D-Day in a Cross Timbers Village

B. P. Gallaway
On a stormy, Monday morning, June 5, 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower suddenly rose to his feet and faced the Allied commanders assembled in the war map room of the old Southwick House, near Portsmouth, England. It was 4:15 a.m. Ike's next statement was destined to mark the following day, Tuesday, June 6th, as "D-Day," one of the most significant days in the history of World War II.

"O. K.," the 53-year-old general said grimly, "we'll go!"

The room was emptied of personnel in a matter of seconds as Allied commanders rushed to their units to take the first steps which would set in motion the largest and most massive invasion in the history of man!

Shortly after midnight on June 6th, the invasion began. British and American airborne troops made the initial drops into the darkness which shrouded the Normandy Peninsula, and later, just before dawn, seaborne landings were made along the coast after hours of preparatory bombardment. During the weeks and months which followed, more than two million Allied troops, 20,000 vehicles, and literally mountains of supplies were landed on the coast of German-occupied France. As the world would eventually learn, this giant operation signaled the beginning of the end for Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich.

Within minutes after the first Normandy drops began, the news was flashed out to the world. Radio operators in various parts of North America began picking up a series of flashes from Berlin announcing the invasion. The first Allied news which arrived in the United States originated in Eisenhower's headquarters in England and was read over a trans-Atlantic hookup at 2:32 a.m. (central war time). Every one of the seventy-four Associated Press newspaper offices in Texas was notified and put on the wire, and the official announcement of the invasion was flashed into the Lone Star State.

During these days, Dublin, Texas, was a thriving little town of approximately 2,500 inhabitants nestled among the gently-rolling hills of the Western Cross Timbers. It was essentially a farm and ranch community which catered to farm-related industries. In addition to grocery stores, service stations, general merchandise establishments, coffee shops, dry goods stores, and other businesses common to East Texas towns, Dublin boasted two hatcheries, two feed mills, several cotton gins, a cheese plant, a peanut mill, and a creamery. Dublin was served by the Santa Fe, "Katy," and Wichita Falls and Southern railroads; and Patrick and Blackjack streets, in the center of town, formed a junction for Highway 67 which ran north and south and Highway 6 which ran east and west.

Public school commencement ceremonies had been conducted just one week earlier, and forty-eight young men and women had been graduated, thus bringing to a close the 1943-1944 school year. The school superintendent, R. S. Vestal, was making preparations to move to Dimmitt, while the future superintendent, W. D. Raley, was living with his family in Clyde.

B. P. Gallaway is associated with the Department of History at Abilene Christian College.
"I recall that we were in Clyde when we heard about the invasion," explained Mr. Raley. "The telephone operator called us and gave us the news."

As Superintendent Raley contemplated his move to Dublin, he must have been aware that the chief landmark in his future home town was a huge, neon sign which hung above Patrick Street in the center of town. Against a faded, blue background, large white letters boldly announced to the world that this little town was "Dublin, Home of the World's Championship Rodeo." When the news of D-Day arrived during the pre-dawn hours on June 6th, the fifth annual rodeo had just ended only a few weeks before, but Mayor C. E. Leatherwood and the directors of the rodeo association had already begun planning for an even bigger rodeo the following year.

The first news of the Normandy landings probably came to the night operators in the upstairs telephone office of the Texas Power and Light building or perhaps to night watchmen and law enforcement officials who had access to radios. Churchbells, sirens, and whistles announced the invasion about 3:00 a.m. in many Texas towns, but evidently the great majority of Dublin citizens were allowed to sleep until daybreak and learn of the historic event from their radios at breakfast. Many Dublinites did not hear the news until they arrived for work later in the morning. Some service stations, such as Camp Dublin station and cafe on North Patrick, were open all night and the landings were probably discussed by transient truck drivers and bleary-eyed, early-morning coffee drinkers.

The people of Dublin depended largely upon radio newscasts for current reports on the progress of the invasion, and during the course of the day they listened to special messages from General Eisenhower and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hearing these familiar voices tell them that all was well seemed to bolster their courage and their determination to endure. Many heard the President speak on the evening of June 5th, but they assembled around their radios again on D-Day to hear another message from their national leader. Roosevelt stated that he had known the night before when he had spoken of the fall of Rome that Allied troops were crossing the English Channel at that very moment to launch "another and greater operation." A feeling of sheer desperation and helplessness permeated every corner of the little village, and anxious Dublinites braced themselves to hear the most recent news concerning the advance or retreat of Allied troops. All during the day the news reports were generally favorable, but the impression prevailed that Allied casualties were high.

Newspapers played an important role in keeping Dublinites abreast of rapidly-moving events. Elmo Hallmark, Dublin agent for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and the Dallas Morning News, received a special shipment of extra editions about 1:00 on the afternoon of the invasion, and the regular edition of the local weekly, the Dublin Progress, appeared three days later and carried a short story of the Normandy landings. The Progress reported that an "invasion prayer meeting" was held on the Baptist Church lawn on the evening of June 7th, and all "service men's mothers and wives" were invited to assemble every Wednesday morning in the parlor of the Methodist Church to pray "for the success of the invasion."

Heads were bowed for prayer all over Texas. The people of Dublin, along with the people of other towns and cities, huddled close to their radios and
prayed with the President for British and American boys fighting on the blood-soaked beaches of Normandy:

Lead them straight and true. Give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness to their faith. They will need thy blessings. Their role will be long and hard, for the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces.

Success may not come with rushing speed, but we shall return again and again, and we know that by Thy grace and by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph! 13

The news of the first landings in Normandy spread rapidly through the downtown sections of town during the mid-morning hours as residents arrived in town for work or shopping. Before D. R. Franks and his wife opened the City Drug store, located in the center of town, they stopped by their church for prayer. Uppermost in their minds during the course of the day was the safety of their son Raymond, a navigator stationed in England. Later, they learned that he flew three missions across the Channel on this very day. 14 Cafes and coffee shops became popular sites for news discussions, but since D-Day fell on a Tuesday, the number of sidewalk meanderers arriving in town was probably smaller than usual. Frugal housewives may have contributed to the small number of people downtown by deciding to postpone their shopping tours until the following Saturday, perhaps hoping that Gerald McIlroy, a local grocer, might put his tomatoes back "on special" at 9 cents per pound. 15 Since this particular Tuesday did not follow a "trade" Monday and since most merchants followed McIlroy's example and ran their "specials" on weekends, it seems reasonable to conclude that it was not a major shopping day. Nevertheless, the customary, small groups of rough-hewn males began to assemble by the large window in "Doc" Lander's Corner Drug store to discuss items of masculine interest, which undoubtedly included the Normandy invasion. Later in the day, similar groups formed down the street on the shady side of Patrick in front of the Dublin National Bank and farther up the block by the stairs between Higginbotham's department store and D. R. Franks' City Drug.

Discussions of the invasion were not restricted to cafe conferences and sidewalk symposiums, however. Joe Kennedy, who worked in Higginbotham's, remembered discussing with his customers the widely-held notion that the war might soon be over.

"The news of the landings and airborne assaults," Mr. Kennedy recalled, "brought new hopes for an early victory and a close to all hostilities." 16

And, the same opinion was held by the personnel in the trucking office of "Charlie Ben and his Moving Men," located behind a Gulf service station on a well known old street popularly called "Rat Row." Mable Bradberry, bookkeeping for her son who owned the trucking establishment, recalled that "everybody in the office and everybody in town was terribly, terribly excited about the landings." 17

As often as not, the excitement which swept town was born of fear and anxiety since so many local boys were believed to be involved in the Normandy fighting. And, many were. Among them was the present-day Postmaster, Bill Cowan, who plunged into the "cold waters of the English Channel" and waded
ashore on Utah Beach. Fred Patton, a member of a special engineer brigade, stormed ashore on bloody Omaha Beach during the initial landings. Lloyd Maikell, flying with the 316th Troop Carrier Command, helped tow gliders filled with troops across the Channel. Vernon Gilbriath and Manson Humphries also “hit the beaches of Normandy” on this historic day.

As was feared by the home folk, some Dublin boys were captured, wounded, and killed. Among them was Leland Burdette who was in the first waves of the invasion but was severely wounded and returned to England. Vernon Gilbriath and James A. Boynton fought their way into the French interior, but Gilbriath was captured and Boynton was killed in action.

As D-Day drew to a close and darkness descended about the little East Texas town, its inhabitants knew that the “second front” which Joseph Stalin had demanded for so long had finally been initiated. But there were many things that they did not know and must wait to learn. They did not know whether or not the invasion would succeed. They did not know how much it would cost in human lives. More important to them at the moment, they did not know how personal it would become. All they could do was read their newspapers, listen to their radios, continue to pray—and, wait!

As city lights came on, some Dublinites sought escape from the anxieties and excitement of the day by listening to their favorite Tuesday evening radio programs. Others visited friends, wrote letters to loved ones, or simply prepared to retire early. More adventurous souls attended J. W. Blevins’ Majestic theater, downtown. Blevins’ motion picture program was an unlikely “double-feature” combination entitled, “Rosie the Riveter,” starring Jane Frazee, and, “Deep in the Heart of Texas,” with Johnny Mack Brown. It seems reasonable to conclude that his cash receipts on the evening of D-Day were anything but spectacular.
NOTES


5 Abilene Reporter-News, June 6, 1944.

6 Texas Almanac, 1945-1946 (Dallas, 1945), 444; Fifth Annual World's Championship Rodeo Souvenir Program, 1944 (Dublin Rodeo Assoc., Inc., 1944).

7 Dublin Progress, June 2, 1944.


9 Dublin Progress, June 16, 1944.

10 Sixth Annual World's Championship Rodeo Souvenir Program, 1945.

11 Abilene Reporter-News, June 7, 1944.

12 Ibid., June 6, 1944.


14 Dublin Progress, June 9, 1944.

15 Franklin D. Roosevelt, recorded excerpt from the President's D-Day radio message to the American people, in Reynolds, “D-Day Plus 20.”


17 Dublin Progress, June 2, 1944.


19 Mable Bradberry, telephone conversation with writer, June 30, 1969.


23 Mr. and Mrs. John N. Henson to B. P. Gallaway, May 21, 1969, personal letter in possession of writer.

24 Ibid.