

All is Fair in Lies and World War II

by Debbie Neece, Bartlesville Area History Museum

World War I left a scabbed wound upon the European infrastructure and economy, and the devastation plummeted morale. Tensions were high and “poking a bear” could have easily erupted bitter resentment into a volatile situation. Hitler took complete control of Germany between 1933-1934 and slowly expanded his dictatorship across the area until the invasion of Poland in September 1939, in spite of a threat from Britain and France that an invasion of Poland would result in war and it did...beginning World War II.

Europe was a hot bed of conflict. Countries were at each other's throats placing trade embargos and sanctions. Japan invaded China in 1937. Germany attacked the Soviet Union June 1941. Then...Pearl Harbor was attacked December 7, 1941 by the Imperial Japanese Navy; killing 2,403 Americans and wounding 1,178; destroying 188 aircraft and 18 ships – including five battleships. Caught off guard, sheer panic and confusion consumed Pearl Harbor. That hostile event was a major poking of a neutral bear, leading the United States to join the Allies, entering World War II the following day with the full force of American tenacity. BIG MISTAKE Japan!



Let the strategic planning begin. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called the Pearl Harbor attack “*a date that will live in infamy*” and declared war upon Japan. Germany, Italy and Japan were in an alliance known as “Axis,” and on December 11, 1941 Germany and Italy joined Japan, formally declaring war upon the United States. Since the U.S. was a melting pot of nationalities, unconstitutional restrictions and curfews were heaved upon foreign born but legal American citizens, increasing at-home tensions.

From the lips of Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 6, 1941, calling for freedom everywhere in the world, to the paint brush of Norman Rockwell who took these words to imagery, “we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms: Freedom of Speech and Expression, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear. To that high concept, there can be no end save victory.” Just over three years later, the United States met that test.



General Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower was FDR’s trusted U.S. Army Commander in Europe and Eisenhower was selected to lead the forces in Operation Torch in Africa, followed by invasions of Sicily and Italy. His victories brought high praise from FDR and Great Britain’s Winston Churchill, who selected Eisenhower as the “*Supreme Allied Commander of the European Invasion*” called Operation Overlord. Better known to us as the D-Day landings on June 6,

1944, this was the most epic air and amphibious military operation on record. The Normandy Beaches were a German stronghold entrenched pillbox bunkers along the bluffs overlooking the beaches. The difficult to maneuver terrain was the perfect location for snipers hiding in wait. Eisenhower knew a straight forward assault would be disastrous; he needed a strategic plan.

Have you ever played the Battleship boardgame and found yourself in a strategic game to save your ships from the enemy? When Eisenhower put in effect his plan of lies, deception and strategic manipulation, he gained the attention of the world and set forth the plan to sink Nazi Germany. Two years in design, D-Day was a pre-game of hide and seek with a masterminded element of surprise.

With a trusted meteorologist at his beck and call, Eisenhower carefully monitored weather conditions in search of the calm before the battle. The waters of the five Normandy Beaches (Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword) were heavily protected by mines and embedded "German made railroad iron" obstacles requiring low tide to expose and destroy the underwater dangers.

Eisenhower's ultimate goal was to *"accept nothing less than full victory."* As the first phase of Operation Overlord, he created a massive bed of distraction by eerily dropping four-hundred cloth, cord and brass eyelet dummy parachutists behind German lines in the moonlight of D-Day morning. Inside the parachute pouches, some were fitted with pyrotechnic devices that mimicked the sound of gun fire. And, to add even more confusion, some actual special forces paratroopers were dropped too.

The Allies created General George S. Patton's First United States Army Group with strategically placed inflatable Sherman tanks, which were reported by German reconnaissance aircraft as a buildup of Allied forces, believing a convoy of tanks was converging on the area. There was no such army group and the Sherman tanks were full of hot air. This was just a fictitious optical illusion.

In the wee hours, fake landing craft made of wood and canvas were launched into the waters filled with empty barrels as decoys, while thin strips of aluminum were dropped from aircraft over the English Channel to produce blips on radar screens, which gave the illusion of a grander than truth invasion. The airwaves were flooded with fake radio messages leaking false information to the Germans by double agents and spies



who were clueless to the deceptive stew they were feeding the Germans. The Germans believed they were being confronted from all sides and this led them to hold fast to the Pas de Calais region, spreading their troops thinly across a 150-mile area and leaving Normandy Beach vulnerable to the invasion...the Allied Invasion.



As dawn broke over the English Channel, the lives of over 160,000 allied troops were about to change forever. The fall of Nazi Germany depended upon their dedication and fortitude. Allied aircraft and radar jamming equipment created smokescreens that hid the invasion of Normandy, France, as boots hit the ground...



Pennsylvania born **Harry Edgar Brown** had a youthful obsession with planes. He heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor and joined the Army January 22, 1942 with hopes of serving in the Army Air Corp. However, after his Fort Bragg Basic Training, he was assigned to the 42nd Artillery, 4th Infantry Division. He saw an announcement that the 4th Division was in search of liaison pilots and he applied. With several hundred flying hours under his belt, he was accepted and was sent to England for four-months of invasion training. Given the coordinates and a compass, he quickly found the destination was Normandy Beach. On June 5th, they loaded Harry's plane on a truck and drove it onto a Landing Strip Tank (LST). They sailed to Utah Beach the following day and sat two-miles off the beach, where they witnessed the first invasion and the accuracy of the German pillbox gunners. In the afternoon, the loaded trucks left the ship and were driven into a clump of trees where ten Piper Cub planes were assembled right there on Utah Beach and joined the reconnaissance under the cover smoke grenades. Once their duty was complete, Harry sailed into New York Harbor for a 30-day leave and admired the Statue of Liberty. On a train home, he heard the Japanese had surrendered. He applied at Phillips Petroleum in December 1945, was hired and moved to Bartlesville, where he worked as a draftsman and engineer for 37 years. He now rests in Memorial Park Cemetery, forever 101 years young.

Michigan born **Richard “Dick” Freiermuth** was employed at Phillips Petroleum Company in Michigan when the military came knocking. He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in October 1942 and assigned to Drew Field near Tampa, Florida for radar training. December 1943, he sailed from New York and his unit landed at Omaha Beach on “D-Day plus 3 days” on an army transport watercraft. Bullets were whizzing through the metal and flying past soldier’s heads. The air was heavy with the smell of gun powder and the fear of death was as thick as pea soup but courage was their only way home. The sea was rough, waves crashed against the hull and there was no way the watercraft could drop the front ramp. The soldiers were instructed to bail out over the side cargo nets, where they were battered against the craft. Dick crashed into the side of the craft over and over as he tried to make his way into the ocean, losing his gun and helmet. Bare of protective equipment, he was defenseless and knew he was about to die. He made his way to the shore, stepping over the dead as he took a helmet and gun from men who no longer needed them for survival. He did survive, returned to the U.S. and his work at Phillips. However, his experiences that day left him with deep emotional scars that never healed. Some of the war heroes who walk among us carry their emotional wounds and scars in silence; for others, sharing the experiences eases the pain and brings a comfort. For Dick, the nightmarish pain was lifelong.

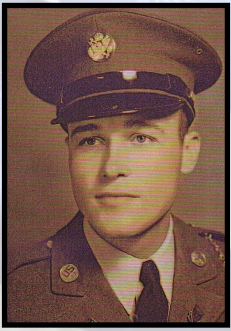


Oklahoma born **Kenneth Beckwith** was drafted November 22, 1942. After basic training at Shepherd Fields, TX, he was assigned to the Air Corps with radio and gunnery training. His first flight mission was June 6, D-Day, joining nearly 3,000 other Allied planes, dropping bombs over the Germans at Normandy, returning to base to reload and flying back to repeat the drops. No time for a clear thought. They flew 33 missions from June 6th to August 13th when they were shot down. Beckwith parachuted into an orchard with German soldiers hot on his trail. He was captured with an injured ankle and transported in a hot “standing-room-only” boxcar to a barbed wire encased POW Camp at Wessler, Germany; then to a camp at Stalag Luft IV September 1944 where communication, sanitation, food and water were in grim supply. Beckwith left the U.S. weighing 215# and was discharged September 1945, at 150#. He said starvation was real and if it had not been for the Red Cross, he would have starved to death.



Arkansas born **John Blue** moved to Bartlesville with his family in 1927. Two weeks short of his ninth-grade graduation, he served two “hitches” with the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Osage Hills of Oklahoma, building rock cabins and roads. Then, he was drafted January 1942. After a whirl-wind of training, he landed at Omaha Beach before the first wave of the invasion, directed to clear the area of obstacles. John Blue was one of the Unsung Heroes of D-Day. Their efforts were valiant, tossing fear aside with the mission forefront, at all cost. This elite group of men have fallen short only in their recognition. The Landing Craft ramp dropped and John fell into the ocean, about to drown, weighted under water by the 80-pounds of explosives on his back, another soldier pulled him to safety as bullets and large artillery flew over their heads. They strapped dynamite to each underwater obstacle and strung primer cord and dynamite caps to blow the obstacles and clear the beach for the Landing Crafts to arrive. He also served at the Battle of the Bulge before heading home with an injured leg, Purple Heart and Bronze Star.





Oklahoma born **Louis Bowdre** couldn't find a job during the depression so he enlisted in the army in 1936. Basic training was at Fort Sill where he was told his pay would be \$21 per month; but that was before deductions, \$1.25 for laundry and twenty-five cents for the old Soldiers Home. At least there was a bed to sleep in, two pairs of shoes, two pairs of pants, two shirts and three decent meals a day. The news reported Japan invaded China and Germany invaded Poland, then Pearl Harbor happened and attitudes at Fort Sill changed overnight. "We wanted to get those guys whipped and get this over with," he said. Training was intense and February 1943 his ship sailed but several redirections kept his group from Normandy.



Walt Sires was Bartlesville born, Labadie Heights educated and Pruneville raised. His dad worked at the smelters so his family was great friends with the Mnich family and shopped at the Mnich Grocery. Walt was a College High School senior when Pearl Harbor was bombed December 7, 1941. He followed several of his friends to the enlistment office, where Walt tried to join the Navy and Air Force but he was colorblind and rejected. However, his name was the first 19-year-old drawn in the Washington County draft. January 1943, he went to Fort Sill for basic training and left the United States October 8, 1943 for England. After invasion specific training, carrying 80# packs and a rifle in 300-yard sprints, he spent a month and a half in a concentration type camp, secluded with his unit, doing daily calisthenics, while awaiting their trip to Normandy. They loaded onto a Liberty Ship after dark on the 5th and transferring to the Landing Craft was

exceptionally dangerous as swells were 15-20 feet high on the English Channel. He shared the trip with some Navy men, two gunners, the pilot and 21 other men; each carrying a rifle, gas mask and 80 pounds of explosive plus a D-Bar of chocolate to eat. The beach was lined with big telephone poles with anti-tank mines strapped on each pole. Jutting from the ocean floor, railroad steel "Cracker-Jacks" lined the beach and struck the Landing Craft as they neared the shore. The Germans also had barbed wire entanglements along the beach and Walt's team was required to clear 50 feet of the beach, paving the path for the tanks, artillery and infantry. The machine gun fire and bombers were intense and they lost more than half their outfit the first day. The Omaha beachhead was secure within about two weeks and his group pushed ahead.

According to Walt, "When I went overseas, I don't know how many boxes Gus Mnich and his wife Nellie sent me. She also sent boxes to my brother. I was discharged October 24, 1945 with 5 battle stars from Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes, Rhineland and Central Europe, 2



Purple Hearts (shrapnel in his back and later his legs during the Battle of the Bulge). When I got home, I called Gus to say I was home because Mom and Dad didn't have a telephone. Gus made a dead run to our house to tell them I was home. When I got to Bartlesville, the first thing Gus asked me was if I needed any money; then, he made me a great big sandwich out of his Polish Sausage and opened a quart bottle of King Beer and we sat down and ate that sandwich and drank that beer. It was great to be home." Before the war, Walt had begun working at Phillips Petroleum, September 1941, and once he came home, he returned to Phillips as a drafting engineer.

Ramona born **Howard Barnes** was “just a kid” when Pearl Harbor was bombed. His family didn’t have a radio so they were clueless about world happenings. Then, a neighbor announced, “The Japanese have bombed the hell out of Pearl Harbor.” Howard was just 17 years old when he joined the Navy on July 29, 1943. Still just a kid. After basic training, he shipped over the pond to Southampton, England, where he shuttled prisoners and wounded men between England and France for about 6 months. Then, a Chaplain visited and prayed for Howard’s squad and it was time to get serious. They were supposed to go to Normandy on June 5th but the sea was too rough. The morning of June 6th, they set sail and arrived in Normandy about 7:00 a.m., anchoring 2-3 miles off Omaha Beach while the first invasion occurred. Howard’s group made eight trips ashore; on one trip, they picked up a German Depth Charge and hauled it back to England for dissection...to see what made it “tick.” After D-Day, Howard’s group went to North Africa, Italy, Southern France, through the Panama Canal, Pearl Harbor for supplies and to the Philippines. By then, the war was over and he was discharged April 1946, just 21-years-old. He then found employment at REDA that lasted 35 years.



Eisenhower was an exceptional leader and WWII military hero with an astonishing amount of knowledge of strategic planning and backbone. He was prepared to accept sole responsibility for all failures and constantly monitored the number of wounded and casualties, carrying with him the burden of every lost life, while sharing the glory of victory with others.

Beginning in the moonlight of June 6, 1944, the beaches of Normandy, France were stormed like no storm before. By air, sea and land Utah Beach, Omaha Beach, Gold Beach, Juno Beach and Sword Beach were consumed by a full-blown, no-mercy, attack resulting in over 9,000 Allied troops being killed within the first 24-hours of D-Day. The sea churned a



foamy red and the sand a crimson sludge as life poured from the warriors who fell short of their earthly fight into heavenly victory. The Battle of Normandy lasted two months, three weeks and three days, leaving in its wake beaches littered with disabled equipment and burials. This service came from a generation of men who were a force of winning determination, with the fear of defeat but the guts to forge ahead to victory – losing lives along the way but capturing freedom for many more.

According to Joe Todd, Washington County Military Historian and Vietnam Veteran, “*of the 5,474 Oklahoma WWII casualties, we lost 197 military heroes from Washington County. Of this number, 123 were returned and buried in Washington County, while others were buried in American cemeteries around the world: France, England, Philippines, Japan, North Africa, Netherlands, Belgium and Italy.*”

The last known survivor from the first wave of the invasion was Choctaw Warrior **William Norman “Bill” Parker** of Oklahoma. On a rope net, he descended into the ocean with canons firing overhead, fearing each breath would be his last. It was reported he walked over 600 miles across Europe and was wounded twice during his days of intense combat. He returned to the United States with two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star, World War II Battle of the Bulge Commemorative Metal and debilitating nightmares. He often visited the Tulsa Air and Space Museum, sharing his experiences and visiting the exhibited World War II B-24. In 2022, he mustered the courage to return to Omaha Beach on the 78th Anniversary of D-Day and found solace in children playing and laughing on the beach. He said, “After I saw them, I never had another nightmare, they cured me.” In 2022, Mr. Parker was also awarded the French Legion of Honor Medal. Mr. Parker took his last breath on September 11, 2023, 98-years young.

June 6, 2024 marks the 80th Anniversary of D-Day and Normandy will celebrate LIBERTY. France has not forgotten...from Museums dedicated to discussing this history, documenting the fight to liberate France; to the monuments that commemorate the titanic effort; to the cemeteries where our heroes rest, decorated in floral remembrances...France has not forgotten.

This year, along the Normandy Beaches, visitors will pause in remembrance under a barrage of fireworks, a symbolic throwback to Francis Scott Key’s 1814 Star-Spangled Banner, “*And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there...*” D-Day marked the beginning of the end for the Nazi Germany occupation in Western Europe. The Allied Forces captured the beaches of Normandy and paved the path for the liberation of France through the element of surprise, because all is fair in lies and World War II, so remember...American stands for peace at all cost so don’t poke us,

WE ARE THE BEAR!

