

The Bedford Boys

One American Town's Ultimate D-day Sacrifice

Alex Kershaw

For Discussion

1. What were the Bedford boys' reasons for enlisting in the National Guard, and how were their circumstances changed by the onset of World War II? How did the Bedford boys respond to their new situation? What other conflicts since World War II offer parallels with the Bedford boys' shift from reserve status in the National Guard to active duty?
2. Captain Taylor Fellers's younger sister, Bertie Woodford, is quoted as recalling, "A lot was expected of Taylor." (p 23) What did the people of Bedford expect of Captain Fellers and the young men under his command, and why? How reasonable or fair is it for a community to expect so much of any individual in times of war or catastrophe?
3. After eighteen months of training in England, how did an increasing awareness that chances of being killed were very high affect the behavior of American soldiers? In turn, how did that behavior affect relations between Yanks and Brits? How might officers have dealt differently with the men's growing fears and anxieties?
4. How adequately did the training undergone by Company A and other units prepare the men for the actual D-Day Channel-crossing and assault on the Normandy beaches? What measures might have been taken, in terms of planning and training, to lessen the number of casualties suffered by the Bedford boys and the rest of the 29th Division? What were the reactions then, and what is your reaction, to "Liberty magazine's bold prediction: 'There will be no needless loss of life in the American Army in World War II if the orders and plans of our High Command are carried out'?" (pp 85)
5. Kershaw quotes rifleman John Barnes recalling the full dry-run operations undergone by the Company A boat teams, as asking: "I often thought at the time, why did we go? . . . Were we lining up like sheep off to the slaughter that we knew was ahead? What forced us to obey when our heads, our hearts, and our feet wanted to go no further?" (p 82) Based upon your understanding of the story, how would you answer these questions?
6. How do the specific accounts of the experiences of medic Cecil Breeden, Private Russell Pickett, radio operator Bob Sales ("There wasn't a man off my boat who lived, except me." [p 143]), Hal Baumgarten, Sergeant Bob Slaughter, Brigadier General Norman Cota, Sub-Lieutenant Jimmy Green, and others—and the recollections of many—contribute to the high drama and tragedy of Kershaw's D-Day narrative? How do the individual stories of the Bedford

boys and others contribute to a fuller and deeper understanding of the D-Day invasion and the realities of war?

7. What specific difficulties, including “the placement of ingenious and lethal obstacles along the entire Normandy coastline,” did the Allied soldiers confront as they landed and as they made their way off the beaches and inland? Which of these difficulties resulted from actions taken or not taken by the Allied Command? Which of them, in your opinion, could have been prevented or avoided? How, then, would you account for the ultimate success of the Allied invasion?

8. Given the actual events of the D-Day invasion, why might some people think that the Bedford boys and other Allied units were unnecessarily put in harm’s way? On the basis of weather conditions and other factors as of June 5, 1944, to what extent do you agree or disagree with General Eisenhower’s final decision, agreed to by the other Allied commanders, to launch Operation Overlord on June 6? What were Eisenhower’s possible alternatives, and what might have been the consequences?

9. How did loved ones back in Bedford County deal with the pain and uncertainty of separation and restricted news? How did the wives and families of the twenty-two Bedford boys who were killed deal with their losses? What role did the life of the community play in each individual’s handling of loss and grief?

10. Eloise Powers, Clyde Powers’s sister, later recalled: “People say the men who died on the beach were heroes. I think the heroes are the ones who came back and had to live with it for the rest of their lives.” (p 217) In what ways were both the men who died and the men who survived heroes?

11. What roles did fate and luck play in the outcome for individual soldiers and in the outcome of the invasion overall? What was the effect on the survivors of a perception that death and survival were the result of luck? Why might those survivors who came across the corpses of dead companions think, as did Roy Stevens in at least one instance, “Maybe he’s the lucky one”? (p 182)

12. “Soon,” writes Kershaw, “no one will be left to tell what it was like to be on Omaha Beach.” (p 236) Why is it important to recall “what it was like to be on Omaha Beach” and, during the following days, in the hedgerows and villages of Normandy? Does your community commemorate this historic event; and if so, how? If not, how might it do so?

13. Sculptor Jim Brothers’s bronze statues for the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Virginia, depict soldiers struggling to reach the beach, scaling the Normandy cliffs, and dying, rather than standing erect in pride and victory. Why might the monumental portrayal of soldiers struggling and dying be more appropriate to what those men accomplished than the more traditional statues of past memorials?

About the Author

Alex Kershaw is the author of the widely acclaimed and best-selling books *The Bedford Boys* and *The Longest Winter*, and two biographies: **Jack London** and *Blood and Champagne: The Life and Times of Robert Capa*. He has been a journalist and screenwriter in Britain and now lives in Bennington, Vermont.