This week in history: August 25-August 31

25 August 2014

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Voyager 2 flies by Neptune and Triton

On August 25, 1989, the spacecraft Voyager 2 made its closest approach to the planet Neptune, still the only successful visit by a manmade craft to the most distant planet in the solar system. Voyager 2 performed flawlessly a complex maneuver that made use of Neptune's gravitational pull to bend its trajectory sharply downwards in the direction of the planet's giant moon Triton, enabling a flyby of both Neptune and Triton in a period of just 24 hours.

Radio signals from Voyager 2 required four hours and 6 minutes to travel the 2.8 billion miles back to Earth, transmitting photographs of the planet and its moon that "left jubilant scientists agog," in the words of the *New York Times*. The data collected was critical for precise measurement of the size, mass and density of Neptune, as well its chemical composition and magnetic field.

The maneuver permanently bent the trajectory of Voyager 2, which has continued for the past 25 years on a path angled below the plane of the ecliptic (the plane in which all the planets move) by about 30 degrees, headed towards interstellar space.

Voyager 2 was launched in 1977, actually shortly before the launch of its sister vessel, Voyager 1, and visited Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus before its pass by Neptune. The spacecraft then began the next phase of its mission: to reach the confines of the solar system and beyond. In 1989 scientists estimated that the one-ton spacecraft, powered by a small nuclear generator, might transmit data for 25 more years. Like Voyager 1, Voyager 2 is still successfully transmitting data to the Deep Space Network as it advances through the Kuiper Belt toward interstellar space.

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50 years ago: Uprising in Philadelphia

On August 28 an uprising against police brutality took place in Philadelphia. In three days of rioting that followed, 774 people were arrested, 341 people were injured, and 225 businesses were damaged. It was the sixth major "race riot," the term used at the time, to take place in the hot summer of 1964, following similar revolts in Harlem and Rochester in New York, Jersey City and Elizabeth in New Jersey, and the Harvey-Dixmoor "gin bottle riot" in Illinois. All of the revolts were triggered by police brutality, coupled with the growing jobs and housing crisis gripping the urban North.

A series of instances of police brutality had taken place in North Philadelphia, the densely populated neighborhood that was home to about 400,000 of the city's roughly 600,000 African Americans. The police violence took place in spite of measures the city had taken to ease racial tensions, including sending mixed black and white police patrols into the neighborhood and instituting a "civilian review board" for the police department.

Both a black and white officer were involved in the incident that triggered the riot. Officers Robert Wells, who was black, and John Hoff, who was white, physically dragged a black motorist, Odessa Bradford, from her broken-down car and arrested her. Within hours thousands of black youth were on the streets in protest. As with previous riots in 1964, elements of the black middle class in the clergy and oriented to the Democratic Party were unable to curb the uprising.

After the Philadelphia riot, Roy Wilkins, the head of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) condemned the uprisings, and claimed that outside agitators had "been paid to start and keep them going." "There can be only one answer," intoned the *New York Times*, "prompt and effective police action to enforce the law and end anarchy."

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75 years ago: Anglo-Polish defense pact signed

In the wake of the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, on August 25, 1939, an Anglo-Polish Common Defence Pact (CDP) was reached between the British government and the Polish administration in Warsaw. The agreement contained promises of mutual military assistance between the nations in the event either was attacked by a "European country."

After the concessions to Nazi Germany's territorial demands at Munich by the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain the previous year, which led to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, Hitler had become convinced that the British would not risk war over Poland and was shocked by the announcement of the mutual defense agreement. Earlier in August Hitler had planned for "Case White," the military invasion of Poland, to begin on Saturday, August 26, at 4.30 a.m. Hitler still believed in his ability to intimidate the British into backing down from their commitment to Poland, and pushed the invasion back one day, to August 27.

Sir Neville Henderson, the British Ambassador in Berlin, was called to the Reich Chancellery to see Hitler. Hopeful to avoid a European war, the German fascist leader told Henderson that he was prepared to make Britain "a large comprehensive offer"—namely, the continued existence of the British Empire— if in return Britain pledged not to interfere with Nazi plans for the subjugation of Poland. Henderson told an exasperated Hitler that the British government would make no agreement without an end to German aggression and a withdrawal from Czechoslovakia too. Shaken by the turn of events that did not accord with his increasingly monomaniacal world outlook, Hitler then prevaricated at the last minute on August 27. That day, five hours after directives for mobilization were passed to troop commanders, Hitler lost his nerve and the order was cancelled.

By August 30 Hitler became reconciled to war with Britain and France, fixing the new date for the attack on Poland for September 1. On the afternoon of August 31 the Nazis manufactured a crude casus belli by running a false flag operation organized by Reinhard Heydrich, deputy to SS head Heinrich Himmler. Selected SS men faked an attack on a German customs post and radio station near the border town of Gleiwitz, then put out a message in Polish. The SS, dressed in Polish uniforms, shot drugged German prisoners from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, leaving their bodies as fake "evidence."

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100 years ago: German army conducts assault on Louvain, Belgium

On August 25, 1914, the German army entered the Belgian city of Louvain, unleashing mass destruction over the following five days. The attack followed the eruption of world war at the beginning of the month, pitting Germany and Austria-Hungary against Britain, France and Russia, in an imperialist scramble for resources, markets and profits.

Upon entering the city, the German army set the university library on fire, destroying 300,000 manuscripts and medieval books. Ten thousand people, the entire population of Louvain, were expelled. Civilian homes were set alight and citizens were shot without warning. Strategic materials, modern industrial equipment and food were sent to Germany, and close to 2,000 of the city's buildings, nearly one fifth of the total, were destroyed.

The destruction of Louvain followed a similar assault on Dinant two days earlier. There, the German army set fire to over 1,000 buildings and executed close to 700 civilians. Germany's rampage was retaliation for the Belgians' attack on the German army as it passed through Antwerp and other cities, as well as a means of terrorizing the local population into submission.

The German invasion of Belgium on August 4 was one of the first major actions of the global conflict in Western Europe, and reflected the geostrategic importance of the country. Germany had sent a letter to Belgian officials two days earlier, demanding passage through Belgian territory, on the pretext of combating the prospect of an imminent invasion of German territory by France. Belgian authorities rejected the demand, and mobilized their armed forces to oppose the invasion.

In turn, the German invasion provided a pretext for British intervention. Under the 1839 Treaty of London, Britain had a mandate to intervene in the event that Belgium, a formally neutral country, was invaded or attacked.

Around 60,000 Belgian civilians and 40,000 in the military died during the war, with as many as 6,000 civilians executed. German occupation also resulted in the displacement of 1.5 million Belgians, and 120,000 were put to forced labour, including in many cases military service.