

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

D-Day anniversary marked in Bedford

Top U.S. officer addresses crowd

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By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS -

BEDFORD — In a stirring tribute to the D-Day sacrifices of American soldiers and their allies, the U.S. military's top officer said Sunday that World War II's defining moment should remind all that returning warriors need not "suffer in quiet desperation."

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke in the peaceful setting of this small town, which bore the heaviest share of American losses in the June 6, 1944, landings on the beaches of Normandy. The National D-Day Memorial was established here in 2001 as a tribute to those who died in the invasion of German-occupied Europe. Mullen drew a parallel with the needs and aspirations of the men and women returning from today's battlefields, many with the invisible psychological wounds of war. "They, too, have seen and done things we cannot know," he said. "Their lives, too, are forever changed. And just as previous generations of heroes did, they must likewise adjust themselves to peace."

Over much of his nearly three years as Joint Chiefs chairman, Mullen has repeatedly implored the government, as well as communities and volunteer organizations, to help care for returning veterans, as well as families of the fallen. He has called it an obligation that will face the nation for decades after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have come to a close. As part of Sunday's ceremony, the Virginia National Guard's 29th Division Band performed under the direction of Ralph Shank Sr. of Martinsville. Shank, 92, was director of the 116th Infantry regimental band during World War II.

The memorial tells the D-Day tale with details steeped in symbolism, including the height of the triumphal arch inscribed "Overlord," the code name for the operation. The arch is 44 feet, 6 inches high to commemorate the year and month of the landings. Concrete was poured on the pedestrian walkway to resemble waves on the beaches of Normandy.

On D-Day — 21½ years after Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II — allied forces charged the shores of five beaches on France's northern coast. They faced entrenched German forces, land mines, machine guns and heavy artillery.

About 215,000 allied soldiers, and roughly as many Germans, were killed or wounded on D-Day and in the ensuing three months before the allies took control at Normandy, opening a



Ralph Shank Sr. of Martinsville (right) directs the 29th Division Band on Sunday at the D-Day Memorial in Bedford. Shank directed the 116th Infantry Regimental Band during World War II. (Photo by Maj. Cotton Puryear, Virginia Guard Public Affairs)

path toward Paris that eventually took them to Germany and victory over the Nazis.

At D-Day ceremonies last year at Normandy, President Barack Obama honored the dead and applauded what he called the “sheer improbability” of the allies’ success in storming the beaches of Normandy, scaling its cliffs and routing the German defenders.

Congress chose Bedford as the D-Day memorial’s site because it is said to have suffered the highest number of deaths on D-Day of any American community, in proportion to its population, just 3,200 at the time. Nineteen Bedford natives in Company A of the 116th Infantry Regiment were killed on D-Day.

Mullen noted that one Bedford resident today is among the 88,000 U.S. troops in Iraq: Army Sgt. Gordon Musgrove. “Our young troops and their families today still want the same things they looked forward to when they left,” Mullen said. “A job, an education, a home and a better life for their children. We must take care of them, reach out to them, seek to understand them so they do not suffer in quiet desperation.”

Bedford, nestled at the foot of the Blue Ridge mountains, has nearly doubled in population since 1944. Alex Kershaw’s book “The Bedford Boys” recounted the story of its unusually large losses on D-Day. Mullen recalled the anxiety that gripped Bedford 66 years ago as residents huddled around radios for word of progress at Normandy.

“For the families of Bedford and for families across our nation the toughest part was the waiting,” he said. Hours became days. Days became weeks. “On July 17 as the Western Union teletype stirred in Green’s Drug Store, condolence telegrams about the Bedford boys came in, wave upon wave,” he said. “The wait was over and worry turned to heartbreak as family after family learned their wait would last a lifetime.”

In today’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there will be no D-Day, no decisive offensive that brings the fighting to a conclusive end, Mullen said. “And yet, like the Bedford boys, we, our allies and our partners must keep moving forward, even when we are crawling,” he said. “We must take risks and keep pushing ahead. That was what the boys of Bedford taught us. That is Normandy’s legacy.”

