

The invasion that changed history

60th anniversary of D-Day commemorated on Sunday

BY MARK NEWMAN
STAFF WRITER

They will remember on Sunday.

Ceremonies to commemorate the 60th anniversary of D-Day, the largest invasion in history, will be held at thousands of locations around the world.

Most importantly, they will remember at Juno Beach, the site on the Normandy coast where thousands of Canadian soldiers, sailors and airmen took part in the bid to liberate Europe from Nazi tyranny that began on June 6, 1944.

The Canadians were assigned Juno Beach, sandwiched between the British on Gold and Sword beaches, while the Americans were to attack Omaha and Utah beaches further to the east.

Nearly 100,000 Canadians took part in the Normandy campaign. More than 20,000 of them were killed or wounded.

Dundas resident Alec Hunter watched some of the action from about 1,500 feet in the air. Piloting a Spitfire Mark IX, his job was to patrol the shoreline and protect Allied ground forces from enemy air attack.

After months of maneuvers and practice exercises, Mr. Hunter recalled getting word the invasion was finally a go during their evening briefing on June 5.

"We were kind of looking forward to getting on with the thing," Mr. Hunter said. "I went to be and slept very well."

Stationed on the south coast of Britain, Mr. Hunter recalled watching hundreds of gliders being towed by heavy aircraft around 10 p.m. that evening. The gliders contained the pre-invasion force that was to land silently behind the enemy and support the Allied soldiers that would be landing at dawn the next day.

"I had no idea of the mass of ships that were ready to go," said Mr. Hunter, who recalled catching a glimpse of some 7,000 ships and landing craft that had clogged the English Channel during the invasion.

"I hoped to hell they were going to get ashore."

For about 70 minutes Mr. Hunter and other members of the Royal Canadian Air Force wing of the Second Tactical Air Force patrolled the Normandy coast.

He admits to being disappointed that he did not face any enemy aircraft that day. In his log book, Mr. Hunter noted an

Allied forces Mustang aircraft was shot down by enemy ground fire that morning.

Ground crews had painted black and white invasion stripes on the Allied aircraft the night before. Even with that visual aid to help ground forces distinguish between friendly and enemy aircraft, Mr. Hunter said the pilots took precautions to avoid being shot at by their own forces.

"We were warned that we should stay away from the shipping," he said. "That if we got anywhere near the ships (in the channel) we would be shot at."

Like all pilots, Mr. Hunter carried an escape kit in one of his boots. The kit was to be used if he was shot down behind enemy lines. It contained a hacksaw blade, French currency, a compass, protein bars and maps to help guide him back to Britain.

Along with air support, Allied ships in the channel bombarded enemy military installations on shore prior to and during the landing on the beaches.

Mount Hope resident Bill Hoare was a 19-year-old seaman-torpedoman on the cruiser HMS Ajax on D-Day.

He recalled being told that the invasion was going ahead on June 5, as the ship was sailing from the River Clyde in Scotland to the channel.

"We were at the beachhead around 5:30 in the morning and we started bombarding," said Mr. Hoare, who was among 600 crew on board the cruiser. "It was an unbelievable sight that I couldn't really comprehend because nothing had been like it. There were small ships and large ships and ships to bring back any casualties. The channel was a block of ships, it was unbelievable."

While he didn't take part in the actual invasion, Mountain resident Frank Hurst was among those who played an important role in the weeks leading up to D-Day.

As a warrant officer with the British Intelligence Corps, Mr. Hurst worked at Bushy Park, an encampment south of London where the Allied invasion of Europe was being planned under the tightest of secrecy.

Like all the British participants, Mr. Hurst had to be cleared by M-I 5, the British secret service, before he could join the ranks of the BIC.

"Every man in the unit on the British side was selected and we were told that we could not move from that unit for the rest of the war, we could never be promoted and we had very little leave," Mr. Hurst said.

In February, 1944 Mr. Hurst said his unit, which included 18 people, were called to a meeting where they were told about the invasion by a British major and an American colonel.

"You could have heard a pin drop," Mr. Hurst recalled. "We thought, oh my God, do I need to know all this and those officers said you need to know so you can identify a leak when you see one. It was quite a responsibility."

Mr. Hurst said his unit's job was to

ensure the invasion details did not get out and only the officials who they believed needed to know the information were told. The British intelligence officers handled requests from U.S. officers while American intelligence staff looked after British requests.

"We were us sergeants and warrant officers and we interviewed colonels and majors and brigadier generals who had to prove to us that they needed to know," Mr. Hurst said. "They could challenge our ruling but it was never (overturned)."

While the D-Day secret had been reasonably well-guarded there were a few scares.

Mr. Hurst said about three or four days prior to the invasion some reporters were informed of the invasion at a lock-up at a London hotel.

He noted an operator had prepared a teletype announcing the invasion that was slated to be sent to New York City after the invasion had begun. Later that same day some news arrived out of Russia that the Allies wanted sent out right away and the information was inadvertently typed on the same tape that contained word of the Normandy invasion.

Mr. Hurst said the message was sent and news of the invasion was broadcast in New York City on June 5.

"The dilemma was what would the German's think," Mr. Hurst said. "The consensus (among the intelligence unit) was that because the Germans thought that their intelligence service was so good, that this was purely a trial on our part to get them to mobilize when they didn't need to."

The Germans were expecting the main Allied force land, further to the north-east at the Pas de Calais a mere 20 miles across the channel and the fact that June 5 was a poor weather day may have re-enforced their belief that the announcement was a hoax.

BIC officials also had to deal with a potential security risk involving a British captain.

The captain, who was aware of the invasion plans, was associating with people Mr. Hurst said might be "facistly inclined" and whose loyalty could be in question if the invasion failed.

"M-I 5 said that man shouldn't be there," Mr. Hurst recalled.

Mr. Hurst said the captain was a difficult problem for them as he had not done anything illegal and couldn't be arrested without causing suspicion amongst his associates.

"One of our sergeants blurted out, 'why don't we say he's crazy,'" Mr. Hurst said.

With the help of the captain's secretary, the unit began a deception to make the officer think he was having a mental break down.

"I said (to the secretary), I'm sorry we're going to have to do something about your boss and she said I don't like him anyhow, he's pushy and never says thank-you."

For several days the unit would call the

captain on the telephone and then hang up when he answered. When he questioned the secretary about the calls, Mr. Hurst said the woman said she never heard the phone ring.

One night after everyone had left, unit officials went into the captain's office and re-arranged his documents.

The harassment continued until one day when the captain blew up at his secretary.

"He said you must have bloody well heard the phone and she without having to act, was so shocked, she burst into tears and dashed out," Mr. Hurst said. "She went to her supervisor and said the captain keeps saying the phone is ringing and it's not."

Mr. Hurst said the captain was taken for a medical check up and referred to a local hospital for tests.

"We got in touch with the hospital and said this man knows too much and if he stays there he has to be in a separate ward with no visitors," Mr. Hurst said. "The guy never knew what happened to him. In his record I believe it indicated (he had) a nervous breakdown due to over-work."

Mr. Hurst said the captain was released from isolation several days after the invasion.

In Hamilton, a ceremony to commemorate the 60th anniversary of D-Day will be held in the forecourt of city hall at 11 a.m. on June 6. Parking will be free at city hall during the event. A flypast by the CWH Lancaster Bomber is scheduled, weather permitting.

-30-

PHOTO CUTLINES:

Dundas resident Alec Hunter in full gear several weeks prior to D-Day. His log book entry for June 6, 1944.

Mount Hope resident Bill Hoare with a photo of HMS Ajax, the ship he was on during the D-Day invasion.

Mountain resident Frank Hurst, was a member of the British Intelligence Corps that helped guard plans for D-Day.

Canadian forces landing on Juno Beach, June 6, 1944.

Photo courtesy Hamilton Military Museum.