Naval Beach Group Amphibious Forces Commemorate D-Day's 80th Anniversary

NAVAL BASE CORONADO (Jun. 6, 2024) – A flowered wreath honors those lost during the D-Day in Normandy landings of June 6, 1944. The wreath was placed in the surf zone during a commemoration ceremony observing the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings, on the shore of Naval Base Coronado Jun. 6, 2024. Naval Beach Group One hosted the ceremony, which was attended by Sailors from Beachmaster Unit 1, Assault Craft Units 1 and 5, and Amphibious Seabee Battalion 1. (U.S. Navy photo by MCC Mark D. Faram)

By Chief Petty Officer Mark Faram

06 June 2024

CORONADO, California – Eighty years ago today, June 6, 1944, 132,500 Allied forces stormed ashore on France's Normandy coast to begin the final liberation of Europe from Nazi rule.

It was the biggest amphibious operation the world has ever seen. Nearly 12,000 Allied aircraft and 7,000 ships landed 132,000 troops on the beaches or by parachute behind German lines.

By the end of the day, a tenuous foothold in Hitler's "Fortress Europe" had been won at a cost of more than 4,500 Allied soldiers killed and another 5,500 wounded or missing.

It was an operation that could have gone either way. That day in Normandy, the fate of the war hung in the balance for both the Allies and the Axis powers.

“Victory is not assured, but it can be achieved,” Capt. Tim Steigelman, deputy commodore of Naval Beach Group 1 (NBG 1), told a gathering of West Coast Navy amphibious units in a ceremony on the beach near Naval Amphibious Base Coronado.

“The Allied armies’ foothold was tenuous,” he said. “We might have been thrown back into the sea. The Allied advance might have stalled out in the hedgerows or later that winter at the Bulge. But the advance continued, and allied forces prevailed.”

The perceived outcome was in doubt for much of the day. Preparing for any contingency, the Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower prepared two messages for release to the troops and the public that day. One would trumpet success, and in the other, he took responsibility for defeat.

In many cases, Steigelman said, what could go wrong did go wrong.

“When the allied troops hit the beaches with codenames like Utah, Omaha, and Juno,
they faced fierce resistance,” he said. “Much else went wrong; not all amphibious landings occurred at the right locations; paratroopers got separated in their jumps. And yet the allied armies kept coming and kept coming. Eisenhower would not publish his scribbled message of failure.”

Present on the Strand Beach were nearly 200 Sailors from all units under the San Diego-based Naval Beach Group (NBG) 1. Those include Beachmasters Unit 1 (BMU) 1, Assault Craft Units (ACU) 1 and 5, and Amphibious Construction Battalion (ACB)1. All are current Navy units whose jobs or unit lineage can be traced back to World War II and in some cases, the Normandy landings on D-Day.

New modern amphibious technology and technique was highlighted

on the beach with arrival of two Landing Craft, Air Cushioned (LCAC) craft from ACU-5 which disembarked two Marine Corps Light Armored Vehicles (LAV-25).

These are the Sailors and units that would be called should the Nation need to assault an enemy beach again.

Also present were midshipmen from around the nation learning about the Navy, which they will soon join as ensigns.

The Sailor's role in the fight for Normandy started early before sunrise as they prepared to bring the attacking force ashore. Amphibious operations are a team sport. But it's the Army who must win the fight ashore.

It's the Navy's role to get them there and keep them supplied with reinforcements and supplies to sustain the fight. In the aftermath of the battle and for many years this role became little more than a footnote in history. Movies like 1998's "Saving Private Ryan" helped bring the Navy's story back to light.

Most soldiers coming ashore that day arrived on the beach in an LCVP, a Navy abbreviation for "Landing Craft, Vehicle, and Personnel." These boats were also known to the Sailors and Soldiers alike as "Higgins Boats."

The name is a nod to Andrew Jackson Higgins, the New Orleans entrepreneur who invented the craft and others like it and supplied them to U.S. and Allied navies by the thousands.

According to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was in overall command of the Normandy Landings, Higgins was "the man who won the war for us," historian and author Steven Ambrose wrote in his book D-Day – June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II.

“If Higgins had not designed and built those LCVPs, we never could have landed on an open beach,” Eisenhower said. “The whole strategy of the war would have been different.”

Some of the youngest Sailors in the Navy were driving those boats. If not for the grit and determination of these boat coxswains, there might not have been the resounding victory that came with the arrival of the Allies on European soil.

“[The Navy coxswains], as much as anybody, won that lengthy battle for the storm-stricken Normandy beaches of Omaha,” wrote Lt. Cmdr. Max Miller in his 1944 book The Far Shore which describes in detail U.S. Navy’s role in Normandy both on June 6th and in the days after.

The book’s title words – the “Far Shore,” was the Navy’s official word for where the invasion would take place. Miller’s account, written shortly after the battle for the beaches brings their role to light in a way rarely described elsewhere.

Miller called these Sailors “small-boat boys.” It is the legacy of these Sailors that now falls to the men and women of the Navy’s Beachmaster, assault craft and amphibious Seabee units for whom this kind of work is done by today. Back in the day, these units were all male, but in today’s Navy, women fill this role, too.

“He is of high-school age perhaps, or just about to become a college freshman,” Miller wrote in his description of these coxswains.

“His craft would vary from [landing craft] to anything small which could be beached quickly, then backed away again before the [German 88mm artillery] would get adjusted on him,” Miller wrote. “The usual time required for the adjustment of these guns was four minutes. This means that the small-boat boy

would try to accomplish each beach assignment within three minutes.”

Miller wrote that there wasn’t time to check their watches. This battle timing was instinct, born of trial and error and many trips from ship to shore. Many of those who didn’t meet that timeline paid the ultimate price. Others lost their lives to mines and other obstacles.

During the opening days of the battle for Normandy, his boat became his home, battered by the sea and “grimy inside and out” with sand and grease and “with a hull bearing the bumps of many batterings (sic) and with some bullet holes,” Miller wrote.

His existence was that of constant motion from ships to the shoreline, which Miller described as the life of a “water gypsy,” who often never returned to the ship that launched them at 6:30 a.m. on June 6.

To sleep, he said, these amphibious Sailors would “hot rack” in stretchers used for evacuating the wounded and the dead. They became experts at scrounging food and candy. Sometimes, they’d even manage a shower or a hot meal from the ships they’d visit after depositing the wounded and before being reloaded for another trip to the beach.

Their role and that of Sailors throughout the D-Day armada was crucial to the battle’s successful outcome that day. Many more served on the destroyers who brought fire support to the soldiers on the beaches or scoured the beaches as Naval Combat Demolition Units (NDCU) in the dark hours before the landing, clearing mines and obstacles in the way of the landing force.

In the days following the landings, Rear Adm. Alan G. Kirk, commander of U.S. Naval Forces off Omaha and Utah beaches reflected on the Navy’s participation, saying, “Our greatest

asset was the resourcefulness of the American Sailor.” That phrase has often been used as a reason for Navy successes in war and peace in the years since. If needed, that asymmetrical advantage could loom large again in future operations.

“Looking at you all here today, I am heartened,” Steigelman said. “You are training, you will continue to train…you may be called upon sooner than you think.”

“With great sacrifice and some good fortune, 80 years ago today, D-Day at Normandy was a painful, hard-fought success for America and her allies – keep your chin up, keep working every day – when the nation calls, we must be ready again.”