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Testimony (Two pages of text and ten pages of attachments: twelve pages total.)

The D-Day landing of the Allied Forces in Normandy, France, on 6 June 1944 – the largest air, land, and sea operation ever undertaken – included 5,333 ships and boats, some 11,000 aircraft, 50,000 military vehicles, and over 175,000 soldiers, to say nothing of participating sailors and merchant seamen. The Allies suffered 9,758 casualties, among them 6,603 from the United States. On D-Day they took the war back to its maker. Performing heroically, they assaulted Fortress Europe a hedgerow at a time and gave the lie to Hitler’s dream of world domination. D-Day was the turning point of World War II. Liberated Europe never lost sight of that, but its monumental significance soon faded in the public consciousness of this nation. But for the fleeting appearance of the print and film versions of Cornelius Ryan’s *The Longest Day* and Ronald Reagan’s “Boys of Point du Hoc” speech on the 40th anniversary, it disappeared.

Sitting in dimming twilight at the end of a cookout some twenty years ago, a small group of World War II veterans fell to swapping stories. Not unlike the ashes beneath the grill they had cooked supper on, their memories had begun to cool and dissolve. As they sifted through them in the gathering darkness to search for adventure, lost friends, and times long gone, what first appeared to be a tentative stirring in the ash soon emerged as a youthful phoenix. In the weeks following, that fledgling gained strength and built itself a nest: The National D-Day Memorial Foundation. Incorporated in the spring of 1989, the Foundation set about the task of establishing a D-Day memorial in the United States.

For the next half-dozen years, a number of dedicated people came and went as members of a Roanoke-based board trying to identify and secure an appropriate site for a D-Day memorial. Roanoke had peopled one of twelve Virginia National Guard infantry companies of the 29th Infantry Division’s 116th Regiment whose storied antecedents include General Thomas Jackson’s Stonewall Brigade. Roanoke suffered terrible losses on D-Day as did Farmville, Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Chase City, South Boston, and most of the other communities whose young men served in the other companies of that regiment. Bedford, with a wartime population of some 3,000, experienced the severest per capita losses on D-Day, and by 1995 had worked with the Foundation to establish a D-Day memorial there.

In September of 1996, Congress gave the project its warrant and the National D-Day Memorial its designation: “The memorial to be constructed by the National D-Day Memorial Foundation in Bedford, Virginia, is hereby designated a national memorial to be known as the ‘National D-Day Memorial’” (Public Law 104-201, Sec. 1080). Sited on an 88-acre parcel in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Memorial rises on nine consecrated acres, leaving the balance of the land open and available for additional construction as needed. The President of the United States addressed an audience of 24,000 when he participated in its dedication on the 57th anniversary of D-Day. This year the Memorial marked the 65th anniversary of the Normandy landing with a public commemoration and follow-on programs that, over the course of the day, drew a total audience of 9,000.

Between the 57th and the 65th anniversaries, the phoenix that had risen from ashes in 1989 burst into flames. Over that same period, the National D-day Memorial Foundation went in and out of bankruptcy, endured two Federal trials with no convictions, cleared a \$6 million residual debt dollar for dollar, and finished construction of the Memorial. At the end of all that, a new phoenix rose from its ashes, which brings us to today.

The National D-Day Memorial has never been better than it is today. And it is not as good as it will be tomorrow. It is every bit the physical plant the WWII Memorial is and many times more the memorial. Chief among the reasons for that are the gravitas and dignitas that hallmark it. Not merely a destination, the National D-Day Memorial is a sacred place. Memorial staff and volunteers make sure visitors understand that before they enter it. They also make sure visitors understand that its location —

Bedford, Virginia — is less about that particular town than it is about that town's function as an emblem of this nation's communities, large and small, that have provided, and provide still, citizens who answer the call to serve in our military, naval, and air forces.

On the 65th anniversary of D-Day, more than a hundred active-duty veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan turned up at the Memorial in uniform. The divisional shoulder patches and regimental crests worn by many of them were the same ones worn by those who came in at Normandy as well as those who served in Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Bosnia.

If, at first blush, the Memorial's focus on D-Day seems too narrow, a closer look reveals that it exists in tribute to the valor, fidelity, and sacrifice of the Allied forces on D-Day. Writ large, that tribute also includes the D-Day contributions made on the Eastern Front of the European Theater and in the American, Mediterranean, China-Burma-India, and Asiatic-Pacific Theaters, without which the story would have had a different ending.

The Memorial uses that story as a foil to highlight its subject: Character. Presenting D-Day as the structural climax of World War II, the Memorial tells the story and celebrates its subject in such a way as to number it among the most veteran-welcoming sites in the country — branch, place, and period of service notwithstanding — and one of the most instructive for the large population of visitors who know nothing of national service. Since its dedication, the Memorial has received more a million visitors and delivered a broad range of educational programming to some 100,000 school children.

Thanks to the largesse and confidence of its donors and unstinting service of its volunteers, the National D-Day Memorial Foundation has continued to operate the Memorial in direct support of its educational mission: To preserve the lessons and legacy of D-Day. The Foundation is straight-arrow, debt-free, frugal, disciplined, and mission-driven. Few non-profits exceed its scrupulosity. Even so, alas, it cannot sustain itself as an independent entity.

Whether the Memorial should have been built is beside the point: The hard fact is, it has been. Today, it is a significant destination not only for Virginians but for the rest of the nation as well; indeed, fewer than half of the Memorial's annual visitors (altogether some 80,000) come from Virginia. Despite its well-tended grounds and gardens, robust physical appearance, worthy purpose, and rich educational programming, the Memorial lives on subsistence rations gathered from a modest larder.

Is the Foundation going to go in debt to keep the Memorial open? No. Is the Memorial worth keeping open? Yes. Can it be kept open? Yes — if the Congress that gave it its designation in 1996 to become the National D-Day Memorial will do what it should have done then: Enact legislation to help place it under the umbrella of the National Park Service.

In the last two decades, this memorial phoenix has twice risen from its own ashes, and in this 65th anniversary year of D-Day is releasing occasional wisps of smoke. If you think the Committee on Natural Resources should work to find a way to keep it from bursting into flame yet again, please make that finding plain; if not, at least pause to acknowledge the valor, fidelity, and sacrifice that will go unremarked should the National D-Day Memorial close its gates.

10 Attachments (Copyright-free images of the National D-Day Memorial at Bedford, Virginia)