

Soldiers remember D-Day on 50th anniversary of invasion

This year marks the 50th anniversary of D-Day during World War II when American and Canadian troops joined British forces in the final campaign to free western Europe from Nazi Germany occupation. Three million soldiers and 2,727 ships were involved in the largest amphibious military operation in history.

On June 6, 1944, the first day of 'Operation Overload', 57,000 Americans and about 75,000 British and Canadian soldiers landed on five Normandy beaches in France after crossing the British channel. About 23,000 men dropped onto French soil by parachute or in gliders.

Memories of that war in Europe remain forever etched in the minds of local veterans who survived that ordeal. Time has not erased those encounters or memories of comrades who died fighting for freedom. Ione's Paul Rietmann was among those young men who died during that invasion.

Veteran James Farley is currently on a trip to visit the land that he remembers as being torn apart by war. His 15-day tour includes visiting the sites of Normandy beach invasions and major battle sites such as the Battle of the Bulge, Caen and Arnhem. D-Day ceremonies there are expected to be attended by 13 heads of state along with thousands of returning veterans.

Farley became a second lieutenant in the 925 Field Artillery Division following ROTC training at Oregon State College. On D-Day his unit had been stationed near Exeter in England. It took five days for ships carrying that unit's heavy equipment to land at Omaha Beach because of rough seas.

"It was all war," Farley recalls. But I give all the credit to the doughboys (infantrymen) who really had it rough, he said. After destruction of German-held coastline fortifications, his unit provided reinforcements as Allied troops pursued the retreating Germans. They moved across borders as Allied forces freed nations that had been overrun by Germans.

Farley was discharged in February, 1945. He resumed hometown life where he has been engaged in ranching. He also owned and operated an automobile agency and garage for many years before his retirement.

Time hasn't erased stories about morale building tactics used by military units who bragged about which divisions were the most influential in winning the war. As a bombardier and First Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Air Corps, Raymond (Bud) Batty recalls his unit joking about dropping bombs behind Allied forces to keep them moving forward.

Batty flew 54 missions to knock out bridges, roads and German strongholds. The effectiveness of those missions that cut off German supplies and manpower was revealed in the German radio broadcasts of Berlin Sally, who called them "bridge busting bastards," Batty said.

Batty was living in John Day when he was drafted at age 22. He signed up for a three-year hitch in the Air Force. He became an air mechanics instructor at a school in North Carolina. He enrolled in the Army Cadets Air Force School in Long Beach, CA., because he said his mechanic role "was boring". He was one-half inch too short in height to qualify for a pilot. Additional training as a navigator and bombardier molded Batty into a versatile member of a six-man crew flying B-26s.

After crews were assigned, Batty said they practiced "milk runs" in Louisiana. On D-Day Batty's squadron was on the way overseas via Greenland as first replacements after the Normandy beaches were cleared and secured.

Batty's military life was no longer 'boring'. Once his plane suffered mechanical damage and they had to set down in Brussels which, by that time, was being held by Canadian troops. Lacking access to replacement parts, the crew stayed there five days until another plane flew them back to base. Their plane was

later repaired. Another close call came when their plane lost a motor on the way back to England. Batty said his crew was prepared to 'ditch' in the English Channel, but after almost scraping the cliffs they made a safe landing.

With 139 service points, Batty received the distinguished flying cross along with a bevy of medals. But he never received the purple heart as he declined to report to a doctor to verify an injury when anti-aircraft flack sizzled under his flack jacket. Lady Luck flew with him on missions when his plane received 300 bullet holes and when his plane and one other, out of a squadron of 12 were the only ones to escape being shot down.

"Going back to Europe would bring back a lot of bad memories," Batty said, so he and his wife declined to join in the overseas commemoration. He once tried flying small planes but he said they were too slow and too light. Following four years and four days in the service he decided to keep his feet on the ground. After ranching at John Day and Klamath Falls, the Battys came to the Heppner area in 1968 and farmed here before his retirement.

Those successful bombing missions relied on Army Air Force ground crews. John Wood said that his crew of 33 men worked around the clock to keep those big bombers flying. As chief armorer of a squadron of Flying Fortresses, Master Sgt. John Wood's crew was in charge of all bombing and gunnery equipment. Under his direction they were responsible for maintenance, checking and repairing all the complicated mechanisms used by planes to drop bombs with destructive effectiveness.

Wood was drafted at age 30 in April 1942, while living in Enterprise. His basic training began in Texas. Technical schools followed at Denver and Detroit. His 34th unit was formed from the 385 bomb group after advanced training in Salt Lake and Spokane.

After 25 months of military service in England, Wood was sent back to the U.S. He was expecting to be sent to the South Pacific war zone when Japan surrendered. Although his WWII military service ended then, he was called back during the Korean war and he spent nearly a year in California. Since 1966, the Woods have made their home near Heppner where he has spent a lifetime as a carpenter before his retirement.

Then there were the military medics who assisted the wounded and dying soldiers. Their work was sometimes downplayed, but not by the men who personally received that attention.

While not actively participating in combat, Gene Majeske experienced the horrors that war inflicted on young men while he was serving as a young Army medic.

Majeske, who was drafted in 1944, received his basic training at Ft. Lewis, WA. and was then sent to Pennsylvania. Shortly after D-Day he was on an American ship sailing from New York to France as part of the Army's 36th Engineer Regiment.

"Depth charges trying to sink the boat, sounded all night while we were crossing the English Channel," Majeske said. After a safe landing, he spent two years in occupational hospital units in

France, Austria, Belgium and Germany as the U.S. helped restore those countries. After he was discharged in May 1946, Majeske returned to his wife and the Lexington family farm that he has continued to operate.

A Morrow County resident since June 1990, Veteran Jubby Roach readily recalls his World War II service. During D-Day Mater Sergeant Roach was with the Army's 502 Quartermaster Company that unloaded equipment from landing craft on Omaha Beach.

Roach, age 23, was working in California when he was drafted. His basic training began in Illinois. "I'll never understand how I got switched from a medic to a mechanic," Roach said. But he found himself in charge of training men as drivers of trucks and tanks.

In spite of many fallen infantry soldiers on Omaha Beach, Roach's division got on shore with trucks and other equipment. Land mines got some of the vehicles, he said, and for a time he and 33 men were cut off from other Allies by the Germans.

Those trucks, trailers and weapons assisted the reinforced troops as they pursued the retreating Germans across borders. Roach said he was "real lucky" as his unit was cut off again, near the Rhine River. However he lost many close buddies during the four years and 18 days that he served his country, a memory that is difficult to forget.

While some WW II soldiers kept their feet on the ground, three Morrow County veterans chose to jump out into space, rather than depend on a plane for a safe landing. Gene Hall, James Norene and Donald Robinson were with the 502nd Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division.

Hall, whose parents were living near Fossil, was attending Oregon State University when he was drafted in March 1943. Norene, who was also attending OSU was drafted in Dec. 1943 and Robinson left the family ranch near Hardman for the service in January 1942.

After basic training at different locations, these men volunteered for the paratroops. Following extensive training at camps in the southern part of the U.S., they were sent to England. There they acquired an in-depth knowledge of foreign terrain as they continued making practice jumps. Targeted landing sites didn't always pan out due to ground winds. Robinson said he wasn't looking for flowers when he fell through the roof of an English greenhouse and broke some bones in his foot.

General Dwight Eisenhower made the decision about D-Day which was postponed by a day due to bad weather. The Germans, who were fortified along the French coast, didn't perceive that airborne troops would drop inland under cover of night before landing troops reached the beaches.

The night sky was illuminated with tracers as pilots flew slow-moving transport planes, without armament loaded with human cargo. After machine gun fire ripped through the bottom of that C-47, Robinson recalls, they were glad to jump at just 250 feet from the ground. At that elevation, there really wasn't any point in packing an extra chute, he added.

Robinson's division followed

tanks inland as a reserve force to mop up scattered German troops and secure Allied supply routes.

Once while resting briefly near a French village, the tired and hungry paratroopers were befriended by a French farmer. After giving these soldiers Cognac that he had hidden from the Germans, Robinson said that their forward line of march weaved considerably.

Two weeks later Robinson was hit by shrapnel from an 88 artillery shell after encountering Germans entrenched in a French farmhouse. After being attended by a field medic, that night Robinson said he heard German voices while laying in a shell hole. To avoid detection from Germans who weren't taking prisoners of war then, he crawled into a nearby covered slit trench. Members of his unit searched and found him there the next day.

Hall's unit was commissioned with the dangerous job of knocking out communications. Laden with dynamite caps, compound C and primer cord they knocked out bridges and railroads after parachuting 15 miles inland from the coast of France. His unit was later sent to southern France to help secure the Cherbourg Peninsula. His war experiences are one thing that he'd rather not talk about, he said.

Hall was discharged in September 1945. He resides in Heppner after a lifetime of working on ranches and other occupations. Robinson was discharged in January 1948 after spending about three years in and out of Army hospitals. Since then he has been an active cattle rancher near Heppner.

Also opting to float down to earth, Heppner veterinarian Dr. James Norene signed up for the



Gene Majeske with truck during war



Bud Batty in front of barracks



Don Robinson in full jumping gear



James Norene



Gene Hall with his army jeep



L-R: Don Robinson, Jim Farley, Bud Batty, Gene Hall, John Wood, Gene Majeske and Jim Norene look over old photo and news paper clippings from D-Day.