

THE LEGACY OF D-DAY

AN ESSAY BY RON ECKBERG

68 years ago today thousands of young men stormed the coastline of Nazi occupied France to assault Hitler's "Fortress Europe" and preserve freedom. They were young—many no more than 15 or 16 years of age—and they were brave. They fought furiously even in the face of certain death. And indeed, many paid that price.

They died in various ways and in various places. Some died before they reached the beaches as artillery and machine gun fire found their mark sending the landing crafts to the bottom of the English Channel. In other cases boats and their cargo of soldiers were simply vaporized in the flash of the explosion of an artillery shell. Others died as the ramps to the Higgins Boats dropped and the German defenders poured unmerciful fire upon them.

But they kept coming. They kept coming because it was what they were trained to do. They kept coming because it was their duty. They kept coming because they believed in freedom and were eager to defeat oppression.

The Germans knew they must stop the invasion at the waterline or they would never stop it. They fought tenaciously. They were good soldiers even if misguided as to their cause. As good as they were, however, on this day and the days to follow the Allied soldiers were better. They were more determined. They had a courage, a camaraderie and a sense of purpose that Hitler had gravely underestimated. They simply would not be stopped.

The success of the invasion was not a given, however. Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower scratched out a message announcing the failure of the landings, taking full responsibility, and stuck it in his pocket just in case. He knew the obstacles that must be overcome. He knew the power of the enemy they were facing.



Soldiers of the 16th Infantry Division embark their landing craft in the face of withering fire.

That day has come to symbolize the greatness of our military and the young men and women who serve. The heroism and fortitude of the soldiers of D-Day has been repeated time and time again on the ground and in the air throughout World War II and the wars to follow. From Normandy to Iwo Jima to Inchon to Vietnam to Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Americans have stood their ground and taken up the cause of freedom wherever and whenever necessary.

The men who fought and died on the beaches of Normandy followed in the footsteps of a tradition of bravery and determination. They in turn marked the way for others who would follow.

A few years ago I sat with a friend of mine as he and the co-pilot of the B-24 they had flown over Germany over 60 years before talked about war, its necessity, and the mark it left on their lives.

At one point I asked them if they thought young Americans today would stand in such great numbers and with such great fervor as their generation did in the 1940s. I was surprised at their answer.

“Absolutely!” they said enthusiastically and in unison. They still held out great hope for the fighting spirit of our nation. They believed the generations that followed them would indeed rise to the cause of freedom when called.

I am not as sure. I hope they are right. I fear, however, that laziness and complacency have grown deeply within our collective national spirit. I fear we are far too soft to respond as the “greatest generation” did.

Only time will tell. I do know this. All is lost if we fail to remember the sacrifices made on such days as June 6, 1944. If we forget our history and the legacy of D-Day we will find ourselves weakened and at risk.

May God help us remember.



Even when wounded, there was only one direction for the D-Day soldier...forward.

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