Part 3: Early Battles (1939-40, European Theater)

World War II began when Germany attacked Poland from the west, & the USSR attacked from the east. Poland collapsed under Germany's ***Blitz Krieg*** or "Lightning War" – massive amounts of German foot soldiers & tanks moved very quickly & the stunned Polish could not even respond.

The Maginot Line – France built a defensive barrier along the border with Germany. It was built of concrete & steel, but the Germans just went around it to invade France from the north.

"Miracle at Dunkirk" – French & British troops hurrying to stop the Germans got trapped in Belgium because of the German advance. There was nowhere for them to go: the English Channel was on one side, & the Germans on the other. To avoid capture, the Allies sent a call out for all possible sea-going vessels to go to their rescue, because there weren't enough military ships to save them. Commercial ships, fishing boats & even rowboats came to pick up the stranded soldiers. Over 338,000 troops were saved, but a great amount of arms & equipment were left behind.

With no one to stop them the Germans moved into France, which surrendered in June 1940.

Most of France was occupied by Germany, but the Southern part was known as ***Vichy France***, & was led by ***Henri Petain*** – he was mothing but a puppet to the Nazis, & most French people considered him a traitor.

The French Resistance – during the German occupation of France, many French people still lived there. They worked covertly (secretly) to disrupt the German organization through spying, cutting communication lines, guerilla attacks & giving information to the Allies. Their leader, Charles De Gaulle became the French president after the war.

The Battle of Britain – the first major battle fought entirely by air forces. Much damage was done, especially to London, but the British use of radar enabled them to defend so well that eventually the Nazis ceased their efforts. The strength & courage of the people of Britain & the British Royal Air Force was well documented.

Famous quote by Winston Churchill, British Prime Minster.

Map showing European Operations. Notice Germany/Italy's positions.

In the U.S., people were divided about the war in Europe:

1) America First Committee – wanted the U.S. to stay out of the war. A famous voice for this point of view was Charles Lindbergh who had become a hero by completing the first trans-Atlantic flight in 1927.
2) Fight for Freedom Committee – wanted the U.S. to help The Allies and to fight if needed, in order to avoid even greater conflict later on.

The Neutrality Acts prevented U.S. merchants from selling arms & war goods to countries at war.

The Lend-Lease Act of 1941 – allowed the U.S. lend or lease the items forbidden in the Neutrality Acts. It was way to allow the U.S. to help the Allies. The U.S. became known as the Arsenal of Democracy.

The Atlantic Charter – August 1941 – even before the U.S. entered the war, FDR & Churchill met on a ship to sign a treaty of friendship, co-operation & vision for the future of democracy.