

World War II and Occupation Duty Campaign Marker Information



Why does the World War II marker begin in 1939 for an American veterans' memorial?

The United States declared war on Japan on 8 December 1941 following a surprise aerial attack on Pearl Harbor the day before, and thus officially entered the Second World War. The United States declared war on Germany and Italy on 11 December 1941 after both first declared war on the United States. By that point in time Europe had been at war for over two years, following Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, drawing in France and the United Kingdom which were both Polish allies. In Asia the war started even earlier in 1937 with Japan's invasion of China. So while the United States tried to remain neutral, it was forced to defend itself in a world at war. By 1939 American forces manned coastal defenses, fended off submarine attacks, and kept the air approaches to the United States free of belligerent activities. The US armed forces also embarked on a massive rearmament and mobilization to prepare in case war came. For this defense of American neutrality from 1939 to 1941 the services were awarded one of two campaign streamers: the American Defense Service streamer (gold ribbon with red, white, and blue stripes) or the Merchant Marine Defense streamer (ribbon with green, white, red, black, red, white, and green stripes). Thus 1939 officially marks the beginning of World War II for American forces.

Why is 1955 the end date given on the World War II marker?

Germany surrendered to Allied forces on 7 May 1945, marking Victory in Europe day, while Japan surrendered on 2 September 1945, which became Victory over Japan day. Those momentous occasions are commemorated by the World War II Victory campaign streamer (red ribbon with thin white, dark blue, light blue, gold, red, gold, and blue stripes), but those were armistices marking the end of hostilities not the end of World War II itself. A peace treaty, not an armistice, is the official end of a war, and a peace treaty was not signed between the United States and Italy until 1947, and with Japan in 1951. Germany remained occupied until 1955, when France, the United Kingdom, and the United States combined their zones into the Federal Republic of Germany, when West Germany's full sovereignty was recognized and it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. During this period of occupation US forces received the Army and Navy Occupation Service campaign streamers (black and red ribbon with white borders). This unbroken service by US forces from war through occupation is why this marker has "and occupation" as part of its title, and why it marks 1955 as the end of this period. Of note, US forces stationed in West Berlin from 1955 to 1990 continued to receive the Army and Navy Occupation ribbons, since that city remained under British, French, American, and Soviet rule until the signing of the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany. That was the official treaty of peace between the United States and Germany--in 1990.

Why are there ten ribbons on the World War II campaign marker?

The conduct of the Second World War was the most massive, complicated undertaking ever accomplished by the United States. It literally spanned the globe, touched every American, and involved different phases from enforcing neutrality, defensive and offensive operations, and occupation of captured territories. These ten campaign streamers recognize this complexity, and each streamer tells its own tale. The first two streamers, the American Defense Service campaign streamer (gold ribbon with red, white, and blue stripes) and the Merchant Marine Defense campaign streamer (ribbon with green, white, red, black, red, white, and green stripes) are explained more fully under a different FAQ entitled "Why does the World War II marker begin in 1939?" The last two streamers, the World War II Victory campaign streamer (red ribbon with thin white, dark blue, light blue, gold, red, gold, and blue stripes) and the Army and Navy Occupation Service campaign streamers (black and red ribbon with white borders) are better explained in the FAQ entitled "Why is 1955 the end date given on the World War II marker?" The second, fourth, sixth, and eighth campaign streamers specifically recognize the contribution of merchant marine sailors as explained in the FAQ entitled "Why is the US Merchant Marine included in this veterans' memorial?" The three remaining campaign streamers represent the service and engagements by the US Army, US Army Air Forces, US Navy, US Marine Corps, and US Coast Guard. The third campaign streamer (light blue ribbon with a narrow blue, white and red center stripe and a narrow white, red, black and white stripe on each side), is for service in the American Theater, the United States and elsewhere in North and South America, from 1941 to 1946. The fifth campaign streamer (yellow ribbon with a narrow blue, white and red center stripe and a narrow white, red and white stripe on each side) is for action in the Asiatic-Pacific Theater from Burma to Alaska, and Pearl Harbor to Tokyo. The seventh campaign streamer (green ribbon with a brown stripe on each edge, and center narrow blue, white and red stripes) was earned for action in the European-African-Middle Eastern theater from 1941-1946. These ten ribbons together tell the story of America's victory in World War II.

Why is the US Merchant Marine included in the World War II marker?

Merchant marine sailors serving aboard US flagged cargo vessels from 1939 to 1946 were finally recognized as veterans in 1988. Going to sea is always hazardous duty, but doing so as the main target for Japanese submarines and German U-Boats made the US merchant marine the most dangerous occupation of the war—even more so than US submariners or bomber crews, which were second and third most dangerous. A greater percentage of those serving in the merchant marine died of wartime injuries than in any other US service, 1 in 26. Four merchant marine campaign streamers on this marker honor the areas in which they served: the Merchant Marine Defense streamer (ribbon with green, white, red, black, red, white, green stripes, awarded from 1939 to 1941), the Merchant Marine Atlantic War Zone streamer (red ribbon with two thin white center stripes, awarded from 1941 to 1946), the Merchant Marine Pacific War Zone streamer (ribbon with tan, red, blue, white, red, white, blue, red, tan stripes, awarded from 1941 to 1946), and the Merchant Marine Mediterranean and Middle East War Zone streamer (ribbon with blue, white, red, gold, green, white, green, gold red, white, blue stripes, awarded from 1941 to 1946). These mariners served under the command of US Navy convoys and sometimes had US Navy personnel augmenting their crews. For their sterling effort during World War II, merchant marine campaign streamers are included on this plaque, and their service is remembered as part of the Navy wall of the Veterans Memorial.