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# Great Garages

## JUNE 6, D-DAY 75: ON WINGS, TIRES AND TRACKS TO VICTORY

written by David M. Brown

*What is our aim? Victory, Victory at all costs . . .*  
—Winston Churchill, May 13, 1940

Victory came five years later, but among the costs were fear, vomit, blood and death.

PFC Harry F. Swartz was on Omaha Beach that cool overcast morning 75 years ago when Allied forces landed on the French coast to vanquish Nazi barbarism. As part of Operation Overlord, this was the most heavily defended of the five adjacent beachheads attacked by British, American and Canadian forces and combatants of other nationalities.

“You would remember them,” Swartz says of his comrades, with the 2nd Infantry Division, 38th Infantry Regiment, Company C, squeezed into a Higgins Boat, the steel-clad wooden landing craft with the dropping front metal door.

His group were scouts, making them among the first of the division to land. In these boats, up to 36 soldiers would wait for release. Within seconds, the wait was over; many were immediately killed, teenagers, not yet born into adulthood.

“I was sitting in the corner of the Higgins, and the driver drove right in front of a pillbox. The door opened, and big slugs came out of it, and arms, heads, legs were torn off,” recalls Swartz, 94, who lives in Fostoria, Ohio, near Toledo, with his family.

At 18, Swartz, enlisted in the United States Army in December 1943 and boarded the Queen Mary in May 1944 for Southampton; on June 5, his group parted for Normandy.

Released from the Higgins boat June 6, he fell back into 10 feet of water; as with many of the young soldiers laden

with packs, weaponry, helmets and uniforms, he didn’t know how to swim. “The more we were in the water, the heavier we got. I was fighting my battle right there, going up and down and up and down. There must have been a guardian angel because I don’t know how I got out.”

On the beach before them were Field Marshall Erwin Rommel’s satanic beach obstacles, all strapped with his favorite defensive weapon, mines: “jagged triangles of steel, saw-toothed gatelike structures of iron, metal-tipped wooden stakes and concrete cones,” writes Cornelius Ryan in his classic account, *The Longest Day*, which became the 1962 movie with John Wayne, Henry Fonda, Sean Connery and others.

And, beyond the pillboxes, bunkers and barbed wire were the bluffs, where German soldiers easily sighted and gunned down the invaders. “It was impossible to get up there,” he recalls. “You don’t realize how you did it. I was lucky to survive on D-Day, and how I did I never can explain.”

Wounded in action twice, Swartz went on to participate in The Battle of the Bulge and the Rhineland Campaign, including guarding the famous Remagen Bridge. The USS Monticello brought him home in July 1945, and he was honorably discharged October 29, 1945.

Among his many decorations is the French Legion of Honor medal, presented to him by a representative of the French Republic at the annual Conneaut D-Day event in Ohio, August 19, 2017.

The soldiers came from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and Houston, Texas, Fargo, North Dakota, and Macon, Georgia: soldiers, sailors, fliers, captains, generals and corporals, fly-



C-47



Halftrack

boys and just boys, paratroopers, tankmen and medics. Those who lived went home to build a booming America; those who stayed made that possible.

“D-Day means sacrifice, commitment and brotherhood,” says Lieutenant General Michael Ferriter, president and CEO of the recently opened National Veterans Memorial and Museum in Columbus, Ohio.

“As a result of D-Day and the follow-up combat, we have enjoyed 75 years of freedom and the ability to stare down the Soviet Union. This all stems from that magic moment when everyone stood up for what is right.”

### Map in the Direction of V-E Day

The Higgins Boat that Swartz left that morning is one of the many great watercraft, planes and vehicles that ensured the men landed on the beaches, progressed through the challenging hedges of Normandy and deeper through France and across the Rhine.

Among these were the LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank) or tank landing ship, which carried tanks, vehicles, cargo, and troops directly onto shore; LST-325, which was at Normandy, is in Evansville, Ohio. Another veteran of that campaign is one of the Liberty Ships, the Jeremiah O’Brien, docked today at Pier 45 in San Francisco. And, the battleship USS Texas is resting where it should: in Texas.

At The National WWII Museum in New Orleans, visitors can see many of the vehicles that aided in the landings and march inland that resulted in the fall of Nazi Germany.

In addition to artifacts and exhibits, the museum stores and showcases aircraft, boats, such as a 1945 LVT (Landing Vehicle Tracked), a counterpart to the famous Higgins Boats used on D-Day (see below); trucks, including a 1943 Ford-American LaFrance Fire Truck, which is being restored at the museum; WC-54 1944 Dodge Ambulance; 1941 Ford GP (Jeep); and, a M4A3 Sherman Medium Tank built by Ford Motor Company in 1943.

Other macro-artifacts are also on display. Offsite, those 8 and above can ride or take a tour on a restored PT-305 on Lake Pontchartrain throughout the week.

To commemorate D-Day 75, a number of events are taking place in this country and France. Two ceremonies on June 6

will take place in France, a U.S. ceremony in the morning at the Normandy American Cemetery and a main international ceremony in the afternoon at Colleville-sur-Mer. A Daks Over Normandy flyover of 30 international aircraft is scheduled that morning, including American C-47 transports such as the Spirit of Benovia, owned by the Sonoma, California, winery.

A series of ceremonies will also occur throughout the year at the WWII Memorial in Washington, D.C. An extensive docket is also in place at The National World War II Museum: See [nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/75th-anniversary-d-day](http://nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/75th-anniversary-d-day).

And, this year’s D-Day Conneaut is August 15–17, planned by D-Day Ohio. The 20-year-old celebration includes a WWII re-enactment, welcomes 150-plus WWII veterans as well as 45,000 spectators, explains Betsy Bashore, one of the event’s coordinators.

“The D Day Ohio event is the largest of its kind worldwide and each year gathers one of the largest accumulations of WWII veterans one can find together at the same place and time,” says Lee Adams, another coordinator whose grandfather is a Normandy veteran. “We are all very honored to take part in the event and to have the opportunity to honor our veterans.”

### Good Vehicles to Fight Evil

Two of the aircraft at The National WWII Museum participated at Normandy:

•**Supermarine Spitfire** – This fighter plane, number BL370, served in support of the invasion for two weeks, beginning June 6, 1944.

Ordered as an Mk III from the Castle Bromwich Aircraft Factory October 24, 1940, it was built as an Mk VB (Rolls-Royce Merlin 45 engine, two cannon, four machine guns) and delivered in November 1941, explains Tom Czekanski, the museum’s senior curator and restoration manager.

The plane is known as “Gurgaon II Punjab,” indicating that it was presented as a result of funding raised by people from the Punjab region of India. This served with No. 118 Squadron, RAF No. 350 (Belgian) Squadron, RAF, from March 27, 1943–May 11, 1943, and crashed in marshland near the Humber Estuary, September 20, 1944.



2 1/2 Ton Truck



PT-305 USS Sudden Jerk



Higgins Boat



Road to Berlin

The wreck was recovered by Max Elliot, Bernard Jordan and Martin Thompson in the 1980s. Ownership passed to Julian Mitchell and Stephen Arnold, who restored the fuselage to static condition at Kidlington, Oxford, 1983–1996, using parts obtained from Historic Flying Ltd, Audley End; these were removed from other aircraft undergoing restorations.

Sold at auction to The National D-Day Museum in 2000, the plane went to California where replica wings were constructed to complete a cosmetic restoration. The aircraft was painted as “SH-J,” No 64 Squadron, RAF, and displayed when the museum opened on June 6 of that year.

“One of the reasons Normandy had been chosen for the landing was that it was within air cover from England,” Czekanski says. “The planes could fly in, provide fighter support, fly back for refueling and be immediately replaced by other planes.”

•**C-47** – Known as the “Skytrain” or “Dakota” by the British, the great military transport developed from the civilian Douglas DC-3 airliner, which had pioneered commercial airline service in the United States.

Approximately 10,000 were built for the war. The C-47 differs from the civilian plane, adding a cargo door, hoist attachment, strengthened floor and a shortened tail cone for towing gliders, as they did for D-Day.

This “096” was built at the Douglas Aircraft Manufacturing plant in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, delivered to the U.S. Army on April 8, 1944, then assigned to the 806th Army Air Force Base Unit at Baer Field, Indiana.

The following month, it went to the 8th Air Force and transferred to the European Theater of Operations. After arriving in England on May 28, 1944, the aircraft joined the 9th Air Force.

That group had been established in England in October 1943 under the command of Lieutenant General Lewis Brereton to provide tactical air support for the Normandy invasion. C-47A “096” flew its first combat mission during pre-dawn of June 6, 1944, as a part Operation Neptune/Overlord.

As “Chalk #17,” it carried Pathfinders of the 2nd

Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (82nd Airborne) to a drop zone near Picaucville, France. More than 50,000 paratroops were dropped by C-47s during the first few days of the invasion.

Later in 1944 and 1945, the “096” flew missions during Operation Market-Garden, the Battle of the Bulge and Operation Varsity (the Rhine Jump).

C-47s (not this one) also participated in the Berlin Airlift in 1947–48, taking necessities to the people of West Berlin against Soviet resistance.

“Probably more DC3s and C-47s are still in service today in some way than any other WWII aircraft,” Czekanski says. “It’s a strong design and helped not only in Normandy but throughout the war.”

•**Halftrack** – The concept originated before WWI but did not really thrive until WWII, during which they were widely deployed.

The United States manufactured 43,000-plus halftracks in a variety of configurations, but the most common was designed to carry a squad of infantry. Halftracks have the advantage of mobility similar to a fully tracked vehicle but with less complicated steering mechanisms because of the front wheels, Czekanski explains.

In addition, driving a halftrack is easier than a full-tracked vehicle, so the training of drivers is simpler. During the Normandy Campaign, halftracks were used so that the infantry could keep up with tanks.

“Halftracks were essential to our eventual break-out of the beachhead and the race across France,” Czekanski says.

•**2 1/2 Ton Truck** – For the American Army in WWII, the 2 1/2 ton truck was the go-to transport for supplying the troops. The “CCKW” was manufactured by GMC (hence its other name, “jimmy”), which produced about 600,000. Capable of all-wheel-drive, the truck was rated for a cross-country capacity of 2 1/2 tons. “If you move gasoline, food and supplies, you can win the war, and these trucks helped do just that,” Czekanski says.

They were most used during the race across France to

move supplies by the “Red Ball Express,” the quartermaster trucking companies specially organized to move supplies to the front. Most Red Ball Express drivers were African-Americans.

•**Dodge Command Car** – They were envisioned as a custom vehicle for commanders and their staff, and at 3/4 ton capacity, they were much larger than the more common 1/4-ton jeep. Special features were a built-in map table and a tailgate that doubled as a desk.

Unfortunately, the distinctive silhouette was quickly recognized by Axis forces and targeted. The vehicles were soon given up by the brass but continued to be used to haul troops throughout the war, Czekanski explains.

•**Higgins Boat** – The Landing Craft Vehicle for Personnel (LCVP), is known as the “Higgins Boat,” for Andrew Jackson Higgins, a native of Columbus, Nebraska, who was raised in nearby Omaha. He was a longtime resident of New Orleans, where his factory built the great craft, which delivered soldiers such as Harry Swartz to the beaches.

The boats, with the exception of the ramps and armor-plating, were wood, so they deteriorated quickly after the war, Czekanski explains. The ramp for this one was found in San Francisco where the boat had been used as a garden shed. Volunteers, including former Higgins workers, built the rest.

In the late 1930s, the U.S. military began developing small boats for carrying troops from ships to open beaches. The Marine Corps liked Higgins’ design, so his Landing Craft Personnel (Large), or LCP(L), was approved for production and used in the invasions of Guadalcanal and North Africa in 1942.

At first, separate landing craft were used for troops and vehicles, the LCP(L)s and the LCVs (Landing Craft, Vehicle). The LCP(L) was designed without a ramp. “Troops unloaded from the LCP(L) by jumping over the side, which proved unsatisfactory because it’s a long drop,” he explains.

That was attended to. Higgins, who had been manufacturing shallow-water work boats to support lumbering and trapping in the Louisiana bayous, adapted production to include the ramps by combining the LCP(L) and LCVs designs

into the LCVP.

The craft allowed infantry or small vehicles to exit through a front ramp. The LCVP could carry 36 combat-equipped infantrymen or 8,000 pounds of cargo.

He employed roughly 25,000 workers at Higgins Industries during the height of the war; he also owned seven boatyards and factories in the New Orleans area. During World War II, 23,398 Higgins Boats were produced in the United States, most but not all by Higgins.

Higgins died in 1952, and Higgins Industries closed in 1959, but the legacy of his invention continues. One honor was induction into the National Inventors Hall of Fame® (NIHF) in Alexandria, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. The museum is displaying one of his boats, owned by D-Day Ohio.

“He was the man who won the war, President Eisenhower said,” Czekanski explains. “His boats changed the way battles were fought in both the Pacific and European theaters.”

A great cause, great people and great machines made Victory inevitable.

“Seventy-five years ago, members of the ‘Greatest Generation’ stepped on the shores of occupied Europe to liberate it from oppression and totalitarianism,” says Dan Fitzpatrick, U.S. European Command historian.

“The men and women of U.S. European Command will remain forever indebted to those veterans of WWII for their selfless service and sacrifice. We are steeled by the bravery and heroism shown by that generation in the face of evil.”

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The National World War II Museum was first featured in the September 2018 issue of *Highline Autos*.

General hours for the National World War II Museum are daily, 9 a.m.–5 p.m. The museum is closed Mardi Gras Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Adults are \$28, and World War II veterans are free. Additional details are at [nationalww2museum.org](http://nationalww2museum.org) or call 504.528.1944.

For additional photos and the complete GreatGarages library see [Highline-Autos.com](http://Highline-Autos.com).

If you or someone you know has a GreatGarage and would like it to be considered for an upcoming issue, e-mail us at [info@highline-autos.com](mailto:info@highline-autos.com).