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TEN THINGS EVERY AMERICAN STUDENT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT OUR ARMY IN WWII

by Rick Atkinson

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The U.S. Army in World War II is obviously a big subject. It was a big war with a lot going on. For example, on this very date, May 2, in 1945, Berlin fell to the Red Army, and, in Italy, the war ended, as the surrender of German forces there took effect. That's just one day, in a war that lasted 2,174 days and claimed an average of 27,600 lives every day, or 1,150 an hour, or 19 a minute, or one death every three seconds. One, two, three, snap. One, two, three, snap.

In an effort to get our arms around this stupendous catastrophe, the greatest calamity in human history, let's examine ten points every American student ought to know about the U.S. Army in the Second World War. This is a malleable list, and we can probably all agree that we'd like students to know more than only ten things. But let's give it a shot.

#1. The U.S. Army was a puny weakling when the war began. When the European war began in earnest on September 1, 1939, with the German invasion of Poland, the U.S. Army ranked seventeenth among armies of the world in size and combat power, just behind Romania. It numbered 190,000 soldiers. (It would grow to 8.3 million in 1945, a 44-fold increase.) When mobilization began in 1940, the Army had only 14,000 professional officers. The average age of majors—a middling rank, between captain and lieutenant colonel—was nearly 48; in the National Guard, nearly one-quarter of first lieutenants were over 40 years old, and the senior ranks were dominated by political hacks of certifiable military incompetence. Not a single officer on duty in 1941 had commanded a unit as large as a division in World War I. At the time of Pearl Harbor, in December 1941, only one American division was on a full war footing.

Some American coastal defense guns had not been test fired in 20 years, and the Army lacked enough antiaircraft guns to protect even a single American city. The senior British military officer in Washington told London that American forces “are more unready for war than it is possible to imagine.” In May 1940, the month that the German Blitzkrieg swept through the Low Countries and overran France, the U.S. Army owned a total of 464 tanks, mostly puny light tanks with the combat power of a coffee can.

There was also a mental unreadiness in many quarters. In 1941, the Army's cavalry chief assured Congress that four well-spaced horsemen could charge half a mile across an open field to destroy an enemy machine-gun nest, without sustaining a

scratch. This ignored the evidence of not only World War II, which was already two years underway, but also World War I.

#2. *The war encumbered all of America.* Obviously a lot happened to get from an army of 190,000 to an army of almost 8.5 million. A total of 16 million Americans served in uniform in WWII; virtually every family had someone in harm's way, virtually every American had an emotional investment in *our* Army. That WWII army of 8.5 million existed in a country of about 130 million; by comparison, today we have an army of roughly 500,000 in a country of 307 million.

About the time of Pearl Harbor, Army planners estimated that the U.S. Army would require 213 divisions by 1944. (A division typically had about 15,000 soldiers.) We never even got close to 213; instead, the Army mobilized only 90 divisions by the end of the war. That compares to about 300 divisions for Germany; 400 for the Soviet Union, and 100 for Japan.

There were several reasons for this. First, the manpower demands of the air forces and particularly of the supply services competed with the manpower demands of the Army. (Service forces—quartermaster, transportation corps—were more than one-third of the strength of the Army by September 1942.) Second, there was a gradual recognition that the Soviet Union was fighting most of the German army, which meant the United States would not have to face as many Germans as originally feared. There was also a recognition that the United States could provide industrial muscle unlike any nation on earth, to build tanks, airplanes, and trucks, to make things like penicillin and synthetic rubber, not only for us but for our Allies. That meant keeping a fair amount of manpower in factories and other industrial jobs, while of course also getting women into the workforce as never before.

Because we had relatively few divisions, virtually all of them had to be committed to combat. A bit more than two-thirds of the U.S. Army fought in Europe and the Mediterranean, with the remainder in the Pacific (along with all six U.S. Marine Corps divisions). That also meant that you couldn't easily pull the divisions out of the war to let them rest or rebuild; they had to be kept up to strength *while in the fight*.

The First Division is an example. It had fought in North Africa and in Sicily in 1942 and 1943, and when it was committed to battle in Western Europe, on Omaha Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944, of the next 11 months, until the war in Europe ended on May 8, 1945, it spent 317 days in combat. During that period it typically took two to three thousand casualties a month, up to five thousand or more a month. In Western Europe, it had almost 30,000 battle and non-battle casualties (like frostbite or trench foot.) Remember, a division typically has about 15,000 soldiers.

Yet the division ended the war almost at full strength. The Army's replacement system, although poorly run in some fundamental ways, still managed to keep units muscled up, in very sharp contrast to our adversaries, which tended to crumble to nothing. In Western Europe, from Normandy to Czechoslovakia, the Army had 18 divisions with more than 100 percent casualties, and five divisions—including the First—with more than 200 percent casualties. That means the division would be wiped out twice and still be at nearly full strength.

#3. *The U.S. Army did not win World War II by itself.* We can be proud of our role, proud of our Army; we must *not* be delusional, chauvinistic, or so besotted with American exceptionalism that we falsify history. The war began 27 months before American entry into the war. It was fought on six continents, a global conflagration unlike any seen before or since. The British had done a great deal in those 27 months to keep alive the hopes of the western democracies. Russia lost an estimated 26 million people in the war, and its military did most of the bleeding for the Allied cause.

By the end of the war, there were about 60 nations on the Allied side, aligned in what President Roosevelt had long called the "united nations." In Italy alone, Brazilians, Poles, Nepalese, New Zealanders, French, Italians, and a number of other nationalities fought beside us.

Coalition politics played an enormously important part in shoring up the U.S. Army's fighting strength—a recognition that in a global war, the best team wins. In WWII, this was best embodied in Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, who demonstrated diplomatic skills of the first order, including compromise, resolve, coercion, flattery, and patience.

#4. *The U.S. Army's role in the liberation of Europe didn't start at Normandy.* The army, those soldiers and commanders, who landed in France on June 6, 1944, did not leap fully armed from the ether. They had a pedigree, individually and collectively, and it's difficult to understand what happened in those final eleven months of the European war following the invasion at Normandy without understanding what preceded it.

In fact, the path to Normandy began more than two years before D-Day, and involved other, earlier D-Days. On the battlefield, it really started in North Africa. How did the U.S. Army end up in North Africa? The United States, famously, entered the war in December 1941, and almost immediately there was agreement between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill that the first task at hand was to defeat Germany. Their presumption was that Germany was the strongest of the Axis powers, and that clubbing it into submission would inevitably lead to the defeat of its two main partners in crime,

Japan and Italy. But beyond that concurrence, of *Germany first*, there was little agreement on how to translate the principle into a strategic plan.

In fact, there was savage disagreement between the Americans and the British, among the bitterest arguments of the war. Through the spring and early summer of 1942, the American military brain trust led by Gen. George C. Marshall, the Army chief of staff, argued that the quickest, surest way to defeat Germany would be to stage an invasion army in the UK, cross the English Channel, and march for Berlin. The British said "Whoa! Not so fast."

It would be much more sensible, argued the British, to begin the liberation of Europe by attacking the periphery of the Axis empire. North Africa was proposed as a candidate, its most attractive characteristic being that *there were no Germans there*. After Germany invaded France in the spring of 1940, Hitler offered the French a deal with the devil. He proposed the creation of a French rump state, occupying the bottom one-third of metropolitan France with a capital in the spa town of Vichy. (The Germans would keep Paris.)

As part of the deal, the French could keep their empire, notably the French possessions in northwest Africa: Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The French could also retain their navy and an army of about 100,000 soldiers in North Africa, with the proviso that they agreed to fight any invading force, notably the British. Hitler knew that there were more than 17 million Arabs living in these French colonies, and he wanted the headache of governing them to fall on the French. France of course agreed to the deal, except for a few renegades like an obscure brigadier general named Charles de Gaulle.

In the high councils of the British and Americans this debate over where to strike raged secretly for months. In late July 1942, Roosevelt at last sided with the British against the advice of virtually all his senior military officers. He ordered an Anglo-American invasion of North Africa.

The landings—known as Operation Torch—occurred on November 8, 1942, in Morocco and Algeria. After three days of resistance, the Vichy French in North Africa capitulated, joined the Allied cause, and the Anglo-American army pushed eastward into Tunisia; they were close to within sight of the minarets of Tunis before being stopped cold by the Germans and Italians in late November 1942. The Germans, under the command of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, reacted with much greater agility and audacity than the Allied brain trust had anticipated, shoving tens of thousands of troops across the Mediterranean. A stalemate persisted in Tunisia for months.

At the same time, 2,000 miles to the east, the British Eighth Army under General Bernard L. Montgomery had defeated another German-Italian army at the Egyptian crossroads of El Alamein, and for the next three months that Axis army, under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, retreated across the breadth of North Africa, languidly pursued by the British. By late winter 1943, there were four armies—two Allied and two Axis—in Tunisia, a country the size of the state of Georgia.

Over the next two months, Allied strength waxed and Axis strength waned. The Allies gained air supremacy and almost complete control of the seas, effectively strangling the Axis supply line from Europe; the sea passage from Italy became so harrowing that Italian sailors called it "the death route." Hitler decided not to try to evacuate his forces from North Africa; the result was the capture of roughly a quarter million Germans and Italians, a defeat almost as catastrophic for the Axis cause as Stalingrad had been a few months earlier. After Africa came Sicily, then the campaign in Italy. *That* is the context for Normandy.

#5. The U.S. Army for some considerable time after we entered the war was not very good. Part of the WWII mythology is that all the brothers were valiant and all the sisters were virtuous. War is the most human of enterprises, and it reveals every human foible and frailty, as well as human virtues: cowardice and tomfoolery, as well as courage and sacrifice. The Greatest Generation appellation is nonsense. And which generation are we talking about—the generation of senior Army leaders like George Patton, born in 1885, Dwight Eisenhower, born in 1890—or the generation of trigger-pullers, mostly born in the 1910s and 1920s?

In the first couple years of American involvement in WWII the Army was burdened with equipment that in some cases was clearly inferior to the enemy's, tanks being a good example. It was burdened with a number of commanders who were not up to the task: of the first five corps commanders in action against the Germans, three were sacked for incompetence. Our first adversary in the liberation of Europe was the French, and we were hardly brilliant in combat against them.

Those first couple years of war required a sifting out, an evaluation at all levels within the Army of the competent from the incompetent, the physically fit from the unfit. It has sometimes been argued that in an even fight, when you matched one American battalion or regiment against a German battalion or regiment, the Germans tended to be superior, the better fighters. But who said anything about an even fight? Global war is a clash of *systems*. Which system can generate the combat power needed to prevail, whether it's in the form of the 13,000 Allied warplanes available on D-day; the 10:1 American advantage in artillery ammunition often enjoyed against the Germans; or the ability to design, build, and detonate an atomic

bomb? Which system can produce the men capable of organizing the shipping, the rail and truck transportation, the stupendous logistical demands of global war?

Germany could not muster the wherewithal to cross the English Channel, which is only 21 miles wide, to invade Britain. The United States projected power across the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Pacific and into Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Power-projection, adaptability, versatility, ingenuity, preponderance—these are salient characteristics of the U.S. Army in WWII.

#6. The U.S. Army in WWII comprised much more than just riflemen. It also included, for example, the Army Air Forces, which in turn embodied the single greatest military disparity between us and our enemies: the ability to flatten fifty German cities, to firebomb Tokyo, to reduce Hiroshima and Nagasaki to ashes.

Those fleets of airplanes—a thousand bombers at a time attacking enemy targets—are perhaps the most vivid emblem of the “arsenal of democracy” that outfitted our military and, to some extent, our military allies. The United States built 3.5 million private cars in 1941; for the rest of the war, we built 139. Instead, in 1943 alone, we built 86,000 planes, 45,000 tanks, and 648,000 trucks. We made in that one year 61 million pairs of wool socks; every day, another 71 million rounds of small-arms ammunition spilled from Army munitions plants.

The American war machine was “a prodigy of organization,” in Churchill’s phrase, derived from a complex industrial society. To service those planes and tanks and trucks required a vast army of support troops within the larger Army, an army that benefited from “the acquaintance of Americans with the gadgetry of American life,” from what the historian Russell Weigley called a “confidence born of familiarity with the machine age.” All of this gave the U.S. Army a mobility unmatched by any of our adversaries, a mobility that permitted the rapid movement and concentration of firepower. The German army by contrast relied on hundreds of thousands of horses to pull their artillery and to haul supplies.

#7. The Army remained under civilian control throughout the war. When the president, in July 1942, made the decision to invade North Africa, contrary to the advice of virtually all of his uniformed military advisers, he signed the order: Franklin D. Roosevelt, commander in chief. Harry S. Truman, *not* the military, made the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Military strategy, not to mention decision-making, tended to be made during WWII by the civilian leadership, frequently counter to the military’s druthers. In *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration* (1982), Kent Roberts Greenfield, a senior Army historian, listed almost two dozen decisions made by Roosevelt against the advice, or over the protests, of his military advisers, from 1938 to 1944. Besides the decision to invade North Africa, there were more than a dozen strategic decisions for which the initiative apparently came from the president. A good example of this is his initiative to declare that unconditional surrender would be a central Allied war aim.

#8. The U.S. Army in WWII was among the greatest agents, perhaps the greatest agent, of social change in the country during the 20th century. This is ironic given the inherent conservatism of the institution. Our national evolution on core issues of racial and gender equality are very much shaped by WWII.

The U.S. Army was segregated in WWII and exclusionary. In 1939, fewer than 4,000 blacks served in the Army. By early 1944, that number exceeded 750,000, and the disparity between the avowed principles for which the nation fought and the stark, hypocritical reality of American life in the 1940s gave impetus and legitimacy to the civil rights movement. Many African-Americans endorsed what they called the “Double V” campaign: a righteous struggle for victory over both enemies abroad and racism at home. Severe restrictions on combat roles for black troops gradually eased; a group of fighter pilots known as the Tuskegee airmen demonstrated the inanity of those restrictions, including assertions that black pilots lacked the reflexes to be good fighter pilots. It’s hard to imagine Barack Obama elected as president of the United States in 2008 without the accelerated social change of WWII.

The Army in WWII was also an overwhelmingly male institution, and exclusively male in senior leadership roles. Of 1,300 generals in the Army in July 1944, not one of them was a woman. (The first female Army general didn’t come into being until 1970.) But the extraordinary demand for military manpower meant that women were drawn into the national workplace in exceptional numbers; it’s very hard to put that genie back in the bottle.

Moreover, the Army was a democratizing institution, even though it was and remains relentlessly hierarchical. Of 683 graduates from Princeton University’s Class of ’42, 84 percent were in uniform by 1945, and those serving as enlisted men included the valedictorian and salutatorian; 25 classmates would die during the war, including 19 killed in combat.

#9. The history of the U.S. Army in WWII is among the greatest stories of the 20th century. It ought to be taught and learned as a story, with character, plot, conflict, and denouement. John Updike wrote that WWII was the twentieth century’s central myth,

“a vast imagining of a primal time when good and evil contended for the planet, a tale of Troy whose angles are infinite and whose central figures never fail to amaze us with their size, their theatricality, their sweep.”

Samuel Hynes, a fighter pilot in World War II who became a professor at Princeton, observed that the war “was an action in Aristotle’s sense—it had a beginning, a middle, and an end.” That *should* make for lively, coherent narrative, and narrative can be a wonderful teaching tool.

Two cautionary notes: first, as the British historian Sir Michael Howard warns, military history has “all too often been written to create and embellish a national myth, and to promote deeds of derring-do.... The Second World War is ransacked to provide material for the glorification of our past.” Triumphalism is *not* the point. Second, we’ve got to take care not to view the present and the future through the distorting lens of the past. One residue of WWII is a tendency to narrowly define power in military terms, and to define threats in terms of traditional human enemies bent on doing ill. Climate change and our addiction to foreign oil have the potential to do more damage to American sovereignty and our way of life than anything al Qaeda can pull off.

#10. They died for you. We’ve talked about the WWII Army in as both an organism and a machine, an institution that grew stupendously, that demonstrated flexibility and adaptability. But we ought never forget that at the core of this story is suffering. The U.S. military sustained almost 300,000 battle deaths during the war, and about 100,000 others from accidents, disease, suicide. Many of those deaths were horrible, premature, and unspeakably sad. One, two, three, *snap*.

War is a clinic in mass killing, yet there’s a miracle of singularity; each death is as unique as a snowflake or a fingerprint. The most critical lesson for every American is to understand, viscerally, that this vast host died one by one by one; to understand in your bones that they died for you.

I will close by offering a meditation on one death. Among those fighting in the ferocious battle in mid-December 1943 for San Pietro in central Italy, midway between Naples and Rome, was Captain Henry T. Waskow. Waskow was from Belton, Texas, born on a farm, and while he was a student at Trinity College he had joined the Texas National Guard.

The Texas Guard was federalized and became the 36th Infantry Division, and Henry Waskow eventually became commander of Company B, in the 143rd Infantry Regiment. He survived Salerno, but on December 14, 1943, while leading his company up Monte Sammucro, above San Pietro, he was killed by shellfire. His body lay on the mountain for several days until the company runner could get a mule from the valley below and bring Capt. Waskow down. At the foot of the mountain was, by chance, Ernie Pyle, the great war correspondent. Here’s part of Pyle’s account of that scene:

“I was at the foot of the mule trail the night they brought Capt. Waskow’s body down. The moon was nearly full at the time, and you could see far up the trail, and even part way across the valley below. Soldiers made shadows in the moonlight as they walked. Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed to the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden packsaddles, their heads hanging down on the left side of the mule, their stiffened legs sticking awkwardly from the other side, bobbing up and down as the mule walked.

The Italian mule-skinners were afraid to walk beside the dead men, so Americans had to lead the mules down that night. Even the Americans were reluctant to unlash and lift off the bodies at the bottom, so an officer had to do it himself, and ask others to help.

The first one came early in the morning. They slid him down from the mule and stood him on his feet for a moment, while they got a new grip. In the half light he might have been merely a sick man standing there, leaning on the others. Then they laid him on the ground in the shadow of the low stone wall alongside the road. I don’t know who that first one was. You feel small in the presence of dead men, and ashamed at being alive, and you don’t ask silly questions.

We left him there beside the road, that first one, and we all went back into the cowshed and sat on water cans or lay in the straw, waiting for the next batch of mules.

Somebody said the dead soldier had been dead for four days, and then nobody said anything more about it. We talked soldier talk for an hour or more. The dead men lay all alone outside in the shadow of the low stone wall.

Then a soldier came into the cowshed and said there were some more bodies outside. We went out into the road. Four mules stood there, in the moonlight, in the road where the trail came down off the mountain. The soldiers who led them stood there waiting. ‘This one is Captain Waskow,’ one of them said quietly.

Two men unlashed his body from the mule and lifted it off and laid it in the shadow beside the low stone wall. Other men took the other bodies off. Finally there were five lying end to end in a long row, alongside the road. You don't cover up dead men in the combat zone. They just lie there in the shadows until somebody else comes after them.

The unburdened mules moved off to their olive orchard. The men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood around, and gradually one by one I could sense them moving close to Capt. Waskow's body. Not so much to look, I think, as to say something in finality to him, and to themselves. I stood close by and I could hear. One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud, 'God damn it.' That's all he said, and then he walked away. Another one came. He said, 'God damn it to hell anyway.' He looked down for a few last moments, and then he turned and left.

Another man came; I think he was an officer. It was hard to tell officers from men in the half light, for all were bearded and grimy dirty. The man looked down into the dead captain's face, and then he spoke directly to him, as though he were alive. He said: 'I sure am sorry, old man.' Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer, and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tenderly, and he said: 'I sure am sorry, sir.'

Then the first man squatted down, and he reached down and took the dead hand, and he sat there for a full five minutes, holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face, and he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there.

And finally he put the hand down, and then he reached up and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of his uniform around the wound. And then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone.

After that the rest of us went back into the cowshed, leaving the five dead men lying in a line, end to end, in the shadow of the low stone wall. We lay down on the straw in the cowshed, and pretty soon we were all asleep."

But Capt. Waskow had the last word. In a final letter to his parents, one of those just-in-case letters that soldiers sometimes write, he told them this: "I would like to have lived. But since God has willed otherwise, do not grieve too much, dear ones... I will have done my share to make this world a better place in which to live. Maybe, when the lights go on again all over the world, free people can be happy and gay again... If I failed as a leader, and I pray I didn't, it was not because I did not try." He added: "I loved you, with all my heart."

The first duty is to remember. We have an obligation to the Captain Waskows of World War II, and all our wars, to remember.

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