
The National D-Day Memorial, Bedford, Virginia

Monument Review

William F. Lawson

The National D-Day Memorial is a privately funded endeavor commemorating the Allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. Codenamed Operation OVERLORD, the invasion was the most ambitious amphibious operation of all time, and it may well be the most complex military operation ever launched in any war to date. OVERLORD was also the most crucial operation mounted by the Western Allies in Europe. Though it may not have always been clear, everything that came before that June morning was in preparation for it, and everything that came after was a result of it. The same would have been true even had the invasion failed.

So central was OVERLORD to the Allied war effort in the West, and so massive its scale, the generic military term “D-Day,” which merely refers to the day an operation begins, has become synonymous with Normandy. This association is so ingrained in the mind of the public that it seems only natural that the monument is called the “National D-Day Memorial,” as opposed to the “Normandy” or “OVERLORD” Memorial.

The Memorial is the brainchild of Bob Slaughter, a former sergeant in the 116th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division, a Virginia National Guard unit. The 116th was the first unit ashore on the western portion of OMAHA Beach on 6 June. Slaughter was a native of Roanoke, Virginia, so beginning in the late 1980s, he began an effort in his home city to establish a memorial to Operation OVERLORD, and the men who fought there. Much to Slaughter’s disappointment, Roanoke eventually passed on the project. Poetically, the nearby town of Bedford, home of the famed “Bedford Boys,” offered to donate the land and facilitated building the Memorial. Workers broke ground on 11 November 1997, Veterans Day, and officials dedicated the Memorial on 6 June 2001. Auspicious dates indeed for such an endeavor. Highlighted by an address by President George W. Bush, over twenty thousand people attended the dedication ceremony. Situated on a broad hilltop, the Memorial is a truly majestic sight, with its stark triumphal arch at the crest visible from a great distance.

The Memorial, as it exists today, consists of three phases, the English

Garden representing the preparatory phase, the Invasion Plaza, and the Victory Plaza. Each phase commemorates a different aspect of the invasion. Plans are in place for an on-site education center, complete with archive, exhibit halls, theater, and guest facilities. The long-range plan accommodates miscellaneous improvements as needed. These two final phases are currently on hold pending the availability of funding.

Planners cleverly aligned the Memorial roughly north to south to emulate the direction of the invasion itself; south from England, across the Channel, to Normandy and beyond. The vertical plane also plays a role in the design. The Memorial progresses uphill from the English Garden to the Invasion Plaza and, finally, the Victory Plaza that features the triumphal arch. The change in elevation signifies the bluffs around OMAHA Beach and the uphill struggle of the invasion force on 6 June. With the arch towering behind, the ground slopes down slightly as one passes the Victory Plaza. This signifies the central role of OVERLORD to overall victory.

Also acknowledged is the trans-Atlantic nature of the Western Allies. A bust of Franklin D. Roosevelt and

Winston Churchill adorn the western and eastern boundaries respectively. Canada is included as part of the British Commonwealth. In addition, the eastern rim originally featured a bust of Josef Stalin. This, in recognition of the Soviet



Figure 1. The Bedford Boys, photo by author.

sacrifices which made an amphibious landing against the Atlantic Wall feasible in the first place. Public pressure forced the removal of the bust though the plinth on which it stood, along with the accompanying informational plaque, remains.

The Memorial offers guided tours which generally start every half hour. Though visitors may also walk the site themselves, the tour is highly



Figure 2. The English Garden, photo by author.

recommended. The tour sets off from the gift shop on the western edge of the site and progresses along a cherry tree-lined walk to the English Garden. Along the way, one encounters the first of the heartbreakingly realistic artworks of sculptor Matt Kirby and lead sculptor Jim Brothers. Titled *Homage*, this is a monument to the “Bedford Boys,” mostly members of Company A, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division. Bedford lost twenty souls on 6 June, the highest per capita loss of any city or town in the United States. This makes the location of the Memorial especially poignant.

The English Garden

The English Garden is a colorful area, with a lush green lawn, full of flowers, surrounded by cherry trees. In the center of the lawn is a low stone wall, running north to south, giving the impression of an English country estate. The garden is representative of Southwick House, where General Dwight D. Eisenhower presided over Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force

(SHAEF). At the northern end of the wall stands the centerpiece of the garden, a colonnaded folly in which stands a statue of Eisenhower himself.

Looking south from the folly, at the far end of the garden, one sees a rendering of the SHAEF unit insignia: a flaming sword in a triangular shield, topped by a rainbow of colors representing the multinational nature of the Allied forces opposing Nazi Germany. It then dawns upon the looker that the garden is actually a giant representation of the SHAEF insignia. The low stone wall is in the shape of the sword, with red flowers bringing the flames to life. At the southern end, slightly elevated flower beds provide the burst of color for the top of the shield.

Moving away from the folly at the base of the shield, are two plinth-lined walkways forming the sides. Atop each plinth is a bust of one of Eisenhower's principal lieutenants, along with an informational plaque. On the western side are busts of General Omar N. Bradley, Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder. To the east are Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, and General Walter Bedell Smith.

Moving to the top of the shield, at the southernmost end of the garden, one finds, underneath the rendering of the SHAEF insignia, Eisenhower's pre-invasion address to the troops, in which he referred to the "great crusade" upon which they were embarking. Stairs ascend from the end of each walkway to a balcony, from which one can look down upon the garden and view the entire scene. Turning from the balcony, a few steps lead onto the open expanse of the Invasion Plaza.

The Invasion Plaza

Artists painted the circular floor of the wide Invasion Plaza a light blue to represent the English Channel and the approach to the beaches. Lanes representing the convoys to the five invasion beaches separate the Invasion Plaza into five parts. A concrete "buoy" marks each lane. On either side, one sees the Necrology Walls, containing the name of each Allied soldier, sailor, or airman who lost his life on 6 June. Westward, to the right, fronted by a row of small American flags, are the American names on bronze plaques. On the opposite side are the names from the other Allied countries, accompanied by their national flags. The Necrology Walls reach all the way to the front of the plaza.

Looking forward across the plaza, one immediately notices the German blockhouses looming over the low bulk of a landing craft. Standing atop it all is the

triumphal arch, though victory will clearly only be attained through the breaching of those forbidding defenses. As one moves toward the dark firing slits of the blockhouses, the sound of the waterfall between them lends the suggestion of a crashing surf.

When one walks up behind the landing craft, the Invasion Pool comes into view. The Invasion Pool contains the beach, complete with obstacles and assaulting soldiers. Whether the approach to the Invasion Pool was meant to give one an eerie feeling of being part of the follow-up wave or not, the sensation is there, especially when it is quiet.

The landing craft itself is a granite representation of the famous “Higgins Boat,” which carried hundreds of thousands of soldiers and Marines ashore around the globe. Standing behind it, one can see out the front, realizing the limited view of the infantrymen it carried, just after the front ramp dropped. Because the sides of their craft offered a killing zone to a properly prepared enemy, one also glimpses the vulnerability those same men felt at this moment.

The Invasion Pool stretches from the Higgins Boat to the beach. Menacing steel “hedgehogs” jut up from the surface. Underwater jets shoot up at random intervals and give the impression of bullets striking the water just offshore. The scene is a vertical display, emphasized by the waterfalls on either side. One first sees the sculpted figures of American soldiers wading through the water and crossing the beach. One figure has fallen in an awkward death pose right at the water line. Progressing upward, the stark nature of the

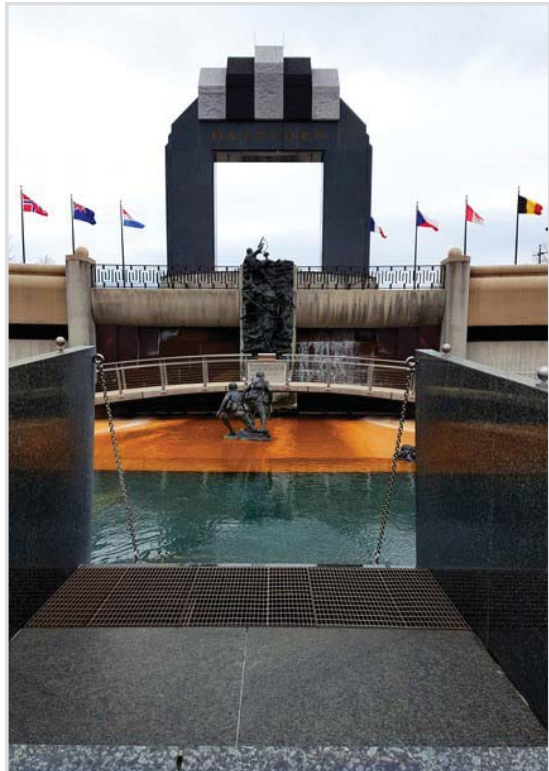


Figure 3. View from the granite landing craft, photo by author.

German defenses on OMAHA Beach stare one directly in the face, evoking wonder that mere flesh and blood could willingly run toward such obstructions on the attack.

In the center, between the defensive works, is possibly the most inspiring of the many works of art in the Memorial. Nineteen feet tall and inspired by the scaling of the cliff at Pointe du Hoc by elements of the US 2nd Ranger Battalion,



Figure 4. *Scaling the Wall*, photo by author.

Scaling the Wall depicts four soldiers climbing the sheer face under relentless fire. This sculpture is the first to overtly invoke the Memorial's motto: "Valor, Fidelity, and Sacrifice." The soldier clearing the top of the wall represents the valor of the assaulting soldiers. The two on the right, with one helping his buddy from above, depict the fidelity shared by comrades in arms. The wounded soldier, hit from above, is falling away from the wall and is a sobering reminder of lives lost gaining the Allied foothold in Western Europe.

Walkways lead around either side of the Invasion Pool to a bridge running between the defenses and the beach itself. From here, the sculptures on the beach stand out for their realism, particularly the piece entitled *Death on the Shore*, inspired by the story of the Hoback brothers of Bedford. Raymond Hoback's friends saw him fall at the water's edge. Though searchers found his personal Bible, they could not find his body and believed the surf swept it out to sea. Later in the day, his brother Bedford Hoback, lost his life in the battle. Their mother insisted that Bedford be interred in the American cemetery in Normandy, saying he would never want to be separated from his brother. The detail of *Death on the Shore* features a Bible falling out of the soldier's pack.

Turning from the beach scene, the scale of the German defenses is clear, but the soldiers climbing the cliff invariably draw one's attention. The sound of the waterfall drowns out most everything else, much like the din of the surf and gunfire must have done on that grim morning. The noise discourages conversation, which seems to fit the solemn nature of the display. The lack of distraction encourages reflection, though little is required from this point of view to gain a small sense of the challenges faced by the invasion troops advancing toward those menacing bluffs.

On either side of the bridge, forming the southeastern and southwestern corners of the Invasion Plaza, respectively, are the Air Court and the Sea Court. An Aeronca L-3B "Grasshopper" observation plane, a model used at Normandy, is the center attraction of the Air Court. Of special note are the black and white invasion stripes painted on the wings and fuselage. These stripes adorned every Allied aircraft that took part in the operation. The stripes alleviated the problem of misidentification and friendly-fire incidents such as those that occurred during the invasion of Sicily the previous year.

The Sea Court features a Danforth-style ship's anchor and a bell from an unidentified US Coast Guard vessel. There are also plaques denoting the service of several individual ships which played a pivotal role in the operation, as well as noting the service of the Merchant Marine, the US Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service), and the famous "Mulberry" artificial harbors.

Victory Plaza

Ramps climb around the Air and Sea Courts to the Victory Plaza and its great triumphal arch. Five capstones, one for each invasion beach, top the art deco style granite arch. The capstones are alternately painted black and white in the pattern of the aircraft recognition stripes mentioned earlier. Artists chiseled “OVERLORD” in large bold lettering on both sides of the arch just under the capstones.

For the best visual impact, approach the arch from the south. By doing so, one will see a granite ring in the pavement inscribed with the code names of the five invasion beaches: SWORD, JUNO, GOLD, OMAHA, and UTAH. The arch itself forms a frame for a gorgeous view of the Peaks of Otter in the background. The view softens the stark granite construction while adding to the majesty of the presentation. A simple sculpture, *Final Tribute*, awaits those walking through the arch and is a sober reminder of the human cost of the victory. *Final Tribute* is a rendering of the common method for marking makeshift graves by sticking the fallen soldier’s rifle, bayonet-first, into the ground, capped with his helmet and dog tags.

As one moves past *Final Tribute*, the sculpture of a US Ranger topping the cliff greets visitors as they approach the balcony overlooking the Invasion Plaza. This is the topmost figure of *Scaling the Wall*, representing Valor. The Ranger’s head and shoulders topping the wall, carrying his Thompson submachine gun, is an inspiring sight indeed. Looking over the balcony, with the Blue Ridge Mountains in the background, the entire Invasion Plaza is in view. The Eisenhower Folly stands in the distance, all in the crowning shadow of the OVERLORD arch.

Beyond Victory

Victory Plaza is ringed by the flags of the Allied nations which took part in the operation. The plaza opens to the south and represents looking forward from the linchpin moment of victory in Normandy to final victory in Europe. Just outside the Victory Plaza ring stands a sculpture named *Valor, Fidelity, and Sacrifice*, after the Memorial’s motto. To recognize a still distant final victory, the sculpture features two American soldiers, one helping his wounded comrade move forward.

The tour ends here, though a few points of interest still lie to the south. Following a discussion of these points, tour guides urge patrons to look at them on their own. The little bit of walking is well-worth the effort. A wide brick walk slopes down slightly from Victory Plaza, many engraved with the names of

veterans. The bricks are available through the Memorial as a means of honoring loved ones. Veteran status is required, though the honoree need not have participated in D-Day or World War II. The bricks are also a fund-raising mechanism for the Memorial.

A large American flag flies at the far end of the walk. Along the way, one sees a statue whose nature is difficult to ascertain from a distance. Getting closer, one can see the statue is of a woman wearing a Great War French Army helmet and holding a sword in her right hand. She stands with her back to a Cross-shaped gravestone draped with the belt of a French Army *poilu*. The belt holds an empty sword sheath. Moving around the front, the reason for the odd appearance manifests itself: the lower half of her face is gone, seemingly ripped away, leaving jagged bronze edges below her nose and cheekbones.

This is the *Lady of Trevieres*. She is possibly the most poignant and moving exhibit of the Memorial. Byron Dickson and Jim Brothers encountered her in the Trevieres town square during a visit to Normandy in 1998. She commemorates the sacrifice of forty-four of the town's sons during the First World War. Her disfigurement was the result of a naval shell, possibly from the USS *Texas*, which landed in the square as part of the supporting fire on 8 June. The town had decided not to restore her, seeing the damage as a testament to the horrors of war. Not surprisingly, the good citizens of Trevieres declined the Americans' offer to purchase the *Lady* for the Memorial. But they did allow a casting to be taken from the original work. That replica stands now in silent tribute, not only to the men of Normandy, but to everyone who bears the scars of war.

The *Lady* faces south, toward the American flag, beyond which one encounters a small walkway circling a garden. On the south side of the garden is a reddish stone bearing a representation of the Purple Heart Medal. The red signifies the bloodshed in the defense of our country. The Purple Heart monument is dedicated to all the men and women wounded in all our wars. In keeping with looking forward to final victory, the west side of the circle features a bust of Harry S. Truman, mirrored by his British counterpart Clement Attlee.

The Memorial is hallowed ground and the Memorial staff treats it as such. This is made clear to visitors. The Memorial recognizes and commemorates the sacrifices required of ordinary people faced with dire circumstances. OVERLORD was perhaps the most complex military operation ever attempted, but it relied on citizen soldiers, like the Bedford Boys, for its success. The importance of OVERLORD cannot be overstated. Had the operation failed, the achievement of final victory in the West would have been extremely difficult, if

not impossible, barring the use of nuclear weapons. Failure at Normandy would not have caused the Allies to lose the war, but the aftermath would have had radical second and third order effects on the course of history.

At the Memorial’s dedication on 6 June 2001, President George W. Bush spoke to the idea of ordinary people working in extraordinary times, stating, “You have raised a fitting memorial to D-Day, and you have put it in just the right place—not on a battlefield of war, but in a small Virginia town, a place like so many others that were home to the men and women who helped liberate a continent.”¹ Though many of the statues and plaques memorialize individuals, such as Eisenhower and Churchill, the real story of D-Day is those ordinary people, and what they did to help rid the world of the Nazi scourge.

Contact Information:

The National D-Day Memorial
2 Overlord Circle
Bedford, VA 24523
(540) 587-3619
Site Director: Jenny Post

Education Center
P.O. Box 77
Bedford, VA 24523
(540) 586-3329
Director of Education: John D. Long

www.dday.org

Group tours are available and special functions abound. See the Memorial’s website for details.

1. Excerpt from President George W. Bush’s remarks at the dedication of the National D-Day Memorial, June 6, 2001, quoted in Dickson, Byron, *The National D-Day Memorial, Evolution of an Idea* (Roanoke, VA: Byron Dickson, Architect, Unknown), 68.