

# Virginians at War

## WWII: D-Day, Invasion of Normandy

### Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

#### **WORLD WAR II: 1939-1945**

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the Asiatic-Pacific theater, and to the far west, the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European theater. By May of 1940, Germany had swept across Europe, pushing the British and French forces out of France across the English Channel, to England. It would be four years before Allied troops re-crossed the channel, and started the push back toward Germany.

America joined World War II in December of 1941, and as war raged around the world, the buildup of men, munitions, and materials started in earnest. England became the training ground for millions of soldiers, as they prepared for the coming invasion of Europe.

*4,000 landing craft*

*34,000 vehicles*

*1,500 tanks*

*12,000 planes*

In preparation for this invasion, Germany built the Atlantic Wall, a defensive line along the coast of France. The wall had over 4,000,000 mines, 500,000 obstacles, thousands of miles of barbed wire, and hundreds of bunkers and gun emplacements.

#### **JUNE 6, 1944**

## **D-Day - Normandy**

NARRATOR: The day of invasion – June 6, 1944 – is etched in the annals of the fight for freedom as “D-Day: Normandy.” Known as *Operation Overlord*, the Allies – the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and five other countries – massed a fighting force of 7,000 ships, 3,000,000 men, and 5,000 aircraft to cross the English Channel and push the Nazis back to Germany.

### **TRAINING**

PROFFIT: We had been training, you know, all over England. Different phases of combat duty, you know, because what is Army life, in those days, but to teach you to kill?

BURKE: We had a lot of amphibious training, and the water – you can imagine how cold that water was – they’d drop us off in that water up to here and go through a full exercise all day, soaking wet, cold up in those moors, to see if you could take it. And we had missions that we had to carry out. We had live fire up there, we had live mortar fire and we were landing in areas that would be similar to where we landed on D-Day in France. But I never gave France a thought. I was too busy dealing with the training!

UNGERLEIDER: Well, the training picked up. We did some practice landings over in a place called Slapton Sands. We trained very hard on the moors. I lost a lot of weight there, I lost a lot of weight going through OCS, gained it back and then lost it again.

SHAVER: In our training, they had prepared what I call the “Sand Table” where they had a section of the beach that we were supposed to go in on, but they had it laid out by how so when we got to the town, it was just like going home, you know, you knew every house that was on the place.

MAYS: Well after we left the British store, we went down to Weymouth. That was the kickoff point where we would make the invasion, where they were... all everybody was assembling, you know? That’s where we got ready for the invasion.

### **PREPARATION FOR D-DAY**

UNGERLEIDER: And then, in late May of '44, we were sent down to the marshalling area, fenced in. We couldn't send out any mail, couldn't do anything. And there, for the first time, we learned that we were going to invade on the coast of France, at a place that we had named "Omaha Beach."

PROFFITT: And they had guards on the outside of the fence, guards on the inside of the fence. If anybody came in through the gate, somebody had to escort them in, escort them out.

MATHWIN: Oh, we're ready. We were ready. We're, "Go, go, go, go get those buggers! We're out to get them, guys!" And "Alright, are you with me? Are you with me?" He really got us going. So we were ready to go. I truly believe that.

SHAVER: I think it was the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, and the original D-Day was supposed to have been the 5<sup>th</sup> of June. But the weather was so rough that they called it off, and postponed it until the 6<sup>th</sup> of June.

HAGSTROM: We boarded a boat, and it was a beautiful boat. And we had a late dinner, and that was steak. We hadn't had steak in a long time. We slowly moved out to sea. We weren't allowed to go up on deck. Nobody could go out on deck.

DEGENARO: We took off from Greenham Commons, in Horsa gliders towed by American aircraft – C-47's – at about 7 o'clock at night. And we flew a couple of hours, as I recall, and then we landed in Normandy. We carried 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division troops.

PROFFITT: And I knew that it was a real thing, then. But I couldn't visualize, in my own mind, how bad it was going to be.

## **D-DAY**

NARRATOR: Early morning, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944: American and British airborne troops flew across the English Channel for an airborne assault.

MATHWIN: As soon as we hit the coast, we got into a lot of flak. And unfortunately, there were a lot of clouds. The aircraft couldn't carry on like they would with a, you know, three-in-a-row type of thing. There was a lot of scatter, and they scattered on the wind. ...with a cow, and that's it! I had an awful time getting out of my harness.

DEGENARO: First of all, we didn't know where we were. We were briefed on where we were supposed to land, but nobody landed where they were supposed to land, and so you picked a field. You landed the best you could. So, we didn't know exactly where we were. We knew we were behind the German lines.

NARRATOR: As the airborne attack got underway, American, British, Canadian, and French troops were preparing to battle Nazi forces on the coast of France.

MAYS: D-Day. That evening, of course, we went out on the 5<sup>th</sup> and German U-boats got in there and we didn't get to go until the 6<sup>th</sup>. When we left out that late, that afternoon, going in there... that was the prettiest sight you had seen. Everywhere you looked, you see ships, boats, everywhere, as far as the eye can reach. I didn't sleep any that night. I told my buddy on there, I said, "I'm gonna travel light tomorrow." We didn't know what we were getting into.

MARTIN: The weather was terrible. It was cloudy, it was rainy, wind was blowing, and it was rough and foggy. You couldn't see very far. We got over the coastline, and we couldn't see very much, you know, that first morning. We were anchored out in the Channel because with that many ships – we had about 6,000 ships altogether in that operation.

THOMPSON: I know there was battleships close by, and the battleships were firing guns, and when they went off it just felt like a small LST would jump out of the water.

HAGSTROM: And that morning, the boats had barrage balloons up to protect them from enemy aircraft coming in. When those naval guns opened up – and these are biggie biggies – at about 6 o'clock and just pounded away, just pounded away. You could hear the things whizzing over your head. They were that low, going right straight for the beach, for the bluff.

SHAVER: All the while, while this is going on, there is a constant stream of LCVP's moving to the shore, and we knew that the actual invasion was underway because the troops were landing. And then after that, it was just a matter of us getting in to the beach.

HAGSTROM: We moved a little bit, but then we stopped, and we were told to hold up here for a while, because the 116<sup>th</sup> wasn't making it. All the ships that were due to go to Omaha Beach started to go in. I got my men up on deck, and we all got

ready, checked out all our equipment, and everything. We were ready to go to shore.

CREWS: They told us, "You're going in. You'll be outnumbered. It's gonna be rough going. You won't have any supplies, or anything that you don't take with you when you go in." They said, "We can't guarantee you but one thing: if you don't make it, somebody else is coming in behind you who will."

BURKE: When we got closer, the sounds changed. You heard small arms fire, you heard mortars coming in, you heard 88's – German 88's, artillery – coming in, whistling sounds. None of us having experienced it before. It's a significant emotional event, believe me.

UNGERLEIDER: We were the second wave selected to go in with the 29<sup>th</sup> Division. The first was Virginia's 116<sup>th</sup> Regiment, and I think it's common knowledge now how badly they were mauled on the beach, and we could see it. We could see it from where we were, and this didn't improve our morale at all, believe me. We saw people getting killed, we saw bloody water, we saw the whole thing and here we were, getting all set to go in behind, and they were supposed to own the beach by that time. And these things that we were on would just be able to roll up to the beach, we'd get off and walk down the steps and go up.

HAGSTROM: So I took half the platoon. I said, "You jump on that side. Half the platoon would jump on this side. Do the best you can with your equipment, so forth the most important thing for you to keep is your guns, your rifles. If you lose the equipment, don't worry about it." So I watched them go in and I jumped in. They went down like rocks. They came up, just with their Mae West on, but no equipment. And we all swam ashore.

BURKE: And I was sitting up on the back, and I stood up. They dropped that ramp, and I'll never forget all the mist, the haze, the smoke, and the sounds of the artillery coming in.

SHAVER: It was very, very bloody. There were bodies everywhere, parts of bodies, discarded equipment, but it was extremely... it was extremely bloody. You're not paying attention to it, because your sole purpose in life is staying alive and getting across the beach to where you figure it's a little bit safer, up against the cliff on the other side of the beach.

BURKE: And so, when I got back up, I went in to the beach. I was soaking wet when I got to the beach. Somebody was yelling, "Don't stop! Keep going! Keep going! Keep going!"

MAY: I got behind one of those crossbars, and the bullets were hitting that bar, and I said, "This ain't no place for you." I got up and ran on over there.

HAGSTROM: And we got up on the shore, and the shore was just littered with dead bodies, wounded bodies. We couldn't move from any place. So I told them to sit tight, and I went out to talk, to see if I could find an officer, and I found one and I said, "What's the story?" He says, "We can't get forward. You shouldn't have come in." I said, "Don't tell us that. We're here!"

SHAVER: That beach was laid out by the Germans so that they had every inch of that beach covered with mines on the top of the beach fortifications, where the ships could come over and they'd hit the mine, and it would blow the ship up.

HAGSTROM: So I told the man to get to the top of the hill, stay there, and I'd find out what was going on. And he said, "Oh, by the way. You see all the dead on the hill?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "They didn't die from machine gun bullets. These men died because of mines." The whole hillside was mines, and they had mines that we weren't taught to recognize. We were taught to recognize metal mines. These mines, the Germans, were made of wood. They called them Schübach mines, and all you had to do was just step on the ground a little bit, and it'd blow your leg off.

MAYS: From that point on, we had to work our way on up that hill, big high ground, higher up. You couldn't see nobody to shoot at. You just had to shoot against the hills, 'cause it was, what they call "pill boxes," you know, underneath that ground. You just had grass on there and stuff, weeds, and then there was minefields there. We had to make our way through minefields, and that was one of the big things that we worried about.

UNGERLEIDER: And I said, "Be sure that you get the word all the way back to step where I step. I'm gonna lead you up through that minefield. There's always one person, at least, that doesn't get the word. And he stepped on a mine, he blew himself up and killed the guy next to him. Those were two men I lost, and I had two men wounded by snipers as we were going up.

MAYS: But we made it on in, worked our way up the hill, then we started shooting, got the word to shoot at the top of the hedgerows. So, that's what we were firing at, the top of the hedgerows going up through there. And it was slow going, 'til we made it to this little town above there.

FARLEY: Never heard about the word "Omaha." They didn't tell us the name of the beach. All I saw, this beach and all these people. My duck went down a few miles, and when we landed, I was lost, in terms of my training. We got out the duck... so much going on, that beach. So many people. So many dead bodies.

NARRATOR: The price paid for victory on the beaches and fields of Normandy were high, but it secured the foothold necessary to allow the Allied forces to launch the military operations to defeat Hitler and the Nazis.

*Over 150,000 men were deployed on the first day of the invasion.  
There were 10,104 killed or wounded.*

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