

Foreword

D-Day: The Campaign Across France

They are called The Greatest Generation because they fought the greatest war in history. The D-Day landings in Normandy in June 1944 and the subsequent campaign to push the Wehrmacht out of France, the subjects of this book, were one of the key turning points of that war. I knew that generation well. My parents and most of the adults around me as I grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s were from that generation, of course, but I also had the privilege of knowing many of them as soldiers and of serving with them on the battlefields of a different war. When I enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1966, almost all the senior leaders were World War II veterans. Virtually all the officers above the rank of lieutenant colonel and the NCOs above the rank of master sergeant had served in World War II. Two of the three of the company first sergeants I had in Vietnam were WWII vets. It was their generation that trained me and my generation how to be soldiers and how to survive on the battlefield.

I had the opportunity to pay them back in some small measure in 2004 and 2005, when I was the Department of Defense Executive Director for the World War II 60th Anniversary commemorations in Europe. In June 2004 I had the honor of commanding the 3,300-soldier task force that supported the D-Day 60th Anniversary observances. Preparations for the events started months in advance, and more than a week before the start of the ceremonies we started deploying to Normandy from our bases in Germany. But even before we started that move, it was important for me that all the Young Soldiers I had out in Normandy knew exactly why they were there, just who all those Old Soldiers were, and why this was all such a big deal.

Several weeks before the move I asked Dr. Charles Kirkpatrick, the V Corps Command Historian, to visit all the battalions involved and give the assembled troops a quick history lesson of what D-Day had all been about and why it still mattered 60 years later. A couple weeks after Dr. Kirkpatrick made his rounds, I personally visited the units. I told the troops that although they were going out to Normandy to work on the preparations, to provide the security, and to participate in the ceremonies, they should take every opportunity to talk to the Old Soldiers, to listen to their experiences, to pay attention to what they had to say. It would be an experience they would never forget.

It worked out beautifully. All the Young Soldiers came through. In the days leading up to the ceremonies and during the ceremonies themselves, all my Young Soldiers treated the returning Old Soldiers like rock stars. Often the families of the Old Soldiers looked on in mild bewilderment, not quite understanding why all these young people were making such a fuss over Old Grandpa. The answer, of course, is that the bond between soldiers transcends any gap across generations. A large percentage of my Young Soldiers then were already combat veterans themselves, having just come back from Iraq. Many would go back again for multiple subsequent tours.

About 900 American veterans came back to Normandy in June 2004. There were, of course, many more British and French veterans present, because they had to travel far less distance to get there. Our policy was to treat all World War II vets equally. Even the few German vets who showed up received the same welcome and the same access badges as anyone else. Not a single vet complained about that policy. A fair number of the British veterans attended the ceremonies at Omaha and Utah Beaches, rather than the

ceremonies on the British/Canadian landing beaches. Those I had a chance to talk to told me that they had actually come ashore at either Omaha or Utah. They included members of Royal Navy shore control parties, Royal Air Force tactical control parties, and various other British specialists attached to American units to support the landings.

Although I remember them when many were still in their 30s and early 40s, the members of the Greatest Generation are all now in their mid-80s or older. They are passing fast, but fortunately their voices can still be heard. The critical value of books like this one is to preserve their memories and their voices for future generations. A book like this, however, is a selective sample by its very nature. It is only possible for those who survived the war in the first place to speak and tell their stories. And as the war itself slides farther back into the historical past, the pool of living vets diminishes until all the voices will finally fall silent. I was in grade school when the last Civil War veteran died, and the last World War I veteran died just recently.

For all its value for future generations, a book like this can only go so far. There are so many compelling stories to capture and preserve that it becomes necessary to restrict the reminiscences to the war itself. But for those who survived the war, that experience formed the foundation for the rest of their lives. For some, the Second World War was the high point of their lives. Nothing after that came close to matching it. For others, their experiences in the war so traumatized them that they spent the rest of their lives haunted by its ghosts and shadows, wrestling with private demons few of us could ever comprehend. For others, their wartime experiences fired them with a determination to grasp life and live it to its fullest. The hundreds of thousands of American veterans who took advantage of the G.I. Bill to get a college education all intended to blaze a trail down that path.

For the most part, we do not have the space to consider the post-war lives of those whose stories appear in this book. I would, however, like to offer some insights on one of these special veterans, James Milnor Roberts, whom I knew. The aide-de-camp to V Corps commander Major General Leonard Gerow, Lieutenant Roberts landed on Omaha's Easy Red Beach with the 115th Infantry on 6 June. As his landing craft started to disembark, the coxswain was killed by German fire. By the time the war was over Roberts was a major and had served in five campaigns across Europe. Following the war Roberts became the president of the Sykes Advertising Agency in Pittsburgh, but he also remained in the U.S. Army Reserve. On 1 June 1971 he was appointed Chief of the Army Reserve, assigned to the Pentagon. He held that post for four years, finally retiring from the Army as a major general. Upon his military retirement he became the Executive Director of the Reserve Officers' Association, serving in that position until 1984. In June 2004 General Roberts was one of the 100 American D-Day veterans selected to receive the Legion of Honor from the French government in Paris on the day prior to the commemoration events. General Roberts died on 2 January 2009, at the age of 91. He was one of the many junior officers and enlisted soldiers of World War II who in subsequent years left such an indelible mark on their country.

This book is not a comprehensive history of the D-Day landings and the Normandy campaign. That is not its purpose. Its intent, rather, is to offer a selection of foxhole-level views of one of the greatest events in history, as seen by those who occupied those foxholes—and lived to tell about it.

Maj. Gen. (ret) David T. Zabecki, PhD

Shifrin Distinguished Chair of Military and Naval History, 2012
United States Naval Academy