

## 'Forgotten day' still fresh for some

By **T.J. GREANEY** of the Tribune's staff

Friday, June 6, 2008 at 12:00 am

Correction appended

Ralph Conte, 91, of Columbia says today is a "forgotten day."



PHOTO: Ralph Conte, third from left, goes over a fligh... **more** [+]



PHOTO: Ralph Conte, 91, of Columbia says today is a "f... **more** [+]

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In his younger years, there were parades and moments of silence, but today, nothing much at all. The World War II veteran planned to spend today, the anniversary of D-Day, visiting with his wife, Norma, in a nursing home and eating a quiet dinner at home.

"Very few people even recognize that it's D-Day anymore," he said.

Part of it is age. Conte said as many as 1,000 of his fellow WWII veterans die every day across the nation. An annual reunion of his 416th Bombardment Group drew eight men last year, and only six are expected to attend this year, which will be the group's last reunion.

But for Conte, the memories are still fresh. On June 6, 1944, Allied troops crossed the English Channel and invaded Normandy in an effort to liberate Europe from Nazi control. Thousands of young Americans never returned and are buried in cemeteries in northern France.

That month 850,000 Allied troops invaded.

"We couldn't believe what we were looking at," said Conte, who watched the invasion from the air. "It was absolutely awesome to see so many thousands and thousands. They seemed like ants all over the place going into the beachhead."

Conte, then 25, was a bombardier navigator posted at an airbase about 30 miles northeast of London. The date and location of the D-Day invasion short for "deployment day" - were closely guarded secrets, but airmen at Conte's base became suspicious when crews began painting the wings and fuselages of all aircraft at the base with alternating black and white stripes several days before. They'd later find out that anything without this insignia would be shot out of the air.

At 2 a.m. June, all lead pilots and bombardier navigators were roused from their sleep and taken to a briefing room. Conte said that as they entered the room, commanding officers locked all the doors behind them and pulled down all the shades.

The pilots and navigators were told, "Today is the day." Glider aircraft were already dropping heavy equipment behind enemy lines, and an amphibious landing was headed to the beachhead at Normandy.

"Everyone howled, 'Normandy?'" said Conte. "We always thought the invasion was going to be at Pas-de-Calais, which is only 22 miles away, but Normandy was 100 miles away from the English coast."

Conte's 416th Bomb Group was charged with destroying a key crossroads at Argentan, behind enemy lines. Cloud cover delayed takeoff until 1 p.m., and after that the formation could fly only at an altitude of about 2,000 feet, about 10,000 feet lower than usual.

Conte said the last planes in his 56-plane formation were "practically scraping the ground," and all were in danger of being hit not only by flak from anti-aircraft guns but also by small-arms fire from the ground.

The sight from above, he said, was more than he could put into words. "All we could see were thousands of boats from horizon to horizon. Anything that could float was on the channel at that particular time," he said. "It was a massive thing."

The 56 planes weaved through the air in evasive action when they spotted the flash of anti-aircraft fire on the ground. "You'd go left 9 degrees and then back right. But you have to realize 56 planes making a turn isn't like going around a corner," he said.

One of the planes was blown out of the sky, killing the three inside. But the rest of the formation made it to the target and destroyed the crossroads, preventing German reinforcements from making it to the battle. In 2001, Conte memorialized the achievement in a book, "Attack Bombers, We Need You!"

Today there are few D-Day veterans left, and none of those contacted knew of any commemorations. One of them, George Parker, 85, of Columbia, said he just feels thankful to have been part of the historic day. He piloted a B-26 Marauder dropping bombs on German gun positions on the Normandy cliffs early that morning.

"No matter what your rank was, if you were in certain places at certain times in history, you can always remember that," he said. "I guess it's the fickle finger of fate."

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This page has been revised to reflect the following correction

SECOND THOUGHTS: Saturday, June 7, 2008

A news story yesterday about a veteran's recollection of the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944, incorrectly said that 850,000 Allied troops crossed the English Channel to Normandy on that day. The figure for invading troops was for the month of June rather than D-Day alone.

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