

June 1944 – World War II at 80

Amphibious landings at Normandy and Saipan

By Ronald P. May
MCC Contributor

The month of June 1944 began with the news of victory for the Allies in Italy as the city of Rome was liberated from German control by the US Fifth Army on June 4.

The attention and celebration were short-lived however, as all eyes and ears quickly turned to Normandy, France, two days later — June 6 — with the announcement that the invasion of France had begun.

Originally scheduled for June 5, the invasion was postponed for 24 hours because of storms and rough seas.

Gen. Eisenhower made the decision to proceed with the amphibious invasion on June 6 with the assurance from his chief meteorologist that there would be a slight break from the storms.

The Allied invasion force was massive, unlike anything that had ever been attempted before.

There were just under 7,000 naval vessels and 12,000 planes used to deliver and support the landing of 160,000 mostly American and British troops launched from the English coastline.

The C-46 cargo planes with paratroopers and gliders took off first in the early morning hours of June 6.

They dropped behind enemy lines to secure critical bridges and road intersections for the advancing troops that would soon be coming from the sea.

The targeted amphibious landing sites were five invasion beaches along the Normandy coastline that stretched for over 50 miles.

U.S. forces were assigned the two beaches on the west side of the invasion line: Omaha and Utah.

The other three beaches — Gold, Juno and Sword — were designated for British and Canadian forces, and a small French unit.

Of the five beaches, Omaha was the deadliest and had the highest number of casualties.

The German forces there were well dug into the sloped ground that rose up from the beachhead.

By the end of the first day, 4,414 men (2,501 Americans) were killed and more than 5,000 wounded.

Those who fell on the shores of Normandy helped achieve a critical toehold in France from which the Allied forces proceeded in the weeks ahead toward their objective of Germany.

Landing on Omaha Beach on June 6 with the 29th Infantry Division was Morgan County native Maurice Kent.

Local memories

Kent was drafted into the Army in 1942 and left the U.S. for England in May 1943.

Just before Kent's unit disembarked from their ship, his lieutenant came up to him and named him the assistant squad leader.

"We hit the beach at 6 a.m.," Kent remembered in an interview. "They (German forces) were throwing the lead right on us. There were 200 Jerries (a slang term referring to the Germans) on that mountain when we landed at Normandy."

Unbeknownst to Kent at the time, his uncle (his mother's youngest brother) was killed on the same day while landing on Utah beach, just east of where Kent landed at Omaha.

Kent's uncle was 21 years old. He was buried at the American cemetery in Normandy.

Pvt. Curtis Billy McGinnis, of Eminence, also survived the initial landing at Normandy.

He was a standout basketball player for Eminence High School, and he also played at Indiana University two years before joining the Army in 1943.

McGinnis earned a Silver Star for his heroics on June 17 while advancing toward the enemy near Monrabot (10 miles east of St. Lo) in Normandy, France.

His award citation reads: "Pvt. McGinnis was met by heavy machine gun and sniper fire. Refusing to consider personal safety, he unhesitatingly engaged the enemy and successfully covered the withdrawal of his men and, trapped by fierce fire, was unable to return to his unit."

McGinnis remained in the status of missing in action for several months. He was declared dead by August.

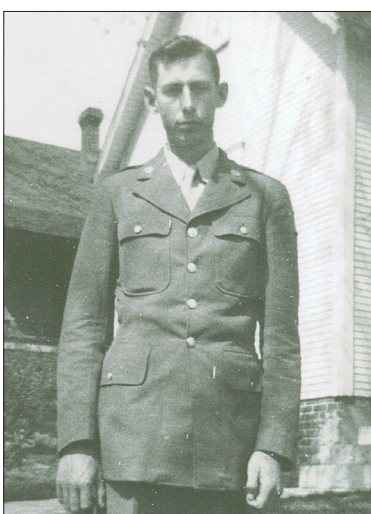
His Silver Star award was presented to McGinnis' father at a ceremony that took place at Camp Atterbury, Ind., in June 1945, a year after the hero's death.

Normandy, France was not the only place Allied forces were landing during the month of June.

Ten days later and 7,500 miles to the southeast, Marine and Army forces stormed ashore on the island of Saipan on June 15-16.



Those who landed at Omaha Beach 80 years ago entered 'into the jaws of death,' and they included Morgan County native Maurice Kent. (Public Domain)



Morgan County native Maurice Kent is shown in his service uniform. He would return to Martinsville, where he later died at 97. (Courtesy photo)



Caryl Farrell, who served with the 27th Infantry Division in the Pacific Theater, holds up his victory medal. He took part in the Saipan invasion. (Ron May courtesy photo)



U.S. troops approach Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944. (Public Domain)



The 27th Infantry of the U.S. Army march to the front lines in the battle against Japanese forces for control of the island of Saipan. (Courtesy photo)

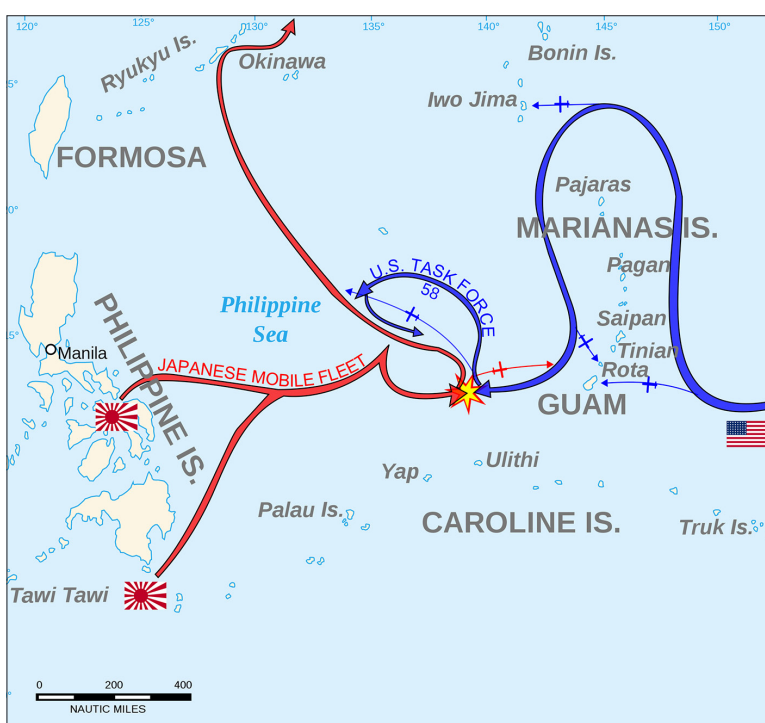
the loss of over 200 Japanese planes compared to 29 American planes shot down.

In both the European and Pacific theaters, U.S. forces stormed into key enemy locations in June from which their march toward Germany and Japan would proceed in the months ahead.

Next time: July 1944

Editor's note: Curtis Billy McGinnis' remains were shipped home to Martinsville in January 1948 for burial. Maurice Kent died in 2019 at the age of 97. Caryl Farrell died in 2018 at the age of 93.

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at <https://ronaldp-may.com> or contact him by email at ron@ronaldp-may.com. Check out his videos on YouTube at [World War II History & Stories with Ron May](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1m1m1m1m1m1m1m1m1m1m1m).



RIGHT: In mid June, the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot took place in the Philippine Sea, while other troops invaded Saipan in the Northern Mariana Island chain. (Courtesy map)