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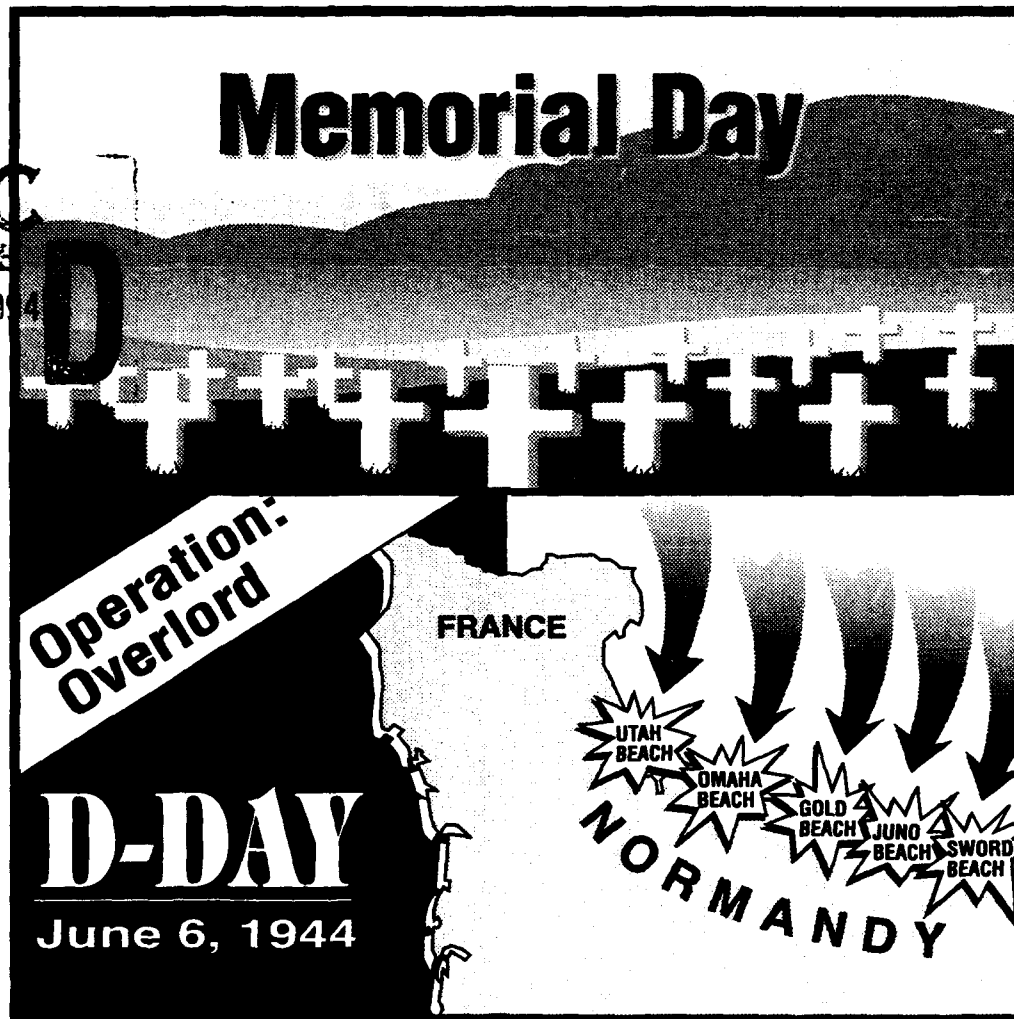


AIR FORCE SPEECH

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

April 1994

MEMORIAL DAY -- REMEMBERING AIR FORCE HEROES OF WORLD WAR II



REMEMBERING THE NORMANDY INVASION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF AIRPOWER

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Memorial Day — Remembering Air Force Heroes of World War II

Today we gather together to pay homage to young and old, from all walks of life, who have fallen while serving their country.

We place flowers on a gravesite.

We pause for a moment of reverence.

We reflect on the heroics of men and women who answered when their country called for them to bear arms and preserve the ideals of democracy.

It's a time to think about the numbers of people who answered. World War I, 4.7 million; World War II, 16.1 million; the Korean conflict, 5.7 million; Vietnam, 8.7 million and in Desert Storm a little over 1 million. That's 36 million people — more than the population of Canada.

Battle death numbers are equally staggering, half a million (520,000) for World Wars I and II; in Korea, 33,600; in Vietnam, 58,000. In ceremonies such as these today, we offer our respects to those who served and died throughout the world.

There are times when our mission wasn't war, but peace, and we still remember those who have fallen. After a recent aircraft tragedy [F-16/C-130 crash at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina], the commander-in-chief, President Bill Clinton, reminds us that "all those who serve in the military at home and abroad put their lives at risk in the service of their nation, and deserve the thanks of all Americans for doing so."

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The 125-year-old tradition of Memorial Day may have started with Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, but many communities claim its origin. Lincoln was dedicating part of the battlefield, the bloodiest in the Civil War, as a cemetery. His simple message rings as true today as it was then. He told his audience "that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

Allow me to echo his sentiments ... Americans have fought and died for principles of freedom and democracy in every corner of the world. This year is the fiftieth anniversary of one of those times — the Normandy invasion — the strategic turning point of the war to free occupied Europe from a murderous madman.

Most of us here did not take part in World War II. Yet it is paramount for us to preserve the heritage of that time. On this day, then, let us remember a few brave airmen who were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. This is America's highest military decoration reserved for those who serve "far and beyond ordinary bravery to include conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."

These men I will mention today are but a **few** of the **many** who showed courage and valor. The reason I'd like to tell you about them is that they did not come home — they are laid to rest or commemorated in American cemeteries on foreign lands.

Near Manila, Republic of the Philippines, is the largest American cemetery. On a plateau with impressive views of Laguna de Bay and the distant mountains, rest the grave sites of those who gave their lives in New Guinea and the Philippines. On the tablets of the missing are 32,281 names, Brig. Gen. Kenneth Walker is one of them.

Commander of the 5th Bomber Command, General Walker was a man of action. He learned first-hand about combat conditions, as he repeatedly accompanied his bomber units deep into enemy-held territory. While leading a bombing mission over the key port of Rabaul, New Britain, he sunk nine enemy ships with direct hits. The bombers were then intercepted by 15 enemy fighters. General Walker's B-17 Flying Fortress was last seen losing altitude, its right wing on fire and two enemy fighters on its tail.

Another name on those tablets of the missing is Capt. Harl Pease Jr. Captain Pease had been promoted to captain in July, and now it was August 7, 1942. He was on a B-17 mission against the enemy entrenched in New Britain. He had engine trouble the day before, and was not scheduled to fly. All serviceable planes already had crews assigned. Somehow, Captain Pease found a crippled bomber and got it into shape. With a volunteer crew, he joined the big mission against the airdrome near Rabaul. Before reaching the target, the bombers were intercepted by about 30 enemy fighters. Captain Pease's plane took the brunt of the hostile attack. However, by gallant action and accurate shooting, he and his crew succeeded in destroying several Zeros [Japanese fighter aircraft] before dropping his bombs on the base as planned. The fight with the enemy pursuit lasted 25 minutes until the bombers dived into cloud cover. Captain Pease's bomber fell behind the balance of the formation due to unknown difficulties and failed to reach the cloud cover. The enemy pursuit succeeded in igniting one of his bomb bay tanks. He was seen to drop the flaming tank, but the B-17 and its crew did not return to base. Captain Pease's citation reads in part: "In voluntarily performing this mission Captain Pease contributed materially to the success of the group, and displayed high devotion to duty, valor and complete contempt for personal danger."

Brilliantly colored flowers edge the reflecting pools of the Cambridge American cemetery in England. The site lies on a north slope framed by woodland, and the 3,812 markers gently arch in sweeping curves. On the great wall of the missing, the name of Lt. Col. Leon Robert Vance Jr. is recorded.

The day before D-Day, Colonel Vance led a heavy bombardment group of B-24 Liberators to attack coastal positions in northwestern France. He flew in the lead aircraft, not as a pilot or co-pilot, but as an addition. He could then devote his time directing the formation. He positioned himself in the cockpit, behind the pilots' seats. This was his second, and last, mission.

His bomber was repeatedly hit by anti-aircraft fire as the group neared the target. The pilot was killed, several crew members injured, and Colonel Vance's right foot was almost amputated. Taking no heed of his own serious injury, Colonel Vance led the formation to drop their bombs on target. Once the mission was accomplished, Colonel Vance began to attend to his personal needs. With the assistance of the radar operator, he applied a tourniquet to stem the loss of blood.

He also saw that the B-24 was heavily damaged — three engines were gone, and the remaining engine was failing — it looked like it would stall [out]. Colonel Vance exerted great stamina by partially standing between the two pilot seats and took control over the plane. Veteran B-24 pilots will agree that flying the Liberator is a taxing effort under ordinary conditions. Nevertheless, Colonel Vance, despite his awkward position, managed to keep the B-24 under control and actually recrossed the English Channel to just off the coast of England. The crew could now reach land safely, and Vance ordered them to bail out. Due to a communications failure, he believed that there was a crew member too seriously injured to jump so he remained with the aircraft. He then discovered his semi-amputated foot was firmly wedged behind the pilot's seat. Further complicating matters, was a 500-pound bomb that had failed to drop and was hanging in the bomb bay.

Colonel Vance did what was necessary under extraordinary conditions. He ditched the plane while lying on the floor using the side window of the cockpit for visual reference. As the plane was settling beneath the waves, an explosion occurred which threw Colonel Vance clear of the wreckage. Weak and exhausted, he searched in vain for what he thought was a missing crew member. An air-sea rescue craft found him within an hour — the ordeal was over. One month later, the medical transport plane taking him back to the United States disappeared. It was never found. Fate had taken a cruel twist — his name now remembered with others on the walls at Cambridge.

Two months after D-Day, another Medal of Honor recipient, Capt. Darrell Robins Lindsey, was the group leader of a formation of 30 B-26 Marauders on an extremely hazardous mission. His target: the strategic enemy-held L'Isle Adam railroad bridge over the Seine River in France. With most of the bridges already destroyed, this one was invaluable to the enemy in moving troops and supplies. Nearing the target area, Captain Lindsey encountered violent ground fire. Fully aware that the gasoline tanks might explode at any time, he elected to continue the perilous run. Fire streaming from his right engine, Captain Lindsey successfully dropped the bombs.

He then gave the crew the order to bail out. With coolness and without regard for his own life, Captain Lindsey kept the rapidly descending plane in a steady glide until the crew could jump to safety. The bombardier offered to lower the wheels so that Captain Lindsey could escape from the nose. Realizing that this might throw the plane in an uncontrollable spin and jeopardize the bombardier's chances, Lindsey refused the offer. The right gasoline tank exploded before he could follow the bombardier out the plane. Encased in flames, the plane went into a steep dive, and exploded upon impact.

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His name is listed on the wall of the missing at Ardennes American Cemetery near Liege, Belgium. The stone memorial's inscription gives thanks "to the silent host who endured all and gave all, that mankind might live in freedom and peace."

A sculpture of the guardian angel stands sentry over the burial ground at Henri-Chappelle American cemetery near Liege. There, Brig. Gen. Frederick Castle is remembered on the walls of the missing. He was a courageous flier who found himself in similar circumstances to Captain Lindsey. General Castle was leading an air division of 2,000 B-17s in a strike against enemy airfields. It was his thirtieth combat mission, and the date was December 24, 1944. His goal was to continue the decimation of the German air force during the "Battle of the Bulge." En route to the target, his plane lost an engine and he was forced to drop the lead. Unfortunately, his lagging plane became an easy mark for enemy fighters. General Castle refused to jettison his bombs so he could gain speed and maneuvering ability — American troops were on the ground below. Fires started in two engines, and he realized the plane was doomed. Without regard for personal safety, he gave the bail-out order and remained alone at the controls. Another enemy attack exploded the gasoline tanks, and the bomber plummeted downward. His citation reads in part: "His willing sacrifice of his life to save members of the crew were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service."

The last mission I'd like to recall for you today is one that some of us in the Air Force call the "hero maker." Of the airmen who flew on that day, August 1, 1943, five were awarded the Medal of Honor — the most ever awarded for a single mission on a single day. I want to tell you about two of them. Their mission was to stem the flow of oil to the German war machine from Ploesti, Romania refineries.

One was the leader of the 93rd Bomb Group, Lt. Col. Addison Baker. As he was approaching the target, his B-24 Liberator was hit by a large caliber anti-aircraft shell. He refused to jeopardize the mission by breaking lead formation by landing. Colonel Baker continued to lead his group. His aircraft on fire, he maintained course steadfast to the target upon which he dropped his bombs with devastating effect. He avoided hitting other aircraft when he left formation, but he couldn't gain sufficient altitude for the crew to escape. His aircraft crashed in flames. His name joins his crew on the wall of the missing at the Florence American Cemetery in Italy.

The other flier is Maj. John Louis Jerstad. Although he had completed more than the required combat missions, he volunteered to lead a formation in the daring low-level attack on Ploesti. He knew the importance of this task, and believed he could make a difference. A short distance from the target, Maj. Jerstad's B-24 was also badly damaged by enemy ground fire. He ignored a field suitable for a forced landing and proceeded to the target. After releasing his bombs, the fire in his plane became so intense that he was unable to continue. His plane crashed in the target area. His white marble marker at the Ardennes cemetery indicates he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

These stories have a common thread — the uncommon bravery of men who faced harrowing, adverse situations. They thought of others, the mission, without regard for themselves. They gave everything — they never came home. They vividly illustrate sacrifices made not only for our country, but also for free people all over the world. Let us give them a moment of dedication.

[PAUSE]

It's been half a century since an American was buried in a foreign land. We have memorials in Hawaii for Korea and Vietnam, and on both coasts for anyone missing or lost at sea. It was a different time for World War II — about 39 percent remained near their battlefield; such as the brave airmen I told you about today. They are but a few of the many who were courageous and valiant.

The spirit of freedom continues to live today as young men and women place themselves in harm's way for other just causes.

The reasons why we started Memorial Day are but a footnote of history. Yet the ceremony, words and deeds still ring true. It is to our fallen, military men and women, both of the past and present, that we pay homage on this Memorial Day. May we never forget the debt we owe them and may we at all times give them the respect and honor that is their due.

[For further information, the speaker may decide to mention that these cemeteries are under the management of the American Battle Monuments Commission. The address is Casimir Building, 20 Massachusetts N.W., Washington, D.C.]

[This speech has sections marked by brackets and asterisks for personalization by the speaker. Due to the nature of the event, the speaker may want to individualize this section with names of units, etc. from the local area that may have participated in the landing. If the audience is unknown, the speech may be presented as is.]

Remembering Normandy and the Importance of Airpower

“Okay, We’ll go”...words spoken June 4, 1944, by Gen. Dwight David Eisenhower as the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces. Thus marked the beginning of one of the greatest joint land, sea, and air operations in history. Eisenhower’s decision was an agonizing one; weather was treacherous and his deputies pessimistic, but circumstances dictated a high tide and a short time span. Further delays would have doubtless given away the plan, known as Operation Overlord, to its planners. D-Day to you and me ...

Fifty years have passed, since that momentous decision. The mission: to gain a foothold on the edge of France and begin the liberation of occupied Europe. The date: June 6, 1944.

Fifty years have passed. Perhaps to you, it’s a date learned in history class; unaware of what this day meant to millions of people. The invasion was a courageous undertaking. If it had failed — and in the first hours of horror and chaos, it nearly did — the world might be very different today.

Fifty years have passed. Perhaps to you, it’s a personal experience or family history.

Amassing for months before the actual date, the invasion forces were enormous. The south of England became one huge military camp packed so full of equipment, men, armament and materiel; there was a joke that the island would have sunk if barrage balloons had not been floating above English cities as protection against low-flying enemy aircraft. The force contained 39 divisions, 20 of these were American. [**] The Allies assembled a gargantuan naval armada, from battleships and destroyers to landing craft and coasters.

Allied intelligence was able to exploit every deceptive trick known to convince the Germans that the target was not Normandy, but the Pas-de-Calais, (pay-dee-kalay) nearly 200 miles northeast. This is where the English Channel was at its narrowest, only 21 miles. The deception worked, duping Adolf Hitler and the German commander in chief in the west, [Field Marshal Karl von Rundstedt] along with his chief field commander, [Field Marshal Erwin Rommel].

Late in the evening of June 5, thousands of ships made their way across the Channel. On that same night, a fleet of cargo planes, mainly C-47 Skytrains loaded with paratroopers, took off. In tow were American Waco and British Hamilcar gliders filled with soldiers or equipment. Fighters and bombers waited until dawn. One Air Force pilot wrote it looked like "an immense migration of birds."

While the Allied invasion force steamed across the English Channel, the Germans in France had no direct knowledge it was at hand — no air reconnaissance during the first five days of June. Their naval patrols charged with mine-laying operations along the coast were canceled because of bad weather.

On June 5, German commanders believed no Allied invasion could take place since the notorious Channel weather had turned temperamental, with violent wind, rain storms, and cloud cover so low that air operations were impossible.

However, Allied commanders believed their weather adviser, who forecast rain clearing, winds moderate, and the thick cloud cover rising. Weather barely tolerable rather than ideal for an assault. The operations were going in on a slim margin of ground superiority. The landing had already been delayed for 24 hours.

The Germans knew an invasion was coming, but not where or precisely when. The army commanders were wary, they knew their attacker would come from the sea and many fortifications existed. The German defenses seemed formidable — 2,500 miles of beach were cluttered with clever death traps, obstacles of varying shapes many carrying explosive charges.

They were designed to impede the movement of landing craft, vehicles and men. Strongholds of artillery, anti-tank and machine guns were protected by concrete emplacements every 1,000 meters. They believed an invasion force could land only in an area where a harbor existed. They didn't count on our ingenuity to bring two portable harbors!

The landings called for an assault on a five-divisional front. Three airborne divisions, including the U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne [**], were dropped inland. They were to protect the sides of the main landing area, and close off the beaches. British and other allied troops were taking the northern beaches, code-named Juno, Gold and Sword. For the Americans, Utah and Omaha.

Americans of the 4th Division [**] hit Utah beach at 0630. They met so little resistance that U.S. commanders thought the Germans had set a trap. But the enemy had been caught flat-footed and Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. rallied his troops, and snatched the lucky break. By evening, men and vehicles were streaming inland.

The 1st Division [**] sailed for Omaha. Unfortunately, things seemed to doom their mission from the start. The sea had turned unruly from the moment the first landing craft put into sea. The waves pounded the smaller crafts, and pulled tanks and artillery into a watery grave. The terrain allowed the enemy to have near-perfect defenses, catching the first wave of the assault in a cross-fire. They were cut to ribbons. Succeeding assault teams floundered against incoming tide, enemy mortar fire and the logjam of disabled equipment.

Retreat seemed imminent. Inspired by the front-line leadership of one of their commanders, infantrymen began punching holes in the German wall. His challenge — "Two kinds of people are staying on this beach, the dead and those who are going to die. Now let's get the [hell] out of here."

Overhead, specially marked black and white striped Allied Expeditionary Air Force aircraft owned the sky. Tactical bombers were hammering the whole northwest coast. The 8th AAF, commanded by Lt. Gen. James Doolittle, alone had 1,300 bombers over the area by daybreak. [**] The 9th AAF's fighters, P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51 Mustangs, roared and dived at German strong points unhindered by Luftwaffe [German Air Force] interference. The Germans had been driven from the sky. In the air, the troops were supported by no less than 10,521 combat aircraft. Over the troops, too, screamed a hail of naval gunfire from the supporting warships. Far inland, the airborne divisions were already down and fighting hastily rallied enemy garrisons.

During the day, Germans flew 319 sorties; Allies 12,015 (not one was interrupted by enemy air action). However, we can't take a snapshot of that day to explain the real importance of airpower. The invasion's air operations cannot be isolated from the earlier offensives carried on by the Royal Air Force and U.S. Army Air Force. The Allied Expeditionary Air Force, comprised of the British 2nd Tactical Group and the USAAF 9th AAF, was set up almost a year before the actual landing.

Gen. Carl Spaatz commanded the strategic bombing operations in Europe. His strategic objective was to provide the necessary firepower for the combined bomber offensive. Round-the-clock bombing by British and American "heavy" bombers, struck at the roots of the German war economy. Conducted by the strategic forces, daylight bombing runs by 8th USAAF's B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators targeted aircraft and ball-bearing production, oil and rubber supplies, and the submarine fleet.

Precision strikes on airfields and bridges by medium bomber B-26 Marauders paralyzed northwestern France. Depending on the length of the strike, Mustangs, Thunderbolts or P-38 Lightnings protected the bombers and began the total destruction of the Luftwaffe. The Mustang, in particular, out-gunned and outmaneuvered the German fighter pilots. In some instances, pilots who remained on the ground were no better off. Their hangars and fields were destroyed by the attacking Thunderbolts.

Allied air support contained the invasion area — destroying communication lines, rail lines and bridges. ... There were 66,000 tons of bombs dropped on Normandy during the three months preceding D-Day, creating what was called a "railway desert" around the Germans. The Allies further strengthened their advance by an additional 14,000 tons dropped on radar installations on the eve of D-Day.

Since everything moves at once in war, it is impossible to determine precisely the relative value of these bombings. This much is clear — the effect of air interdiction was brilliantly successful. Together with a clever strategic deception plan, the air campaign had unquestionably achieved its objective — preventing German defenders from engaging the Allied armies before establishing a secure beach head.

By the end of D-Day, We had control of all five beaches, but much of the jigsaw remained to be put together. British and Canadian beaches had become a solid Allied grip on the left flank. On the right flank, Americans on Utah were ashore, but German guns were still firing at Omaha. The invasion effort was already being replenished with stores, ammunition, and men by a second armada of ships. The artificial harbors were being positioned to keep the Allied forces rolling. And, airborne troops and other fighting units were still isolated at St. Mere-Eglise (mare-a-GLEEZ), flying the American flag. The foothold had been established ... a strategic victory, the turning point of the war.

This day is one without ambiguity. Thirteen nations had to be freed from Hitler's murderous fascism. It was that black and white. Everyone agreed it was right to invade France to pursue the ultimate goal. ... It's a day that renamed French soil, Juno, Sword, Gold ... Utah and Omaha, known forevermore. It's a day when landing forces turned St. Mere-Eglise (mare-a-GLEEZ), Pointe du Hoc (dew-AWK) and other Norman localities into memorials.

Today you can visit these beaches and villages. You can stand on the crest of Pointe du Hoc (dew-AWK) and wonder with amazement how Rangers scaled the cliffs under intense fire. And understand why half of them died. Remnants of both forces remain — signs remind visitors to stay on the path as unexploded ordnance is still a hazard.

The effects of time and erosion are wearing away at the bunkers. A portion of the portable harbor is still visible at Arromanches (arrow-MONSH).

The beaches are serene and deserted now, where 50 years ago, thousands of young men faced death. The sobering reality of how many didn't survive is the American cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer (CALL-veal sear-MARE) where 9,386 are buried with plain white marble markers.

This year another memorial, The Wall of Liberty, is planned to honor all Americans — men and women, both living and dead, who served in the World War II European Theater of Operations. Ground-breaking ceremonies will be held this June in Caen (kawn), the capital of Normandy.

Normandy was not a victory for a single branch of the service, nor the victory of a single nation. Normandy is the classic example of modern combined arms, air-land, coalition warfare. It was a struggle in which the Allies were fortunate to have not merely air superiority, but air supremacy. Their task of winning on the ground was made easier. Where the Allies had won the critical battle for air supremacy was not over the beachhead. It was in the air war lasting several years preceding June, 1944. The final words must come again from the Supreme Allied Commander.

On June 24 he and his son, John, a new West Point graduate, rode through the Normandy countryside observing the aftermath of the invasion. John, offended at the bumper-to-bumper traffic, as it was definitely against procedure — told the General, "You'd never get away with this if you didn't have air supremacy."

General Eisenhower replied, "If I didn't have air supremacy, I wouldn't be here."

Fifty years have passed. While ceremonies and celebrations this June are rightfully focused on the courageous men who stormed the beaches, the air force should be given a moment's pause of silent thanks.

NOTES

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