

# I WITNESSED WORLD WAR II HISTORY

**At the 75th anniversary of the end of the global conflict, survivors recall remarkable moments**

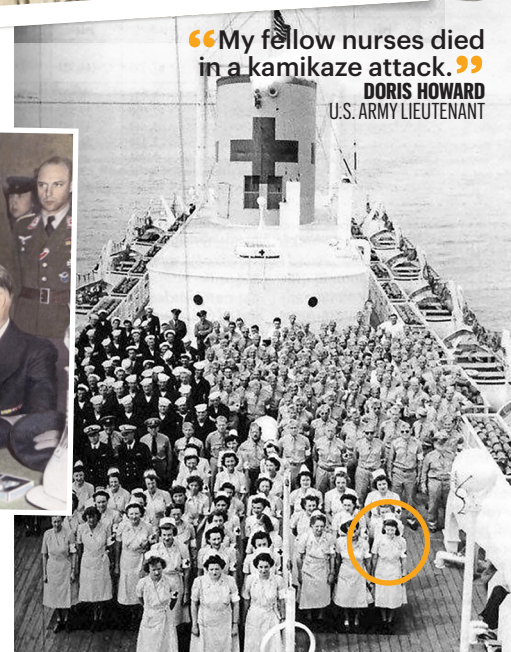
**“I saw the raised flag on Iwo Jima...”  
HERSHEL “WOODY” WILLIAMS  
CORPORAL IN THE 3RD MARINE DIVISION**



**“I watched the Germans’ final surrender...”  
LUCIANO GRAZIANO  
U.S. ARMY MASTER SERGEANT**



**“My fellow nurses died in a kamikaze attack.”  
DORIS HOWARD  
U.S. ARMY LIEUTENANT**



BY ALEX KERSHAW

**T**hree-quarters of a century ago, the most deadly conflict in human history ended. The generation that lived through those memorable events is fading from the scene. Only about 2 percent of the men and women who served in the armed forces during the war are still alive. But some of them can still vividly describe great historic events.

Here are stories about some of the most unforgettable moments of World War II.

## **I SAW THE FLAG RAISED ON IWO JIMA**

Hershel “Woody” Williams was a 21-year-old U.S. Marine training on Guam to invade Japan when he heard that the war was finally over. He says there is only one word to describe how he felt: exhilaration. “Most of us ran out of tents and started shooting into the air, running around like a bunch of idiots.”

For Williams, it was like being released from a death sentence he had lived under since earlier that year, when he’d experienced the horrors of the battle on Iwo Jima.

“It’s not possible to describe the hell of Iwo Jima,” says Williams, 96, the last living Medal of Honor recipient from the Pacific theater. “Unless you’ve been through it, there’s no way you can adequately understand it.”

On Feb. 23, 1945, Cpl. Williams destroyed several Japanese positions using a flame-thrower, repeatedly risking his life as young riflemen around him were killed in one of the bloodiest battles of the war. That same day, from afar, he saw the Stars and Stripes fluttering atop Mount Suribachi.

Williams says superb training kept him alive, along with an unshakable belief that he would make it. “I never let myself think I was not going to survive. I heard Marines say, ‘I’m not going to make it,’ and they didn’t.”

Almost 7,000 Americans were killed and

20,000 others wounded on Iwo Jima.

Williams received the Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman at the White House in October 1945. For many years, he struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder. He began to recover when he recommitted to Christianity, and later served for 35 years as chaplain of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

Most days, the war feels very distant to him: “I have attempted to wipe from my mind the bad things that took place.” But one memory cannot be erased—the faces of two young Marines who died fighting beside him. “They sacrificed themselves for me,” he says. “I have asked the question thousands of times: ‘Why me?’ Why was I selected to receive the Medal of Honor, to have all the accolades, when they gave all they had—their lives.”

## **I WATCHED THE GERMANS SURRENDER**

It was one of the most significant events of the 20th century. And only one man in the U.S. is still alive who witnessed it: the moment the Germans formally surrendered in a small schoolhouse in Reims, France, early on May 7, 1945, ending the war in Europe.

Twenty-year-old Luciano “Louis” Graziano

## SCIATICA BACK PAIN?

Are radiating pains down the back of your leg, or pain in your lower back or buttocks making it uncomfortable to sit, walk or sleep? Millions of people are suffering unnecessarily because they are not aware of this effective, topical treatment.

MagniLife® Leg & Back Pain Relief Cream combines seven active ingredients, such as Colocynthis to relieve burning pains and tingling sensations. Although this product is not intended to *treat or cure* sciatica, it can relieve painful symptoms. *"It provided me with the only relief for my sciatica."* - Mary, LA.

MagniLife® Leg & Back Pain Relief Cream is sold at CVS, Walgreens, Rite Aid and Amazon. Order risk free for \$19.99 +\$5.95 S&H. Get a FREE jar when you order two for \$39.98 +\$5.95 S&H. Send payment to: MagniLife SC-AB6, PO Box 6789, McKinney, TX 75071 or call 1-800-452-1979. Money back guarantee. Order at [www.LegBackCream.com](http://www.LegBackCream.com)

## BURNING FOOT PAIN?

Are you suffering from burning, tingling, numbing or stabbing pain in your feet or legs? Over 20 million Americans live with these aggravating symptoms and put up with the pain because they are not aware of this topical treatment available without a prescription.

MagniLife® Pain Relieving Foot Cream contains eucalyptus oil and yellow jasmine, known to relieve tingling and burning pain, while moisturizers restore cracked, damaged, and itchy skin to help keep bacteria out. *"It's the ONLY product that helps relieve the burning, and tingling feeling in my feet!"* - Mable, NY.

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## MUSCLE OR JOINT PAIN?

Are muscle and joint pains in your back, neck, shoulders or knees keeping you from enjoying daily activities? You should know of a new topical pain reliever that targets the source of the pain – inflammation, instead of masking it with artificial cooling or warming.

MagniLife® Arnica Pain Relief Gel with emu oil and eucalyptus relieves pain from sore muscles, joint discomfort, strains and arthritis. Concentrated, topical gel absorbs quickly leaving no lasting smell. *"It was a bit like taking a Tylenol but with immediate pain-relieving effects."* - Nicole.

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## Your Life

had been living in East Aurora, New York, when he was drafted in 1943. After landing on Omaha Beach and surviving the Battle of the Bulge, he became a utilities foreman with Special Headquarters Command. It was his job, in early May 1945, to keep buildings used by Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower in good order. One such building was the famed Little Red Schoolhouse.

Graziano, 97, still remembers clearly seeing German Gen. Alfred Jodl enter a crowded classroom in the three-story brick building in Reims. "The British, French, Russians, Americans had already signed. The Germans were the last to sign," Graziano says. It was 2:41 a.m. when the steely-faced Jodl finally signed the formal surrender documents with a Parker 51 fountain pen.

Master Sgt. Graziano and others then escorted Jodl along a corridor to a room where Eisenhower was waiting. Graziano watched Jodl walk into the room and "click his heels" and salute Ike, who refused to ever shake the hand of a Nazi. That morning, Eisenhower sent the historic message: "THE MISSION OF THIS ALLIED FORCE WAS FULFILLED."

Given that Graziano was in Reims, heart of the Champagne region in France, it was only natural that later that day he celebrated with some Champagne. "Everyone was really relieved, having a good time ... looking forward to going home." Earlier that spring Graziano had met Eula "Bobbie" Shaneyfelt, a Women's Army Corps sergeant. The couple got married in, of all places, Reims, in October 1945. They honeymooned in Paris and went on to have five children. "She was a staff sergeant,"

remembers Graziano with a chuckle. "I was a master sergeant, so I pulled rank on her. But when we got home, she pulled rank on me."

### MY FELLOW NURSES DIED IN A KAMIKAZE ATTACK

When Doris Howard, 100, saw scenes this spring of the hospital ship USNS *Comfort* arriving in New York Harbor, where it had gone during the city's COVID-19 peak, it brought back memories from three-quarters of a century ago, when she was on the ship's namesake, the USS *Comfort*, off Okinawa, Japan.

Then, the danger was kamikazes—Japanese suicide planes. "You never knew if you were going to be next," recalls Howard, an Army nurse aboard the hospital ship during the Battle of Okinawa, the last major battle of World War II. "You just knew that the odds were that you were going to get hit."

A Wisconsin native, Howard joined the U.S. Army Nurse Corps a few weeks after Pearl Harbor was bombed. By April 1945, she was a lieutenant treating young Americans wounded in battle. "Planes would come over at night, flying very low, horribly noisy, making the ship rock when they would drop bombs. If another ship was hit, we would expect a big surge of patients."

During the three-month long battle, kamikaze attacks accounted for the sinking of 26 U.S. ships. Even though the *Comfort*, carrying more than 500 wounded, was painted white and identified by red crosses, it was still a target. Howard's luck finally ran out on April 28, 1945, when, as she tended to wounded Marines, one of the suicide planes hit the ship. Twenty-eight people, including six nurses, were killed—the deadliest strike on U.S. servicewomen during World War II.

When the plane's fuel tank exploded, Howard recalls she was thrown 8 feet and slammed into a bulkhead. She was deafened and temporarily paralyzed. But



## 'THE WAR IS OVER'

MILLIONS MARKED THE END of the war with letters home to loved ones.

The Center for American War Letters ([WarLetters.us](http://WarLetters.us)) at Chapman University in California, directed by Andrew Carroll, has preserved many of those letters. Here is one excerpt, written by 1st Lt. William Lee Preston

to his brother John on May 10, 1945, after the German surrender:

"Yes, the war in Europe is over. I don't know what the reaction was in the States as a whole.... But, John, the frontline troops didn't celebrate. Most of the men merely read the story of victory from the division bulletin and said something like "I'm glad," and walked away...."

➔ See this letter and others, and more stories from World War II, at [aarp.org/warmemories](http://aarp.org/warmemories).

## PAIN & INFLAMMATION?

If you suffer from pain due to inflammation related ailments such as arthritis, tendonitis, sprains or swelling, you should know help is available. Many people are putting up with the pain because they are not aware of this new, innovative treatment for topical pain management.

MagniLife® Pain & Inflammation Relief Foam targets the source of pain – inflammation – to help reduce discomfort and allow for recovery. *"Love this product! My husband and I use it all the time."* – Sara, TX. Quick drying foam is aspirin-free and menthol-free.

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## ECZEMA ITCHING?

Is itchy, red or cracked skin causing you discomfort or embarrassment? Over 30 million people now suffer from eczema and dermatitis, which is becoming more prevalent among older adults. New treatments are now available without steroids or prescriptions.

MagniLife® Eczema Care+ can be used on the face, scalp or body and contains Oat-derived Beta Glucan to relieve itching, pain and redness. Moisturizing gel deeply hydrates for visibly softer skin. *"Upon receipt, started using and the itching stopped within minutes and has not returned. Great product!!"* – Edward.

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Also available is Psoriasis Care+ at Walgreens stores or at [www.PsoriasisCareGel.com](http://www.PsoriasisCareGel.com)

## RESTLESS LEGS AT NIGHT?

Are you having trouble sleeping due to unpleasant sensations in your legs which make it difficult to stay still? You should know relief is available in a topical treatment that calms and relaxes the legs, so you can rest comfortably.

MagniLife® Relaxing Leg Cream contains vitamins and minerals that quickly absorb to relieve those aggravating symptoms. *"You can imagine my surprise and delight when my legs kept still that very first night, and now every night since!"* – Dawn, VT.

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**"I heard the emperor announce Japan's surrender...."**

**BILL LEIBOLD**  
U.S. NAVY CHIEF BOATSWAIN'S MATE



she was back at her station within hours.

The *Comfort* made it to Guam for repairs. Howard's fellow nurses were buried there in a deeply moving ceremony, the Stars and Stripes draped across their coffins.

Howard was stateside working in a hospital in Oakland, California, when the war ended. "We all just felt great happiness," she says. "It was over, and everywhere it was 'Peace!'" Howard married and worked as a nurse in the Bay Area before moving to Reno, Nevada, in 2005 to be with her son.

This spring, from quarantine, she saw that the USNS *Comfort* had deployed to New York. "There was a call for retired medical professionals to return to duty, so I was trying to figure out what I could do," she says. "Being in a wheelchair, I'm afraid I would be more of a hindrance than a help. But I'd go if they needed me and they would have me."

### I SAW DEFEAT IN THE FACES OF JAPANESE GUARDS

Early on Oct. 25, 1944, Chief Boatswain's Mate Bill Leibold stood on the bridge of the USS *Tang*, the most lethal American submarine. He watched in the darkness through binoculars as the ship's last torpedo broached the surface of the ocean. The next seconds are indelibly etched in his mind.

"There goes one! Erratic!" he shouted.

The torpedo malfunctioned, circled back and hit the *Tang* with an enormous explosion. Of the 87 crewmen, just nine survived. They were fished from the cold waters off Taiwan by Japanese and sent to a POW camp in Omori, Japan. That's where Leibold and his fellow submariners were working when, on Aug. 15, 1945, they heard the voice of Emperor Hirohito on a public address system: "We

have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace ... by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is unsufferable."

Leibold understood from the faces of the Japanese guards that the war was over. He had lost 70 pounds in captivity. That night he celebrated with other "elated" Americans with horse-gut stew. The prisoners weren't released until 13 days later, when American forces reached the camp. But the abuse ended after the emperor's words.

Leibold is convinced that it was love that kept him and the *Tang*'s eight other survivors alive. "Seven of the nine were married," he stresses. Some had small children, and they fought ferociously to see them again. All aboard the submarine had been reported lost. But Leibold's wife, Grace, had clung to hope. He was finally able to hold her in his arms in Los Angeles in late September 1945.

As the coronavirus raged across the United States this spring, Leibold, 97, was restricted to his room in a care facility in California. "It's like being incarcerated. To be perfectly honest, the situation is far stricter than it was at times [as a POW]." He is the last man alive from the *Tang*'s final patrol. "I'm still here, and they're all gone ..."

What will Leibold do to mark the 75th anniversary of V-J Day this summer? Not much, he sighs, given that he's in strict lockdown. "It'll be just another day for me." He looks forward to the next time he is released from a hellish confinement—and again holds a loved one tight. ■

*Alex Kershaw is a historian and New York Times best-selling author of several books about World War II, including The First Wave, about the D-Day invasion, published in 2019.*