

# The Prelude to “D” Day, June 6, 1944

By Eugene “Gene” V. Lipp (453rd)

It was two o’clock in the afternoon in northern England on a mid-week day, June 5, 1944. I was at my desk doing my duties and meeting my responsibilities as the 453rd Bomb Group and Air Base Sergeant Major when my phone rang (certainly nothing uncommon), and I was quickly informed, “Sergeant, this is General Griswold, 2nd Air Division.” “Yes, General – Yes sir,” I replied. The General was the Deputy Commanding General, 2nd Air Division, 8th Air Force. The other two Divisions making up the 8th Air Force, under the Command of General James H. Doolittle, were the 1st and 3rd Air Divisions.

General Griswold asked first for Colonel Ramsey Potts, base commanding officer, and when I replied that he was not anywhere in headquarters, the general said, “let me speak to Lt. Col. Harris” (second in command). “Sorry General, neither he nor Lt. Col. Stephenson are here at this time and neither in Major Pringle,” I said. Pringle was the group and base adjutant, and my immediate superior. Our desks were only 10 feet apart. “General,” I said, “I’m sorry sir that I cannot explain their absences.” He said, “Very well, Sergeant, you will have to act in their absence. I will hold you fully responsible, do you understand?” Or words to that effect. I cannot possibly forget his words after going over them for the last 49 years. “Yes sir; yes General,” I said in response.

“Sergeant,” he said, “I am ordering you to close the base as soon as I finish here. I want the base closed in the next 10 minutes, and nobody, absolutely nobody, may leave the base. You may allow officers and enlisted men to come back on the base where they belong, that only. Do you understand Sergeant?” “Yes, General, I do indeed sir, and I am ready now to implement your orders, sir” I replied. “Very well, Sergeant. I am holding you fully responsible.” “Yes sir, I understand General. Goodbye, sir.”

With that I immediately called our base provost Marshall, a Captain and the equivalent to a chief of police in civilian life, but after 50 years, the Captains name has fully escaped me. He was a good man in guiding and directing the Military Police. The Captain quickly understood the orders from General Griswold. Within 10 minutes the base was closed. I made the announcement on the P.A. system that operated from my office in the headquarters compound. In England the P.A. system was known as the Tannoy.

Unlike the Navy, we did not address our base personnel with “Now hear this.” My announcement always began with “Your attention please,” a slight pause and again, “Your attention please,” and then the announcement. This day the announcement centered upon the instructions from General Griswold, and I made it very clear that the base was closed upon the orders of the deputy commanding general, 2nd Air Division.

Well, you’ve certainly guessed it by now. It was the first official action, the prelude to the commencement of D-Day the next morning, June 6th.

The base closure announcement did indeed cause a really gripping tenseness that dominated, yes, permeated the minds and hearts of the entire base population because “invasionitis” and D-Day talk had been prominently in the forefront of general daily conversation for many weeks. Our base personnel sensed we were very, very close to D-Day, and the announcement fully convinced them. “This is it guys, at any moment.”

At 06:28 the next morning, the combined air, water and land strike commenced. Everything that could fly or float was either in the air or on the water in the greatest military undertaking, the greatest military spectacle of all time. The code name for this huge venture was “Operation Overlord”. True, the base was closed, but it was anything but down. Come dusk, then darkness, the base was certainly alive, really humming, just plain peaking with activity. Mission briefings began well before midnight for all four bomb squadrons comprising our 453rd Bomb Group. Takeoff of the B-24 bombers, and then the rendezvous of the four squadrons, as the Group began about 03:30 a.m., June 6th.

The same was true for the other 13 bomb groups of the 2nd Air Division. After much time spent, the 14 groups successfully joined together as the Division. After considerably more time had gone by, the 2nd Air Division met up in a giant rendezvous with the B-17s of the 1st and 3rd Divisions. What a strike force – the full 8th Air Force now in position to strike just beyond the coast of France. And strike they did with great success.

Our group (453<sup>rd</sup>) flew four missions. Seventy planes were dispatched throughout the day against the target cities of St. Laurent, St. Lo, Caen, and Coutances. The 12 bombers over St. Lo were forced; however, to return to base without dropping their bomb loads because of extremely bad weather. The other 58 did drop their bomb loads successfully. Each plane carried 52 – 100 lb. antipersonnel bombs.

Our four missions were all under the direction of Operations Officer Lt. Col. James M. Stewart. He flew one, if not more of the four strikes on D-Day. Totally he flew 14 missions with our group. At that point, Jim was transferred to the 2nd Bomb Wing, our parent wing, in a well-earned promotion.

If you are wondering if he was the Jimmy Stewart from Hollywood and the movies, yes indeed he was that Jim Stewart, one of Hollywood's greatest, an extremely talented stage and screen actor. And so, too, was he equally competent in all of his assignments in the 2nd Air Division, the 8th Air Force in Great Britain.

I knew Jim Stewart quite well, and I got his autograph many, many times because I was responsible for the safekeeping and distribution of all secret and confidential documents that arrived at our base almost daily by special courier. Each time I presented Stewart with a highly classified document, he, of course, had to sign for receipt of it. Interestingly, from a personal standpoint, I received special clearance from the War Department in order to facilitate the receipt and distribution of those secret and confidential documents.

Well, I must say it felt so good to tell you this story after all these years – only 50! I do hope you have enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it.