



Daddy, what was D-Day?

A medaled veteran answers this question, put to him 15 years later by his daughter

by SCHUYLER W. JACKSON

Ex-Sergeant, 101st Airborne Division, U.S. Army
as told to Fred Blumenthal

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Every parent knows the problem of answering the ceaseless flow of questions from curious offspring, and every father who ever wore a uniform has been plagued for stories of the battlefield. When my daughter Lynne asked me the other evening, "Daddy, what was D-Day?" I found myself stumped.

How do you explain to an 8-year-old that D-Day was courage and compassion, fear and confusion? How do you describe the greatest military operation the world has ever seen when you yourself saw only one tiny piece of the vast and deadly jigsaw puzzle?

D-Day began for me on June 5, 1944, after two and a half years of training, more than 50 practice parachute jumps and five days of final briefing at a camp in the south of England, sealed from the world.

For our last hot meal—perhaps the only one we would have for days—some genius of a mess sergeant (who was probably going to London the next day) dished up greasy pork chops. When they hit our nervous stomachs, they weighed heavier than all the equipment that loaded us down. Mine weighed almost 100 pounds. It consisted of two parachutes, a rifle, three full bandoleers of ammunition, 15 pounds of high explosive, a pistol, switch-blade knife, bayonet, five grenades, K-rations, maps, a pick and shovel, gas mask and a string of detonation caps.

I was a demolition expert, and those caps were my biggest headache. If they were hit by a stray bullet, I would become a human firecracker. If I put them round my waist, they could cut me in two. If I put them round my neck, they might blow my head off. Finally I tied them around my ankle, figuring if something had to go I could best spare my left foot.

Shortly before we climbed into our planes, General Eisenhower paid a surprise visit to our unit and went from man to man to bolster our confidence. He asked me: "Do you feel you really know your job?" I an-



Author wrote story to answer Lynne (l.), 8. Barbara Ann, 5, is next to Mrs. Dorothy Ann Jackson. Flag is war souvenir, dog is named for Nazi General Von Rundstedt.

swered, "Yes, Sir, and I hope this show isn't postponed. I'd like to get going."

I wasn't being brave. That was the way we all felt. We were all on edge—and you can't stay that way for long without something snapping.

I was also troubled with a slight but painful fracture in my right ankle. The medics had given me a shot of novocain to get me through the first few hours in France, but I didn't want them to have second thoughts about the injury and pull me out of the operation. I wanted to jump with my buddies, the men I knew and trusted.

At 9 p.m. we took off into the darkening twilight, 22 paratroopers to a plane. After circling for two hours, to get into formation, we headed for France. Whether it was nervousness or those pork chops I don't know, but most of us dozed. While the plane droned on, I kept wondering how I, a Washington real estate clerk, had wound up in this situation. In all the years I was growing up, my wildest dreams never included flying into France at night to blow up an enemy

gun emplacement. For that was my job—to knock out a German coastal battery zeroed in on Omaha Beach. As it turned out, our bombers did the job for me.

Suddenly we got the three-minute warning to stand up and hook up. It was a relief because we were flying at 400 feet and under heavy fire. The tracer bullets and shell bursts made a beautiful and deadly pattern in the night sky. It was fascinating to watch, but terrifying, too, for we, men trained to fight at close quarters, now felt helpless to reply.

Moments later—at 12:47 a.m., June 6, 1944—I jumped, the fifth man out. In five seconds I was on the ground, unbuckling my chute. I thanked my lucky stars that it had worked—I had left my emergency chute in the plane. At 400 feet there is no time to open a second chute.

I was alone in the middle of a French pasture. Now I had to find my comrades without first running into any Germans, for we were right among them. To identify ourselves to each other we had been issued little tin "crickets"—one click was a challenge, two clicks a friendly response. What had worried us for days was whether the Germans knew our cricket code.

A Click and Certain Death

Weeks before, a Berlin broadcast had shocked us, for it revealed that German intelligence knew our officers were debating whether we should be given gas-proof clothes. If they knew this, did they also know about our crickets? If they did, one click could mean almost certain death.

Gingerly, I reached for the cricket hung around my neck. With trembling fingers I sounded one click—and hugged the ground. I was more frightened of that little tin toy than of all the high explosive I was carrying. Then I sighed with relief. Out of the night, from about 40 yards away, came two answering clicks. I was no longer alone.

I found my buddy, and for the next few hours, so far as we were concerned, it was a two-man invasion of Hitler's Fortress Europe. With grenades—we were

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Jackson, seen in background next to Eisenhower nose, told Allied chief: "I'd like to get going."

D-DAY continued

'I said a short prayer for those on Omaha Beach'

under orders not to use rifles or pistols that first night to avoid shooting each other in the confusion—we knocked out a German anti-aircraft gun that was shooting at our comrades still in the air.

Tiptoeing around pitch-black hedgerows, we kept ducking from ominous, moving shadows darker than the night itself. Although the weather was warm, we were ice-cold with fear—until one of the shadows mooded. We felt silly. Here we were, two men armed to the teeth, hiding from peaceful cows.

Thunder at Dawn

With the dawn came the thunder of the great naval and air bombardment, signaling the landings on Omaha Beach, a few miles away. I confess I said a prayer for the men who were now storming the heavy German fortifications along the coast. It was a very short prayer because dawn also brought the German snipers out after us. They seemed to be everywhere. There were four of us now, and we chased two snipers behind a hedgerow. Feeling sure the odds were with us, we rushed up and sprayed the hedge with bullets.

Imagine our consternation when we found there were 28 Germans behind the hedge. Those who survived surrendered to the four most startled American soldiers in France.

That day, D-Day, was a haze of confusion and violent action. We were trying to fight and find each other and do as much damage as we could. On top of everything, we had language trouble. High-school French isn't much use in the heat of battle. My old comrades are still laughing about how I rushed into a French farmhouse and shouted at the old farmer:

"Me American, where Germans?" The equally excited Frenchman pointed across a field and shouted, "Boche! Boche!"

I said: "To hell with the Boche, where are the Germans?"

But the climax of D-Day really came when at last we were able to get out our maps and confirm a suspicion that had been steadily growing on us.

We were in France, all right, but in the wrong place! Actually I was many miles from

the gun emplacement I was to blow up. In fact, the whole 101st Airborne Division was scattered over the landscape like confetti.

It hadn't been planned that way, of course, but it worked just fine. We were so utterly disorganized that the German High Command was completely baffled. We were following no known military tactics—and they couldn't comprehend what we were doing.

Well, that is my story of D-Day as I have told it to my 8-year-old daughter. But there is another story of that day, which I shall tell her when she is a little older and can better understand its message.

It concerns the burly paratrooper I found as the first light of dawn broke through. He was badly wounded and lay propped against the wreckage of a glider. He was puffing on a stubby cigar as he waited patiently to be moved to the overcrowded aid station.

We talked about many things, but the conversation always returned to his farm in the Midwest. He told me about the new tractor he wanted to buy, how the barn needed a new coat of paint and about a new strain of hogs he was going to raise that would be the best in the world.

We talked for about 15 minutes. Then he took the cigar butt from his mouth, carefully laid it on the ground, closed his eyes and said, "Come visit us." Then he died in that French pasture.

His last thoughts were of the future, a future he was willing to die fighting for. He had set his goal high, a goal little short of perfection. He had never reached his goal, as many of us never do, but that is immaterial. Through men like him I saw a vision that implies the inherent worth of the individual, and his right to live his life using the talents that God had given him.

The author, better known as "Sky" than the more formal Schuyler W. Jackson, won the Bronze Star for the D-Day action he describes, when he and three comrades attacked 28 of the enemy. Nazi toll: 10 dead, 8 wounded, 10 captured. A few months later he earned an Oak Leaf Cluster, and his Silver Star came during the Battle of the Bulge.