

## WWII Veteran Charles Davis' Story



Gilbert Alexander Milne/Canada.

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It all began when I was walking home from work one day. I was working in Brantford, ON at a Sheet Metal Fabrication Shop at the time. I had been on my own since I was 16 and I was now 18 yrs. old. I was almost 17 when WWII broke out. My father was a WWI Veteran. The mailman, the coal and ice man, and many others were as well in the town of Port Dover, ON, where I grew up. The milkman had lost a limb during his service in WWI, along with others. I decided right there and then, that it was the right thing to do and that I was going to enlist in the army, and that's exactly what I did, but first I needed my mother's consent. I then went to the No. 1 Bombing & Gunnery School in Brantford, ON, and signed up with the 69<sup>th</sup> Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, RCA.

I was in Canada, less than 3 months after I enlisted, before we were shipped off to Greenwich, Scotland on September 1, 1941. From there, we were sent to Colchester, Essex, England, which is an Artillery Garrison town since the Roman era. This is where we trained. Today, Colchester Garrison is most known for being home to the Parachute Regiment.

Leading up to D-Day in June of 1944, we arrived at Leigh-on Sea, which is a port located on the River Thames at Southend-on-Sea, in Essex, England. We then carried on to Tilbury Docks, in Tilbury, England. Tilbury Docks built in 1886 was an immediate target for the Luftwaffe during WWII. Tilbury played a very important role during the war not only as a dock but for evacuating school children.

The day had come that we were setting sail to the beaches of Normandy, France, which we know as Juno Beach.

The operation would be called Operation Overlord or D-Day, which was the codename for the Battle of Normandy, the Allied operation. The D-Day operation of June 6, 1944, brought together the land, air, and sea forces of the allied armies in what became known as the largest amphibious invasion in military history.

Initially set for June 5<sup>th</sup>, D-Day was delayed due to poor weather conditions. In a small window of opportunity in the weather, they decided D-Day would be June 6, 1944. With the weather still being poor, our landing craft wasn't able to land until June 10<sup>th</sup>.

We were trained and we were prepared, or so we thought.

I was 21 yrs. old. My duty was to supply the infantry division with ammo and petrol. I waterproofed my Mack truck in every which way I could, to have it ready when landing in the water. It was loaded with 10 tons of ammo. The time came when my truck and I were offloaded into the waters from the Landing Ship Tank, also known as an LST. My adrenaline was pumping, and my heart was racing. I had to drive as fast as I could through the water to get ashore, which had holes on the ocean floor from previous mines blowing up and being shelled. Then, I had to get onto the beach. My eyes were focused dead ahead. My mind was razor sharp. You didn't know where the hell you were going, you couldn't train for that. There was chaos everywhere, loud noises above from enemy aircraft.

The idea was to get onto that beach and get the hell off of it as quickly as possible and go to a marshalling area in the bushes to hide. That night the Germans came over once again, and dropped chandeliers which lit up the whole area, they were bombing us unrelentingly. Shrapnel was flying and blowing up some of the tires on the trucks. I and others were in a trench taking cover. The infantry were the poor buggers that were getting killed.

Canada suffered 1,096 casualties and 381 killed on D-Day alone.

Our goal now, was to move forward to Caen. Caen was an important Allied objective as it was an essential road hub, strategically astride the Orne River and Caen Canal. We were moving every day inland and trying to reach Caen. The reason Normandy took so long to clear out, was because Caen was absolutely demolished. When the Canadian tanks and Infantry wanted to go through, they were obstructed. The Germans defended this stronghold with all their power. It took 6 weeks of fighting and heavy shelling to capture the capital of Normandy.

The Canadians had made the most progress of any Allied army in Normandy, but that progress was not without a price. On the morning of June 20, 1944, I had spoken to my Corporal, who was my buddy, William Pike, and I never saw him again, for he was KIA... killed in action. I'll NEVER forget that day for as long as I live, but you just had to keep moving on.

The Canadian D-Day objectives were to cut the Caen-Bayeux road, take the important Carpiquet airfield near Caen, and then link up with the British troops. In Carpiquet, we surrounded a whole pocket of Germans taking them as prisoners. After that, things started to move, but the holdup was Caen.

Once we liberated France, we advanced northeast through France, Belgium and Holland, then into Germany. There were many lives lost along the way. Germany officially surrendered on May 7, 1945. The war was over, but once again, not without many, many casualties.

I served my country from May 20, 1941, to Dec 6, 1946. I met my wife Doris in the east end of London, England and we married on January 16, 1943. England, especially London, was heavily bombed. My wife worked during the war delivering parcels to businesses. On one such day, a bomb dropped nearby, and she was thrown up against a brick wall. At the time she was 8 months pregnant and miscarried.

On another occasion, in the east end of London, her house was partially bombed. Every night my wife, her siblings, our young daughter and her mother and grandmother would go into the underground for cover with hundreds of others, whilst her father stood watch, for he was too old to serve in the war. Nearly 30,000 civilians were killed by the Germans in England. The worst hit was the east end of London.



Infantrymen in a Landing Craft Assault (LCA) going ashore from H.M.C.S. PRINCE HENRY off the Normandy beachhead, France, 6 June 1944. Credit: PO Dennis Sullivan / Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada/PA-132790.

**I've been fortunate enough to go back to Normandy and to Juno Beach for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and every 5 years thereafter to pay my respects to my fellow comrades. I feel it is my privilege and my duty to do so, and to visit my Corporal's grave. Most recently, this past June, I traveled back to Normandy and to Juno Beach for the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D-Day to pay my respects once again, but this time was different. As I gazed out at the water on Juno Beach and thought of my comrades, I knew that this would be my last visit, and at 102 years old I'm almost certain of it.**

I just want to say, never under-estimate the impact of war. War is hell. People don't remember D-Day. People don't realize what a horrendous job it was. What a feat that had taken place. No idea. No idea how many people were killed, Germans and Allied troops. The war is a terrible bloody thing.

**WE WILL REMEMBER THEM.**

**-Charles Davis, 2024**