

The Bedford Boys: A Time for Remembrance and Gratitude

Thursday, June 6th, 2019, brings the 75th anniversary of D-Day, the massive assault on occupied France by Allied Forces in World War II. It was the greatest seaborne invasion in military history.

President Trump has gone to Britain to share in the remembrance of D-Day. Speakers in Great Britain, the United States, and France will remind us, and rightfully so, of that historical event and of the past sacrifices that have enabled us to live in freedom. Some of us may break out "The Longest Day" or "Saving Private Ryan" as a way to recollect the dead of that battle and to honor those who, having gained a foothold on French soil, marched across that country and linked up with the Soviets to bring down tyranny and Adolph Hitler.

As we call to mind those boys and men who parachuted behind enemy lines into Normandy, who rode on landing craft into the machine gun and artillery fire at beaches code-named Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword, who climbed the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc, who drowned in the English Channel or were shot dead in the surf, some in our country will also remember the Bedford Boys.

On June 6, 1944, Bedford was a sleepy small town located in the foothills of Southwestern Virginia. It had a population of around 3,200. Like so many such towns, there was nothing particularly unusual or important about Bedford, nothing that set it apart from its neighbors or, for that matter, from any small town across the United States.

Except for a National Guard Unit: Company A, 116 Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division.

On D-Day, 34 young men from Bedford and Bedford County were serving in Company A, one of the units spearheading the initial assault on the Normandy beaches. Before the day was over, 19 of those young men of Company A were dead, the highest per capita D-Day losses of any community in the nation. One soldier lost his twin brother. Two other brothers died there. Three more Bedford soldiers died in subsequent fighting. Another young Bedford soldier, Benjamin Hubbard of F Company, also lost his life that day.

Days after the invasion, the government telegrams began pouring into the town. The telegraph operator came to work that morning and found the message, "Bedford, we have casualties." Then came another message with the same header. Then another and another and another.

As Alex Kershaw reports in *The Bedford Boys: One American Town's Ultimate D-Day Sacrifice*, these were young men of their time, patriotic, sons of the Depression who appreciated the money that came with joining the National Guard, friends linked by family, school, heritage, and place. They [spent their last night](#) on earth writing letters home, playing cards, praying, and keeping up that bravado special to the young by joking and telling stories.

Fittingly, Bedford is today the home of the National D-Day Memorial, which honors not just the young men from the town but all of the Allied Forces who died that day. Here visitors find a replica of soldiers staggering in the water toward the beach, a museum, and various presentations and events. Here, too, they often find a quiet solemnity among the tourists who have come to spend some time with these dead soldiers.

There is another memorial as well to the Bedford Boys, a memorial made not of metal or brick but of flesh and blood. Company C, 3rd Battalion, 116th Infantry Regiment is [a unit](#) of Virginia's National Guard, and over the years many young men and women from Bedford, imbued with the patriotism of those

who laid down their lives on the beach at Normandy, have proudly served in that unit.

In “Saving Private Ryan,” inspired in part by the story of the Bedford Boys – the movie’s director, Steven Spielberg, helped fund the memorial – General George C. Marshall learns that three brothers have died in combat in the same week, two of them at Normandy. He must decide whether to send a patrol to search for the fourth brother, a paratrooper also fighting in Normandy. Marshall recites the letter Abraham Lincoln wrote to Mrs. Bixby of Boston, who had purportedly lost five of her sons in battle. In that letter, Lincoln offers what little comfort he can and then expresses the deep gratitude of the republic for having “laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.”

Let us hope and pray that there will always be young people like the Bedford Boys who love their country and who are willing to risk their lives to preserve our freedoms.

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