

## Why D-Day Lives

By DOROTHY RABINOWITZ

**NORMANDY**—"... Gentlemen in England now a-bed shall think themselves accursed they were not here."

The British soldier who had been moved to recite these lines from "Henry V" while being carried toward the invasion beaches on June 6, 1944, would years later recall the dawn of D-Day, as the fantastic armada heading toward the enemy stood revealed in the morning light.

For all his forebodings and those of his comrades, this witness wrote, there was no suppressing the excitement—the recognition, tinged with pride, that one was a participant in an event that would live in history. Still, it is a question whether even someone with so acute a sense of occasion could have anticipated the extraordinary drama and symbolism that would attach to D-Day 50 years later.

### Critical Mass

That drama and symbolism have, to be sure, reached a critical mass on this anniversary—but it is also a fact that, as historic battles go, this one has scarcely languished in neglect over the years. To understand why requires only looking at a few of its dramatic components (setting aside for a moment the moral and political ones): the buildup, the plan so intricate and daring, the generals, the weather, the Mulberry portable harbors conceived by an Allied strategist while lying in his bathtub, and above all the phenomenal feats of

deception through which the Germans were gulled into deploying armies where no invader would land.

This is, as they say, some story. Anyone who doubts it should note the uncharacteristic absorption in the historical details evidenced by the 20- and 30-something TV publicists promoting the D-Day programs.

Ten years ago, on the 40th anniversary, which also brought

forth huge commemorative assemblages and visits to Omaha Beach by world leaders, it was said that this would have to be the great D-Day remembrance because the veterans of Omaha and Utah were aging and there might not be terribly many around for the 50th anniversary. Those prognosticators should see what is going on here in Europe. The former invaders of Normandy—many of them looking extremely hale and hearty and on occasion

still trim enough to wear their old uniforms—have re-entered in numbers far exceeding those of 10 years ago.

Today, in a huge ceremony, hundreds of thousands of Americans, British, Canadian and other Allied veterans will be gathered on Omaha Beach for tributes from heads of government. Before their arrival in France, large numbers of the former servicemen last week journeyed to the English port towns where they had been billeted prior to the invasion.

They were trailed by a substantial army of reporters and camera crews who found indeed plenty to record.

Weymouth, from which so many American troops departed for the shores of Normandy—particularly the First Infantry Division (the "Big Red One")—is festooned now with the Union Jack and Stars and Stripes. Everywhere on the beaches assorted fresh-faced young American and British servicemen stand by, near some tank display or other, and watch quietly as busloads of the older Americans come and go.

One bus carrying members of the First Division—which stormed Omaha Beach at H-hour—rolls in on a sun-filled day. A military parade has just ended and the strains of marching music are still to be heard as the passengers look around for the war memorial where they are to lay a wreath.

Among the British vacationers in this pleasant, slightly garish, holiday town is a handsome man, perhaps 40, who has

paused near the bus with the First Infantry Division sign on it to explain who these visitors are to his preteen daughters. After the veterans lay their wreath, the father stands his girls close by as he reads aloud, slowly, every word of the inscription to the Americans killed in the invasion. He explains later that since the family had previously taken a holiday in a nearby town, he feels guilty

about not making the trip before now to educate his daughters about the meaning of this memorial. He hopes they will learn something from all the D-Day talk and ceremonies. It concerns him, he explains, that his daughters never ask about such things on their own.

If D-Day ceremonies could do the trick, this father's concerns would be over—for everywhere there are ceremonies, small and large. The next morning, as a band

strikes up, a wet wind blasts the crowd gathered bravely outside the town theater for what is described as a "train-naming ceremony." No one can get quite clear the full details of the train to be christened—except for the central fact that it is to be called the Omaha-something. Inside the cavernous theater, which is a center for D-Day visitors and displays—including a somber and very large quantity of photographs and death notices of town boys killed in World War II—locals and honored guests mill about.

Most notable among the locals is a grizzled man who goes from group to group searching for Americans from the First Division. A lecturer at a local college, he hopes to find and say thanks to the Americans who befriended his mother during the war. It is a story that he has

clearly heard all his life, one that tells how his mother, burdened with a seriously infirm small child and with little money and food in a time of strict rationing, survived thanks to the Americans who helped out with food and medical attention. He has no names but hopes by asking to get clues as to who those benefactors were.

The search is made no easier by the fact that numerous D-Day veterans traveling with the First Division today in fact come from another outfit—namely the 147th Engineers, Combat Infantry Division. Their job was to use explosives to clear exits from the beaches. The trouble was, explains Robert Baldwin, a genial white-haired man nearing 80 who had once been Maj. Baldwin, the troops kept pouring in too fast. "Too fast! We would have had to blow them up, too. They kept on coming. There was no room to do the work." The quietest of the group, his voice grows hard and urgent for a moment—as though that desperate quandary so long ago is again his to solve. Did he, himself, have any close calls? He waves the question off until, with a laugh, he lifts a mass of hair covering a huge scar from shrapnel running across his skull. "That close enough for you?" inquires the major in the kindest of voices.

Present in the group, as well, is retired policeman Dan Bowman, who had, as a member of the 82nd Airborne Division, parachuted into Normandy the night before the landings. He is, like the majority

of the veterans here, most at ease recalling what he considers a light moment, i.e., how he and his buddy, starving for food sometime after the drop, competed with the Germans in lobbing grenades to frighten a farmer's pig into range of their guns. The Americans won. Mr. Bowman can also be eloquent, nevertheless, on the uses of piano wire as a deadly weapon, if need be—a weapon he remembers and wishes never to think about.

Soon they will all be on their way to Normandy, where others who made the D-Day landings are already settled in. Among these is former First Sgt. Leonard G. Lomell, acting platoon leader in D Company, Second Ranger Battalion. A retired lawyer, Mr. Lomell and his staff sergeant, Jack Kuhn, were among the Rangers who survived the climb up the

cliffs of Pointe du Hoc to achieve their prime mission—the destruction of the huge German guns aimed at the beaches.

### 'Vow to the Death'

For finding the guns, which had been moved, and destroying them with thermite grenades while Sgt. Kuhn covered him, First Sgt. Lomell received the Distinguished Service Cross and a battlefield promotion. Sgt. Kuhn, who would go on to become police chief of Altoona, Pa., would for other actions beyond the call of duty receive the Silver Star. "We had made a vow to the death to succeed in our mission," Mr. Lomell matter-of-factly notes. "We knew that many would die but also that one of us at least would survive and get the job done."

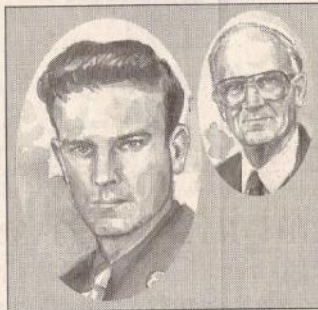
It is the kind of comment that might nowadays sound unconvincing—except from such men as these. These words are, in that sense, similar to those spoken by a British naval officer, Adm. Edward Gueritz, who said 10 years ago: "I thought, if I were to die in the attack on Normandy, then it would be a good way for it all to end."

To hear these men talk is to grasp how central the experience of D-Day has been in the lives of those who arrived on the beaches that sixth of June, 1944—and perhaps to grasp as well something of the reason the world's memory of this event has had so enduring a life.

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Lt. Leonard G. Lomell, Company D, 2nd Ranger Battalion, then and now



Sgt. Jack E. Kuhn, Company D, 2nd Ranger Battalion, then and now