



D-DAY: JUNE 6, 1944

Bedford's toll

Nineteen men from Bedford were killed on Omaha Beach on D-Day.



Taylor N. Fellers



Leslie C. Abbott Jr.



Wallace R. Carter



John D. Clifton



Frank P. Draper Jr.



Nick N. Gillaspie



Bedford T. Hoback



Raymond S. Hoback



Clifton G. Lee



Earl L. Parker



Jack G. Powers



John F. Reynolds



Weldon A. Rosazza



John B. Schenk



Ray O. Stevens



Gordon H. White Jr.



John L. Wilkes



Elmer P. Wright



Grant C. Yopp

“This company will be in the leading wave of infantry in the invasion of Europe. You men will be part of a great force to end the war.”

TAYLOR N. FELLERS



Roy O. Stevens



Elisha R. “Ray” Nance

BOB BROWN/TIMES-DISPATCH

D-Day

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ship's location. Nance sidled through the curtain and into a night that was utterly black and starless.

He leaned against a railing and stared off in what he supposed was the direction of France, listening to the waves smack the hull. After some time, the familiar tall, lanky figure of Fellers emerged from the passageway and stood beside him. Nance expected him to speak, but Fellers just stood against the rail and stared off as Nance had been doing.

Far away, brilliant dashes of anti-aircraft fire pierced the night and rose into the sky. The thin beam of a searchlight followed, and suddenly a fireball erupted at the top of the beam. The burning plane fell like a rock and vanished into the darkness of occupied France.

Nance thought Fellers surely would say something about that. But Fellers remained silent.

“I guess he felt that everything that could be said had been said,” Nance recalled. “There was nothing left for anyone to do but follow orders.”

A voice crackled over the ship's intercom to summon the first wave of assault troops to their loading stations. Fellers departed without a word. Nance walked to the side of the passageway where Company A would emerge from the lower decks. As each man emerged from the curtain, passing from the light into the dark, Nance lightly touched his arm.

Nance knew all 187 men in Company A from their months of training in England. But he had known many of them long before.

Nance had grown up in Bedford, where Company A was not only the local National Guard unit but a part of the fabric of rural life. The company's roots could be traced back to Stonewall Jackson and other heroes of the Confederacy, but its more recent history was not the stuff of legend.

In the years before World War II, young men in Bedford had filled the ranks of Company A mainly to earn extra money to ride out the Depression. They could collect at least \$30 a month for marching around the local armory and handling weapons left over from the last world war.

Best of all, they spent two weeks a year on maneuvers in Virginia Beach. Each evening after drills, the men would hike up the beach to steal a few glorious hours at the oceanfront hotels, where city girls lounged in bathing suits and swing music drifted out across the water. For some of the men, those nights were a revelation, a first glimpse of a world beyond Bedford.

But the low-key rhythms of Company A changed in early 1940 as America edged closer to the war in Europe. Everyone knew the draft was coming and that the Guard would be called to active duty. Bedford men who had not joined Company A in

peacetime joined up for war. If they were going to get sent into battle, better to go with friends than with strangers.

Serious professionals and shy country boys

Company A was a collection of serious professionals, free spirits, shy country boys, star athletes, ladies' men and family men. It had three sets of brothers, including the twins Roy and Ray Stevens, and more cousins than anyone cared to count.

Fellers, the man who commanded Company A, was earnest and driven, a natural leader. The oldest child of a prominent family, he had worked his way up to the job of state highway foreman for bridges in Bedford — a choice post at the time. He had worked his way up through Company A as well, and the men considered him demanding but fair.

At 27, Fellers was almost a decade older than some of his men, and he took an almost fatherly attitude toward them. In a letter to his mother from England, he wrote:

“I am beginning to think it is hard to beat a Bedford boy for a soldier. . . . I am truly proud to be commanding my old hometown outfit and just hope I can carry them right on through and bring all of them home.” Company A's first sergeant, John Wilkes, was a crew-cut, redheaded bear of a man, a former farmer and miner whose thundering voice made new arrivals to Company A quail. “He looked like a wall coming after you,” a recruit from New York recalled, “and he worked you hard.”

But when nobody was watching, Wilkes would bail men out of trouble. After one man broke his foot playing football in violation of camp rules, Wilkes carried him piggyback across the base to the infirmary, and reported that he had been hurt running the obstacle course.

The Hoback brothers left people wondering how they could possibly be brothers. The elder of the two, Bedford Hoback, was a slightly built, gregarious, wheeler-dealer. He would gladly lend you \$4 if you'd pay him back \$5.

And he cheerfully disregarded authority. Twice he had been busted in rank from noncommissioned officer to buck private for simple acts of defiance, including eating a sandwich in formation. “He was a really a good guy, but he didn't like having to follow so many rules,” recalled one of his friends. “If somebody told him he couldn't go into town, he'd go into town.” Getting demoted “did not seem to bother him at all.”

Hoback's little brother Raymond idolized him and had joined Company A right behind him. But Raymond was one of the quietest, gentlest men in the unit. He carried a Bible wherever he went and read it in quiet moments.

Nearly as dissimilar as the Hoback

brothers were the Stevens twins. Roy was devil-may-care. Ray was more serious, a dedicated soldier and budding leader. The Stevens twins were inseparable, especially when they fought, as they often did when they disagreed. Anyone who tried to separate them before they were finished might end up trading punches with both.

The Stevens twins differed in one more respect. Roy had a serene, unshakable feeling that he would get home alive. Ray felt just as certain that he, Ray, would not. Ray had exasperated Roy by making him promise to take care of the family farm.

The Stevens family had a third, unofficial member in Company A: Grant Yopp, who had gone to live with the Stevenses after his parents' divorce. Yopp was a tall, lean young man, several years younger than Roy and Ray, and he looked up to them as big brothers. He joined Company A after they did.

Just before they were sent overseas, Yopp and Ray Stevens visited Yopp's sister Anna Mae at her apartment in Washington. They had a couple of drinks and Yopp, who had just married, declared he was eager to go to war, kick some butt and come back home. Ray Stevens said he did not expect to make it home.

Frank Draper Jr. came from what some people in Bedford considered the wrong side of the tracks. But he had grabbed the town's attention in high school by starring in baseball and football, and when people looked at him closely they saw an all-American boy — handsome, intelligent and genuine. He was as good a soldier as he was a center fielder, and many men in his company, if forced to choose one man to stand with them in a do-or-die fight, would have picked Draper.

Elmer Wright was an even better ballplayer than Draper. A big, strong, right-handed pitcher, he had fired his fastball past the best hitters in his part of Virginia. The St. Louis Browns had welcomed him into their minor-league organization, where after a slow start he had finished 10-5 with San Antonio in 1941. Then he joined Company A.

Between drills and marches, Wright would produce a ball and glove from his pack and seek out someone with nerve enough to catch him.

Most of the young men in Company A were just starting their adult lives, but John Schenk was further along. He had a promising job running a hardware store, and he had just married the love of his life. Before he shipped out, he and his bride Ivylyn agreed to pause every day at 5 p.m. to think of one another.

The only father-to-be in the company was Earl Parker, who had astonished his friends by successfully wooing one of the loveliest girls in Bedford. His wife, Viola, was three months pregnant when Earl went overseas.

Little Wallace Carter was so proficient in pool and games of chance that he wore the nickname, “Little Snake Eyes,” which set him apart from his brother back home, “Big Snake Eyes.” Handsome Weldon “Tony” Rosazza and J.D. Clifton attracted girls in such numbers that other men would accompany them on leave to collect the overflow. Jack Powers was a consummate soldier who had trained with the Rangers.

But many of the other Bedford men stood out only in their shyness. They were basically country boys from good families who had been reared to say little and do as they were told. The nation's fledgling armed forces were full of such young men.

In August 1940, Company A and other National Guard companies making up the 29th Division were ordered to report to Fort George Gordon Meade in Maryland for “real” army training.

Word of the attack on Pearl Harbor reached Company A by radio as the men camped near South Hill en route back from some maneuvers. Some cried angrily for revenge; others cried at the thought of going to war. Roy Stevens and a few others took their churning emotions to a local tavern where, he recalled, “after a few rounds we had the Japs pretty well whipped.”

But Company A remained at Fort Meade through the winter, spring and most of the summer. Finally, in August 1942, the company was ordered to Camp Blanding, Fla., and issued new weapons and uniforms. A few weeks later, the company was abruptly ordered to New York to be shipped overseas.

A five-day crossing on the Queen Mary

The Bedford men were astonished to see the huge ocean liner Queen Mary waiting to ferry them to England. The liner could outrun anything in the German navy and was more than twice as fast as a U-boat. It seemed the safest possible way to travel.

But on Sept. 28, 1941, the second day of the five-day crossing, the Queen Mary was struck broadside by a large wave and heeled over so far that many of the 15,000 men on board feared it would capsize. Soldiers and equipment skittered across the decks as the liner righted itself.

And that was only a prelude. Two days later, less than 200 miles from the British Isles, the liner accidentally rammed one of its escort ships, the British cruiser Curacao, cutting the warship in two. Roy Stevens felt the liner shudder and rushed topside to see the ocean full of wreckage and drowning men. The Queen Mary could not stop to help without exposing itself to attack. More than three-fourths of the 400 men on the Cura-

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