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Allied paratroopers pay tribute to 65th anniversary of D-Day with reenactments of 1944 airborne operations

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SAINTE MERE EGLISE, France -- With his plane engulfed in flames after being hit by German anti-aircraft fire, Ralph Manley jumped out at an altitude of 200 feet and managed to deploy his chute and touch down on the Normandy beaches near Caen, France. That was 65 years ago. The veteran of the 101st Airborne Division's 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment returned to France this month to take part in events commemorating the 65th anniversary of D-Day and was the only D-Day veteran to jump in Normandy again this year.

“I’ve been here several times. This is the only time I’ve been able to jump. I’m representing my city government in Springfield, Missouri. I bring a proclamation of appreciation to the very towns we liberated 65 years ago,” said Manley.

The 85-year-old veteran made his return jump onto nearby Angoville-au-Plain Drop Zone June 4, completing a tandem jump there with the Liberty Jump Team, a group of commemorative jumpers that includes several active and retired servicemembers who jump “in World War II style” in tribute to veterans of all wars.



STAFF SGT DON GRAHAM

Paratroopers make their descent onto La Fiere Drop Zone in France's Normandy region, June 7. More than 350 U.S., French, German and British airborne troops completed the jump in tribute to the 65th anniversary of D-Day.

“He was elated and did excellent!” wrote the jump team’s public relations manager, Jil Launay, in an e-mail June 10.

Manley’s feat was followed by another larger airborne operation June 7, the official military

jump in honor of the 1944 allied invasion. For that mission, 228 American and 136 French, German and British paratroopers jumped into La Fiere Drop Zone on a wet, blustery afternoon. The U.S. Soldiers and Airmen represented a variety of commands and airborne units, including the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions; the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team; the Special Operations Command Europe; the 75th Ranger Regiment; the 1st Battalion, 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment; the 5th Quartermaster Company; the U.S. Army Reserve Command; the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command and the Air Force's 86th Airlift Wing.



MASTER SGT CECILIO RICARDO JR

Local French children congratulate an American paratrooper after he successfully jumped from a C-130 onto La Fiere Drop Zone in France's Normandy region during a June 7 airborne operation commemorating the June 6, 1944 D-Day invasion.

Those 350-plus paratroopers were a fraction of the more than 13,000 American and 7,000 British paratroopers who dropped into the region in 1944 to neutralize German coastal defense batteries and more quickly expand the area of the D-Day beachhead.

While Manley was the only jumper this year who is a veteran of the 1944 airborne operation, there were other paratroopers honoring the 65th anniversary who had ties to the original mission.

One was Lt. Col. David Sink, commander of the 4th Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment. Sink followed in the boot-steps of his great grandfather's uncle, who jumped here 65 years ago.

"It's really amazing that we had the opportunity to take part in this," said Sink.

"The United States will never forget the sacrifices that the paratroopers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines took on that day," he added. "We need to continue to remember those who sacrificed not only their lives to ensure that freedom came back to France and the rest of Europe."



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