

Seventy years ago the Allied forces landed in Normandy. The Greatest Generation's greatest victory lives on.



Under the cover of shell fire, U.S. infantrymen waded ashore during the Normandy landing in France on June 6, 1944. It's unclear how many Nebraskans and Iowans fought on D-Day, though it was certainly in the hundreds.

A STORIED INVASION

BY STEVE LIEWER • WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

IN THE ANXIOUS FINAL DAYS before his giant gamble at Normandy, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower took great comfort in spending time with his troops. • On the eve of D-Day, Eisenhower visited the fellows at the 101st Airborne Division. Their job would be to parachute behind enemy lines in the dark of night. In small groups, they would seize roads, bridges and waterways so German forces couldn't reinforce the soldiers defending the beach. • It was among the riskiest missions of a supremely risky invasion for the Allies. • Typically Eisenhower liked upbeat chatter with the troops, about their homes and hobbies. Happy, morale-boosting stuff. • In the memory of Technician 4th Grade Chuck Davis of the 101st, though, Ike was unusually solemn that evening.



“Most of us were scared. We didn’t know what was coming. Anybody that said they weren’t, they didn’t know what they were talking about.”

Chuck Davis of Bellevue, a Technician 4th Grade in the 101st Airborne Division

“We were all lined up. Eisenhower came down,” said Davis, now 95 and living at the Eastern Nebraska Veterans Home in Bellevue. “One thing he did say was, ‘Be careful.’” Eisenhower stayed the whole evening with the troops, until the last aircraft took off after midnight. At that point, his driver Kay Summersby later would report, he turned to her with tears in his eyes. “Well,” he told her, “it’s on.” Seventy years later, D-Day — June 6, 1944 — stands along with the Civil War battle of Gettysburg as the most storied, and important, battles in U.S. history. The fate of many nations depended on the ability of six divisions of American, British and Canadian troops grabbing a toehold across 50 miles of fiercely defended French coastline. It is the largest amphibious invasion ever staged. The day began in terror, confusion and, for hundreds of troops, death before they even fired a shot at the enemy. The finely tuned plans developed over months quickly fell into shreds due to the whims of weather, currents, enemy resistance, Allied errors, and, in many cases, plain bad luck. Yet the Allies won the day, mostly because of the pluck and ingenuity of small, often ad-hoc, groups of soldiers who improvised plans when their tanks, trucks, heavy weapons and much of their gear were waterlogged and ruined in the tides of Normandy. By the end of the day the Allies had landed some 156,000 troops ashore — nearly as large a force as the United States stationed in all of Iraq at the peak of the Iraq War. They had come aboard some 6,900 ships and landing craft. More than 11,500 planes crossed the English Channel. More than 4,400 Allied soldiers died that day, according to the National D-Day Memorial Foundation, including 2,499 Americans. Nearly 8,000 Allied soldiers were wounded. It’s not clear how many of those who fought on D-Day hailed from Nebraska and Iowa. Certainly it was in the hundreds, and very likely in the thousands, based on the states’ populations at the time. Nor is it known how many Iowans and Nebraskans were killed. Thirty-five men who joined the military in the two states died on June 6, 1944, and are buried in Europe, according to the American Battle Monuments Commission. But that number — 28 Iowans and



Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower gives the order of the day, “Full victory — nothing else,” to paratroopers in England just before they boarded planes for the first assault in the June 6, 1944, invasion. The general spent D-Day eve visiting with the 101st Airborne Division.

seven Nebraskans — is only a starting figure. Others were shipped home to stateside cemeteries. And some bodies never were recovered. Nebraska has long kept a special connection with D-Day because of Omaha Beach, code name of one of the five Allied landing sites. (The others were Utah, Gold, Sword and Juno.) There’s no solid answer in the historical record of how Omaha Beach got its name, though World-Herald reporter Henry J. Cordes a few years ago uncovered some intriguing links to an Omaha carpenter who served under Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley, commander of the First Army during the run-up to D-Day. (See story on Page 10DD.) The D-Day anniversary falls just days after Memorial Day, and as the Greatest Generation fades into history, these two solemn days seem linked more than ever. Pfc. Carl Praeuner of Battle Creek, Nebraska, nearly died on D-Day after being shot in the leg on a hill above Omaha Beach. He recuperated for months in England and earned a medical discharge

ON THE COVER

The U.S. Coast Guard photo captures American soldiers exiting their landing craft and wading into the waters off the beaches of Normandy. They stormed ashore under heavy machine gun fire from the Germans.

from the Army in April 1945. For decades he donned a uniform and fired a rifle during Memorial Day services and at military funerals for American Legion Post 75 in his hometown. “I was proud to serve my country, and yet today I get a thrill when the flag passed by,” Praeuner wrote in a 2004 account for his family of his wartime adventures. “The sounding of taps still sends chills up and down my spine.” On Memorial Day this year, though, the Legionnaires will play taps for Pfc. Praeuner. He died May 8, just shy of 70 years since he joined the greatest invasion in the history of mankind. Known to planners as Operation Overlord, the Normandy landings not only involved painstaking planning — consider just the buildup of some 2.8 million troops in southwest England, opposite the Normandy shoreline — but also deception on a massive scale. The Allies wanted to surprise the Germans, even though the invasion was the most widely anticipated event of the

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