

Remembering D-Day 80 years later at Blue Ridge Mountains Memorial



A map of D-Day invasion plans forms a mosaic over the statue of General Dwight D. Eisenhower at the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Va. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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By Katherine Rodeghier

The position of General Dwight D. Eisenhower's right hand seemed both odd and familiar. The sculptor based it on a photo, said tour guide Bill Jackson at the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Virginia.

Jackson held up a news clipping of Ike chatting with troops, asking where they were from and what they liked to do back home. Fly fishing, one said, and the general cocked his wrist to grip an imaginary rod as the image was snapped. When Ike turned to leave, he had tears in his eyes,

Jackson said. Aides had informed him thousands under his command would be dead within days during Operation Overlord, forever known as D-Day.

Nearly 80 years later, emotions still can run high when visitors hear the stories guides relay on tours of the memorial honoring the 4,415 Allied troops who died on the beaches of Nazi-held Normandy, France, on June 6, 1944.

The Bedford Boys

Set in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the memorial grounds cover 50 acres outside Bedford, a small town that suffered the highest per capita loss of inhabitants during this turning point in World War II. At the time, Bedford was home to 3,200 residents. Twenty perished on D-Day; one a twin. Many had signed up for the Virginia National Guard during the Depression, perhaps for the extra dollar per day or the handsome new uniforms they hoped would impress the ladies. Few thought they would ever go to war.

Tours of the memorial begin at “Homage,” a sculpture honoring the Bedford Boys. It depicts a soldier standing over a field grave marked by a helmet balanced on a rifle sticking up from the soil. A plaque details the baptism by fire endured by these young men on D-Day. Some died when their landing craft struck an obstacle and sank, others perished within minutes of landing on Omaha Beach.



The sculpture “Homage” pays tribute to the Bedford Boys, the 20 men from Bedford, Va., who perished during the D-Day invasion. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Because it suffered the severest loss of life on D-Day, Bedford was chosen as the site of the memorial. In a speech dedicating it on June 6, 2001, President George W. Bush said, “Fifty-seven years ago, America and the nations of Europe formed a bond that has never been broken. And all of us incurred a debt that can never be repaid. Today, as America dedicates our D-Day Memorial, we pray that our country will always be worthy of the courage that delivered us from evil and saved the free world.”

No government funds were spent on the memorial, which is run by a nonprofit foundation through donations, admission tickets and purchases from its gift shop. It receives about 60,000 visitors a year.

Turning point

The Bedford Boys were among 150,000 troops participating in D-Day, the largest amphibious landing in history. It stretched across 50 miles of beaches and gave the Allies a crucial foothold in Europe in the war with Nazi Germany. A mosaic depicting a map of the invasion covers the ceiling above Ike’s statue inside a stand-alone portico. It forms the centerpiece of a stylized English garden, a nod to Britain where D-Day was planned. Busts of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stand nearby.

Walls ringing a broad plaza bear bronze plaques honoring troops killed in a 24-hour period on June 6 and 7, 1944. Names of 2,502 U.S. troops cover the west wall; 1,913 names of other Allied Expeditionary Force members line the east.



The names of 2,502 U.S. troops who died during the D-Day invasion cover a wall at the National D-Day Memorial. The names of 1,913 Allied Expeditionary Force members line an opposite wall. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Next door, a tableau represents the beaches of Normandy with a granite Higgins Boat, the landing craft carrying troops from ship to shore, and a reflecting pool with two “hedgehogs,” obstacles the Germans placed in the water to snare boats. Sprays in the pool represent bullets hitting the water as sculptures depict servicemen in grim battle poses.

Monuments to naval and air forces supporting the invasion flank the beach scene. A memorial wall nearby pays tribute to Gold Star families whose loved ones perished in World War I and II. A cutout of a soldier — the “missing man” — reflects their profound loss.

Rising above it all, a 44.5-foot arch inscribed with “Overlord” looms over the names of the five beaches where the battle raged: Omaha, Juno, Utah, Gold and Sword. Beneath it, the National D-Day Memorial Seal bears a motto in Latin: “Ad commemorandum fortitudinem, fidelitatem, sacrificium eorum,” which translates as “Remembering their valor, fidelity, and sacrifice.” The flags of 12 nations flap in the breeze, first the United States and then, in alphabetical order, allies Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland and the United Kingdom.



The code name for the D-Day invasion, Overlord, is inscribed on a 44.5-foot arch ringed by the names of the five beaches where the landings took place. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Marking 80 years

On June 6-9 this year, an [80th Anniversary of D-Day Commemoration](#) will feature guest speakers, author book signings, flyovers and an authentic Higgins Boat on display, ([dday.org/80th/schedule/](#)). World War II veterans, military personnel and representatives from Allied nations will be on hand for a wreath laying on June 6. Concerts and a sound and light show are planned for June 7 and 8. A field chapel worship service on June 9 will examine the role of chaplains in World War II.

Admission to the memorial is free on June 6. At other times, tickets for adults cost \$10 online or \$12 at the memorial, students \$6 or \$8, veterans not serving in World War II \$8 or \$10. Free admission for active-duty military and World War II veterans. For details, see [dday.org/](#) or call (540) 586-3329.

Free one-hour guided walking tours are led by volunteers when available, but visitors are welcome to take self-guided tours using a free app or map available in the gift shop. The memorial is wheelchair accessible; a limited number of wheelchairs are available at no additional fee. The central portion of the memorial is off limits to pets except service animals. Animal crates are provided in a temperature-controlled kennel.



Sculptures of men in battle poses are part of a beach tableau re-creating the D-Day landing on the shores of Normandy, France. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

A small town remembers

Visitors are asked to check in at the foot of the memorial at the Bedford Area Welcome Center, where they can find information about this region of the Blue Ridge Mountains and this municipality first established as the town of Liberty in 1782. Bedford became the county seat and center for the production and distribution of tobacco, corn, wool, textiles and synthetic rubber products. Several of its buildings are in the Victorian, Italianate and Classical Revival style, replacing wooden structures lost in a fire in 1884.

The welcome center has brochures for a self-guided [Bedford Boys Homefront Tour](#) of the town where these young men grew up. It includes factories converted to the wartime production of hoses for gas masks, insulation for aircraft and submarines, wool for uniforms and rayon thread for parachutes. Workers gathered after shifts at Fishers Restaurant, a 1940s diner near the depot for trains carrying passengers, freight and mail. In February 1941, the Bedford Boys attended a dance and farewell party at Bedford High School, then kissed their mothers and sweethearts goodbye and boarded the train bound for war. A plaque outside the school erected by the class of 1944 honors former students killed in World War II.

Green's Drug Store was a gathering spot during World War II. A wooden booth in the back of the store contained a teletype machine operated by 21-year-old Elizabeth Teass. On July 17, 1944, she was stunned to receive a series of telegrams beginning with the words "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret" The machine spit out message after message with the shocking news. Nine of the 20 Bedford Boys who died on D-Day are buried in Oakwood and Greenwood cemeteries.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a writer's conference sponsored by Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge, visitvbr.com.*

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