

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Veterans laud D-Day Memorial

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By MICKEY POWELL - Bulletin Staff Writer



Some local veterans say the nation's first D-Day Memorial, which was dedicated Wednesday in Bedford, is an appropriate tribute to soldiers who lost their lives during the Allied Invasion in World War II.

Ray Brodie, 79, and Clyde England, 86, both of Martinsville, as well as John Hager, 84, of Fieldale, attended the dedication ceremony. All called the memorial extremely impressive and said its creators could not have done a better job.

"They didn't miss a thing," Hager said. All of the different portions of the invasion are represented by the memorial, he said, and explanations of what happened during those segments are provided.

"It is a beautiful structure, if you understand the military," England said. The memorial recalls the Normandy beach battle at which more than 6,000 U.S. soldiers were killed or wounded. According to England, military historians believe that "if we had lost that battle, we would have lost the war."

A 44 1/2-foot-tall arch is topped with black and white granite to resemble Allied aircraft used during the June 6, 1944 invasion. A Higgins boat - a kind of landing craft used at Normandy - is shown in a shallow pool, complete with air jets designed to resemble explosions. Bronze statues depict soldiers crawling across a concrete beach.

"The statues are realistic," said England. "We lost a lot of people on the beach."

While Hager especially liked the different segments of the invasion being represented, Brodie said he was mostly impressed with the arch.

"It really stands out," he said. "You can see it some distance away."

England said what he likes most about the memorial is "the fact we got it built." Plans to build the memorial have been discussed for about a half century, he said, but "no government agency ever wanted to do anything."

"We were running out of time," added Hager. Many World War II veterans are in their latter stages of life.

The \$13.6-million memorial was paid for entirely through private donations.

Martinsville businessman Morton W. Lester donated a 1942 Aeronca L-3 airplane to the memorial. The plane is believed to have been used by the military during the war.

Not yet constructed is a three-story education center, also to be built with private money, that will look like a German bunker. England said the center should help visitors learn more about what happened during the invasion.

Bedford was chosen as the site for the D-Day Memorial because the town had the highest per capita loss of life of any U.S. community during the war.

More than 15,000 people attended the dedication ceremony, based on estimates. The local veterans who attended said they had expected to see an enormous crowd.

"Getting the crowd in and out was a problem for them, I'm sure," England said of the dedication ceremony organizers. Shuttle buses were used to transport visitors from parking areas throughout the Bedford area.

