

D-DAY

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"When the war was won, we claimed no spoils of victory — we helped Europe rebuild," Obama said in a speech at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. It is the site where 9,387 fallen soldiers rest under white marble tombstones on a bluff above Omaha Beach, the bloodiest among five beach landings by U.S. and British troops.

"This was democracy's beachhead," he said, assuring veterans that "your legacy is in good hands."

F-15 jets flew over the cemetery in missing-man formation, a 21 gun salute boomed and taps sounded.

The day of gratitude drew royals including Queen Elizabeth II of England, who dined at the French presidential palace in the evening, and the king of the Netherlands, Willem-Alexander, as well as political leaders from across Europe. German Chancellor Angela Merkel also joined in, along with a small group of German soldiers, as a sign of European unity.

Both symbolism and pragmatism were on French President Francois Hollande's agenda. With an invitation to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had been elbowed out of



A British veteran walks among headstones before participating in a French-British D-Day commemoration ceremony at the British War Cemetery in Bayeux, France, on Friday.

THOMAS BREGARDIS/AP

G-7 talks a day earlier, the ceremonies also became a moment to try to deflate the tense situation in Ukraine. The West fears the ongoing fighting there could fan a new Cold War with Moscow, which has annexed the eastern Ukraine region of Crimea. Hollande's invitation to Ukraine's president-elect gave impetus to a diplomatic ballet of meetings behind the scenes.

Putin, who was present as a tribute to the Russian loss of more than 20 million troops in WWII — the

largest among Allies — met with Petro Poroshenko and Obama on the sidelines of the event. Obama met privately, and briefly, with Putin.

"It is because France itself experienced the barbarity (of war) that it feels a duty to preserve peace everywhere, at the frontiers of Europe as in Africa," Hollande said.

Dancers re-enacted the drama of the Nazi takeover and battles across Europe against Hitler's forces on a stage at Sword Beach, one of the landing points

near Ouistreham, a small port where British troops landed and fought their way to Pegasus Bridge, a key route. Ouistreham was the site of the main international ceremony.

It was 6:30 a.m. on June 6, 1944, when soldiers started wading ashore. Operation Overlord, as the invasion by U.S., British, Canadian and Polish forces was code-named, was the first step in breaching Hitler's stranglehold on France and Europe. Besides Sword and Omaha, Allied forces landed on

Utah, Juno and Gold beaches — all codenames.

Ahead of the landing, the U.S. Army's 2nd Ranger Battalion went in with the 5th Battalion Rangers, scaling the craggy cliffs of Point du Hoc to put out of action six 155mm Nazi howitzers that could target landing areas. Paratroopers from the 101st Airborne division jumped into dark skies, some getting lost in hedgerows, shot down or caught in trees.

At least 4,400 Allied troops were killed the first day, and many thousands more in the ensuing Battle of Normandy that opened the Allied march to Paris to liberate the Nazi-occupied French capital in August. Another August assault was launched by forces from North Africa into southern France.

"They left home barely more than boys. They came home heroes," Obama said at an observation deck in Colleville, overlooking Omaha Beach.

Seven decades later, gratitude for life is a theme that runs through some veterans' recollections.

"I was lucky I survived," said U.S. veteran Oscar Peterson, 92, who fought with the 2nd Infantry Division, during his visit to Colleville. At the time, he said "I would say that if I could survive this, I'll work the rest of my life for nothing

to be alive."

Clair Martin, 93, of San Diego, California, landed on D-Day with the 29th Infantry Division and said he kept fighting until he reached the Elbe River in Germany the following April. "I praise God I made it and that we've never had another World War," he said.

While many of the fallen in the Battle of Normandy — Americans, British, Polish and even Germans — lie in manicured cemeteries, some victims have been largely forgotten — the French.

The Vichy government which collaborated with the Nazis — and which France took decades to admit represented the state — used the bombings as a propaganda tool, burying the extent of fatalities. Historians now believe that nearly as many French civilians died in Allied air raids as Britons during the German Blitz.

"U.S. veteran Jack Schlegel, 91, of Albany, New York, who fought in the 508th Parachutist Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne, paid tribute to those who survived and are transmitting the D-Day message.

"I love, especially in this area, the patriotism I can see, that you're so thankful that the Allies ... helped liberate this country from the Nazis and giving the younger children a chance to grow up without this oppression."

HONOR

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"You embody the long-lasting French-American friendship from Yorktown and Lafayette to Chateau Thierry and the Red Farm and to the beaches of Normandy," Barbet told the veterans gathered on the second floor of the Statehouse. "I wish to express our deepest gratitude for what you did to liberate France and Europe in 1944 and 45. I'd also like to remember the sacrifice of the 400,000 American soldiers who died during World War II and in particular, the 4,153 from South Carolina, as well as your comrades who rest on French soil."

Sen. Lindsey Graham, who attended the ceremony, said as young men, the veterans answered the call to serve their country, and many of their comrades didn't return.

Curtis Flemming, of Greer, was a seaman first class in the 6th Naval Beach Regiment. He was awarded a Purple Heart and the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign medal with four bronze stars. Flemming joined the Navy in November 1942 and was attached to a battalion that transported supplies and weapons to Normandy during D-Day and controlled traffic over Omaha



ALEX C. HICKS JR./ALEX.HICKS@SHJ.COM

Amy Challenger of Greer shows a picture of her father, Thomas Roy Scott Jr., who died in March. She accepted her father's appointment into the French Legion of Honor on his behalf. See more photos from the event at GoUpstate.com.

Beach.

"The 6th Naval Beach Battalion faced extremely egregious conditions in getting to shore," Barbet said. "Despite the heavy enemy fire and threats of mines on the beach, the battalion helped build up a firing line and set up control stations on the beach to direct the landing crafts."

While at Omaha Beach, Flemming was responsible for keeping the lanes open.

"You were there from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. until, hit with shrapnel to the leg and back, you were evacuated to a hospital in England that same day," Barbet said.

An injured Flemming was put aboard a landing ship, tank (LST), and it took three days to get him to an English hospital.

"(This medal) means a great deal," Flemming, now 89, said. "I had an awful lot of friends who never made it back, and I accept

this for their actions, too."

Flemming's sentiment was echoed by George Wheeler, of Gaffney, a first lieutenant in 1955 Quartermaster Company Truck. Wheeler took part in the Torch Operation in Africa and was one of three officers assigned to a truck company that delivered supplies primarily to the Army air forces.

Wheeler then fought in Corsica, and in August 1944, he landed in Frejus and drove across France, from the Rhone Valley to Nancy and Paris.

Barbet said Wheeler was in constant danger due to "unceasing enemy fire determined to destroy every convoy and prevent any restocking." While Wheeler was in Lyon, he helped many French people cross the Rhone because all bridges had been destroyed, Barbet said.

"What we saw in southern France was very mild, we had little resistance, compared to how hard those in Normandy had it," Wheeler said.

Wheeler was honored to have received the recognition, but said there were "thousands just as deserving as I am."

Amy Challenger, the daughter of Thomas Scott Jr., of Greer, accepted the award on behalf of her father, who died in March.

Scott was a technician who enlisted in the Army on Dec. 9,

World War II veteran honorees

Byron Burns, of Laurens
George Wheeler, of Gaffney
Frederick Wehrum, of Anderson
Earl Manning, of Batesburg
Leon Blackmon, of Bamberg
Chris Carawan, of Columbia
Curtis Flemming, of Greer
Thomas Scott, of Greer, was honored posthumously.

1942. He was sent to the European Theatre in 1944 and began combat in France on Dec. 9, 1944.

"His battalion had the mission of using 155 howitzers against the German army that was located in Driant," Barbet said. "After defeating the enemy, his unit moved to the Sarre Valley and participated in the Ardennes campaign."

Scott received the Good Conduct Medal and the World War II Victory Medal.

"My father would be so proud," said Challenger, holding a framed photo of her father when he was young. "But, just like all of these other men, they take collective credit for one another."

Challenger said her father was particularly proud of having served under Gen. George S. Patton during the Battle of the Bulge.

TRAIN

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other people will be spared the suffering that you saw in this (courtroom) today," Easler said.

As part of the proceedings, Blake Smith of Greenville-based Parham, Smith and Archenhold gave a presentation, which asserted that Matthew Conrad, the train's operator, was negligently hired and trained and that former LLR employee Donnie Carrigan was negligent in inspecting the ride.

The plaintiffs agreed that Conrad continued to increase speed on the third and final lap, reaching speeds of more than 20 miles per hour going into the final curve before losing control of the train.

It was "numbing" for Easler to hear dollar amounts assigned to those who suffered as a result of the crash.

One boy thrown from the train had swelling of the brain, various cuts that required stitches, a large laceration to a thigh that required a great deal of treatment and several sur-

geries. His family's attorney told Hayes that his medical bills were about \$75,700. The settlement amount was about \$104,200. Attorney fees were about \$22,400.

One girl's legs were injured — with one requiring surgery after the femur shifted. The medical bills totaled around \$24,600. The family settled for \$22,900. Attorney fees are around \$8,560.

A boy — 3 years old at the time and found on a rock after being thrown from the train — suffered a lacerated spleen among several other injuries. He was hospitalized four days. His family settled for \$37,600, not including attorney fees.

According to testimony, Misti Miller lifted the car that fell on one of her young son's legs — trapping him beneath. He had a severe femur injury that required about a month of hospital-

izations, multiple procedures, including skin grafts for open wounds, and he is still monitored for a severe injury that has affected his growth rate.

Miller's other son, 4 at the time, suffered a traumatic brain injury. He was found lying in the water beneath the track after he was "catapulted" from the train. He underwent multiple procedures and suffered hearing loss. He also was hospitalized for a month. Their medical expenses were \$1 million.

Smith, whose firm represented the family, said attorneys negotiated a medical lien of \$600,000 down to \$75,000.

Each boy received about \$391,700 in the settlement. Attorney fees were about \$130,600 respectively.

After the court proceeding, Smith told reporters that a court ruling in June 2011 held that multiple claimants from a single

incident could each sue for the \$600,000 limit under the state's Tort Claims Act. Smith said attorneys argued in mediations that the Cleveland Park train crash could be a multiple occurrences case, allowing them to receive an additional \$1 million.

A resolution to transfer \$2 million from the state Insurance Reserve Fund to the Spartanburg Disaster Relief Fund to compensate victims of the Cleveland Park train derailment passed the state Senate in the 2011-12 legislative session. But the House failed to pass the resolution.

It was introduced again in January 2013, but didn't make it out of committee.

Smith said families did not get what they deserved in compensation.

Both the plaintiffs and defense understood legal problems and limitations, Smith said, and claimants were "very reasonable given the limitations that we had, but we all understand that there's some things that need to be changed."

Easler said, "This was the only recourse we had left to deal with this case."

The pastor hopes other government bodies take the train derailment seriously and ensure proper inspection procedures are followed and that amuse-

ment park operators are trained.

The Easlars spearheaded the law named for their late son. Benji's Law requires that miniature trains have working speedometers and devices that limit speed to the manufacturer's recommendation or less. It also requires documented training for drivers and mechanical inspections of trains that include a speed test.

Benji's Law unanimously passed the state Senate and House. Gov. Nikki Haley signed the bill in March 2012.

Easler hopes state and county governments will re-examine how they "insure their industries" and train employees to prevent other accidents in the future. Smith agreed.

"Hopefully new policies and procedures will not only be implemented, but they will be enforced and that's the most important thing — making sure this never happens again," Smith said.

In a statement released Friday afternoon, Spartanburg County Council Chairman Jeff Horton said he was pleased all parties worked together to end the litigation.

"As we move forward with our desire to rebuild Cleveland Park as part of our parks system and to provide the community with parks that are fun, safe, attractive, accessible and family friendly, I can assure you that we on Council, our County Administrator, and our Parks Department are committed to taking those steps necessary to ensure that another such tragedy does not occur on our watch," Horton said.

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