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## The enduring legacy of America's Greatest Generation

By Richard Eckstrom, SC COMPTROLLER Special to the Moultrie News Mar 27, 2019



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At this time 75 years ago, our nation was preparing for one of the boldest military missions history has ever recorded.

If successful, the invasion of German-occupied France by American, British and Canadian troops would turn the tide in World War II (WWII) and ultimately save the world from Nazism. The stakes were high; so was the probability of failure. The French coast would be fiercely defended by the most formidable divisions of the Nazi machine supported by a vast system of fortifications, machine gun nests, mines, and boobytraps.

A successful invasion by Allied forces would depend on more than military might. Success for the largest amphibian assault in history would rely on relentless planning and cooperation. Mobilizing the necessary 7,000 naval vessels and 11,500 aircraft – and more than 2 million troops – would be a logistical feat the world had never seen before and hasn't seen since. The crucial supply of munitions, food and fuel would need to flow unabated.

The mission would rely on cunning, ingenuity, innovation, and painstaking research. A shrewd deception campaign – including bogus radio traffic and an extensive “dummy” army of inflatable tanks – would fool the Germans into believing the attack would happen 150 miles northeast of the actual invasion site. American and British technological and engineering advances – from new amphibious vehicles to make-shift harbors and an underwater fuel pipeline spanning the English Channel – would help provide the Allies the upper hand.

Code-breakers would successfully decrypt secret German communications to learn Hitler's defense plans. Aerial

reconnaissance units would take as many as a million photographs to pinpoint Nazi positions.

In the spring of 1944, the Allies were in the final stage of their meticulous planning and preparation. Troops were pouring into staging areas in England, receiving briefings, and rehearsing their roles. During April and May, the Allies waged air strikes to knock out German defenses – with countless bombs dropped far from the planned landing site to mask the true invasion plan.

Landing operations began on June 6 – D-Day – as the biggest invasion fleet in history steamed from England toward the beaches of Normandy.

Above all else, a successful invasion relied on thousands of individual acts of valor by young men who heroically charged headlong ashore toward fierce machine gun fire, or parachuted into unknown dangers behind enemy forces. They set a new standard for courage that day, choking back fear to defy what was then thought impossible, breaking through Hitler's "impregnable" defense system within hours.

Though months of bloody battle remained, the tide of battle had shifted for the Allies and the outcome of the war in Europe was no longer in question. Within a year, Hitler was dead and Germany surrendered. But the cost was high: Of the 150,000 men who landed in France that day, 4,414 died – including 2,499 Americans.

In a couple of months, a grateful nation will observe the official anniversary of the Normandy landings. Unfortunately, reflections on WWII these days tend to be confined to occasional anniversaries or to history books. That's a shame.

For decades, the story of WWII – of D-Day, of Pearl Harbor, of the Doolittle Raiders, of the Battle of Midway – were passed along verbally from one generation to the next, sometimes from first-hand memories. And for decades, we looked in awe at that venerable generation. Young men fresh from high school who

summoned the courage to storm beachheads, often losing their lives defending their nation. Our national identity was forged from their gallantry, grit and sacrifice.

But with each passing year, with fewer and fewer Americans of that generation still living, their contributions fade further from our national memory – and it becomes easier to take for granted their incredible sacrifices, what they stood for and what they gave us.

WWII shaped our nation. It's a part of history our children and grandchildren need to know – a reminder of what's possible, of a time when high ideals prevailed, and of the tremendous sacrifices of past generations so that future generations could live in relative peace. Times have changed, yet the legacy of America's Greatest Generation is more important than ever.

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