In the bloodiest six years in the history of the world, 16 million
WORLD WAR II (1939-1945) was the greatest catastrophe in history. More than a half-century after it ended, this conflict remains by far the most costly war of all time.

The Axis powers—Germany, Italy and Japan—posed the greatest threat to Western civilization ever faced. But they were destroyed by the Allied powers led by the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and France.

What I think of the G.I.’s (the men who fought the war) was best said by Sergeant Mike Ranney of the 101st Airborne Division: “I’m treasuring the remark to a grandson who asked, ‘Grandpa, were you a hero in the war?’

“No,” I answered, “but I served in a company of heroes.”

So far as I am concerned, so did they all."
Some 2,300 Americans were killed and 19 ships—including the U.S.S. Arizona (above) and the U.S.S. Shaw—were sunk or damaged at Hawaii’s Pearl Harbor.

PEARL HARBOR ★★★★★★★

By the winter of 1941, it seemed clear that war was inevitable. Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) Party wanted more space for their German homeland. In Japan, Minister of War Hideki Tojo knew that for his country to grow, it would have to deal strongly and swiftly with the United States.

Few realized how strongly and swiftly it would come.

At 7:53 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, Lieutenant Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, in his lead Japanese bomber, called out on his radio: “Tora! Tora! Tora!” (Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!) It was the code-word signal that the Imperial Japanese Navy had achieved maximum strategic surprise over U.S. Army and Navy forces based in and around Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. At 7:55 a.m., the Japanese war planes attacked.

By the time the attack ended, the Imperial Japanese Navy had accomplished its goal of crippling the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Most of the fleet was at the bottom of the harbor, and most of the Army, Navy and Marine fighter planes and bombers were smoking ruins.

It was “a date which will live in infamy,” said President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Dec. 8 when he asked Congress to declare war on Japan. When Japan’s Axis allies, Hitler and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, honored their treaty obligation and declared war on the United States four days later, the conflict had truly become a world war.

GUADALCANAL ★★★★★★★

After the Americans’ stunning victory in the Battle of Midway in July 1942, a stalemate existed between Japan and the United States. Japanese forces were constructing an airfield on Guadalcanal, one of the Solomon Islands, only 1,200 miles from Australia. Once the airfield was finished, Japanese warplanes could easily attack Australia. American strategists could not let that happen, so Guadalcanal became the place where the United States committed its men and ships to a full offensive.

On Aug. 7, 1942, 19,000 men of the First Marine Division invaded, supported by Navy warships and supply ships. Though the landing went smoothly, everything after that seemed to go wrong. The Japanese Navy swiftly counterattacked at night and forced the U.S. Navy to retreat with their supply transports only half unloaded.

Isolated, short of food and ammunition, weakened by tropical diseases, the Marines desperately fought against the Japanese. People in the United States were worried that the Japanese would win. Even Marine Major General Alexander Vandegrift, who commanded the invasion force, later said there were “a hundred reasons why this operation should fail.”

But it did not fail. At times fighting barefoot because there were no replacements for their rotted boots, the Marines beat back attack after attack. Ultimately reinforced and resupplied, the Marines finally defeated the Japanese and took Guadalcanal.
While war raged in the Pacific, Europe too was aflame. During the battles in Sicily and mainland Italy the American and British war planners were deciding which was the best spot in northern France to land an invasion force that would be able to drive quickly into Germany. There were many challenges. The landing beaches had to be within range of protective Allied fighter planes based in England. They had to be in an area where defense fortifications were weak or incomplete. And, perhaps hardest of all, the invasion had to be where the enemy would least expect one. The place chosen was the shore of Normandy, France.

On June 6, 1944, the American and British armies landed. This landing was not only the biggest amphibious operation in history but the most thoroughly planned and practiced. In preparation for going ashore on D-Day, 170,000 soldiers, British and Canadian as well as American, participated in exercises from January through May 1944. Every one of them knew what was expected of him and what he could expect in the way of German resistance. They knew that Hitler had erected defenses called the Atlantic Wall to stop them. The Atlantic Wall consisted of reinforced concrete forts, trenches, minefields, and anti-landing craft devices of all kinds, and it was backed up by panzer (tank) divisions and manned by battle-hardened Nazis.

At one of the landing sites, Omaha Beach, incoming fire from the German machine guns and cannons was horrendous. Sergeant John R. Slaughter recalled, "There were dead men floating in the water and there were live men acting dead, letting the tide take them in." They needed leaders to get them off the killing field that was the beach.

In Sergeant William Lewis's case, "Lieutenant Leo Van de Voort said, 'Let's go...there ain't no use staying here, we're all going to get killed!' The first thing he did was to run up to a gun emplacement and throw a grenade in the embrasure. He returned with five or six prisoners. So then we thought, if he can do that, why can't we. That's how we got off the beach."

On D-Day these men fought some of the toughest soldiers in the German Army, and beat them. Less than a year later, they would win the war against Nazi Germany.

Heroes: U.S. Marine Raiders after a secret mission in the Solomon Islands.

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE ★★★★★★

As 1944 came to a close, it looked as though Germany was running out of resources with which to fight. The Americans thought the Germans would give up before the New Year began, but at 5 a.m. on Dec. 16, Hitler launched a major offensive that came as a complete surprise.

In the Ardennes Forest of Belgium the Germans broke through thinly held American lines and drove on toward the English Channel, destroying two American divisions. The Germans put more men, tanks, airplanes and other firepower into the offensive than they had four years earlier when they attacked the French Army. It became the biggest battle the U.S. Army had ever fought.

The Germans thought they had divided the Allies and were about to drive the American, Canadian and British troops out of Europe.

But throughout the battle zone individual Americans began to resist. At Elsenborn Ridge, Sergeant Arnold Parish of the Second Infantry recalled, "We were helpless and all alone and there was nothing we could do." When the German infantry attacked, supported by tanks, Sergeant Parish thought that perhaps it was the end of the world. But within seconds he and his platoon were firing back. The German attack was repulsed.

Throughout the Ardennes the G.I.'s dug in and badly disrupted the German timetable. By the end of the month the Germans had been thrown back and were on the defensive. It was a great victory brought about by ordinary men who wanted nothing more than to go back home, but first they had a job to do.

In Belgium, surrounded U.S. troops of the 10th Armored and 101st Airborne held on until they were relieved by fresh troops. Top: The 289th Infantry marches in. Above: Guarding German prisoners.

THE ATOMIC BOMB ★★★★★

By August 1945, Japan was defeated, but it refused to surrender. Operations Coronet and Olympic, the invasion of Japan, were ready to be launched, but everyone was reluctant to see them given the go-ahead. General Douglas MacArthur, who would command the invasion, predicted that it would "cost over a million casualties to American forces alone."

Something had to be done to shock sense into the minds of the Japanese military leaders. President Harry S. Truman knew he had a weapon with unimaginable power. He just hoped that it would have the effect needed. He ordered the only two atomic bombs in the world to be flown from the United States to the B-29 air base on Saipan.

The first target was the city of Hiroshima on the island of Honshu. Colonel Paul W. Tibbetts Jr. piloted the B-29 Enola Gay, which carried the first atomic bomb. On Aug. 6, 1945, at 8:15 a.m., it was released over Hiroshima. In a single blast, the city was destroyed. The world had a new image of war: a gigantic, terrifying mushroom cloud.

President Truman called upon the Japanese government to surrender, but the Japanese high command still refused. Three days later, at 11:01 a.m., Bock's Car, the B-29 piloted by Major Charles W. Sweeney, dropped the second atomic bomb. Its target was the city of Nagasaki, on the island of Kyushu.

On Aug. 15, in the first public speech a Japanese emperor had ever made, Emperor Hirohito told the nation that the government was going to surrender. At long last World War II was truly over.