japan in the Pacific. With economic sanctions initiated by the United States and other nations impacting Japan's ability to continue its conquests in China and Indochina, Japanese leadership decided to try and cripple the US Pacific Fleet with a surprise attack while seizing American-controlled islands in the Pacific. On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, bringing the United States into the war.

U. S. Involvement in World War II

American involvement in World War II pre-dated the country's formal entry into the armed conflict. Crucially, in early 1941, the US Congress approved the Lend-Lease program, through which the United States would supply Allied powers (including Japan's opponents in China) with vast amounts of food, weapons, and other war material throughout the war. American volunteers also served in the militaries of Allied countries against both Germany and Japan. In Europe, this most famously took the form of "Eagle Squadrons," American pilots serving in Britain's Royal

Air Force. In Asia, Americans served in the Chinese Air Force as the First American Volunteer Group, nicknamed the Flying Tigers for the nose art they put on their P-40 Warhawk fighters.

In the early days of World War II, there was significant domestic political opposition to America getting involved in the conflict. World War I, the Great War, was considered to have been an unnecessary and pointless waste of life by many in the late 1930s/early 1940s. President Franklin Roosevelt favored US involvement to the end of stopping Nazi Germany, but was forced to move cautiously by public opinion. The America First movement, championed by such celebrities as Charles Lindbergh, had considerable influence. Virginia's political establishment, as Democratic stalwarts, largely supported Roosevelt and interventionism. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the following declaration of war on the US by Germany in support of their Japanese allies, removed Roosevelt's constraints, and the US entered full-heartedly into the war.

The US Military in World War II

The United States was forced to fight on two fronts in World War II; the Pacific, against Japan, and Europe, against Germany and Italy. For both strategic and political reasons, Roosevelt and Churchill favored prioritizing the defeat of Germany, but it would take most of 1942 to prepare American forces to enter into major combat against Germany., and not until 1944 would most of America's military forces and resources be dedicated to the defeat of Germany. Combat on land, air, and sea against Japan's aggression in the Pacific began immediately and did not let up until the war was over.

The US military, while larger than it had been at the start of World War I, still had to undergo historic amounts of expansion to meet the needs of World War II. The Army's expansion from a force of 189,000 into an army of millions was overseen by the army's chief of staff, George C. Marshall, a graduate of Virginia Military Institute. The Navy and Marines went through their own vast expansions as well. The Marine Corps and the bulk of the Navy would focus exclusively on the Pacific Theater of Operations, fighting against Japan, aided by Army units. The bulk of the Army's forces however, would eventually be dedicated to the European Theater of Operations.

In Europe, American ground forces entered major combat for the first time in November 1942 with Operation Torch, invading North Africa in support of British efforts there. By mid-1943, German forces had been driven from North Africa, and Allied forces invaded first Sicily, and then Italy, where combat began in late 1943 and would continue for the remainder of the war, with American and British forces slowly pushing up the Italian peninsula against well-entrenched German forces. Rome fell on June 4th, 1944, to American forces.

Italy was a secondary effort to the main Allied plan to defeat Germany; an invasion of France via the English channel. Germany was dedicating the bulk of its army to fighting a massive conflict in the Eastern Theater against the Soviets, who were slowly but steadily driving the Germans westward. If Allied forces could seize a beachhead in France, they would be able to liberate France and take the war to Germany. After massive preparations, on June 6th, 1944, Operation Overlord commenced on what is now known widely as D-Day., as American, British,

and Canadian forces stormed several landing sites in Normandy. After intense combat on the beaches, particularly what was called Omaha Beach, (much of the fighting there was done by Virginians of the 29th Division, 116th Regiment in particular) the Allies were successful in seizing their beachhead.

After breaking out of Normandy at the end of August, Allied forces swept through France and by early 1945, had expelled the Germans from Belgium and the Netherlands as well as France, and in March 1945, began the invasion of Germany proper. The end of the war in Europe soon followed as Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945, following the capture of Berlin by the Soviet Red Army and Adolf Hitler's suicide.

In the Pacific, Japan scored a number of early victories over the United States and its allies in the Pacific, but the tide soon began to turn as the military and industrial might of the US was directed at Japan. The Battle of Midway in June 1942 permanently reversed the tide at sea, dealing a major blow to the Japanese fleet. Japan fought stubbornly, and the war was characterized by incredibly brutal and bloody combat across many islands as entrenched Japanese troops fought to the end against American and Australian troops, but the tide pushed inexorably west until Japan was driven back into their home territory. The war in the Pacific was brought to an end when Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States.

Women in World War II

As in World War I, women were crucial participants in the national effort to wage such a massive conflict. Women played a crucial role on the homefront in collecting and financing for the war effort, in addition to patriotic demonstrations such as victory gardens. As before, women stepped into many of the jobs and roles in the homefront that were more traditionally associated with men, such as industrial work. This was true to an even greater extent than in World War I, as a much greater amount of young men joined the military. The same was true of women; 358,000 women served in the military during World War II, primarily through organizations such as WAVES, WAC, and the nursing corps of the Army and Navy. Women pilots were a notable presence in the American military for the first time as well, through the WASP group, which consisted of women pilots performing military flight duties to free up male pilots for front-line combat service. Over 10,000 women also joined the Coast Guard through the newly created SPARS branch, aiding immeasurably in increasing homefront security. Through these and many other other contributions, women contributed vastly to the success of the United States in World War II.

Virginia in World War II

Virginians were involved in the United States' pre-war efforts to aid the Allies from the very start. Virginians were among the volunteers who fought against Germany and Japan in the militaries of other countries, and at home, Virginia's political establishment and congressional delegation supported the efforts of President Franklin Roosevelt to pass Lend-Lease and other appropriations for the support of the Allied nations. Politically, most Virginians supported the

internationalist viewpoint of the Democratic Party of Roosevelt's day, and consequently, also supported intervention in World War II.

Prominent Virginians in World War II

A number of America's most prominent military men in World War II had Virginia roots and connections. George S. Patton, though not a native of the state, came from a prominent Virginia family, which included a grandfather and great-uncle who had fought for Virginia during the American Civil War. Patton briefly attended the Virginia Military Institute before transferring to West Point, and he spent a substantial portion of his peacetime career stationed at Fort Myer, Virginia. Patton would go on to become one of the most famous and prominent American field commanders of World War II, particularly noted for his skill in and influence on armored warfare, as well as his colorful and controversial personality. Patton commanded large bodies of troops in North Africa, Sicily, and perhaps most famously, he commanded the Third Army during the liberation of France and the invasion of Germany. He died two months after the end of the war, in a car crash in occupied Germany.

The Virginia connection was even stronger in the case of George C. Marshall, who like Patton, was not born in Virginia, though he had family roots in the state, being a distant descendant of the famous Supreme Court justice John Marshall. Marshall, like Patton, attended the Virginia Military Institute, but unlike Patton, he did not move on to West Point, instead graduating from VMI. He served during World War I and the interwar years primarily as a staff officer. He rose all the way to Army Chief of Staff by the time that World War II broke out, due to favorably impressing President Franklin Roosevelt with his willingness to tell Roosevelt when Marshall thought Roosevelt was wrong.

Marshall served as the Chief of Staff throughout the war, being the chief organizer of the wartime expansion of the US military and the war effort in Europe, playing a central role in the planning and preparation for Operation Overlord. Marshall became the first US general promoted to five stars, giving him the rank of General of the Army. After the war, he retired but continued to play a prominent role in government, serving as Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, and devising the Marshall Plan to rebuild war-torn European economies after World War II. He retired to Leesburg, Virginia, in 1951, where he spent the remainder of his life until he died in 1959. In an interview after leaving office, former President Harry S. Truman unequivocally chose Marshall as the most important American of the past thirty years. Marshall's reputation as an organizer, planner, and statesman has endured, in part through the efforts of the George C. Marshall Foundation and the Marshall Museum in Lexington, Virginia.

Rivaled only by Patton and Eisenhower in overall fame among US Army leaders in World War II, Douglas MacArthur was born in Arkansas to a mother who hailed from Norfolk, Virginia, and had married his father there. MacArthur spent much of his early career in and around Washington D. C., and rose to prominence in World War I as a brigadier general, earning multiple decorations. In the inter-war years, MacArthur served as superintendent of West Point, Chief of Staff of the Army, and oversaw the creation of a Philippine Army. He also attracted controversy when he used forces to disperse the "Bonus Army" in Washington in 1932, using troops to clear out camps of protesting veterans who wanted the government to redeem their

service certificates for money during the Depression (originally they were not to be able to do this until 1945).

Recalled to service at the start of World War II, MacArthur attracted criticism for how he handled the defense of the Philippines, which fell to a Japanese invasion force. MacArthur was ordered away from the Philippines to Australia before his forces there surrendered, famously declaring "I shall return." MacArthur was made overall commander of the Allied Forces in the southwest Pacific, in which capacity he oversaw a series of successful campaigns conducted by American and Australian forces in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands throughout 1942 and 1943.

In 1944, MacArthur was able to fulfill his promise, and returned to the Philippines as the commander of the American forces that liberated the islands. Following the war, he oversaw the occupation of Japan and played a leading role in the Korean War. Attracting far more than his fair share of controversy over his career, which resulted in his eventual relief from command in Korea, Douglas MacArthur was nevertheless one of the most significant military men in American history. When he died in 1964, by his own request, he was buried in Norfolk, Virginia, where the MacArthur Memorial is located today.

Virginia's Military Installations in World War II

Virginia was a major military hub for the United States during World War II, containing some of the most notable military bases, training centers, and shipyards. Virginia was particularly important in terms of its naval facilities and industries. Norfolk Naval Shipyard built 6,850 ships for the US Navy during World War II, averaging close to five a day, and Newport News Shipbuilding assembled many ships for the Navy as well, most notably aircraft carriers and cruisers. Several of the famous US carriers of early World War II were built there, such as the *Yorktown*, *Hornet*, and *Enterprise*. The shipyard would also construct seven *Essex* class carriers during the war. A subsidiary of Newport News Shipbuilding that was established in North Carolina constructed 126 Liberty ships, a type of cargo vessel, among other vessels. The Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation saw almost 10% of all US soldiers who served in World War II pass through the port on their way to Europe, and the combat forces that invaded French Morocco as part of Operation Torch loaded up in Hampton.

A number of infantry installations also existed in Virginia that were important in World War II. Fort Belvoir was a key infantry training center, as was Camp Lee, which particularly served to train quartermaster personnel. A total of over 300,000 personnel trained there during World War II. Fort A. P. Hill was established as an army training facility during the war, and continued to function in that role and as a major staging ground, as well as a school for engineer officers. Camp Pickett housed the Medical Replacement Training Center, making it crucial to the medical support network for American soldiers in the field. Marine Corps Base Quantico was vastly expanded by the government during World War II, in order to provide additional space for training, particularly in marksmanship and maneuver.

Additional military facilities located in Virginia during World War II included the Radford Ordnance Works, which manufactured ammunition for the United States military during the war.

Langley Field, (later the much more extensive Langley Air Force Base) and perhaps most notably of all, the Pentagon, which served as the headquarters of the entire US Department of War during World War II, and remains the headquarters and nerve center of the Department of Defense today.

Virginia Homefront during World War II

World War II did not just impact those Virginians who served in the military, or those who took up new jobs specifically to support the war effort. The war and its effects permeated everyday life all across the country, affecting day-to-day civilian business, and causing concern in the minds of nearly every citizen about the security of the country against attack. The most obvious impact on daily life was via government rationing. The government rationed various important materials to conserve them for the military, namely food, various metals, gas, etc. Civilians were expected to make do with less, and attempted to do so through various means, such as growing more of their own food, often in “victory gardens.” Recycling of many key materials became a matter of routine across the country.

Various civil defense organizations were formed to be vigilant against any threats. Among the earliest after Pearl Harbor was a University Civil Defense Organization formed in Charlottesville, VA, for the security of the University of Virginia. This group initially consisted of air raid and fire wardens as well as police. A volunteer unit, called the Dawn Patrol, was soon formed at UVA, and by 1943, most of the university's students were involved in some sort of military program.

The civil defense organizations were mostly land-based, but the Coast Guard cooperated with such groups to increase security in the Chesapeake Bay. Over 10,000 women joined the Coast Guard via the SPARS branch during World War II. Virginia schoolchildren were taught via spotter cards what Axis aircraft looked like, in order to recognize if they were under attack or friendly planes were just passing by overhead. While such fears are easy to laugh at today, real German threats did lurk just off the coast of Virginia in the form of the dreaded German U-boats. These U-boats would repeatedly sink vessels near the Virginia coast, paying particular attention to the Chesapeake Bay and Hampton Roads areas. The victims of these attacks were usually civilians and members of the merchant marine. Throughout the first half of 1942, these U-boats were a serious threat to individual vessels, as they were allowed to roam nearly unchallenged for some time; the US Atlantic Fleet was concentrating on protecting convoys across the Atlantic. The U-boat threat did not wholly disappear from Virginia's coasts until 1943.

World War II Memorials and Museums in Virginia

-National D-Day Memorial, Bedford

-AAF Tank Museum, Danville

-Lynchburg Museum and Monument Terrace, Lynchburg

- 116th Infantry Regiment Foundation Museum, Verona
- George C. Marshall Museum, Lexington

- Shenandoah County Historic Court House, Woodstock

- Dickenson County Military Veterans Memorial, Haysi

- Old Russell County Courthouse, Castlewood

- War Memorial Chapel at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg

- Virginia War Memorial, Richmond

- Virginia Holocaust Museum, Richmond

- Military Aviation Museum, Virginia Beach

- General Douglas MacArthur Memorial Museum, Norfolk

- Nauticus and Hampton Roads Naval Museum, Norfolk

- Virginia War Museum, Newport News

- The Mariners' Museum, Newport News

- Virginia Air and Space Center, Hampton

- United States Army Transportation Museum, Fort Eustis

- Americans in Wartime Museum & Virginia Museum of Military Vehicles, Nokesville

- Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington

- Iwo Jima Memorial, Arlington

- Freedom Museum, Manassas

- George C. Marshall International Center, Leesburg

- Mount Vernon & Fort Hunt Park, Alexandria

- National Air and Space Museum, Chantilly

- National Museum of the United States Marine Corps, Quantico

Further Reading:

V for Virginia: The Commonwealth Goes to War

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4249293>

Higher Education Goes to War: The University of Virginia's Response to World War II

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4249294>

Women's Army Corps

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140320082332/http://www.army.mil:80/women/wac.html>

Partners in Winning the War: American Women in World War II

<https://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/partners/exhibitentrance.html>

American Women in WWII

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/research-starters/women-in-ww2.html>

Virginia Women in WWII

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewir47a1sc_UAhXBzz4KHYGHB2QQFggoMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.lva.virginia.gov%2Fpublic%2Fguides%2FWomenofWWII.pdf&usg=AFQjCNHdm7yT1507_EG_nmZhU4Lx-hZtSA&sig2=3t1OtVuAmR9kGNac6yO3og

The American Home Front

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/research-starters/home-front.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/>

The World War II Home Front

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/world-war-ii/essays/world-war-ii-home-front>

Victory Gardens

<http://www.vahistorical.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/victory-gardens>

The World At War

<http://www.euronet.nl/users/wilfried/ww2/ww2.htm>

26 Photos Taken During WWII in Virginia

<http://www.onlyinyourstate.com/virginia/world-war-ii-va/>

Turning Point: World War II

<http://www.vahistorical.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/turning-point>

The Military in Virginia

<http://www.virginiaplacse.org/military/>