

World War II at 80 – May 1945, Part I



An Army private is shown breaking the news of the end of the war in Europe to other soldiers after receiving an Associated Press news flash on it. (Public domain photo)

Victory in Europe: A Tempered Joy

By Ronald P. May
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GERMANY — The month of May brought the long-awaited end to World War II in the European theater.

The city of Berlin fell to the advancing Soviet forces on May 2 following 16 days of combat that resulted in the deaths of 81,000 Russians and almost 100,000 Germans.

The capital city of Germany lied in ruins.

A million German soldiers were surrendering each day.

On May 7, German military leaders signed an unconditional surrender document with Western Allied military heads in a ceremony that took place at a red brick schoolhouse in Reims, France.

Marshal Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union insisted that another surrender ceremony take place one day later in Berlin to signify the end of the war on the Eastern Front and to recognize the Soviets for their role in defeating Germany.

The Western Allied powers declared May 8 as Victory in Europe (VE) Day, while the Eastern powers chose May 9 as their date to celebrate the war's end in Europe.

Large gatherings of celebration occurred in North America, England and France.

The joy, however, was tempered with reminders that the war in the Pacific theater was still raging.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill said during his May 8 radio broadcast to the British, "We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing as Japan remains unsubdued."

President Truman, who was celebrating his 61st birthday on May 8, asked that no nationwide celebration be held.

He stated in his news conference, "Our rejoicing is sobered and subdued by a supreme consciousness of the terrible price we have paid to rid the world of Hitler and his evil band. ... If I could give you a single watchword for the coming months, that word is work, work and more work. We must work to finish the war. Our victory is only half over."

Martinsville did its part to abide by the President's wishes.

City churches had their doors open on V-E day to allow people to come in for "quiet meditation and prayer." The next day, each church held an evening service for "thanksgiving and to pray for the speedy conclusion of the war in Asia."

There were more hard months ahead in the Pacific theater.

U.S. Occupation Zones and Duty

Following Germany's surrender, the country was divided into four military occupation zones.

The American zone was southern Germany, which included Bavaria.

The British zone was in the northwest part of Germany and included the Ruhr region.

The French zone was southwest Germany and included the Saarland.

The Soviet zone was most of the Eastern part of Germany.

The city of Berlin was also divided into four sectors, one controlled by each of the Allied victor nations.

The purpose of the occupation was threefold: to oversee the demilitarization of the German forces, to reeducate the German public (denazification), and to aid in the reconstruction of the country.



Kermit Emerson just turned 100 last October and still lives in Mooresville. (Ronald P. May photo / MCC)

While many American military members (three million) returned home following Germany's surrender, more than one million — those who did not have sufficient time-in-theater points for going home — remained in Germany as part of the occupation forces.

Kermit Emerson

Kermit Emerson of Liberty, Ky., (he later moved to Mooresville) was one of them.

He was part of the 9th Army, assigned to the 207th Field Artillery Battalion Service Supply Division.

When the war ended in May, the 9th Army settled into some mop up work, which included collecting weapons from surrendering troops of Germany's 1st Army.

"They were tickled to death to meet us," Emerson said of the German soldiers. "They were so glad it (the war) was finally over!"

Emerson spent several months in Germany cleaning up military vehicles that were going to be shipped back to the States.

He was then sent to Frankfurt, Germany, and assigned to a transportation battalion.

He spent his days doing jeep runs to pick up and drop off people at the Frankfurt airport.

Emerson returned home just before Christmas in 1945. He continues to live in Mooresville and turned 100 last October.

John Jackson

John Charles Jackson of Martinsville also spent time in Southern Germany at the end of the war.

A Paragon High School graduate, Jackson served as a 105 mm Howitzer artilleryman with the 379th Field Artillery Battalion, which was part of the 102nd 'Ozark' Division.

Jackson arrived in France in August 1944 and later engaged in combat along the German Siegfried Line.

"I was all over Germany," he said, "and went as far south as the Austrian border"

Although the artillery guns were usually set back a mile from the front lines, the guns and their crews were frequent targets for German Luftwaffe planes and enemy artillery rounds.

"German planes were flying over us all the time," remarked Jackson. "But our big worry was the 88's (German anti-aircraft cannon). We'd hear them coming through the air, and we'd jump into our foxholes! They got some



Emerson's service photo (Courtesy photo)

of our men."

After Germany surrendered, Jackson had the opportunity to visit "the Eagle's Nest," Hitler's mountain hideout in Berchtesgaden, located in southeastern Germany near the Austrian and Czech border.

The mountain peak structure was built to honor Hitler on his 50th birthday.

There was an underground elevator that took people from the parking area up to the peak where the building was located. But using the elevator was a privilege reserved for the few.

A sign nearby read, "For Field Grade Officers Only."

Fortunately, on the day Jackson was there, Gen. Eisenhower was also visiting the hideout.

When Eisenhower saw the sign, he removed the restriction and said that everyone could ride the elevator.

"So, I got to ride the elevator", said Jackson.

Jackson returned to Martinsville in the spring of 1946.

He died at the age of 98 on March 25, 2020.

Perhaps no one was happier for the end of the war in Europe than the approximate 90,000 U.S. servicemen who were still prisoners of war in Germany.

Charles Smith

Pvt. Charles A. "Slim" Smith, of Morgantown, was one of those POWs.

A 1938 graduate of Morgantown High School, Smith joined the Army in October 1941 and was part of the landing forces in North Africa in May 1942.

He was captured by the Germans on Feb. 17, 1943, in North Africa during the battle at Kas-



After World War II came to an end in the European theater, Germany was divided into four occupation zones. (Public domain photo)



John Jackson, of Martinsville, stands in front of Hitler's 'Eagle's Nest,' during his time in service. (Courtesy photo)



John Jackson shows a German band he acquired during his service in World War II. (Ronald P. May photo / MCC)



Morgantown's Charles "Slim" Smith in 1941, before his service in the North Africa campaign, and prior to his 27 months as a captive in a German POW camp.

Charles A. 'Slim' Smith, of Morgantown, was a POW in Germany for more than two years before his liberation in April 1945. (Courtesy clipping)

serine Pass and spent the next 27 months as a POW at Stalag 2B camp near Hammerstein, Pomerania, along the southern shore of the Baltic Sea. (The city is now Czarné, Poland, the result of a change of borders following World War II.)

The camp, with a peak pop-

ulation close to 30,000, housed prisoners from many nations, including Poland, France, Belgium, Serbia, Netherlands, Soviet Union, Italy and America.

Smith and some 500 other Americans were liberated by the advancing Russians in April 1945.

Smith made it back home to Morgantown in June 1945.

He later received the Sagamore of the Wabash honor from Indiana Lt. Gov. Joe Kernan (a POW during the Vietnam conflict) at the Morgan County Veterans Memorial program in Martinsville in November 2001. Smith wore his World War II Army uniform for the event.

All service members from the European theater, those at home and those serving occupation duty, awaited notification on whether they would be transferred to the Pacific Theater for further combat service.

Next time: May 1945 – Victory in Okinawa, Carnage in the Philippines

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