

So when do You Celebrate VJ Day?

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Something less than half of our readers were alive on “Victory over Japan” Day, usually known as VJ Day. Some of you remember where you were during that eventful time. But, what date was it, that glorious day in 1945? Ask twelve different older adults, and you’ll get nearly twelve different answers. Before we reveal the answer, let’s consider the situation in August 1945.

As related in a previous article, victory in Europe was May 8, 1945, now called VE Day. It was dramatic, but tempered by the belief that several years probably remained before the Japanese Empire could be defeated. It appeared that surrender would only come when the last Nipponese fighter was killed on the last island of the archipelago.

That belief was well attested to by the GI soldiers, many from Sauk County, in the Pacific theater of operations. Japanese soldiers rarely surrendered, and Okinawa was the first American battle in our history where more American than the enemy soldiers were killed to win a battle. But unknown even to Vice President Truman was the recent successful test detonation of an atomic bomb. This, it developed, would change everything.

In those days the Baraboo News-Republic news coverage was similar to the State Journal of today, with Associated Press and United Press ticker machines feeding in national and international front page news. Much local news was shifted to inner pages, particularly during the war.

As July 1945, droned on, nearly every day brought a startling headline. We were now close enough that our warships could bombard Japan from a discreet distance, along with punishing air strikes from carrier planes, as did B29’s from Guam and Iwo Jim. Though officially neutral, Russia started showing interest as the American forces edged closer and closer to the shoreline of the enemy.

In other July news, the British voted Churchill out of office, and in New York City, a bomber crashed into the Empire State Building, with damage to both. In Baraboo four men died in an explosion in the Neutralizing House at the Badger Plant, now into full operation. The home front was getting a little dangerous too!

In Guam, a B29 christened “The City of Baraboo” geared up for a mysterious run over Hiroshima to assess the weather and the flak. Strange assignment, plane commander 1st Lt. Garvin R. Kowalke of Baraboo must have thought—(See Dewel, Sauk County and Baraboo, Volume II, pages 833-839 for details).

Finally, on August 7, the News-Republic headlined “Atomic Bomb dropped on Japan” along with an attempt to explain the meaning of this new weapon of war. It was later learned that



The Memorial Wall at the WWII Memorial

Each gold star represents 100 American Servicemen

Who gave the ultimate sacrifice.

“The City of Baraboo”, Kowalke’s plane, had preceded the bomb drop to assess the enemy target.

A review of the headlines of that important summer month of August 1945 gives a hint as to the confusion after the drop of the previously secret atomic bomb, code name “Little Boy”. Despite its initial ferocity, it offered the possibility of an immediate surrender, with the additional bonus of saving the lives of untold Japanese and American young men over an unknown period of years.

In early August 1945, possibly the most newsworthy month of the 20th Century, the newspaper did not know yet of the atomic bomb. On August 2, it reported that four Japanese cities were “smashed” by conventional bombing. On Aug 6, Japan was hit by the atomic bomb. On August 9, Russia, previously neutral, “smashed” into Manchuria.

On August 9 the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. On the 14th Japan cabled what seemed to be an acceptance of terms, but on the 17th McArthur cabled the Japanese to “stop stalling”. On August 20 McArthur cabled surrender terms to Japan. Meanwhile it was announced that production at Badger Plant would end in September. On September 2, 1945, Japanese signed surrender terms..

So, back to our original question: What is the date of VJ Day? August 6, the day Hiroshima was bombed? August 9 when the Nagasaki bomb, (code name “fat man”), showed we meant business about surrender? How about August 10, when the Japanese cabled that they would surrender, but then procrastinated?

How about McArthur’s angry notice to the enemy on August 17 to stop stalling? Hostilities had continued, and men were dying needlessly on both sides. Or do you observe the day, September 2, when a Japanese delegation appeared on the battleship Missouri in formal white tails and top hats and signed the surrender terms? Was not the celebrating over by then?

Actually the official day is September 2 in the United States, but nearby Korea celebrates on August 15. England and Australia have another date, and Japan observes August 15th as “The Day for mourning and praying for Peace”.

Whatever day you choose, those are the events that ended WWII, called the defining event of the 20th Century. At the WWII Memorial at Washington there is a wall containing gold stars. Each vertical stack contains 15 stars, and there are some 270 such vertical stacks. Each star represents not just one but 100 American Servicemen killed in the war. Worldwide, including civilian casualties, the war casualty rate is untold millions of the existing generations of that fated time.

So, make your choice of which day to observe VJ Day and the end of WWII. Even those who did not lose a loved one can reflect on our good fortune, thanks to the GI’s and the bomb. Together they destroyed the brutal Japanese Empire of the early 20th Century.