

75 Years Ago

WINCHESTER HELPED STORM THE BEACHES OF NORMANDY

By Ellen Knight¹

Seventy-five years ago, on June 6, 1944, the churches of Winchester rang their bells and opened their doors for prayer services. Official word had been received that the Allied invasion of France to liberate German-occupied western Europe had begun. It was D-Day.

In the early hours of that day, allied paratroopers parachuted into France. A naval bombardment preceded the amphibious assault. More than 5,000 ships and landing craft crossed the Channel to land about 156,000 Allied troops, plus vehicles and artillery along a 50-mile-wide area of the coast called the Bay of Seine.

At 6:30 a.m., the initial seaborne forces began hitting the five beaches which comprised the landing areas at the Bay: Omaha and Utah, where the heaviest losses were suffered, plus Sword, Juno, and Gold Beaches.

“We had quite a number of Winchester boys who landed in France on D-Day,” *The Winchester Star* reported that August.² Before, on, and immediately following June 6, Winchester residents played diverse parts in the immense operation. Not everyone there has been identified, but those who are known give an idea of the breadth of service involved.

PREPARATION AND SECURITY

Over a year of preparation went into Operation Overlord and involved not only the strategic planning for the invasion but also the organization, training, and management of the thousands of troops massed along the coast of England.

Capt. Philip Claflin (of Grove St.), assistant security officer at the Southern Base Section of the ETO Headquarters in England assisted in establishing and maintaining a security organization to prevent leakage of information to the enemy. He was cited for rendering “an outstanding service to the mounting of the assault and build-up forces for the assault on the European continent.”³



Maj. Richard Leghorn (Wedgemere Ave.) commanded the 30th Photo Recon Squad from August 1943 to July 1944. Starting in January 1944, he and his unit flew missions from England over northern France, photographing German forces, transport networks, and communications facilities, in preparation for the D-Day invasion. After D-Day, Leghorn’s unit flew in support of the U. S. First Army as it advanced through France including the Battle of the Bulge and the drive into Germany during the spring of 1945.

Pvt. William Costello (Water Street), a machine gunner and veteran of two invasions, was one of a number of crack artillerymen aiding in the training of troops in Britain. After D-Day his division took part in the invasion, cutting through the Cherbourg Peninsula. (He was killed in action that December in Belgium.)

Pfc. Podgaro Iannacci (Swanton Street) was a member of the Army Engineers unit in England that provided “hotel service,” including food, beds, and other necessities for the thousands of tactical troops massed in the marshalling areas.⁴

During preparations, Lt. Col. Wallace Snow (Park Ave.) served in an executive capacity with the Army Transportation Corps, and former selectman Capt. Vincent Clarke (Bacon Street) was assigned to that corps, which supplied transportation to ground troops and helped moved supplies of food, equipment, and munitions in England and France before and after D-Day.

PRE-INVASION BOMBING

Capt. Frank Bates (Park Ave.) and T-Sgt. Jeremiah Shinnick (Washington St.), a radio operator-gunner, were in separate B-26 Marauder squadrons of the 394th Bomber Group, officially commended several times for its bombing accuracy during pre-invasion attacks and subsequent operations in support of ground forces in Normandy.⁵

Radio mechanic S-Sgt. Sam Elder (Cambridge St.) was part of another bombardment group similarly commended. His group was one of the first to operate from French soil after the invasion.

PARACHUTING IN

Early on D-Day, before anyone landed on the beaches, paratrooper Maj. John Hanlon (Bridge St.) parachuted in with the 101st Airborne, the “Screaming Eagles,” tasked with seizing positions west of Utah Beach. Not far behind was Sgt. Jerry Ficociello, also of the 101st Airborne. “I banged my heels into French soil shortly after midnight on D-Day,” Hanlon wrote. “In fact, I had been in France for at least seven hours before the first man got off a boat.”⁶



Pvt. David Welch (Lebanon St.), with the 82nd Airborne, was part of the parachute infantry regiment which captured Ste. Mère Eglise three hours before the Allied landing on the beachhead, thus securing an important junction through which the Germans were expected to move up reinforcements.

SWEEPING THE CHANNEL

The Germans having liberally planted mines in the English Channel, about 255 minesweepers were deployed to clear shipping lanes. Lt. John Buckley (Pine Grove Ave.) received a Bronze Star

for his part as skipper of one of those mine sweepers.

One of the floating mines missed in the sweeping struck and sank an American landing ship within sight of the Normandy beaches. One survivor was Pvt. John McLaughlin (Main St.). "I feel darned good," McLaughlin said back at a British invasion port, "and hope to get back to the old outfit soon."⁷

LANDING THE TROOPS

Cdr. Joseph Barbaro, a Winchester native who entered Annapolis prior to World War I, was credited with landing the first Allied troops on the shores of France during the invasion. Early on D-Day, the USS *Jefferson*, under his command, was in position off Omaha Beach. While the bombardment continued, boats filled with 29th U.S. Infantry Division troops and equipment were lowered into the choppy water of the Bay of Seine. At 6:30, the landing boats hit the beaches and troops raced ashore to meet heavy enemy fire. The *Jefferson* left the transport area at sunset and returned safely across the channel.



Carrying another sort of cargo, high explosives, Ensign George Hebb (Stowell Road) (left) skipper of a landing craft, reported being able to get his LCT in and out of Omaha Beach without any casualties.⁸



ON THE BEACHES



Lt. Samuel Keyes (Lloyd St.) landed on Red Beach, part of Omaha Beach, in the early morning. "I certainly wish I had had a camera, but ... I guess it's better if these things stay forgotten. I aged about three years and hope I will never have such a day again," he wrote home.⁹

"I've been over here in France ever since this thing started," Pfc. Michael S. Gillotte (Cedar St.) wrote his family. He landed on Utah Beach with the 359th Infantry. "With the birds singing in the trees and the cows eating in the pastures, a person wouldn't know that behind every tree and hedge row there was death waiting for him."¹⁰ He was awarded a Purple Heart for wounds sustained in July (and was killed in an accident in 1945.)



S-Sgt Clyde Philbrook (Middlesex St.), a veteran of WWI assigned to the 16th Signal Service company, landed with the initial landing party.

Pvt. Harry Carlson (Brookside Ave.) landed on Omaha Easy Red Beach with the 1st Battalion's 29th Infantry Regiment, about at 7:30 p.m. During his tour of duty he received several military honors, including two purple hearts.

On D+4, Pfc. Tom Gainey (Sylvester Ave.), a veteran of the African and Sicilian campaigns, hit the beach with the anti-aircraft artillery of the 1st Division in the 1st Army. He received a Purple Heart after being hit with shell fragments in the right leg during the St. Lo drive in July.

IN FLIGHT



Overhead on D-Day, Lt. Whitey Wright (Fletcher St.) flew over the invading U.S. Army troops. "I had a ring-side seat," he wrote. "We expected a big fight and were told that the troops on the ground needed absolute head-cover as they approached Omaha Beach."¹¹

Also playing a part in combat flying during the invasion, bomber pilot Lt. Ralph Colliander (Forest St.) of the 8th Air Force went on to complete 35 bombardment missions in the European Theater.

CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE



T-5 Frank Provinzano (Florence St.) landed with one of the first detachments of the 9th Air Force Aviation Engineer Battalion to construct an emergency landing strip behind the front line. While under continuous enemy fire, the battalion started its operations on the beachhead on the morning of D-Day and completed the landing ground, for which the unit was awarded the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation.¹²

Capt. William McGann (Sheridan Cir.) was a member of the first Service Group of the Allies Expeditionary Air Force to land in Normandy after D-Day. His group provided supply and maintenance for the 9th Air Force fighter planes which operated from advance airstrips in Normandy.

MEDICAL AID

"I landed in France on D-day, June 6 at 9:30 a.m.," Capt. (Dr.) Angelo Maietta (Main St.) wrote to the Rotary Club. "Of all the landings made that day, the one on our beach was the most difficult...many, far too many, of our boys were killed and many more were wounded.... For 12 hours, the length of time my battalion remained on the beach, I was very busy caring for the wounded oftentimes just by instinct. I had no time to think of anything. Things were at a very crucial point. Things were at a very crucial point. Mortar shells and 88s were shrieking and



bursting all around. I thought my time had come. I made up my mind that if I had to die, I would die like an American doing my duty to the end, and with my wife's name on my lips and with her and my children in my heart and mind. Thank God, I was spared."¹³



Capt. William Barone (Washington St.) arrived at Omaha Beach on D+5 while Germans were bombing. "A G.I. was waving for me to get under a truck," he said.¹⁴ The G.I. was Winchester's Patsy Guarino. A flight surgeon, Barone was given command of a mobile hospital serving bomber groups which participated in the invasion.

Lt. Mary Louise Carpenter (Ravine Road) of the Army Nurse Corps arrived on D+7 to help care for the worst wounded, following the army through to victory in Germany. "The descriptions by various reporters of the parachutists emplaning, of gliders being release over France, and of the actual landings of the infantry on the beaches made a crescendo of excitement," she wrote while still in England. But after arriving in France, she witnessed the horrors, "As our kind of hospital is for the immediate treatment of those hurt too badly to be transportable, we see some of the grimmest results of war.... They're so good, these boys; they bear so much pain without a murmur, they just seem to accept it as part of military life like sleeping in pup tents and eating K-rations and carrying heavy packs and rifles."¹⁵

FOLLOWING UP

D-Day, of course, was only the start of the invasion. More than two million Allied troops were in France by the end of August.



More Winchester men arrived in France or flew raids over it, joining in the push east. Lt. Floyd Tremberth (Woodside Road) (left) was in a squadron which destroyed a hidden enemy airbase beyond Allied lines in Normandy later that June. "For half an hour we went back and forth across it. The anti-aircraft emplacements were knocked out right at the beginning and from then on we had a field day."¹⁶

Army chaplain Joseph Mahoney, former curate at St. Mary's, was assigned to a division of the 9th Infantry which landed on Omaha Beach shortly after D-Day. As the division fought through France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, Father Mahoney received the Bronze Star for gallantry, the Bronze Star for meritorious service, a Purple Heart for a head wound received in the Battle of the Bulge, and six campaign stars for the battles in France.

Total numbers of those from Winchester involved in the invasion are impossible given that the details of many service men and women have been lost over the past 75 years. New information is welcomed at the Winchester Archival Center (archives@winchester.us).

¹ Published in the *Daily Times Chronicle*, June 3, 2019.

² *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 11, 1944.

³ *The Winchester Star*, July 6, 1944.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 29, 1944.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, August 4, 1944.

⁶ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 29, 1944.

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, June 30, 1944

⁸ *The Winchester Star*, July 7, 1944

⁹ Samuel S. Keyes, *Until I Write Again... Love, Sam: Letters Home During World War II*.

¹⁰ *The Winchester Star*, July 21, 1944.

¹¹ Whitelaw Wright obituary.

¹² *The Winchester Star*,

¹³ *The Winchester Star*, July 14, 1944.

¹⁴ *The Winchester Star*, June 2, 1994.

¹⁵ Letter published in *With Love, Jane*, edited by Alma Lutz, 1945.

¹⁶ *The Winchester Star*, July 21, 1944.