

Features



TOP

D-Day: 'The Beginning Of The End'

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D-Day: 'The Beginning Of The End'

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June 6, 1944.

It's a pivotal day in history. It's the day when the largest armada the world had ever seen was poised to land on the European continent - with 156,000 Allied troops from the U.S., the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway and Free France all ready to land on a 50-mile stretch of Normandy coast with the support of 5,000 landing craft, 50,000 vehicles, and 11,000 planes.

And in command of one of those planes was a young Army Air Corps officer from Dexter.

Clifford Manlove was a captain on D-Day, in charge of a B-24 bomber based in Wormingford, England. A photo hangs on the wall at Manlove's home of ten young, smiling men alongside a bomber they had christened "The Missouri Mule." Three of the men were from Missouri; three had the first name Clifford. Now, some 67 years after that fateful June in 1944, only two of that crew are still alive to talk about the experience.

Manlove said the 490th Bomb Group hadn't been in England all that long before June

1944.

“The crew had just a few missions under its belt,” Manlove recalled. But more importantly in some ways was that the crew had no idea that the call to wake up on the morning of June 6 would be the dawning of a turning point in the war.

“I hadn’t heard a word about D-Day or an invasion before that morning,” Manlove said. Maybe it was the group’s newness to the scene; maybe because it was out the craziness of London and the hub-bub along the eastern coast along the English Channel. Manlove doesn’t know.

“We really didn’t have any idea.”

But once they were awakened that morning and had breakfast, and then went to the various briefings, it was clear this would be a different sort of day.

“When I walked in that briefing room and saw that big map – then I knew,” Manlove recalled. He said the briefing map was a large map of Europe - and red lines showing the route of their mission.

As a bomber group, he and his crew went on bombing raids – train depots, factories, and large strategic targets. But the target this morning was different.

“Our target that morning was a bridge,” he recalled. “It was a tactical target, and we didn’t normally have tactical targets. You never knew what the target was going to be until the briefing. So you can imagine the surprise when we had a bridge. It must have been some bridge!”

Weather – which had plagued General Dwight Eisenhower and the Allied commanders in executing the invasion plan - was perfect when Manlove and his crew left the base. Manlove was the lead crew for the mission, with nine other men aboard the B-24. The plan was to drop the six 1,000 bombs on a bridge near the French city of Nantes and return to base.

Contrary to most other missions, Manlove said there was not a secondary target and if the bombs were not dropped on the bridge, the bombs were to be returned with the crew.

“When we took off it was clear – it was a beautiful day,” Manlove said. “Then, when we got over the English Channel I saw one of the most impressive sights I have ever seen.

There in the channel – stretched out as far as the eye could see – were all the ships and landing craft in the invasion force. It was impressive.”

But as soon as the crew hit the French shoreline, clouds began to mess with plans. The cloud cover prevented the crew from seeing the target.

“We were told that if we couldn’t see the target – if we didn’t have visual sight of the bridge – we were to return to base without dropping our bombs. That’s what we did.”

The Missouri Mule and its crew returned safe and secure to its base in Wormingford, ready to fly again another day.

“You couldn’t help but feel that this was the real thing,” the active 94-year old Manlove said. “We felt like this was the beginning of the end, really. There was a very good feeling.”

Manlove went on to complete his tour with the 490th Bomb Group, and then volunteered for a second tour before returning to Missouri in 1945. He went on to take his experience and training as an officer in the Air Force, making a career in the service.

But on that morning of June 6, 1944, he and his crew took off on a fateful day – a day some have dubbed “The Longest Day” when the Allies began to the long road to victory in World War II.

Photo Above: Cliff Manlove keeps a photo of the B-24 crew who flew with him on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Manlove is standing, second from the right.

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