

Remembering D-Day and a farmer who lived it
Colleen Kottke, Wisconsin State Farmer Published June 3, 2020

Leslie Roger Mabie 17 Dec 1921 – 13 Jun 2014



Les Mabie as a new Army recruit



Les Mabie in 2012 on his farm

Les Mabie was one of the 380 members of the 294th Joint Assault Signal Company who landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day. Only 80 survived the assault unharmed .

The battle that began on June 6, 1944, known as D-Day, saw 156,000 American, British and Canadian forces land on five beaches along a 50-mile stretch of France's Normandy region. The invasion was one of the largest amphibious military assaults in history and has often been called the beginning of the end of World War II in Europe.

Les Mabie was born in 1921, the fourth of 17 children who lived on several farms in Rock County (he graduated from Edgerton High School). Like most young men of the era, Les wanted to join the war effort and enlisted rather than be drafted. "I was running the farm and if I enlisted, the Army said I could go to school for special training," Les says. "Over the next six months, I attended vocational schools at Janesville, Milwaukee and Chicago for communications training while getting paid \$21 a month."

After basic training and a series of specialized training schools, Les shipped off to England in April or May 1943 and began serious training for a landing in France with his unit, the 294th Joint Assault Signal Company. This was a very specialized organization of about 380 men, whose job was to set up radio and phone communications during the coming invasion.

On June 5, 1944, the GI's loaded on an LCI (landing craft infantry) for the invasion planned

for the next day. "That night was the longest and worst night I ever spent," Les says. "I was so worried and couldn't sleep; would I be able to shoot at another person when we got into battle?" Mabie and his fellow soldiers clambered over the side of Higgins boat to escape enemy fire before the door was opened.

Before dawn, Mabie and his company loaded into small Higgins boats holding about 30 troops each. It was a rough ride to near shore, about an eighth mile from Omaha Beach, and there were bombs, artillery and small arms fire everywhere and it was so noisy, he remembers. Before the front ramp opened, Mabie and others clambered over the side of the small boat – they knew the bullets would fly in when the door ramp opened – and hit the water.

On the way down, Les said he ditched all the personal stuff he was carrying (not the audio equipment), which weighed about 120 pounds in case the water was deep. It turned out to be chest high and he and his fellow soldiers plodded towards shore at 6:16 a.m. on D-Day.

"It was bad," Les remembers, "I'd have a friend next to me and he'd be gone. Then another and another. It was terrible but our orders were to never stop to help anyone who was wounded."

Mabie made it to the beach, and with the others remaining from his unit, began assembling the radio system that included wires, generators, radio, phones and the other equipment. "Our job was to communicate with the Air Force and direct their air strikes," he says. (This was the only communications system on the beach until noon of D-Day.)

Mabie kept trying to do his assigned job while moving forward and being under attack from the Germans dug in on the hills overlooking the beach. "We moved with the infantry. I had a carbine...it took two days for our group to get off the beach and over the hills."

"We crawled on our bellies to get to the concrete pillboxes," he says. "Then we threw grenades into the gun slits. The grenades explode 6-7 seconds after the pin is pulled but our orders were to hold it for two seconds so the Germans wouldn't throw them back – that was hard to do."

The Normandy invasion was the biggest invasion ever with some 156,000 troops involved (10,000 casualties) and Omaha Beach was the toughest beach of all with 34,250 soldiers landing and 2,400 who were killed or wounded. (Only 80 of Mabie's unit of 380 men survived the war intact.)

The book *Overlord, The D-Day Landings* says, "What marked Omaha Beach from other Normandy landings was the high level of losses among the first assault waves in such a short period of time." and, "the sacrifice at Omaha was the foundation for the liberation of France." Les Mabie was in that first wave in the assault and spent the next six months in combat, all the way to Paris. "I never got a scratch." he says.

On December 6, 1944, Mabie was shipped to England, then back to the U.S. on the luxury liner Queen Mary (but not in a private stateroom) for more training. He was slated to be in the

invasion of Japan. "They told us to take care of all our personal business, because we probably wouldn't come back," he remembers.

But, the atomic bombs were dropped and Les Mabie came home in the summer of 1945. He went to work at Fairbanks-Morse in Beloit, got married and in 1957 bought the farm at Stoughton and raised two sons, Ricky and Stanley and went on to be active in the dairy world. Jerseys and Holsteins

The Mabies were well-known for their registered Jerseys and Holsteins. "We showed at State Fair, Dairy Expo and county fairs," Les says. "I was on Tri-State Breeders, Equity and AMPI boards."

Of the 20 or so dairies that had thrived for so long on Highway 138 between Oregon and Stoughton , the Mabie farm was the last to quit milking (in 1992).

Les Mabie and his wife Jean returned to Omaha Beach in 1994 ("it surely didn't look the same," he said) and have regularly attended 294th JASCO reunions. He is proud to still weigh 145 pounds, the same as when he enlisted. But, he does have a bleeding ulcer dating to his Army days, that has never been cured. "I guess I was nervous inside as a result of my combat days," he says. "But by and large, I've had a great life."

Les and Jeannette Mabie, both in their 90's, died a month apart in 2014.

I consider Les Mabie, the mild mannered and unassuming dairy farmer a real-life hero, and one of those responsible for what America is and has been for the decades since World War II. Talking with this humble dairyman was a special privilege. It is indeed proper that we pause and remember Les and those other gallant warriors who lived and died for our country's future on June 6, 1944 – 76 years ago.

John F. Oncken

