

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

D-Day veterans recount beach, bullets

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In 1992, 79-year-old Ray Brodie of Martinsville revisited the beach of Normandy, France. Looking inland from the English Channel, he wondered how any of them had made it across alive.

He had. So had 84-year-old John Hager of Fieldale. And 80-year-old Hugh Byrd of Collinsville, as well as 78-year-old Glenwood Hankins of Martinsville.

Today, we remember the men who crossed that beach and who came back, who can help us remember the heroism and sacrifice of those who did not return. Today is June 6, the 57th anniversary of Operation Overload, or D-Day, the 1944 Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied France.

Hager, Brodie and Hankins said they planned to attend today's dedication of the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford.

Fifty-seven years ago, U.S. soldiers realized, the long months of training in Great Britain were pressing toward a single operation. When military officials went around asking soldiers to choose someone to assign power of attorney, "we knew the time was drawing close," said Hankins.

The Army also asked that soldiers send all personal belongings back to their families, he said. Hankins said they were confined to a staging area in southern England with no communication coming in or going out. "We went over again and again relief maps and mockups of the geography of the shore on which we were going to land," Hankins recounted. The mockups and maps were of the northwestern coast of France, about 90 miles across the channel from where the soldiers were staged. It would be the area from which the liberation of Europe from the Germans - whose occupation spread from Norway to the north, North Africa to the south and Russia to the east - would begin.

Hankins, Byrd, and Brodie belonged to H Company of the 116th Infantry, 29th Division, which was made up of National Guard units from Virginia, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and the District of Columbia. Theirs would be one of the first of the Allied outfits to hit the shore of Normandy, France.

The landing was to take place along a coastline with a flat beach 200 to 300 yards wide - "as smooth as a table top," said Hankins - against cliffs.

The shoreline was heavily fortified with mines and spikes. The beach was covered with planted obstacles that looked like huge rocks rising from the sand, ready to tear the bellies of vehicles running over them.

The cliffs were crowned with German bunkers and pillboxes, concrete encasements housing machine gunners and "deadly" 88mm artillery guns used as anti-aircraft guns as well as anti-tank weapons.

Late June 5, after weather forced a 24-hour delay of the invasion, said Hankins, the soldiers boarded troop ships loaded with vehicles and artillery, bound for Normandy.

The men were quiet, said Hankins. The ship's radio was tuned to American music - Bing Crosby, the big bands, and the like. They heard a German propaganda broadcast featuring "Axis Sally," the German equivalent of Japan's famed Tokyo Rose. "She had a sexy, soothing, seductive voice," said Hankins. She suddenly oozed on the air, saying, "'I know you boys are coming. The gates of hell will be open for you.' "

"'And if they're not, we'll blow them open,'" Hankins said a soldier, a coal miner from southwest Virginia, replied.

Byrd, who was a radio operator, said that although the soldiers knew the seriousness of the operation, they still had no idea what they were in for.

At 2:30 a.m. June 6, about 12 miles from the French coast, the ships moved into a circular pattern, marking time as soldiers climbed into 36-men landing craft known as LCVs, said Hankins. "We circled the water for what seemed like an eternity," waiting for that part of the operation to be completed, Hankins recalled.

Brodie said the English Channel was so turbulent that the LCVs were rising and falling more than 10 feet alongside the troop ships. Soldiers had to time their jumps onto the ebbing and cresting boats.

"I had had all kinds of amphibious training and had never gotten seasick, but before I got off that bugger, I did," said Brodie. "I don't know if I was seasick or scared sick, but I vomited everything in me."

In the smaller crafts

the soldiers were to take the rest of the journey, hitting the shore in waves, Hankins recalled. The first wave, a demolition unit, was to hit the shore at 6:30 a.m. to blow up the defense obstacles; the second wave was to hit at 6:45; and the third, at 7.

It was dark, and the sea soaked the soldiers with a skin-numbing, cold spray, Hankins recalled.

Before the men hit the beach, naval artillery tried to soften the enemy up, said Hankins. Historians' accounts say the ships aimed their guns too high, over the cliffs and into the French countryside, leaving the German gunners ready and waiting.

As the LCVs approached shore, all hell broke loose, recounted the four veterans. German weapons fire sprayed the beach.

For Hankins and his buddies, fear and self-preservation narrowed their focus to a single objective - getting across the beach to the foot of the cliffs.

Byrd remembered hitting the beach running, "when I suddenly realized something didn't feel right," he said. "I looked down and saw part of my foot sticking out of my boot," he recalled. An 88mm shellburst had sent shrapnel down one leg and blew off part of his foot. "I fell to the ground and started crawling, but I felt like I wasn't crawling fast enough," he said. Byrd said a British commando picked him up by the belt and pulled him behind some logs that had been German defense obstacles. Byrd said he stayed there about a day and half until medics took him off the beach to a troop ship.

Hankins said the choppy water and intense German fire sent the LCVPs to sections of beach completely different from the landing areas dotted with pins on the planning maps. That may have saved his life, Hankins speculated. Where he landed, soldiers didn't encounter as much enemy opposition.

Hankins said he made it across the beach and found a cloak of smoke from fire blazing in a wooded area off to one side of the cliffs.

When the ramp dropped on Brodie's vessel, he stepped into water that engulfed him, he said. Brodie was loaded down with 80 pounds of military gear including a water-resistant flak jacket covered with pockets.

Brodie said when he scuffled from the water, the pockets of the flak jacket had filled with water, weighing him down to the extent he could hardly move. Brodie remembers lying belly-down, head towards the beach to let his jacket drain.

Brodie made it across the beach, he said, only to discover that his outfit was "disorganized and shot up." Many of the officers of his unit were left dead in the water or on the beach, he said.

Brodie belonged to machine gun unit that supported a rifle unit. A sergeant directed him and several others to work their way up a cliff to support a rifle unit trying to knock out a pill box. When they saw that the rifle unit was already moving on the pill box, Brodie and his men headed back to the beach. As they looked back to see where the other men were, German soldiers sent a hail of bullets over their heads. Brodie said when he looked up, bullets were flying so thick, he felt he could reach up and grab a hand full.

Hager was in a heavy equipment outfit and rode the first day of D-Day off shore in a troop ship. On the second day of the operation, his ship struck a mine and was forced to shore, said Hager.

The vessel unloaded troops, jeeps, trucks and guns onto the beach, where the Americans found a road between cliffs. Rolling through the cliffs and into the countryside, Hager said, they came upon "hedgerows," rows of hedges sectioning off French farm land, the Germans starting firing on them, forcing everybody to the ground. After a period of being pinned down, recounted Hager, the sergeant commented that he hadn't filled out the morning report. Hager said he quipped, "'You ought to wait a while, 'cause things are liable to change.'" In a matter of days the beachhead was secured, and the men settled into a rhythm of war whereby progress seemed to be measured by a few hundred yards per day. However, as difficult as those days were, no one ever questioned the reason for getting into the war. Brodie added, "If we hadn't went over there, they (the Germans) were coming over here, so we weren't bitter about being there."

Brodie said there were days when, "though you were sure you were going to be shot the next moment," someone would quip something to make you laugh.

Hager recounted the story of one of the soldiers with whom he shared a foxhole saying he had to go relieve himself. The soldier walked some distance from the camp, dropped his pants and squatted. Some Germans launched a mortar at him and he heard it coming in. Grabbing his pants and attempting to pull them up, the man "high-tailed it" back to foxhole, said Hager. Hager said he was laughing at the GI, causing the soldier to grow angry and shout, "You wait, you're going to get yours."

In less than 24 hours, the same thing happened to him, said Hager, laughing about the memory.

Hager, Brodie and Hankins were at the Elb River in Germany in early May 1945 when Germany surrendered. Byrd had been flown back to the states.

Hager, Brodie, Hankins and Byrd eventually came home to marry and rear their children. Hager retired from Fieldcrest Mills. He and his wife Francis have two children. Brodie retired from the public works department of the city. He has five daughters. His wife is deceased. Hankins retired from the U.S. postal service. He and his wife Bernice have three children. Byrd retired from DuPont. He and his wife Florence have one child.

Since the 50th year anniversary of D-Day, and the subsequent Steven Spielberg movie "Saving Private Ryan" and Tom Brokaw's book "The Greatest Generation," the veterans said more attention has been paid to them than at any other time. And they think it's a good thing. Hankins said it's good for people to know that freedom is not free.

With all the attention focused on them, do they see themselves as heroes? By no means, said Byrd. "Most of the heroes are still in France," he said. "We were just men serving our country."