

# Living Legends

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

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr. 🌿 opening photo by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez



**A new day**  
**dawns** for two old timers — retired Col. Harold Weekley, a former member of the 398th Bombardment Group, and a B-17 Fighting Fortress named “Aluminum Overcast.” Although little has been published about the Army Air Forces involvement in D-Day on June 6, 1944, an estimated 11,000 Allied aircraft were involved in the invasion — 882 of those were B-17s, including those of the 398th Bombardment Group.

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



courtesy Col. Hal Weekley



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

**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.

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

**398th Bombardment Group aircraft mechanics** change a B-17 engine at Nuthampstead, England. During the group's stay in England, from May 1944 to April 1945, the 398th flew a total of 195 missions, and lost 292 men and 70 B-17 aircraft in combat.



courtesy Col. Hal Weekley

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.

On June 6, in observations scheduled around the globe, the world will remember. ☪

### **D-Day and beyond**

**May 1944:** Eighth Air Force dispatches heavy formations of bombers and fighters for 25 days in May, while 15th Air Force flew for 21 days.

Targets included oil refineries and oil-production facilities in Germany. On May 28, and again the following day, a total of 1,756 heavy bombers struck targets. Fighter aircraft swooped low and bombed the entrances of railroad tunnels and collapsed bridges, crippling Germany's transportation routes.

Ninth Air Force took down every major bridge over the Seine River from Paris to Le Havre, France. This prevented German re-enforcements from getting to Normandy.

**June 2-5, 1944:** Eighth Air Force bombers changed their role

in preparation for D-Day. The bombers continued attacks on transportation and airfield targets in northern France, but added a series of blows against coastal defenses around Pas del Calais. Planners designed this coastal attack, called Operation Cover, as a ruse to deceive the enemy about the actual invasion point. In one such attack on June 5, the Mighty Eighth sent 629 bombers to the Pas del Calais area.

On June 3, stormy weather forced General Dwight D. Eisenhower to postpone the invasion 24 hours. Instead of a June 5 invasion, it would now be June 6.

**June 6, 1944, D-Day:** The invasion began at 30 minutes past midnight when airborne troops began landing by parachute. While bombers battered the cloud-covered beachheads, medium bombers and fighters

flew inland to strike at communication centers, airfields, troop concentrations, railways and truck convoys, hitting military targets as far as 100 miles inland.

Every pilot wanted to go, according to an Army Air Force report dated Feb. 27, 1945. Rank, a privilege rarely exercised arbitrarily, was pulled right and left, according to the report. At one base, there wasn't a single flight-qualified second lieutenant who was given the chance to fly in the first mission.

Allied air forces sealed off the invasion area enclosed by two major rivers by bombing all the bridges between Paris and Orleans. This excluded Paris from the battle area.

Gliders also were used during the D-Day invasion [See "Silent Wings of History," April 2003]. They carried thousands of nurses, troops and equipment onto enemy fields. Despite heavy

casualties, many as a result of crash landings in fields and hedgerows, they completed the mission.

**July 25, 1944:** After fighter-bombers blew up all the bridges around Saint Lo, 400 medium bombers attacked the southern end of the area with 500-pound bombs. The fierce air assault and fast-moving troops dazed and demoralized the enemy. The breakthrough presented an opportunity for the defeat and destruction of German forces, according to the 1945 report.

Ninth Air Force civil engineer groups, after participating in D-Day, followed the Army forward with the Saint Lo breakthrough, sandwiching heavy construction equipment between tanks and supply trucks. They repaired captured enemy airfields and did so under heavy fire, working from dawn

until dusk. Despite the speed of the ground troops, airstrips were always within 100 miles of the front lines.

**August 1944:** Lt. Gen. George Patton purposely left an exposed flank of the 3rd Army as they swept along the north bank of the Loire River in France. He told Brig. Gen. Otto Weyland, "I'm counting on you to protect my right flank with your airplanes."

Some 30,000 Germans south of the Loire who might have driven into the 3rd Army's rear were frustrated by fighters and light bombers. For three weeks, the German commander below the Loire tried to move his troops by night to attack, but couldn't. It became obvious that to save his own organization he had to retreat. However, the air attacks broke up his forces. Although at no time had he been engaged by any sizeable element of ground forces, his

position became hopeless and he surrendered, in fact, to an air force. For the first time, air forces not only had secured an army's flank, but aerial pressure resulted in an enemy's surrender, according to an Army Air Forces report prepared in 1945.

**Aug. 25, 1944:** Paris was liberated at a cost of 153,000 Allied forces wounded and 37,000 dead.

**Dec. 16, 1944:** The Battle of the Bulge, in the Belgian Ardennes Forest, was Hitler's "last stand." At the battle's conclusion, casualties included 81,000 injured Americans with 19,000 killed; 1,400 injured British with 200 killed; and 100,000 Germans killed, wounded or captured.

**May 8, 1945:** Germany surrendered, and V-E Day, Victory in Europe, was declared.