

‘This Was Holy Ground’: The Faith-Filled Story You Never Knew About D-Day

The entire nation fell to its knees in prayer on June 6, 1944, at 12:37 a.m. Eastern War Time as the news of the D-Day landings in Normandy began to trickle in over the BBC radio.

Initial reports from German broadcaster TransOcean in Berlin called it “The Invasion.” However, it would still be hours before Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces Europe (SHAFE) issued any statement. Due to the six-hour time difference, it was nighttime in New York and early morning across the Atlantic in France as Operation Overlord commenced at dawn with ship and aerial bombardment off the coast of Normandy.

The greatest armada ever assembled in the history of the world was now off the shores of France as the whistles blew and the ramps dropped while the Allies stormed the beaches designated Omaha, Utah, Gold, Juno and Sword to liberate Europe and free the world from Nazi tyranny.

Hitler and Field Marshall Rommel, after building numerous concrete gun emplacements, beach barricades, hundreds of machine-gun nests and dozens of mine fields along the coasts had declared occupied France and Normandy “The Atlantic Wall,” “impenetrable” and “fortress Europe.”

However, on the morning of June 6, numerous Landing Ships, Tank (LSTs) and Landing Ships, Infantry (LSIs) filled with thousands of U.S., British and Canadian soldiers plowed relentlessly through the rough surf and heavy artillery and machine-gun fire directly at the beaches. They dropped their ramps and stormed ashore with unflinching courage and valor into the face of heavy enemy fire, demonstrating for all eternity that they are the Greatest Generation.

A Humble Nation on Its Knees in Prayer

The entire country knew from President Roosevelt down that only divine intervention would ensure the success of the greatest invasion in the history of mankind.

First-Wave Chaplains

U.S. Army chaplains were among those in the first wave on Omaha and Utah beaches. The Army chaplains demonstrated gallantry, intrepidity and served with distinction under heavy enemy fire. A number of U.S. Army chaplains came under withering enemy fire, including Lt. Col. George Russell Barber.

Barber was one of many holding services for thousands of soldiers on 11 different ships in Weymouth harbor along with handing out Gideon Bibles to the soldiers.

"Those men were anxious to get a Bible," said Lt. Colonel Barber in an interview in 2001.

"Remember your mother, your father, your brothers, your sisters. They all love you. They are praying for you, too," he told the troops. He also quoted the 23rd psalm and emphasized, "God is in control."

One of the men in attendance at his services that day was the famous *Stars and Stripes* news correspondent, Ernie Pyle. "Chaplain, I will see you on the beach," said Pyle.

"We're on His side, and we're going to win. Jesus gave His life for us, and we may have to give our lives for Him and for our country. He knows all about it, and He's with us here," Barber told the troops. Standing on the bridge of the ship, he prayed for everyone on the ship through the public address system.

General Eisenhower also prayed with his chaplain. Then orders were given for the troops to deploy.

Church Bells Bring Freedom

As the first French village was liberated, the church bells began to ring. One French church groundskeeper humbly apologized to American soldiers as they marched by. The main church bell had been decommissioned by two German snipers only 24 hours earlier, leaving only two smaller bells in the steeple to ring in gratitude for their freedom.

The French groundskeeper rang them anyway, and church bells began ringing out freedom in village after village and town after town.

As the news of the Normandy landings seeped across France and Belgium, church bells in steeples rang out that morning where they could with people shouting, "Normandie! Normandie! Les Allies ont débarque en Normandie!" ("Normandy! Normandy! The Allies have landed at Normandy!"). The word "Normandy" is now synonymous for freedom and liberation in the hearts and minds of liberty-loving people everywhere.

Over the course of the next 24 hours, the freedom of the entire free world hung in the balance upon the success of the landings. Never before in the history of the world had so much been committed into the hands of so few. The Greatest Generation was showing why they deserved the honors.

I want to ask you one favor.

In my entire life growing up as a child to an adult, my father never asked me for anything or to do anything for him.

He had been on the battleship USS Nevada (BB-36), which was Eisenhower's flag ship on D-Day. Underage, he had signed up directly after Pearl Harbor as all my uncles had. Growing up in our family, I learned that courage and valor were common as table salt.

Our families had lost everything on both sides to the Nazis.

My grandmother told us how they came to the churches first in Austria and singled out the strong believers in any church role and replaced them with favorable government replacements.

My Austrian grandmother, Nana Timinski, said, "It was the churches that fell first! They came after us in the churches first! Then the rest of the government was easy."

Until her death 95 years later, she always had a U.S. flag displayed on a stand in the corner of the foyer in the entrance to her home.

The Nevada was the only battleship to be in all major theaters in WWII including North Africa, Atlantic convoy duty, D-Day and the Pacific, including both the Iwo Jima and Okinawa invasions. I was preparing to go to Germany to stay for a short time on assignment, which meant coordinating with the U.S. Embassy in Bonn there.

Due to our family's history in Europe, he did not want me putting one foot in Germany, but later relented.

Growing up, I learned all the stories. President Kennedy, Robert and Ted Kennedy came to our home often in Bethesda, Maryland, when I was a child. I remember seeing my father and President Kennedy talking together in the kitchen about night patrols in the Pacific. Since my father and the president were both Navy officers, with my father on the Nevada and the President on the PT-109, they could often be seen talking together. My dad was with Spalding, which was the Nike and Adidas of its day, and Robert and my father were best of friends. I grew up playing touch football in the fall with all the Kennedy kids on Saturday mornings.

My father asked me, "I want you to go to the American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer. That's all. I want you to see what I saw. To walk the beaches. I want you to go. That is all I'm asking is for you to go to Colleville-sur-Mer." I made a promise, and I told him I would go.

On the morning of June 6, 1944, he was a lookout and medic with the captain on the bridge of the Nevada, watching the Nevada's shore bombardment through field glasses and scanning for any enemy fighters who would come from above.

I went to the American cemetery with U.S. State Department personnel for the Remembrance Ceremony anniversary festivities.

I left the group and went down to the beach at low tide. The weather was nearly like it was on that day, 75 years earlier.

As I walked the beach and looked at the cratered dunes from the shelling, the cement machine gun nests, the rusted barbed wires and the open sandy beach where the men had to rush hundreds of meters exposed to enemy machine gun fire to find any cover, a depth of solemn reverence permeated my soul.

Walking where the bodies of thousands of soldiers—who died upon the stakes and wires, shot or blown apart as they rushed the gates of hell—had fallen by enemy fire, I saw the waves rush up on the shore then gently recede in the morning sunrise.

This was holy ground.

Then, as the morning sunlight pierced the cloudy, overcast skies, words born in the Spirit came from heaven: “Indeed, from eternity I am He” (Isa. 43:13a).

Then, “There is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I act, and who can reverse it?” (Isa. 43:13n).

The freedom they fought and died to give us is a gift. A talent. In many ways far more important than the talents of money in the Gospels.

Freedom bears with it solemn responsibility.

A Time of Remembrance

This year marks the 75th Anniversary of D-Day remembering the men who fought to full victory overcoming the most evil threat the world has ever known. We owe them a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid.

And as Americans, may we deepen our commitment and renew our strength today to live our lives for His glory, accomplishing all that He has given us to do.

And for each of us in this generation, no matter where we are, what state of life we are in or what our calling to remember—the whistle has blown, and the ramp has splashed down.

Steven Selthoffer *is a communications executive living in Bonn, Germany. He helped start the ECLJ with Jay Sekulow and Pat Robertson and also works in Olympic sports.*