

The Bedford Boys: D-Day Heroes

Derek Young tells the story of the small-town Americans who led the way and paid the price on June 6th, 1944.

On June 5th 1944, America had been at war against the forces of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany for two days short of three and a half years. Their sons, brothers, fathers, nephews, uncles, friends and neighbors who were fighting, were two oceans away from home and they fought on the sea, in the air and on land for the freedoms that were precious to so many people who were living under enemy occupation. What the folks at home did not know, as they went to sleep that night, was that the invasion to free Europe had already begun!

In the ports and harbors all around the South of England there are gathered over 6,200 vessels to lead the land invasion of France, there are 4,125 landing craft, or 'Higgins boats' named after their inventor based in New Orleans, these are protected by more than 1,210 warships and this mighty armada and army will be supplied by 864 merchant vessels carrying men and supplies.

The first Americans to land in France were the men of the two parachute divisions, the 82nd 'Screaming Eagles' and the 101st 'All American' who had taken off from airbases carrying over 13,400 men

towards the objectives in France. The main objective for the 101st is the town of Saint Mère Eglise, the 82nd's is to capture the causeways that cross the flooded land behind the beach soon to become famous as 'Utah,' where the 4th Infantry division is due to land.

There are units of three American infantry divisions heading towards their designated beaches in Normandy. The 4th will land more than a mile from its designated target but, facing only light resistance, 57 year old Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr., the oldest man to land that day, will make the decision and announce 'We'll start the war from here.' Troops landing at Utah Beach will suffer the lowest casualties of all on D-Day.

The other two American Infantry divisions – the 1st, Big Red One, so named after their distinctive divisional badge, and the 29th, the Blue and the Grey, a reference to the unit's Civil War National Guard origins – will not fare as well. They will hit 'Omaha' beach. The beach is more than five miles long with steep bluffs to the rear. These bluffs are almost 150 feet high in some places and there are only five natural gullies, or draws, leading up

from the beach. These exits are protected by fifteen German strong-points, consisting of light artillery pieces, machine guns and concrete emplacements protected by mines and barbed wire.

The Allied plan called for these defences to be flattened by a bombing raid as the troops approached the beach. Naval gunfire has been directed to destroy bunkers and gun emplacements but this will be ineffective also. Specially designed amphibious tanks of the 743rd Tank Battalion which were supposed to accompany the infantry onto the beach have been launched too far out to sea and most have sunk in the six foot waves; only three will make it onto the beach – the infantry will be going in alone.

One unit will epitomise the sacrifice of America on 6th June 1944 – the men of A Company, First Battalion, 116th Infantry Regiment from the 29th Infantry division, also known as the 'Bedford Boys'. The majority of the 200 men in A Company came from Bedford, a small town in West Virginia, a town that before the war had a population around 3,000 people. This was a close knit community where everyone knew everybody, they went



Into the Jaws of Death BY ROBERT F. SARGENT.

Men of Company E, 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division land from an assault craft in one of the first waves onto Omaha Beach

to school together, they worked together and socialised together. They also joined the National Guard together, the dollar they were paid for attending drill and their smart uniforms were welcome in a community that suffered from the Depression throughout the 1930s. The Company was almost more of a social gathering than a military unit, but when the call came after Pearl Harbour, the Boys were in for the duration.

There were five sets of brothers in the company, Ray and Bedford Hoback, Harold and John Wilkes, Henry and Jack Powers, Roy and Ray Stevens and Earl and Joseph Parker. Joseph was transferred to Company 'F' prior to the D-Day landings. The Stevens brothers were twins and Earl Parker was the only one of the Bedford Boys to have children prior to the landings in France. These

boys from this small community were to lead America's assault on the beaches of Northern France. For that privilege they would pay a terrible price.

Company A was deployed in six boats and headed for the beach at 04:30. It was still dark but the first rays of sunshine were appearing on the eastern horizon as the boats made ten knots heading for the shore. Their landing time was 06:36 and the Royal Navy's Lt. Jimmy Green felt sure he would deliver the Boys on time as they ploughed through the choppy waters.

On the way in they passed a group of LCTs (landing craft tank) heading slowly, too slowly, toward the beach. A Company would arrive ahead of the tanks, which were vital in the plan for destroying German resistance on the beach. This was not a good omen as the landing

craft continued in towards the landing zone.

By the time the landing craft began the final approach, most of the occupants were seasick, badly seasick. The rockets that were supposed to blast the German defences flew over the heads of A Company only to land harmlessly in the water, no danger to the defenders who now opened up on the approaching assault landing craft with mortars and artillery. To add to the mayhem, LCT No. 911 began to take on water and started to sink. The five remaining craft continued towards the shore – the men in 911 would have to fend for themselves for now.

An eerie quiet descended on the five remaining craft as they headed for the shore. The ramps of the craft were lowered and the men moved forward into the cold water and headed for the beach. The Ger-

The author's collection includes an invasion map and photographs of the Bedford Boys and US troops taking cover behind German defenses on D-Day

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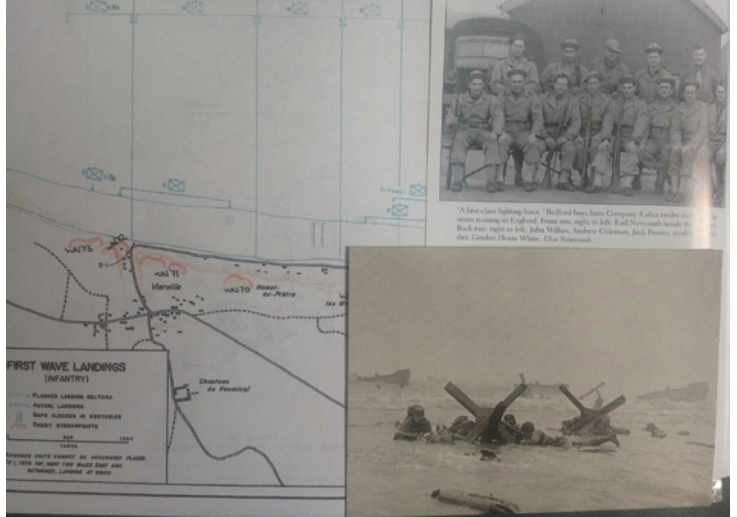
man guns remained silent, as the Bedford Boys, led by Captain Fellers, closed up to within 200 yards of their target, Vierville Draw, and waited. It was open beach between them and their goal, Fellers gave the order to advance and as they did the Germans opened up with rifle, machine gun and mortar fire. It was not a battle, it was a massacre.

Within a minute, quicker than it takes to tell, Fellers was dead along with 28 others from his landing craft, and the fight had only just begun. A second craft hit the beach. Down went the ramp and in came the German fire, fast, furious and deadly accurate. Only a few of these men made it across the sand to the shelter of the sea wall. It took less than ten minutes to land A company on the beach and, as a fighting unit, it was destroyed in about the same time, but the 29th Boys kept coming – there would be no going back from this beach.

The wounded laying on the beach came in with the tide, trying to stay low to avoid the enemy snipers and machine gunners. Everyone on that beach, dead and alive, were targets. Many of the wounded, unable to swim or move, drowned as the incoming tide swept over them, ending their suffering on that bloody beach.

At 07:00, Company B arrived and the whole macabre scene began again, but this time there were fewer Germans and more of the Boys made it onto the beach and the relative safety of the sea wall.

By the end of the day Omaha beach was in American hands. A long narrow strip of France had been won but at a terrible cost. By the close of the day, 19 boys and



A Bedfords fighting force. Bedford boys from Company A after trucks and some remaining in England. From top, right to left, Earl Newcomb, second row, back row right to left, John Wilkey, Andrew Coleman, Jack Peters, middle row, Gordon Henry White, Elton Newcomb.

men from Bedford were dead. Many others were wounded and more would fall in the coming days in France. The news of the invasion was the talk of America and news of the cost was yet to arrive. It was not until July 6th that the people of Bedford had confirmation that their boys had been in the first wave. Some realised that the casualties would be high, all hoped that their kin would be safe.

The first news arrived by telegram on Sunday July 6th. Soon after, 20 homes had the Gold Star Decoration adorning their windows, for a 'Gold Star Mother' who had given her son. The number would continue to climb throughout the summer. It would be the end of July before Bedford would know that 19 of its sons had been killed on 6th June. Nearby Lynchburg suffered heavily too but no town gave more than Bedford – some families gave twice as neither of the Parker or Hoback brothers would see home again.

By the end of D-Day, the US army was ashore, but it would take 10 more months to defeat the Germans. Many more would fall but no small town would suffer the losses of Bedford. In time the town would recover to be reckoned by some as 'The best little town in America.' It's difficult to argue with that.

D-Day Events in Normandy

Normandy, the site of the Allied invasion and liberation of Europe is holding many events to commemorate and celebrate the 70th anniversary, starting this month and continuing through the summer.

Find full details and dates at www.the70th-normandy.com, but highlights include:

Exhibitions at Fermanville, Dives-sur-Mer; Cresserons and Saint-Côme-du-Mont; **The Freedom Tattoo procession and parade, Saint-Lô; In the Footsteps of the Commandos, Sword Beach; They Were the First**, documentary, Pegasus Memorial; **Concert for Peace, Sainte-Mère-Église; D-Day Normandy 1944, 3D Imax film, Caen Zénith; Parachute show, La Fièvre near Sainte-Mère-Église; Liberation Ball, Fermanville; Giant picnic** on Omaha beach, Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer; **Ceremony of Peace, Sainte-Mère-Église; 39-45 conference, Fécamp; Concert for Freedom, Lisieux; Service for Peace, Merville gun battery; The Atlantic Wall conference** at Azeville gun battery, Utah Beach; **Lights of Liberty sound and light show, Bayeux cathedral; Franco-German Encounters concert, Lisieux; Tour of Cherbourg in vintage cars.** ★