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FEATURE**D-Day**

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them came through. I think many of these outfits had similar numbers," said the 74-year-old Spiegel, a Pittsford resident and former town supervisor.

Considered by many to be the 20th century's most pivotal military invasion to date, D-Day was set into motion by U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower on June 5, 1944.

Also known as Operation Overlord, D-Day involved approximately 5,000 Allied ships moving 70 miles across the English Channel to the French coastline. There were 25,000 men making the initial assault against Nazi German forces, with another 125,000 to follow.

As dawn broke on a stormy June 6, the fierce shoreline fighting had already begun. These Allied ships' efforts were preceded by 15,000 American and British paratroopers who had landed inland during the night on the western and eastern ends of the 50-mile battle area.

"There were 33,000 guys on shore before us. We were only a couple of miles off shore, and you could see it — it was like a movie. It looked pretty interesting, until they started shooting back at us," said Momano.

In all, 3,000 American, British and Canadian servicemen died on June 6 at Normandy — and several more thousand would perish as Allied troops continued to forge inland during the ensuing days.

Yet the beginning of World War II's end had begun. By pushing the Nazis back, the Allies had gained some crucial momentum that would lead to Germany's surrender less than a year later.

Germany chancellor Adolf Hitler had been sucked in by a phantom attack that was supposed to have taken place closer to England, in Pas de Calais. Allied intelligence was able to crack codes in German radio transmittal and determine that an attack on Normandy would catch the Nazis off guard as they prepared for the would-be invasion at Calais.

Spiegel pointed out that once the Normandy attack was underway, Hitler also made the crucial mistake of underestimating its impact.

"Even though Hitler was told it was a real invasion, he held his tanks back," said Spiegel. "Hitler was an ally, as far as I was concerned."

Spiegel added that there was virtually no choice but to attack Normandy, since the Germans were threatening to engulf all of western Europe at that point and create a stranglehold for the Axis powers.

"We knew it had to be done. The Germans' and Japan's intentions were clear," said Spiegel.

"Stopping Hitler was every American's lot and life in those days. Judging from Hitler's inroads in Austria and Poland, it was evident to observers that the whole world would be engulfed in Nazism," said Father John S. Hayes, who served as a wartime chaplain with General George S. Patton's Third Army. He now resides at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary in Pittsford.

"Everyone knew they were probably involved in the biggest military undertaking of its kind ever attempted," noted Charles Guggenheim, who produced and directed the documentary *D-Day*.

This one-hour program, which appeared on the Public Broadcasting Television network's *The American Experience* documentary series earlier this week, revealed actual close-up footage of the Normandy fighting and its bloody aftermath. The film was accompanied by emotional voice-overs from recent interviews with Allied participants.

Despite the severe casualties, Guggenheim — who has won three Academy Awards for past documentaries — told the *Catholic Courier* that the Normandy invasion came at a time when the United States badly needed a moral boost.



World War II veteran Frank Sdoia holds a plaque presented to him April 24 by the Monroe County Powers Chapter 15. The plaque honors his service to disabled American Vets. S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

ed States badly needed a moral boost.

"People don't realize that America was not totally out of the Depression," he said. "The ability to produce armament and put men in the field so quickly — it showed how America could produce and execute. We will never have anything that large again."

One of the keys to the Normandy invasion's success was the LCVP — a landing craft which could pull almost right up to shore and easily discharge soldiers via a metal ramp in its front end. The man who designed and produced 20,000 of these LCVPs, Andrew Higgins, has become the inspiration for the first-ever National D-Day Museum, scheduled to open in New Orleans, La., in 1997.

According to Lee Schlesinger, board chairman for the \$30-million museum, this gallery will be constructed near the factory area where Higgins' company built the LCVPs.

"It's for the education of young people and kids of the future. They don't know too much about this," said Schlesinger, a New Orleans real-estate developer.

In light of severely divided opinions regarding U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, the people Schlesinger is targeting may be surprised to discover that there was a time when citizens were overwhelmingly in favor of going to war.

Meanwhile, World War II veterans are skeptical as to whether this country might ever again battle as eagerly as it did 50 years ago.

"I would have to say no, because of the distrust of government. I don't like to say that, but if I was called today, I'd have second thoughts," acknowledged Father Hayes. "The values of patriotism and devotion to one's country have gone by the board. Values were destroyed by Vietnam."

"It's much better to be completely sure of your cause," Spiegel remarked.

To Sdoia, it's sad that American veterans who willingly fought in Vietnam are not regarded as heroically as their World War II counterparts.



Provided photo

Frank Sdoia worked with the 300th Port Company 1st Engineers Special Brigade during the war, unloading ships and checking cargo.

"I always feel sorry for the kids. The people didn't support these kids when they came back," he commented.

On D-Day's 50th anniversary, Sdoia and his wife, Mary, plan on supporting former servicemen by visiting the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Canandaigua.

"We go once a month. I'd rather be there for the 50th. They're (the media) glamorizing (D-Day), and I don't like that," remarked Sdoia.

Momano, on the other hand, will be returning to the scene of his life's most tumultuous moments. He and his wife Hedelheid, a native of Germany, are leaving next week for their 20th trip back to Normandy.

Yet only recently did Momano actually get up the nerve to stroll the beach's shores for the first time since 1944.

"For years I would go out there, but I couldn't walk on the beach until six years ago," Momano recalled.

"And man, I got the same feeling I did on D-Day. It was a terrible, scary feeling."

D-Day to be remembered on public TV

WXXI-TV in Rochester has furnished *The Catholic Courier* with a list of several Public Broadcasting System programs commemorating D-Day and World War II which will be airing on the station in the upcoming weeks. Outside of Rochester, check local listings for dates and times.

"The 1994 National Memorial Day Concert" will salute D-Day's 50th anniversary, as well as the women who served in the Vietnam War. This live broadcast from the U.S. Capitol's West Lawn airs on Sunday, May 29, at 7:30 p.m.

"A Fighter Pilot's Story" chronicles producer Quentin Aanenson's experiences as a combat pilot during D-Day. This program will be shown in two episodes, beginning at 4 p.m. on June 4 and 11.

"Victory at Sea" gives an overview of American and Allied naval operations during World War II. A series of 30-minute programs produced by NBC-TV in the early 1950s, these shows are set to air from 2 to 8 p.m. on June 5 and 12.

"From D-Day to the Rhine with Bill Moyers" is an encore presentation of Moyers' 1990 documentary. This show, featuring a new interview with author and noted D-Day historian Stephen E. Ambrose, airs on June 5 from 10 to 11:30 p.m.

"D-Day Remembered — A Musical Tribute from the Q&A" will include appearances by celebrities such as Walter Cronkite and Bob Hope. It airs on June 6 at 8 p.m.