

Gilbert vet recalls his role in Normandy Invasion

BY DAVID M. BROWN
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Seventy-five years ago, Henry DuBay helped save the world from Nazi domination.

The 95-year-old Gilbert man piloted a C-47 transport during the Normandy Invasion that began June 6, 1944, as part of Operation Overlord, which began the Allied effort to retake Europe from Hitler's occupation forces.

On the morning of June 6, massive Allied forces assaulted five codenamed beachheads with unprecedented air, land and sea force as Americans landed on Omaha and Utah, the British on Gold and Sword and the Canadians on Juno beaches.

Free French forces also participated, as did fighters from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand and Norway. More than 100,000 took part; of these, an estimated 10,000 died or were wounded.

"He is my hero, as every soldier in World War II is. I have such admiration for those men who risked their lives for freedom," said his daughter, Dr. Holly West, a resident of Val Vista Lakes in Gilbert.

Her siblings are Hayden, in Virginia, and Hestin, Maryland. DuBay has six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

"My father tells stories of flying through air so thick with smoke that staying in formation was nearly impossible, because you couldn't see the other planes 15 feet away," she added. "With one navigator for every eight planes, finding your target was your one consuming thought. There was no time to be afraid."

DuBay was born in Greenfield, Massachusetts, and grew up in northern New York State, where his father was an immigration officer.

Just out of high school, he signed up for a new pilot training program in Chateaugay, New York, just across the border from Canada, which had already been at war for more than a year as a member of the British Commonwealth.

It was July 1941, six months before the Japanese attacked on Pearl Harbor.

DuBay trained at various bases, including Lawson Field, Georgia — now in Fort Benning — where he was trained in dropping paratroopers.

During his 2 and a half years of active service, he piloted a variety of C-47s in North Africa and throughout Europe, for which he received various honors, including the Air Medal and eight Bronze Stars.



World War II veteran Henry DuBay of Gilbert will get an Honor Flight to the war's museum in New Orleans later this month. (Kimberly Carrillo/Staff Photographer)

He delivered supplies to Gen. George Patton's Third Army and the Red Ball Express, dropped paratroopers, tugged gliders, and during the Battle of the Bulge, landed at night and in bitter cold with only the lights of runway jeeps to assist him.

He said his guardian angel helped him as he went through a tour of duty that brought him in proximity with men and women who became legends during and after the war.

His first mission for the U.S. Air Force was flying supplies from Africa to Sicily in July 1943. During this time, 64 C-47s were shot down in a "friendly fire" incident by Allied naval vessels and shore troops, costing more than 465 lives, he recalled.

DuBay was on the ground that day. A month later, he was in Palermo after that island was freed from the Axis and became Allied headquarters for the campaign.

One day, he saw a vehicle coming along the road, carrying some of the military titans of the Allied forces — Generals Dwight Eisenhower, Patton, Omar Bradley, James Doolittle and British Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery.

"I stood up and saluted," he recalled.

While in Africa, he got a pass to Algiers, the French colony, and went to a "Red Cross Club," where soldiers could dance with local women.

While dancing with one of the women, he received a courtesy shoulder tap from a man not in uniform who wanted to dance with her.

"I let him dance in for 30 seconds and then cut back in," DuBay said.

It was U.S. Sen. Albert Benjamin Chandler, eventual governor of Kentucky and commissioner of Major League Baseball, who was on a congressional tour.

At the end of the decade, Chandler approved Jackie Robinson's contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, which integrated the league and changed baseball, and sports in general, forever.

As the Allies prepared for the Normandy Invasion, troops, vehicles, armaments and supplies were shipped to Great Britain.

There, while awaiting his orders, DuBay went on a date with a young woman in Folkingham, not too far from London. Her name was Margaret Roberts, who was attending school to become a scientist; he had, Albert, owned grocery stores.

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He never saw her again but years later recognized the woman on television and in the press with other history makers such as the late President Ronald Reagan.

"She married a guy named 'Thatcher,'" DuBay said with a chuckle, recalling the "Iron Lady" Britain's prime minister from 1979 to 1990.

The night before D-Day, the base was locked down with no passes, an indication that Eisenhower had given his famous, "Let's go."

When DuBay arose early in the morning of June 6, the field was covered with infantrymen and planes that had flown in overnight from bases throughout England, painted with black invasion stripes.

"I don't know how they did it," he recalled.

Then, he waited for his orders to fly. DuBay, this month, will be honored for his role in the war as the world marks the 75th anniversary of the invasion of Normandy.

"Henry DuBay certainly qualifies as a member of 'The Greatest Generation' and as a true war hero, delivering troops, supplies and fuel, often behind enemy lines," said Rick Hardina, president of Honor Flight Arizona, the state chapter hub of the national nonprofit founded in 2005 one year after the WWII Memorial opened in Washington, D.C.

The group will be taking DuBay to the World War II Museum in New Orleans in June, where he will be honored as a Normandy combatant.

Completing his duty in September 1945 at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, DuBay married Hazel Instone and earned his architectural degree from North Dakota State.

He designed international airports and worked on the intercontinental ballistic missiles and the Apollo Project for NASA, which 50 years ago this July put Americans on the moon.

But DuBay said he doesn't think much about World War II, saying, "We had a duty that had to be done."

But his daughter remains awed. "Looking beneath him, he saw men swarming the beaches of Normandy and saw with his own eyes what you and I can only imagine from D-Day films," his daughter said. "How these men had such bravery I cannot imagine or ever understand, but thank God they did, thank God they did." 🇺🇸

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