

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

D-Day plus 65 years

Two Company H survivors recall invasion

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By KIM BARTO - Bulletin Staff Writer

Sixty-five years ago, Martinsville residents Glenwood Hankins and Clyde "Windy" England landed at Omaha Beach in Nazi-occupied France and took part in a battle that would be the turning point of World War II.

Today, they are believed to be the only surviving veterans from Company H of the 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division of the Virginia National Guard.

Saturday marks the 65th anniversary of D-Day on June 6, 1944, when 150,000 Allied troops stormed the beaches of Normandy and gained a foothold against the Axis forces in Europe. The massive operation involved more than 5,000 ships and 11,000 aircraft and left nearly 10,000 Allied soldiers killed or wounded.

Neither Hankins nor England could have imagined that scenario when they signed up for military service before the war. By the time the United States became involved in World War II, England had been in the National Guard for several years. Now 94 years of age, he enlisted in 1935 or 1936. Hankins joined the company at age 18 and was inducted in February 1941 for what he thought would be one year of service.

Shortly after, the company left for training in Fort Meade, Md. The group "had no idea the U.S. would be involved in a war at that time," said Hankins, 86. Then the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and the guard members were held in service for the duration of the war. "I left here in '41 to do a year of training. It took me five years to get back," England quipped.

The war also meant nearly five years of separation for England and his wife, Mildred, after he was sent overseas. Letters were their only contact during that time, and all correspondence home was censored. "We went to the post office two or three times a day," Mildred England recalled. Company H left the United States in September 1942, with 85 enlisted men and nine officers, according to Hankins. They were among 15,000 soldiers who crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the Queen Mary.

The trip was risky because Adolf Hitler had placed a bounty on the ship, which carried troops across the ocean every week, Hankins said. "Any submarine captain could get a handsome reward for sinking the Mary," he said. Training, and more training The American troops made it to southern England and began readying for the D-Day invasion.



Glenwood Hankins holds a display of his wartime medals, shown with an old photo of himself in uniform.

England, then a sergeant, was a platoon leader in the machine-gun section of Company H. From October 1942 until June 1944, “we just trained and trained, and studied maps,” he said. “We did more walking than anything else,” Hankins said. Infantry training included two 25-mile hikes every week and “a lot of night maneuvers,” he said. Despite all the marching, “I enjoyed it,” Hankins said.

The men could get passes to visit nearby English towns in between the weeks of training. Before he joined the National Guard, Hankins said, “I’d never seen the ocean. I don’t guess I’d been more than 200 miles away from Martinsville at any time in my life until then.” Troops started amphibious training near the end of 1943. They did practice landings using barges in a river and then moved to the British coast.

“The coastline of England was similar to the coastline of France,” England said. By the time D-Day arrived, he said, “we knew pretty well what the terrain was and what we would have to do to get through it.” After countless training exercises, Hankins said, he knew it was “the real thing” when they were taken to a camp in Weymouth. All movement in and out was prohibited, and their belongings were sent home.

“When it really dawned on us that this wasn’t a practice was when they came around and asked if you had a power of attorney,” Hankins said. The invasion Allied forces were supposed to leave Weymouth to begin the invasion the night of June 4, but stormy weather in the English Channel postponed D-Day for 24 hours. The night of June 5, troops set off across the channel to Normandy, about 90 miles away. They had little sleep and ate breakfast at 2:30 a.m. before loading into small boats in darkness, Hankins said.

Soldiers were to travel the final 12 miles to the beach in Higgins boats, or landing crafts for vehicles and personnel (LCVPs), which had one end that dropped down as an exit ramp. “It was raining and storming, and the channel, which is rough normally, was really rough,” England recalled. “A lot of the boys got sick.”

On the way to Omaha Beach, there was silence except for the sound of the boats’ motors, Hankins said, “each man with his own thoughts and prayers.” Navy ships opened fire at targets on the beach, which was “quite a display of fireworks,” Hankins said. Daylight was breaking as they approached the coast. The wind and rain sent a number of boats off-course, separating the men of the company. Hankins said his group landed about half a mile east of its designated area, while England’s boat landed almost a mile from where it had planned. Hankins, then a staff sergeant in charge of two squads of men in the mortar platoon, was in the third wave landing at 7 a.m.

“I didn’t land on the hottest spot on the beach,” he said. “Some of the other people had met more of a resistance than we did.” The soldiers landed at low tide, with roughly 400 yards of open water to cross before reaching the sand. “We were sitting ducks there,” Hankins said, with “mortars, machine guns and everything firing” as they approached the shore. There were no casualties on the beach among soldiers in his boat, but one man was killed by a mine when they reached the top of the bluffs, Hankins said.

In England’s group, “I lost three men in the water from gunfire and two more on the beach,” England said. When he got out of the boat, England recalled, the water was almost up to his chest. The hard part was the load carried by the soldiers, he said. In the machine gun unit, some men carried a machine gun, which weighed about 18 pounds full of water, England

said. Others carried the 34-pound tripods that supported the guns. They also carried boxes of ammunition, which weighed 15 pounds apiece. "Everybody carried at least two (boxes) and sometimes more," he said. "With a long day's march, they got very heavy." The beach was lined with three rows of concertina wire, which was "razor-sharp on both sides," England said. "We couldn't get up on the beach because of that." A soldier was going to blow a hole in the wire, but he was shot first. Someone else stepped in and blew the hole, "and we got up the hill," England said. "Really, we didn't have any opposition up there."

At the end, he said, "I think we had one man who wasn't bleeding. All the rest of us had gotten scratched up from shrapnel." Meanwhile, Hankins had a near-miss as he was running up a path in the sand dunes. He tripped and fell forward as explosions went off on either side of him but did not hit him, which he called "a miracle." "I must've tripped on the trip wire," he said.

Hankins said he was functioning "on autopilot, you might say. You fell back on your training." He added he does not remember eating anything that day and cannot say how long the operation took. "I had no concept of time. I knew it was a long day," Hankins said. Enemy fire The next day, the men of Company H regrouped and began retaking France from the Nazis. "We got off at the beach better than I thought we ever would," England said. "The next day, we got into the real war then."

Both England and Hankins were wounded in different incidents in August and were awarded the Military Order of the Purple Heart. The Americans took the small French city of Vire and had captured "a bunch of prisoners," England said. He was returning from escorting the captured men to prison when another soldier "hollered at me and said, 'They're shooting down the road.'"

England could not hear what the soldier was saying, and enemy fire struck him in the front pants pocket of his left leg. The blast blew apart a pocket knife and some coins and embedded the pieces in his leg. He was hospitalized in England.

"I never did get back to the front," he said. Instead, he did paperwork until his discharge in 1946. Four pieces of metal remain in England's leg to this day, he said. Hankins was wounded twice by artillery, first in Brest, France, and then near Aachen, Germany. He was evacuated to England the second time but returned to his company on Christmas Eve, staying with it until the war ended in 1945. After the war Hankins met his wife, Bernice, after the war. They will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary later this year.

Bernice Hankins was by her husband's side recently when he was awarded France's Ordre Royale de la Legion D'Honneur, or Legion of Honor, which is the equivalent of being knighted in France. Soldiers who participated in the liberation of France can be eligible for the award. "I was surprised," Glenwood Hankins said. "It was something I didn't expect."

The ceremony, held April 29 at the French Embassy in Washington D.C., was "quite an honor," Bernice Hankins said. "I was real proud of him, but then, I've always been proud of him."

The veterans of Company H used to mark the D-Day anniversary with a reunion. But now that just two of them remain, Hankins said he and England just "call and say hello." The youngest D-Day veterans turn 82 years old this year, according to the National D-Day

Memorial Foundation Web site. "We've lost eight or 10 (of the group) in the last two years," England said. Veterans of the 29th Division have a publication called "The Twenty-Niner," he said, "but almost nobody's left to receive it." England attended the opening ceremony of the D-Day Memorial in Bedford and has since visited it several times.

He also returned to France once to dedicate a memorial on Omaha Beach a few years after the war. However, from his wartime experiences, he said, "I was really not impressed with the French people." As England and other soldiers were marching through a small French town, he recounted, a girl offered a cup to one of the Americans.

"When he went to drink it, she threw it in his face. That was bad," England said. "Of course, when we were there, the Germans had removed all the people who were for a free France." Hankins has had positive experiences with the people of Normandy during trips to France for the 35th, 40th, 50th and 60th D-Day anniversaries. In 2004, he and his wife were part of a small group of veterans hosted by a French organization, "Les Fleurs de la Memoire." Members of the group have adopted the graves of American soldiers killed in the invasion. The Hankinses befriended a French couple who live outside Paris and have been placing flowers and taking care of an American grave for 40 years.

In Normandy, Hankins said, "People come up to you all the time, just because you're American, and say, 'Thank you. Thank you for my freedom.'"

