



REMEMBERING a Great Crusade

By Christianna McCausland

The National D-Day Memorial commemorates the 70th anniversary of D-Day.

IT'S A FAIR QUESTION: Why is the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Virginia? This town, fringed by the Blue Ridge Mountains and farms famous for apple orchards, is small enough that even the least-ambitious pedestrian could walk from one end to the other with little effort. Yet this hamlet sustained the largest per-capita losses on D-Day of any other community in the country. When Company A of the 116th Infantry Regiment from Bedford landed in the first wave at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France, on June 6, 1944, it sustained a 90 percent casualty rate by day's end.



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL D-DAY MEMORIAL FOUNDATION IN BEDFORD, VIRGINIA

Scaling the Wall by artist Jim Brothers

Standing on Main Street today, you wouldn't find it hard to imagine how devastated this small community was when word arrived that one after another of its boys had died, 19 in one day and several in the days to follow. They are now known simply as "The Bedford Boys." Bedford is just west of Lynchburg and just east of Roanoke, cities that supplied young men in the second and third waves to land on Omaha Beach.

"This part of Virginia took a big hit on D-Day, so it's appropriate for the [National D-Day] Memorial to be here," explains Jim McCann, site operations manager. "These three communities suffered some of the greatest losses."

This June marks the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landing, perhaps the last such remembrance when surviving veterans of the conflict will be in attendance. A host of special events is planned at the memorial and in the town of Bedford over the June 6 weekend, including a parade,



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The National D-Day Memorial pays tribute to the Allied Forces participating in the largest land, sea and air operation in history: the invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944.

an outdoor showing of *Casablanca* and a performance by the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. On June 6, there will be a ceremony and the dedication of a new sculpture in memory of the Bedford Boys called *Homage*. The Bower Center for the Arts in Bedford is presenting *The World at War: Home & Abroad*, an exhibition of artwork and memorabilia on loan from the memorial and community members. Organizers anticipate that 8,000 to 10,000 visitors will see the memorial throughout the June 6 weekend.

The memorial was founded by John Robert Slaughter, a veteran from Roanoke who was in Company D of the 116th Regiment on D-Day. President George W. Bush dedicated the memorial on June 6, 2001. It is positioned on a hill atop 88 undeveloped acres with peaceful views of the Blue Ridge's Peaks of Otter, a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts. Guided and self-guided tours begin at the Bedford Welcome Center,

a new facility that presents short films about D-Day and the local area and has a miniature site plan of the memorial.

Covering more than eight acres, the memorial celebrates the valor, fidelity and sacrifice of the Allied Forces on D-Day. Although it is the National D-Day Memorial, McCann explains that "this memorial doesn't just recognize the Bedford Boys or the United States; the view was to tell a broader story and remember all who gave their lives that day."

Historical storytelling plays a large role in the memorial, which McCann describes as "an educational tool with three main plazas reflecting different parts of the D-Day story." Much of the memorial's programming, from its on-site Victory Garden to its online virtual field trips, is aimed at school-age children. There are more than 400 narrative plaques within the memorial, so you'll want to set aside plenty of time to appreciate them.

The 45-minute guided tour begins



Reynolds Garden features a sculpture of General Eisenhower.

at Reynolds Garden, where a sculpture of General Dwight D. Eisenhower stands in a Classical Revival-style folly, symbolizing England and the preparatory meetings of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) based there. A portion of the garden is patterned in the shape of the SHAEF shoulder patch.

The central plaza represents the Channel crossing and landing. Five wedges representing the beaches converge at a stylized landing craft that opens onto an elaborate water feature. Air jets force spray into the air, recollecting gunfire hitting the Channel surface. “Hedgehogs” recall the obstacles that the Germans placed on the beach. In the water and on the “beach” are sculptures of soldiers fighting and dying, culminating in soldiers scaling a massive wall and waterfall. In the spirit of internationalism, the central plaza is ringed with a necrology listing the names of every Allied soldier who died on D-Day, more than 4,400 in total.

Standing guard over the memorial is Overlord Arch (named for the operation that commenced on D-Day). Rendered in the Art Deco style popular in the World War II era, its black and white stripes are the same as those used to distinguish Allied aircraft during the invasion. Flags of the 12 Allied Expeditionary Forces ring the arch.

Within the national memorial are

meaningful nods to the sacrifices made by the towns in this still-rural corner of Virginia. For example, a Bible belonging to one of the Bedford Boys who died was found by another soldier and mailed back home to the boy’s mother. (His surviving sister still has it.) The bronze Bible lying next to the sculpture of a fallen soldier on the beach is an allusion to this story. Visitors have begun to leave American flags in the flower box surrounding a sculpture called *Valor, Fidelity, Sacrifice*. Look closely, and you can see the soldier in that piece is wearing a wedding band. The wife of a soldier who died on D-Day donated it to the sculptor. Her husband gave the band to a friend to send home in the event that his body couldn’t be returned. To learn more about the local boys, it’s worth a stop at the tiny Bedford Museum, which has a room dedicated to the 29th division with a wall of photographs of each of the Bedford Boys who died.

The Bedford Boys left an indelible mark on this small town—a mark that’s still tangible today. Yet the folks at the National Memorial are always quick to point out that “Bedford is emblematic of all communities, large and small, whose citizen-soldiers served on D-Day.”

For information on the National D-Day Memorial, visit dday.org, or call 800/351-3329. For information on planning a stay in Bedford, go to visitbedford.com, or call 877/447-3257.



A Sherman tank stands guard outside the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana.

National WWII Museum

The National WWII Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana, will mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day with a number of special events on Friday, June 6, and Saturday, June 7.

Activities will include special commemorative ceremonies; around-the-clock D-Day briefings; D-Day newsreels; musical performances; and tours of the Higgins Boats, which played a crucial role in the invasion of Normandy. There will also be a rock-wall climbing experience and more for the kids.

Most significant of all, visitors will have the chance to meet and thank WWII veterans who were on the shores of Normandy.

For more information, visit nationalww2museum.org.