

## **D-Day in Clatskanie**

*by Deborah Steele Hazen*

Eighty years ago today, June 6, 1944, when the long-awaited Normandy invasion came, Clatskanie, like thousands of small towns and cities across the nation, had already been deeply-affected by two and a half years of World War II. This little town, roughly half the size it is now, lost at least 28 boys and men in combat during the war - some before D-Day, some during, and many in the long and bloody year that followed the invasion.

During World War II my grandmother, Malvina Lewis Steele, wrote a front page column entitled "The Yankee Mailbox," which carried news of local military personnel in The Clatskanie Chief newspaper, which three generations of my family owned and operated from 1922 until 2014.

In the June 9, 1944 column, she wrote: "Well, boys, it came. I mean D-Day, and Art and I happened to be lucky enough to have the radio still running and heard the first official U.S. announcement of it, later followed by talks from reporters on boats in the channel, heard the Norwegian king talk and later some from The Netherlands. All in all, of course, it was a thrill, but we couldn't help thinking of the boys we knew who were waiting in England for just this thing to happen. Immediately thought of Sgt. Ted Karasti, knowing he is a commando scout; Herbie Erickson, a paratrooper; and wondered if Irving Jones, another paratrooper, might not have been in that same locality, but we haven't heard of his whereabouts lately...There are a lot of others in the same area we wondered about, but, of course, we don't know just what their work is. But these we mentioned, had a really good chance of seeing duty in the beginning of the invasion."

As it happened, Ted Karasti, who later came home and was the pressman for The Clatskanie Chief for years, wrote home after D-Day, affirming that he was in the invasion and that the only scratches he got were those received going through the bush after the enemy.

Herb Erickson, who parachuted behind the German lines with the 101st Airborne Division in the early morning hours D-Day and later was in the Battle of the Bulge, survived the Normandy invasion despite being separated with eight others from his company for a night and a day. One of his comrades-in-arms wrote home to his family that Herb's "quick thinking and still better shooting" played a major role in their survival.

Herb's brother, John, was not so fortunate. Sgt. John Erickson, the brother of the late Melvina Barr, well-known local teacher and historian, and the uncle of current Clatskanie resident Bertie Barr Smith, was killed at about 10:30 a.m. on D-Day when the Liberator B-24, for which he was a gunner, collided with another U.S. aircraft over northwest France.

Irving Jones, a paratrooper whom my grandmother correctly assumed might see action in the D-Day invasion, was killed on June 8, 1944 in France, two days after the start of the invasion. He was 22 years old, and left a wife and baby. He was the son of the Rev. and Mrs. Leonard Jones who had pastored the Clatskanie Methodist Church.

Lt. William Clark Hill, whose brother Alex lived in the Mayger area, was reported missing in France at about that time, and Warren Jones, whose parents were former Clatskanie residents, was another paratrooper lost in the D-Day invasion.

Fighting in Italy just a week before D-Day, Sgt. Rudolph Erickson of Quincy was killed in action on May 28, 1944. He was one of five brothers who were serving overseas during World War II or immediately thereafter.

Just a month later, Rudolph's brother, Staff Sgt. Harold W. Erickson, a ball turret gunner on a Liberator flying out of Italy, was killed in action over Austria.

By June 30, 1944, a letter had been received from Sgt. Stanley Lund dated on D-Day: "Well, it's here, the invasion, and we are right in the middle of it, but happy just the same. I imagine everyone at home is happy, too. I think today is a day I'll never forget. History is in the making and my squadron had the honor of being the first Marauders to take off this morning. It was quite a thrill. I'm sure tired, haven't slept since yesterday morning, it's worth it, tho." Stan Lund returned home and served this community as fire chief for many years.

PFC. Need O. Koski, of Clatskanie, was with an infantry regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, which parachuted into France several hours before the land invasion on D-Day with the job of preventing German forces from reaching the beach-head, and to clear the way for Allied ground troops. A release from the public relations headquarters of the European Theater of Operations for the U.S. Army described the experience as follows: "Some met machine gun fire before they hit the ground. Snipers were all about. The paratroopers fell everywhere - in the water, swamps, trees - and almost every man found himself face to face with the enemy, facing fire. For nearly 34 hours, the men were in constant contact with the foe, exchanging fire."

In a letter quoted in my grandmother's column on July 28, 1944, Sgt. Ray Ollila wrote home to his parents after being awarded the Air Medal and an Oak Leaf cluster "for exceptional meritorious achievement while serving as waist gunner of a Flying Fortress on a number of combat missions over Germany and German occupied Europe." His letter read in part: "We had come to the target and after the signal of 'bombs away,' all the bombs had not dropped. We tried everything we knew in the way of releases to get the bombs to drop, but they would not. We needed to get rid of the load so we would not burn up the engines in trying to save gas so we could get back to England. Here's where I came in. It seemed that there must be a way to release them. I offered to take a look while I brought an extra oxygen mask to the nose. After a little tinkering with an empty bomb shackle I found that there was an easy or fairly easy way to get rid of the bombs. I went back and told the pilot that I thought I was able to get rid of the bombs. The bombardier wasn't sure. Anyway, I got permission and they opened the bomb bay doors so they might be dropped. This time I took my chute with me and of course that always very necessary oxygen bottle. I opened the door and looked at the vast emptiness and the narrow cat-walk. In a way it looked terrible but I knew it was safe so I went to the bomb racks. By this time the bombardier had come back to watch. After a little clambering around I succeeded in reaching the first bomb shackle which held a 500 pounder. I pulled a little lever past a little bridge and down went the bomb. The ease of the operation surprised me a bit. After that a couple more bombs dropped, emptying the bomb bay for all excepting one which was too hard to reach. I guess everyone was a little bit happier and me the happiest because I had been able to help at a good time."

Headlines in the August 11, 1944 issue of The Chief brought more tragic news, Sgt. Merlin (Bud) Groskopf of Clatskanie was reported missing in action over Germany on July 21, 1944. A 1943 graduate of Clatskanie High School and the valedictorian of his class, he was serving as a tail gunner on a Liberator.

Also in August, 1944, word came that 1st Sgt. Tom Takemoto had been killed in action in Italy. His family of Japanese descent had been removed from their home on the Clatskanie diked lands and interned with other Japanese-Americans. His brother, Minorri, a private in the Army Reserves stationed in Payette, Idaho, wrote poignantly to The Chief: "Sure has been a long time since we left Clatskanie and wish to be able to come back soon. I don't know whether the public will take us back, but I hope by my serving in the United States Army and the sacrifice my brother has made for our home, the United States and Clatskanie, our loyalty

will be proven to the people in Clatskanie that we are all fighting for democracy and a better place for all our children to live.”

After surviving the landing at Anzio, being wounded and hospitalized for two months, S-Sgt. Richard McKinney, another local man, was killed in action in Italy in the late summer of 1944.

A veteran of earlier battles in Africa and Sicily, Captain Eugene Gustafson of Clatskanie was killed in France on October 28, 1944.

Lt. Robert Mervyn, husband of the former Mary Minkoff of Clatskanie, was killed in action on Nov. 20, as the drive into Germany began. He went to France shortly after D-Day and was serving in the 29th division of the 116th Infantry.

These are the D-Day related stories of some of the Clatskanie area's soldiers, certainly not all, and we have not touched on those from our town who fought in the Pacific theatre or in Europe either before D-Day or in the final months of the war.

### **Still Worthy of Such Sacrifice**

Thirty years ago, on the 50th anniversary of D-Day, my father, the late Gail Steele, who was serving as a cryptographer with a Liberator bomber group in Italy at the time of the Normandy Invasion, recalled his memories of that day. In conclusion of that column, which was written after he became blind, we wrote together the following words:

On June 6, 1944 the minds, hearts and prayers of all of America and many other nations were focused on the beaches of Normandy. As a nation we need to hold and honor the memories of that day.

We must honor the heroism of the men - many of them still in their boyhood years - who were willing to fight, and in thousands of cases to die, for a cause in which they believed.

We who survive must honor their deaths by keeping alive their love of freedom and their spirit of self-sacrifice for a cause greater than themselves.

We must also ensure that the way of life for which they died is still worthy of such sacrifice.