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by Tech. Sgt. Jeffrey Williams
934th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

9/30/2009 - **Minneapolis-St. Paul** -- **Editor's note: this is the first of three articles detailing the 934th's connection to WWII historical events.**

On May 6, 1945, Edward Kennedy, chief of the Associated Press western front staff dispatched the scoop of a lifetime. At General Dwight Eisenhower's headquarters at Reims, France, General Gustaf Jodi, German army chief of staff, signed the terms of surrender at 7:41 p.m. central war time. The European Theater of World War II was officially over.

Less than 12 hours later, at 8:35 a.m. central war time on May 7, Kennedy's dispatch was released by the New York desk of the Associated Press, and the world went wild with joy.

The Minneapolis Morning Tribune ran the headline, "Announcement Due at 8 A.M.: Today Will Be VE-Day" in its May 8th edition, while it's cross-town rival, the St. Paul Pioneer Press ran with the headline, "City Set To Mark V-E Today." Hundreds of other newspapers, like the Rochester Post-Bulletin in Minnesota, ran with a simple headline declaring, "President Announces Victory."

President Harry Truman joined British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Russia's Marshal Josef Stalin in issuing a simultaneous joint proclamation of Germany's unconditional surrender.

After 16 years of depression and war, the announcement sparked celebrations worldwide including thousands gathering at Trafalgar Square in London and New York's Times Square. At the celebration in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, revelers were so excited that a riot broke out.

In Minneapolis, grocery, meat, hardware and liquor stores were closed all day on May 8, and the Cargill Corporation let their employees leave at 12:30 p.m. Near the Foshay Tower on 9th Street and Marquette Avenue, paper and streamers were thrown out of office windows like a ticker-tape parade in celebration of the European theatre's end.

But the war was not finished for pilots and crew of the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron, the precursor to today's 96th Airlift Squadron. Flying C-47 Skytrain cargo aircraft with the large wartime marking 6Z stenciled on the left side of the fuselage, the squadron was assigned to the 440th Troop Carrier Group of the 9th Air Force's 50th Troop Carrier Wing.

The 96th Troop Carrier Squadron performed admirably during Operation Neptune, more commonly known as D-Day, for their role in dropping paratroopers from the 3rd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division on June 6, 1944. By December 1944, the squadron airdropped supplies to ground infantry units fighting at Bastogne, Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge, and was stationed at Orleans, France, 133 kilometers southwest of Paris, when Germany surrendered.

Cpl. William G. Wildes, a special vehicle operator for the squadron, laughed when he recalled his activities on that day. "I was driving a beer truck back from Paris. We went to Paris to get beer and found out about the war's end when we got back to quarters. I guess the war was over when I drove through the gate," he said.

After finding others, he just thought about home, though he did have an encounter with a brother in the Navy while Cpl. Wildes was stationed in France.

"I just looked forward to seeing my mother, father, brother and sister. Most of the guys just kept to themselves and did their own thing. My brother took a C-47 flight over from England to France, which was a no-no," the corporal added. "I was given permission to fly back with him to England and ended up staying a couple of days with him on his boat. We had a real nice time."

Now 85 years old, he looks back fondly upon his experiences in the war.

"I enjoyed England and France. I didn't see any action except for planes that came in on a wing and a prayer, that were all shot up. I am sorry that I didn't stay in, but a lot of us just wanted to go home. We went into Omaha Beach at Normandy a few days after the invasion, and when we left there we got to see the cemetery. My one request is that I get to see it again," Cpl. Wildes said.

On Dec. 31, 1945, he was discharged and worked in a shoe shop in his native Massachusetts before moving to Colorado, where he currently resides. He drove truck for 17 years before starting up his auction house business which he maintained for 25 years. "I'm thankful for the education. The military was good to me. They really taught me a lot and I don't regret it one bit," he concluded.

In "The 440th Troop Carrier Group in Operation Neptune," the late Randy Hills wrote, "Victory in Europe, V-E Day, fell midnight of May 8, 1945. The activities of the 440th TCG were increased rather than lessened by war's ending. Now there were hundreds of thousands of liberated prisoners and displaced persons to be rushed homeward. Emergency food and medical cargoes had to be rushed to critical areas throughout Europe, wherever hunger or disease threatened. There were still wounded to be moved to the hospitals."

The mass celebrations and euphoria felt during the first V-E Day 64 years ago have been replaced with much smaller and more somber wreath laying ceremonies in remembrance of those who fought and died on foreign fields two generations ago.

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