

Living Legends

America's "greatest" veterans reflect upon D-Day and turning the tide of war

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They are known as “the greatest generation.”

On D-Day, they proved it.

At predawn, June 6, 1944, members of the 398th Bombardment Group awoke to a day that would turn the tide of the war in Europe and end with 3,000 Americans dead.

Like most in the Army Air Forces, 1st Lt. Ike Alhadeff trained for this particular day, but he didn't know when Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower would give the go-ahead for the largest amphibious military operation in history: Operation Overlord, code named D-Day — the Allied invasion of German-occupied northern France.

During a 3 a.m. briefing at Station 131 in Nuthampstead, England, the young B-17 pilot with the 398th discovered Operation Overlord had started a little past midnight.

“We knew D-Day was coming, but it was a shock when it came,” said the 88-year-old who lives in Seattle, Wash.

Pre-dawn strike

On his first D-Day mission, Lieutenant Alhadeff dropped all his bombs in an attempt to soften the German defenses stretched across a coastline where Allied forces would land. On his second run, cloud cover prevented him from releasing ordnance. Eighth Air Force launched 882 B-17s during that first strike.

“When we could see through an opening in the clouds, it looked like there were so many boats you could walk across the channel,” he said.

That same scene was played out for Tech. Sgt. Armand Fugge, a 398th engineer and top turret gunner for a B-17 Fighting Fortress. He's now 82 years old and lives in Mathuen, Mass.

“We were awakened at midnight and briefed at 0130 that today was D-Day,” Sergeant Fugge wrote in his diary. “11,000 Americans and British are to hit [bomb] the coast before the wave of landing barges. Bombs had to be away by 0722 because the invading [forces] would be hitting the beaches two minutes later.”

The sergeant said they dropped 38 100-pound bombs,

but all afternoon missions were scrubbed due to weather.

First Lt. Mark Woods, a 398th B-17 navigator, now deceased, wrote in his diary, “We were awakened at 12:30 a.m. after three hours sleep. We hurried to the briefing looking for another milk run [routine mission]. We all became quiet when they raised the curtain over the wall map. There was a mission plotted which looked like the last few raids. Major Jones, the S-2 [intelligence] officer, took the floor with a pointer. He said this looks like another milk run gentlemen, but it is not. This is the beginning of the invasion, and you are part of it. Everybody was more or less stunned. I think I shook a little. We took off before daylight. I saw six landing boats heading for the beach. Bombs went away with two puffs of flak. I saw hundreds of planes. Security was perfect. Now, 12-and-a-half hours after they hit the beach, every last man is praying and hoping for the best.”

Missing from each account are stories about being attacked by German Luftwaffe aircraft defending their front. That's because the Allied air forces made a concerted effort to cripple German air power well before D-Day. Between January and May 1944, the attrition rate for Luftwaffe pilots was 25 percent, according to “With Courage, The U.S. Army Air Force in World War II.” When new German pilots joined fighter squadrons, their brief careers averaged 30 days or less.

From May 1 to June 5, 1944, Allied forces flew about 35,000 sorties, nearly a thousand a day, preparing for the surprise landing on the beaches of Normandy, according to an Army Air Forces report prepared in 1945. The targets were enemy airfields, railroad yards, transportation routes, coastal gun positions, communication locations and bridges.

On D-Day, just before troops stormed the Normandy beaches, American heavy bombers and large formations of Royal Air Force heavies joined Allied naval forces to bombard beach defenses. Although aircrews encountered few enemy aircraft, estimated at only 100 sorties that day, many flew through a barrage of flak from anti-aircraft artillery.

The Luftwaffe's absence on D-Day hurt German morale. “The failure of the Luftwaffe and U-boats to take advantage of an ideal target was most discouraging and demoralizing

to the officers and men,” said a captured Nazi in the 1945 report.

With the beachhead secured, 155,000 Allied troops would be in Normandy before day’s end. But their journey came at great cost. Fierce German resistance resulted in approximately 2,500 casualties. Eighth Air Force suffered only three losses on D-Day, after having deployed 1,729 bombers that dropped 3,596 tons of bombs.

Beginning of the end

By nightfall, Allied troops had a toehold on the continent, and the Army Air Forces’ job was to stop a counterattack and ensure the thrust into Europe was successful. The months following D-Day proved to be perilous for aircrews. Many died or were captured as prisoners of war — a fate that had befallen Lieutenant Alhadeff.

Two months after D-Day, Lieutenant Alhadeff’s Flying Fortress was hit by ground fire and erupted into flames.

“When a fire started in a B-17, you knew it was going to blow up, which it did. But we all got out OK,” he said.

His entire crew was captured and taken prisoner. The officers were sent to one camp while enlisted were sent to another. He remained a prisoner of war for 10 months until he was freed by Allied forces.

Now, 60 years later, his memories of being a POW are fading. “I forget the bad parts. I remember I was hungry all the time and cold in the winter. It just wasn’t a pleasurable experience. Years later it doesn’t seem so bad, but at the time it wasn’t very good.”

B-17 pilot then-1st Lt. Harold Weekley was shot down over Le Manoir, France, a couple of months after D-Day on Aug. 13, 1944. His entire crew survived, and he was the first in the 398th to escape enemy territory. He evaded the enemy for six weeks with the help of the French Resistance, ending up with the British 8th Army.

After retiring from the Air Force in 1968 as a colonel, one of his jobs for 23 years was to fly a B-17 for the Experimental Aircraft Association at air shows around the nation. When he retired from that career in 2001 at the age of 80, he claimed to be the last World War II combat B-17 aircraft commander to fly a Flying Fortress.

“People who have fought in a war together are closer than family,” Colonel Weekley said. “When life depends on each other, there’s a very strong feeling that never goes away.”

For members of the 398th, and all Army Air Force retirees, the ties that bind become stronger when they meet for reunions. This year, for the 60th anniversary, the 398th is returning in time to tour Normandy. Because of their advanced ages, the group is calling the tour “One Last Look.”

They’ll have a memorial service at their former base at Nuthampstead.

They’ll also visit a cemetery where a number of comrades were laid to rest.

And they’ll remember.

“The people you’ve flown with, you’ll never forget,” Colonel Weekley said.



398th Bombardment Group B-17s fly on a bombing run to Neumunster, Germany, on April 8, 1945. Exactly a month later, on May 8, Germany surrendered, and V-E Day — Victory in Europe — was declared.

Photo by M/Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez