

## The Bedford Boys

National D-Day Memorial Honors One Small Town's Extraordinary Sacrifice  
By Ann Norvell Gray, FRA Today, June 2021



Bedford, Virginia, is a lovely small town nestled below the Peaks of Otter in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. For the past 20 years, its population has hovered around 6,500 souls. On the face of it, this country town off the beaten track would seem to be an odd choice for the location of the National D-Day Memorial — until you know the story behind the reason for its placement there.

In the spring of 1944, Bedford's population was half of what it is now. For almost two years before the launch of Operation Overlord, about 30 young National Guard members from the town had been assigned to active duty in Company A of the 116th Infantry Regiment in the 29th Division. They trained for several months up and down the East Coast, and then shipped out to England to be prepared for amphibious landings in Normandy, France. On the morning of June 6, 1944, Company A was at the forefront of the D-Day landing on Omaha Beach. Within the first hours of the assault, 19 of those young soldiers from Bedford were dead. Four more would die before the Normandy campaign ended. The peaceful little Virginia farm town lost a greater proportion of its young men than any other American town would lose in all of World War II.

Twenty-one months before that dreadful day, the newly minted "Bedford Boys" sailed for Britain aboard the RMS QUEEN MARY. The elegant liner had been stripped of its carpets and art deco fittings and transformed into the equivalent of an underground dungeon, with no bathing facilities for the enlisted men. It was not a luxurious experience. A big ship full of American soldiers was a prime target for the U-boats, and it has been reported that Hitler declared a bounty equaling about \$250,000 to the submarine captain who sank it. But the QUEEN MARY was escorted, it zigzagged and it was faster than its predators.

The young Bedford Boys had never been out of the country before; many had never been out of Virginia when their deployment began. They were not trained for the sea services, and many of them were miserably seasick. During their crossing, they were expected to attend preparatory lectures and were issued an Army pamphlet covering cultural differences between Virginia and England. Most of them were scared and did their best to distract themselves during the long days at sea.

Roy and Ray Stevens were twins, two of 14 children descended from generations of Bedford farmers. They were good boys and exceptionally close. Four of their siblings had died in childhood. In 1938 they were 18, and they joined the Bedford guard, partly for the extra dollar they earned on their active weekends, partly for the sense of belonging and partly for the effect on the girls. They took great pride in their uniforms, which were far smarter than what their Depression-era wardrobes could manage. However, like many of their fellow guard members, they didn't expect to actually have to go to war. Still,

they were part of a proud rural culture, and the stories of the Civil War and World War I were family stories to them. When it became clear that they would be called up and sent to Europe, all of the Bedford Boys tried their best to take it in stride and be honorable soldiers.

Clyde Powers, his younger brother Jack and the Stevens twins were headed to Omaha Beach on the morning of June 6, pitching and rolling through the rough seas aboard a wave of assault landing craft, or LCAs. Clyde Powers and Roy Stevens, both separated from their brothers, were aboard LCA 911 when water began rushing in, the bow disappeared into the swells and the craft went down. For hours, while the German machine guns tore apart the landing forces on the beach, Roy and Clyde struggled to jettison the heavy gear that was pulling the survivors under and clung to anything afloat. They were rescued when a British coxswain maneuvered his empty Higgins boat back toward them and hauled them out of the water. As they headed back toward Plymouth, England, the two felt both immense relief and terrible remorse for leaving their brothers somewhere amid the carnage ashore.

Less than a week after June 6, both Roy Stevens and Clyde Powers returned to Normandy to rejoin the surviving forces as the invasion continued past the beaches, hoping to be reunited with their brothers. Above the cliff, among rows of hastily erected crosses in an improvised cemetery, they found them. Numb with grief, they walked the rows until they accounted for all but four of the Bedford Boys. Among them were the graves of Raymond and Bedford Hoback, another pair of brothers, both of whom died that morning on the beach. The family of Earl and Joe Parker also lost both of their sons in the campaign. Roy Stevens was one of the few who would come home to Bedford.

## **Waiting for News at Home**

Meanwhile, news that the invasion had begun started coming in. Across Bedford, everyone was glued to their radios, both hoping for and fearing news of their sons, their brothers and their husbands, who were surely in harm's way. The wait was excruciating. Weeks went by. Ever since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, telegrams had been arriving about once a week reporting the wounding, deaths or disappearances of servicemen among the 4,000 on active duty from Bedford County. On July 17, 1944, the wires from Western Union lit up with the first news of the Bedford Boys. The town was in shock.

Clyde's brother Jack was not officially reclassified from missing in action to killed in action until the beginning of August, by which time Clyde had been wounded and evacuated to England. While he awaited passage back home, Clyde wrote this letter to his parents in Bedford:

"Dear Mom & Dad, Am still in England, and have been trying to get a sun tan, but haven't had much luck so far. ... I visited Jack's grave before leaving France, he is buried on top of a hill, overlooking the English Channel alongside the rest of the boys he had served with. It is a very pretty place, and the French people have planted flowers there, just be glad Mom that he is not missing, for at least you know where he is now, and that is a lot better. He was killed instantly and there was no suffering on his part. ... Will tell you more about it, when the war is over. ... Love, Clyde."

By the end of the summer, the loss of 19 boys in the first hours on the beach and four more later in the invasion had been confirmed. "In a matter of minutes," Alex Kershaw wrote in his book *The Bedford Boys*, "a couple of German machine gunners had broken the town's heart."

## **The Memorial**

Driving west out of Bedford through the beautiful, peaceful foothills of the Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains to the 50-plus-acre park where the National D-Day Memorial stands makes the chaos and terror of the landing on Omaha Beach seem too remote to imagine. The memorial itself is a sequence of three plazas arranged in chronological order, from preparation for the invasion through the D-Day landings to the Overlord Arch and the flag garden, which celebrate the ultimate victory. The center section is anchored by the circular invasion pool. There is a simplified profile of a Higgins boat with beach obstacles and a fallen soldier in the water. Two more soldiers advance across the beach under fire, and another group struggles to scale the cliff.

The design is elegant and reductive, inviting quiet contemplation. Visitors may walk around and through the spacious sculptural invasion pool along walkways that allow the elements to be seen from all angles. The faces of the emblematic bronze soldiers tell the affecting personal story of that terrible day. The Overlord Arch represents the intense focus on the goal of turning the tide of the war in Europe, leading to the neutralization of the fascist threat to the free world.

The planning for a memorial in this place began in 1988, but the enabling support didn't begin to materialize until the 50th anniversary of the invasion in 1994, when the town of Bedford donated an 11-acre parcel of land. Three years later, a \$1 million grant kicked off the fundraising campaign. The National D-Day Memorial Foundation bought surrounding acreage to establish the park. Completion took seven years and \$25 million. Congress warranted the establishment of the National D-Day Memorial, and in 2001, President George W. Bush dedicated the completed project, saying: "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.

### **The Tribute Center**

In the center of town, there is a much smaller but far more intimate center dedicated solely to the stories of the Bedford Boys. In the old Green's Drugstore, where everyone in town used to gather, Kenneth and Linda Parker (unrelated to Earl and Joe Parker) have made extensive renovations, filling the new spaces with photographs and personal belongings on loan from the families of the lost boys. They opened it to the public in 2018 as the Bedford Boys Tribute Center.

People who have been to Bedford often recommend beginning with an hour or so at this center. They say that witnessing the depth of the town's unimaginable sacrifice makes the D-Day memorial so much more compelling. The Parkers understand the principles of duty, country and family that led so many American men and women of the Greatest Generation to give of themselves for the greater good.

"On the battlefields, the soldiers told themselves that one step closer to Berlin was one step closer to home," said Kenneth Parker. "Bedford's only collective defense system against overwhelming grief was to bury it in the back of their minds and move forward."

With these stories, the Parkers remind visitors every day of the year that freedom is not free.