Kansas At War

Part 4

Over There

Adolf Hitler's aggressive designs on the European continent and his repression of Germany's Jewish population caused much concern in the United States during the latter half of the Depression decade. German troops occupied Austria in March of 1938, and the ill-fated Munich Conference sought appeasement in September; six months later, however, the German army invaded and easily conquered what remained of independent Czechoslovakia. In another six months, on September 1, 1939, the Fuehrer's troops stormed into Poland, and Britain and France declared war. A brief respite interrupted the rapidly escalating hostilities, but in April of 1940, the Nazi war machine launched its "blitzkrieg." In less than three months, Britain stood alone.

Through it all, President Franklin D. Roosevelt guided the American ship of state on a narrow course, precariously balanced between total neutrality and belligerency. The majority of Americans, while favoring the English and sympathizing with the plight of the other allies, were much less inclined than was the President to provide assistance if it meant risking war. Indeed, FDR was restrained by his persistent isolationist attitude, as pervasive in Kansas as anywhere in the nation.

Nevertheless, as the situation in Europe grew ever bleaker, the U.S. took steps to prepare for war. In addition to the implementation of the selective service system and vastly increased defense spending, the President was authorized to activate the National Guard, and the first of these units was called to active duty on August 31, 1940. The Kansas guard, with units from Nebraska and Missouri, was ordered into federal service two days before Christmas 1940; together they formed the Thirty-fifth or "Santa Fe" Division. Before its one year of expected active service ended, Pearl Harbor was attacked, ending all thoughts of avoiding open hostilities. America entered the world war as a full partner in the allied crusade against totalitarianism.
Anti-aircraft machine gun batter on board the USS Enterprise, probably during an engagement in the Java Sea, February 1942. In October of that same year, the Enterprise was badly damaged during the Battle of Santa Cruz, southeast of Guadalcanal.
Tens of thousands of Kansas men and women heeded their country's call to arms including Col. David C. Schilling, pictured here in the cockpit of his fighter plane. A native of Leavenworth, Schilling was an ace fighter pilot credited with destroying thirty-three German planes.

The "arsenal of democracy" was soon waging its own, unprecedented war on two fronts, thousands of miles from America's shores. Tens of thousands of Kansas men and women heeded their country's call to arms by joining the various branches of the armed forces and participating in military operations from the Coral Sea to Okinawa and from North Africa to the Rhine and beyond. Unlike their cohorts in the Thirty-fifth Division and the veterans of earlier wars, Kansas soldiers did not serve in units composed of men from the same locale. Kansans could be found in all branches and regiments of the U.S. armed forces, their comrades hailing from all forty-eight states and territories of the union.
Marines prepare to take a Japanese airfield on an unidentified Pacific island.
A
ter a disastrous beginning and the near total destruction of the
U.S. Pacific fleet, the American war machine began operating
more effectively and prospects improved. Within a year, "the magnif-
icent might of America," according to Kansas Gov. Payne Ratner,
was becoming evident on battlefronts around the world. "Today, for
the first time in his bloody, brutal career of unexampled military tri-
umphs, Hitler is tasting the bitter cup of defeat. Today, a disillu-
sioned and discouraged Mussolini is deep in the depths of black
despair. Today, the sneaking little yellow men of Japan, blind as they
are in their paganism, begin to doubt their destiny."

Continuing their "leapfrog" strategy in the Pacific theater, combined army-navy forces land
near Hollandia on the northern coast of New Guinea, April 22, 1944.
In the South Pacific, the first steps toward victory had been taken with the combined army and navy "island hopping" campaign toward Japan. Three months after launching this offensive in the Solomon Islands on August 7, 1942, allied forces, under the command of Kansas' favorite wartime son Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, landed in Morocco and Algeria. The North African campaign was followed in 1943 by the invasions of Sicily and Italy, and finally, on June 6, 1944, D-Day, the offensive that commenced on the beaches of Normandy.

* D-day plus 1, June 7, 1944. American assault troops move onto a beachhead in northern France.
Many Kansans took part in this beginning of the end, including the Thirty-fifth Division's 635th Tank-Destroyer Battalion. After a visit from Generals Eisenhower and George Patton on June 25, the rest of the division, which had disembarked in England on May 27, was landed on Omaha Beach on July 5, 1944. As the Thirty-fifth fought its way across France and into Germany, it experienced difficult fighting in the Lorraine Campaign and was a key element at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. At war's end, the Thirty-fifth Division, with many other Kansas soldiers and sailors in the European and Pacific theaters, served for a time in occupation before returning to the States and to much anticipated civilian life.
The "Jayhawk" crew and their B-24 Liberator were shot down over Leipzig, Germany, on July 7, 1944. Although part of the crew survived, the pilot (back row, left), navigator (back row, second from right), and the bombardier (back row, right), all young Kansas airmen, did not.

Army nurses at an evacuation hospital in Italy, November 20, 1944. Hundreds of Kansas women served with various branches of the armed services; among them was nurse Ruth Lee of White City, pictured here on the right.
Nearly 4,000 Kansans, however, did not come home, having been killed in the service of their country; thousands more were wounded. Scores of honors were received and citations awarded. Nine Kansas servicemen were awarded the congressional Medal of Honor “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty” during engagements with the enemy at Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan, and in Italy, Rumania, and France. The big majority of Kansas Gls, whether nurse or medic, WASP or combat airman, WAVE or sailor, WAC or foot soldier, simply did the duty for which they were trained.

*A wounded marine receives treatment at a jungle aid station behind enemy lines on the Pacific island of New Britain.*
One month after the end of World War II, marines of the Fifth Division raise the stars and stripes over the Japanese naval base at Sasebo, on the island of Kyushu, Japan.

Of his experience with the Ninety-sixth Infantry Division during the critical and costly struggle for Okinawa in May 1945, one Franklin County private years later remembered:

"The noise was deafening . . . The incessant gun fire, the blast of grenades, the yelling of orders, the cries and screams of the wounded and the dying, and yes the sobbing of brave, but hysterical men."

"I stood up through all this remarkably well. Remembering it, I can hardly believe it myself."

The experience was typical. Millions of servicemen and women, like this eighteen-year-old Kansan, were justifiably proud of what they and their comrades had accomplished. They "wouldn't take a million" for their wartime ordeal but were also not eager to relive their part in the four-year carnage—an experience that would truly mold a generation.