

NGEF, NGAUS to Rededicate Monument at Omaha Beach

On the high ground above Omaha Beach in Normandy, France, there is an old and tattered wall that was built as a fortification against the expected Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe, an event that ultimately occurred June 6, 1944.

The wall has an obvious blast mark. It's where U.S. soldiers—specifically men of the District of Columbia National Guard's 121st Combat Engineer Battalion, part of the 29th Infantry Division—smashed through it, starting the long and bloody journey to the end of World War II in Europe.

The scar on the wall symbolizes the significance of Guard contributions on D-Day. Meanwhile, a nearby landmark pays tribute to all Guardsmen who fought in Europe in both world wars.

The National Guard Monument was erected by NGAUS and dedicated on the 25th anniversary of D-Day in 1969. The granite monolith was designed by renowned French war monument architect Francois Carpentier and sits atop a battered pillbox from the German defensive system known as the Atlantic Wall.

While veterans, national leaders and others from Europe, America and beyond gather this month to mark the 65th anniversary of the historic invasion, another ceremony will take place at the National Guard Monument.

National Guard Educational Foundation (NGEF) and NGAUS board members and staff will join members of the 29th Division Association on June 5 for a rededication of the recently renovated structure.

Jonathan Bernstein, NGEF director, has been coordinating repairs to the monument and pillbox. Harsh weather has taken a toll on the site, which still contains a PaK 43, a large, ubiquitous 88mm gun used by the German army.

Preserving the gun from further deterioration and joints on the pillbox are part of the repairs.

The monument sits near a draw below the town of Vierville-sur-Mer and was a critical

pathway into the Normandy countryside off Omaha Beach. The 29th, a division made up of Guard units primarily from Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, captured the draw and fought across Europe until the end of the war in May 1945.

The 29th took some of the heaviest losses of any Army division. Though 14,000 soldiers at full strength, it suffered 22,000 casualties before Germany surrendered.

According to historian Joe Balkowski, the 29th was one of the most capable and unique divisions to land on Normandy. Though comprised of mostly draftees by the end of the fighting, it had a core group of Guard commissioned and noncommissioned officers throughout. That left a distinctive stamp on the unit.

"[T]he division as a whole had a ... National Guard aura," says Balkowski, who is also the author of *Beyond the Beachhead*, a history of the 29th at Normandy. "They had the reputation of being a local unit."

The 29th landed alongside the 1st Infantry Division. The two divisions saw the worst of the fighting on D-Day. Balkowski says the 29th was chosen because Allied commanders trusted the unit's abilities.

Before D-Day, the 29th had only trained at home and then for many months in the United Kingdom. But senior commanders recognized its readiness. Balkowski said the unit was one of the best in the force at amphibious landings, which was an essential skill for reaching the beach that day.

"When you consider what the unit had been through in training, it was at its most skilled moment on the beach," he says. "It was at its best."

—By Andrew Waldman



U.S. Troops land at Omaha Beach in France on D-Day, June 6, 1944.



First dedicated by NGAUS in 1969, the Guard Monument at Omaha Beach honors all Guardsmen who fought in Europe.