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A Struggle for Collective Memory:
Sacrifice, Healing, and the Legacy of D-Day in Bedford, VA.

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Located near Bedford, Virginia, in the rolling hills of that state's piedmont, the National D-Day Memorial and its triumphal arch emblazoned "Overlord" are within sight of the busy US Highway 460. The Memorial, dedicated on June 6th, 2001 in a ceremony presided over by then-US President George W. Bush, commemorates the one-hundred-fifty-thousand soldiers who landed in Normandy, France on that date in 1944, beginning the drive that would win World War II. It contains many symbolic statues, of both generals and common soldiers alike, that show the grittiness and anxieties of the day, as well as artistic references capturing its losses, heroes, failures, and successes. The memorial was spearheaded by a local veteran, Bob Slaughter, who landed on D-Day in the first wave of the invasion, but by the 1980s was concerned that the stories and struggles of his generation were not being passed down to posterity.¹

The memorial's location was eventually chosen because of the significance of the town of Bedford to the invasion. With a population of only 3,973 in 1940, Bedford was a small but

¹ National D-Day Memorial Foundation, <https://www.dday.org>.

bustling town and a close-knit community.² It was the county seat of Bedford County, population 29,000, and was founded in 1782 as the town of Liberty, Virginia. Its patriotism was beyond question. Like many communities in early America, Liberty utilized the militia system for its defense, and by the twentieth century the original unit had evolved into Company A, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Division, of the Army National Guard, also known as the “Stonewall Brigade.” During the Great Depression, many young local men joined its ranks as a means of securing a job, and for the social opportunities being in uniform offered.

This paper will draw on both primary and secondary sources to demonstrate that only through the passage of time were the community and the individuals who lost family members able to move forward, as well as how they were affected in the aftermath of the war. In addition, it will illustrate the ways in which the townspeople served the larger American war effort, and how Bedford’s story represents small-town life and sacrifice within the context of a worldwide struggle.

Bedford was in many ways traumatized and transformed by the war. On June 6th, 1944, the 29th Division and Company A would lead the assault on Normandy, landing on Omaha Beach. In addition, the US 4th Division landed on Utah Beach, and two British and one Canadian division landed on beaches codenamed Gold, Juno, and Sword. Company A of the 116th numbered approximately 215 men including thirty-five soldiers from Bedford.³ By day’s end, nineteen of those thirty-five would be killed. Proportionately, Bedford suffered the highest

² James W. Morrison, *Bedford Goes to War: The Heroic Story of a Small Virginia Community in World War II* (Warwick House Publishing, 2004).

³ George D. Salaita, “Notes Embellishing Omaha Beach,” *Journal of Military History*, 72, issue 2 (April 2008): 531-534.

casualty rate of any American community that day. The community and those who survived the nineteen “Bedford Boys” were left to pick up the pieces the best way that they could.

Two substantive books and a series of articles have each attempted to illustrate these issues. Author James W. Morrison’s book *Bedford Goes to War: The Heroic Story of a Small Virginia Community in World War II* paints a full picture of the town before and during the entire conflict.⁴ Throughout the first three years of the war, Bedford’s citizens had served their country in a variety of ways, including serving on draft boards, rationing boards, volunteer organizations, and by converting local factories to produce material needed for the military.⁵ They bought war bonds, conducted scrap metal drives, planted victory gardens, and conserved their resources. A local rubber factory, Rubatex, focused its operations on synthetic rubber for gas masks, and other items for the military. Hampton Looms switched to making uniforms, and gave its workers a six-cents pay raise, a boon to the local economy, which was still reeling from the 1930s. The citizens participated in air-raid drills and blackouts, volunteered for civil defense, and changed their clocks backwards to conserve electricity. And they volunteered for duty.

In addition to the 116th Infantry, thousands of Bedford men served in other units, in all branches of the American Armed Services, and in all theaters of the war.⁶ According to Morrison:

“The 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion had at least five Bedford County men in it when it participated in the invasion of Anzio, all five lost their lives. A USAAF company which served in the Pacific and fought in Solomon Islands had five Bedford men in it. At least 5 Bedford men served in the 366th Infantry regiment, a unit manned with blacks. Battery B

⁴ James W. Morrison’s book *Bedford Goes to War: The Heroic Story of a Small Virginia Community in World War II* (Warwick House Publishing, 2004).

⁵ Morrison, *Bedford*, 78.

⁶ Bill Geroux, “Sacrifice: On July 17th, 1944, 41 Days after D-Day, the Invasion Came Home to Bedford. It Was the Day the Western Union Telegraph Machine Wouldn’t Stop,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 28th, 2000, https://richmond.com/news/virginia/sacrifice/article_e401166c-ed0b-11e3-bf96-0017a43b2370.html.

of the 285th Field artillery observation battalion had 3 Bedford men, two losing their lives and the other severely wounded in the Malmedy Massacre in Belgium.”⁷

Two local newspapers, the Bedford Bulletin and the Bedford Democrat, reported and editorialized on the progress of the war, in addition to publishing obituaries and accounts from local soldiers. Deployed overseas, the men longed for home, and home longed for them.

The main thesis of *Bedford Goes to War* is that few American towns sacrificed as much as Bedford, Virginia during World War II. Bedford did its best to adhere to Federal guidelines regarding resource usage, manpower, and enlistment quotas, but life, or at least a measure of it in wartime, carried on. It would never be the same, however. Restrictions on consumer goods such as rubber, limited to one new set of tires per year, and gasoline, limited to twenty-five gallons per user per month, would change the social structure of the town, but not necessarily for the worse. While recreational driving ceased, in its place was a greater reliance on personal interactions such as social or gardening clubs and movies.⁸

But according to Morrison, as the war dragged on and an invasion of France became imminent, the atmosphere in town began to change. Company A had deployed to England in September 1942, and while its soldiers kept up a steady stream of correspondence with their loved ones, eventually they would have to do their job. “In mid-April 1944,” Morrison writes, “the local defense coordinator, C.O. Updike, reported that ministers and other community leaders were preparing plans for church prayer and meditation services for the time of the invasion. The day was to be known as ‘I-Meeting Day,’ the I presumably standing for Invasion.”

⁷ Morrison, “Bedford,” 69.

⁸ Morrison, “Bedford,” 146.

Bedford Goes to War's primary flaw is that it does not explore the personal elements of the story in any depth. While it is comprehensive and touches on personal accounts, letters, and reminiscences, it does not give the reader a sense of who the individuals that lived through the story were as people. Its strength is its ability to show the whole Bedford community and the interactions of individuals to a large degree. The reader is given a sense that the war changed every aspect of life in the town, but left wondering in what ways. While this can make for an enlightening read, there is more to humanity.

Author Alex Kershaw's work *The Bedford Boys* focuses on the men and military experiences of Company A, 116th Infantry, 29th Division, the titular "Bedford Boys," as they enlist, serve, deploy, train, fight, and in some cases die together from 1940 until just after D-Day.⁹ The reader can see each soldier as the man he really was, feeling and understanding his motivations and struggles. The narrative begins in 1940, as war is raging in Europe but still far from the town of Bedford. As it progresses, the men gain confidence while training in England, and while away the time awaiting the invasion by drinking, marching, writing home, complaining about officers, being promoted, replaced, and reassigned, and bonding in a way that only soldiers can. It is an engaging and personal work, which focuses on the soldiers of Company A and the individual loved ones they leave behind.

At 3:32am Bedford local time, June 6th, 1944, Allied commanders announced by radio that the invasion of "Fortress Europe" had begun, with the 29th Division in the first wave. By day's end, nearly one and-fifty thousand men would hit the beaches of Normandy, France and begin the slow drive against Nazi German tyranny. "The Bedford Boys' senior commanders were also confident," Kershaw wrote, "they believed the troops would meet little resistance. The

⁹ Alex Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys: One Town's Ultimate D-Day Sacrifice* (Da Capo Press, 2003).

boys did not need to be combat veterans, they figured, because they did not envision a prolonged firefight on the beach.” It was a grave mistake. Omaha beach was well defended by the German 352nd division, and it would see the costliest fighting of the invasion.

The National D-Day Memorial was one way in which Bedford was able to heal, but while the war was in progress, and for years afterwards, the pain of loss was simply too much to bear. The town and the citizens never fully recovered from the loss of the “Bedford Boys.” A darker tone seemed to set in, but the citizens helped each other in many ways.

Communal bonds are strong, and a loss by one member is a loss shared by all. Company A included twins Bedford and Raymond Hoback, and after their enlistment their fifteen-year-old sister Lucille spent the next two years filling in for her brothers around the family farm. Rising before dawn, Lucille assisted her father milking cows, feeding chickens, and other tasks as needed. On July 16th, 1944, her father was informed by sheriff Jim Marshall that their two boys had been killed. Upon being told, her mother and younger brothers broke into tears. Lucille, who seldom cried, soon joined them. It was a Sunday morning, and when the family missed their usual 10 o’clock service, word of their loss spread. Within minutes, the pastor and several church members were at their door.¹⁰

A few weeks before the invasion, Viola Parker, young wife of Earl Parker of the 116th, began sleeping with a radio near her bed at her parents’ farm.¹¹ She had written him nearly every day, and received a reply about once a week, but military censors prevented him from telling her anything more than that he was in England. With invasion looming, however, her anxiety increased until she felt she had to know immediately when it happened. Viola had given birth to

¹⁰ Geroux, “Sacrifice.”

¹¹ Geroux, “Sacrifice.”

a daughter, Danny, shortly after Earl's deployment, and was distraught over the idea that the two might never meet. On the night of June 5th, "Viola lay awake until dawn, when, four miles away in downtown Bedford, church bells began tolling the news of the invasion. The churches were on hilltops, and the sound clanged through the warm air down the deserted streets and out into the valleys and hollows."¹²

The town was coming alive, but the mood was desperate. Throughout the day citizens flocked to their places of worship for prayer and meditation. Weeks passed, with the war's progress covered but without word of the casualties. The town's two newspapers, the *Bedford Bulletin* and *The Bedford Democrat*, had no obituaries to publish, but speculation was running high. Tension set in. Without explanation, in early July young Viola Parker and other families suddenly received returned stacks of unopened mail. Their loved ones had simply stopped responding to their letters.¹³

On July 17th, the first reports came. Because Bedford had no Western Union office, the telegram service enlisted local taxi-cab driver Roy Israel for the unenviable job of delivering the news of Company A's losses to their families. In the first few minutes of the invasion, nineteen of thirty-five Bedford Boys had fallen to German guns, including Company A's commanding officer, Captain Taylor Fellers, who was believed to have been hit while still in his landing craft. Roy and Ray Stevens, twin brothers who had enlisted together in 1942, had planned on buying a farm together after the war. Ray was killed in the first few minutes of the landing, on Dog Green

¹² Geroux, "Sacrifice."

¹³ Barbara Lam Helms, Interview by author, April 23, 2020.

sector, Omaha Beach.¹⁴ Per capita, Bedford had suffered the highest casualty rate of any American town that day.

In addition to the town of Bedford, Virginia, the County of Bedford includes many small communities such as Goode, Huddleston, Big Island, Thaxton, Moneta, and Forest, Virginia, all of which had men serving in the 116th.¹⁵ On 6 June, 1944, only fourteen men from the town were serving Company A. The rest of the county contributed another twenty-four. Of those from the town, six were killed. The town also lost one soldier serving in Company F of the 116th.

Entire generations of sons were killed. A family by the name of Powers had three sons and one daughter in the service. That July, they received notification that all their sons had been killed. Local resident Barbara Lam Helms was three years old on D-Day, but grew up in Bedford, and attended school and church with many of the families of the deceased.

“Everywhere we went,” she told this author, “people were talking about it. The boys went to Bedford High School, played ball, lived on farms, trained together.” During the war, many families proudly flew services flags in their windows. After D-Day, nearly twenty Bedford families replaced the flags’ blue stars with gold stars, indicating the death of a loved one.

Bedford lost sons in other units and other battles of the war, but none had the impact of Normandy.¹⁶ As the fighting dragged on, more bad news came in. For families of the bereaved, the only immediate comfort was to turn to each other. A pall set in over the town. Roy Stevens survived the war; however, he mourned the loss of his brother for the rest of his life. Church was an essential part of the healing process. “[Worship] services were an all-day affair,” according to

¹⁴ Barbara Lam Helms, Interview by author, April 23, 2020.

¹⁵ Salaita, “Notes,” 531-534.

¹⁶ Morrison, *Bedford*, 66.

Helms, “but we were part of an active war effort. The families had to adjust, like everyone else.”¹⁷

Life went on. Rationing, blackouts, air-raid drills, shortages, and now losses increased. One way in which the families helped each other was through traditional mourning practices, such as cooking, and bringing food to the bereaved, as well as helping with farm work, bringing each other food, and letting each other know that they were not alone.¹⁸

The 29th Division stayed in the war until the end, fighting in Brittany and then pushing towards the German heartland, helping to liberate France and Holland. In the process, it suffered nearly four thousand soldiers killed in action, and another twenty-thousand wounded. For its part, the 116th was nearly wiped out, losing eight-hundred soldiers killed on 6 June alone, but was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation and the French Croix de Guerre with Palm for landing in Normandy. After nearly eight months of continuous combat, the 29th crossed into Germany proper near Cologne, and linked up with the British Twenty-First Army group, trapping German troops west of the Rhine River.¹⁹ It then rested for the first time since June, at a castle owned by Nazi Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. It ended the war two months later when it encountered Soviet troops on the Elbe, linking the war’s major allies.

But for the survivors of Company A and the 116th, as well as their families and those who lost loved ones, victory alone would not bring peace. As the years passed, the pain of loss was simply too much to bear. No one in Bedford could bring themselves to talk about what had happened to the “Bedford Boys.” A 1984 *New York Times* article entitled “For Bedford, VA, The

¹⁷ Barbara Lam Helms, Interview by author, April 23, 2020.

¹⁸ Barbara Lam Helms, interview by author, April 23, 2020.

¹⁹ 29thdivisionassociation.com/29th-division-world-war-ii.

Waters Have Never Closed over D-Day,” written for the fortieth anniversary of the invasion, claimed that “for outsiders Bedford has become an emblem of the invasion's cost. Television crews came. Kathryn Ryan, who helped her husband, Cornelius, to interview survivors for his best seller, ‘The Longest Day,’ told an interviewer that discovering Bedford's loss had given her a special sense of poignancy. ‘To this day,’ she said, ‘it is a town of widows and children.’”²⁰

The Bedford Boys were gone, but they were not forgotten. In 1954, a block of granite donated by France and quarried from Normandy, was dedicated in Bedford alongside memorials to veterans of previous wars.²¹ For a time, the stone was the setting for small, informal commemorations. But eventually, even they faded away. The town had moved on. Viola Parker, whose letters to her husband Earl were ominously returned, learned the circumstances of his death, but remarried, and raised their daughter with her second husband. Lucille Hoback, fifteen-year-old sister of Bedford and Raymond Hoback, wrote that her mother never got over the death of her boys.

The survivors of Company A often had their own scars to deal with. At age nineteen on 6 June, Private Edward B. Farley's role was logistics, transporting guns and ammunition ashore via truck. Seventy years later, in an interview with the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*²², he recalled seeing bodies in the sand. At age eighty-nine, he had recently been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. “Your dreams carry you there,” he said in the interview, “back to

²⁰ Bill Keller, “For Bedford, Virginia, the Waters Have Never Closed Over D-Day,” *The New York Times*, June 11th, 1983. <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/11/us/for-bedford-va-the-waters-have-never-closed-over-d-day.html>

²¹ Keller, “For Bedford.”

²² Ramsey, John. “D-Day 70 years later: America's Unforgotten,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 6th, 2014. www.richmond.com.

seeing all those dead soldiers, and sometimes it still does it to me... [Here,] I'm 89 years old, and still being treated for a war that was so long ago."

As the years passed, the face of the town changed. The 29th Division and with it Company A, 116th Infantry Regiment was deactivated in the 1960s.²³ The war in Vietnam and the emergence of American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars posts generated some interest in preserving the memory of the Bedford Boys, but this came to nothing. Normandy was still too painful for many veterans.

In the 1980s, however, a wave of public interest in memorializing the war began to emerge. A veteran of Company D of the 116th, Staff Sergeant Bob Slaughter of Roanoke, Virginia, began giving lectures and interviews about his experience in the Normandy invasion. In time, Slaughter became interested in a memorial, not just to the 29th Division, but to all Allied troops, nations and units that participated in D-Day. He hit upon three ideas:

First, there should be some tribute to the veterans, living and dead, who had landed in Normandy on June 6, 1944, especially since many of the survivors were starting to pass from the scene. Secondly, the tribute should have an educational component aimed at younger generations, perhaps a D-Day display at the Roanoke Valley Museum, to remind them of both the horrors of war as well as the price of not being prepared. Thirdly, "There ought to be a statue, too. And I don't mean any of that abstract crap, either."²⁴

In addition, Slaughter wrote a memoir, and served as President of the newly founded 29th Division Association. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Slaughter and his fellow veterans, "29ers" as they were dubbed, searched for a location for the memorial.

²³ Roger H. Hill, "Memorializing Community Grief: Bedford, Virginia, and the National D-Day Memorial," (PhD Diss, George Mason University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006), <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/304915907?pq-origsite=summon>.

²⁴ Hill, "Memorializing Community Grief," 212.

In 1994, the Bedford city council agreed to take up a proposal by Slaughter to locate the memorial in the town. The fiftieth anniversary was approaching, and the French were keen on the idea of commemoration. Many American veterans, now well into their seventies and eighties, were able to travel to Normandy for the anniversary. Author Stephen Ambrose became interested in the memorial project, insisting that it be built in Bedford, home of the “Bedford Boys.” Over two-thousand Bedford area men had enlisted in World War II, but now they were dying at an accelerated rate. Soon, it was feared, there would not be many veterans left.

Relations with the French continued to develop. In 1997, Bedford hosted a groundbreaking ceremony for the memorial, which was attended by members of several Normandy communities, including Vierville-sur-Mer.²⁵ As a symbolic gesture, a group of Bedford residents including Barbara Helms developed an alliance with a group of Normandy residents.²⁶ Alternating every other year, the two would host each other, one group traveling to France to see Omaha Beach and the Colleville-sur-Mer American cemetery, and the other traveling to Bedford to see the developing memorial and other parts of Virginia. The memorial was dedicated on June 6th, 2001, the fifty-seventh anniversary of the invasion.

Grief and loss are an inevitable part of life, and are something every individual, and indeed every community, must deal with from time to time. But they are never more tragic when they are unexpected, and no nineteen or twenty-year-old soldier expects to die. When they die en masse, those that are left behind must pick up the pieces and move on as best they can. It’s not something a person easily gets over, especially when that young soldier is your husband, your brother, your father, your son. “The town never got over [its D-Day losses],” according to

²⁵ Hill, “*Memorializing Community Grief*,” 254.

²⁶ Barbara Lam Helms, Interview by author, April 23, 2020.

Barbara Helms.²⁷ But it also never lost its sense of community, and that was the deciding factor. Only through the passage of time and by banding together as a single entity were the survivors of Company A, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Division, the “Bedford Boys,” able to move forward.

About the author

Richard Elliott Martin is a Senior history major, research fellow, and creative writing minor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. He is a Civil War nerd, actor, poet, essayist, historian, blogger, and musician who aspires to become a full-time writer someday. He works at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, and lives in Richmond.

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²⁷ Barbara Lam Helms, Interview by author, April 23, 2020.

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