

Rural community honors vets with National D-Day Memorial

By Kia Shant'e Breaux
The Associated Press

BEDFORD, Va. — Thousands of veterans, along with friends and relatives of fallen soldiers, watched the unveiling Monday of a portion of the National D-Day Memorial being built in Bedford, which lost two-thirds of its soldiers in the June 1944 invasion.

"I think there are a few days in our history that should never be forgotten," Jeannie Schulz told about 4,000 people who endured chilly, intermittent rain to witness the Memorial Day dedication of a portion of the \$12 million shrine.

"Perhaps at times we have too many monuments, too many holidays and things of this kind, but D-Day is not one of them. It is one of the days we should never forget."

Schulz, widow of "Peanuts" cartoonist and World War II veteran Charles Schulz, took over as campaign chairman of the National D-Day Foundation after her husband died in February.

The memorial, now partially completed, honors the 6,603 Americans killed along the coast of France in the D-Day invasion of Nazi-held Europe during World War II. A total of 9,758 Allied soldiers died.

The D-Day invasion hit this rural farming community, with a population of 3,200 in 1944, harder than most. Nineteen of its 35 soldiers died during the first 15

minutes of the invasion, four more in the following days. The community in southwest Virginia, about 25 miles east of Roanoke, had the most casualties per capita of any U.S. community.

Dedication of the completed memorial is scheduled for June 6, 2001, the 57th anniversary of the invasion. Showcased at Monday's Memorial Day ceremony were a granite arch and a sculpture, "Death on Shore," depicting a lone fallen soldier on the beach with a Bible falling out of his backpack.

The family of Bedford and Raymond Hoback, brothers from Bedford killed on D-Day, unveiled the statue with Lt. Gov. John Hager.

City officials and dignitaries from Normandy laid wreaths at the foot of the sculpture as a band softly played taps.

Two other sculptures, "Final Tribute," showing an inverted rifle with a helmet resting on its stock, and "Across the Beach," depicting a soldier dragging a wounded colleague, were unveiled earlier. A total of 10 sculptures are planned for the site.

Also featured at Monday's ceremony was a black and white granite arch inscribed with the word "Overlord" — the Allied Forces code name for the Normandy landing. The arch stands 44 feet, 6 inches high to represent June 6, 1944. The colors are the same as the Allied Forces' airplanes dur-

ing the attack.

Schulz and Hager cut the ribbon in front of the arch and statue to thunderous applause from the crowd, and flags of the 13 Allied nations were raised.

During the ceremony, five D-Day veterans shared their recollections of the invasion.

Bob Slaughter of Roanoke, chairman of the D-Day foundation, recalled scurrying across Omaha Beach amid heavy gunfire and then pausing to clean his rifle.

"It was then that I began to examine the extent of the hammering we had taken," he said. "It was there that I realized the bloodied price that we would pay for freedom."

A contribution from "Saving Private Ryan" director Steven Spielberg will be used to build a theater at the memorial. It will be named for the director's father, Arnold Spielberg, a World War II veteran who flew Army Air Corps missions as a radio operator in Burma. Also planned was an education center about D-Day.

Seeing the progress of the memorial was a dream come true for many D-Day veterans.

"I think this is terrific," said 75-year-old George Tate of Mechanicsville, who fought at Normandy on D-Day. "It doesn't bring anybody back, but it helps. It was a terrible thing for this town, so I think this is an appropriate place for this memorial."

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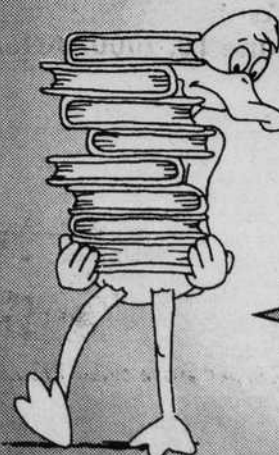
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