

View of invasion from above breath-taking, says Spit pilot

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From his grandstand seat in the sky, Cecil Brown could see the D-Day invasion unfold before his very eyes.

The Canadian Spitfire pilot flew twice across the English Channel to "Juno" beach on June 6, 1944.

"It was breathtaking really because at 1,500 feet you could almost recognize people on the ground," says Brown, a member of Royal Canadian Air Force Squadron 403, who lives in Mississauga.

"We flew up and down over the beach and we could see all the equipment and the men wading through the water and the landing craft lowering their ramps and tanks coming off."

Brown, 76, says he suspected a major invasion was planned because for weeks before D-Day heavy traffic headed towards seaports in southern England. Brown was stationed at Tangmere, near Chichester.

Starting about midnight on June 6, Brown says he and his fellow squadron members could hear heavy bombers going over to France. "You were supposed to be sleeping, but you could hardly sleep with the noise overhead all night."

Brown, a flight lieutenant, and his cohorts were roused at about 5 a.m. and began to prepare for flights across the channel. Brown says he had helped paint the Allies' white and black D-Day stripes on his Spitfire Mark IXB two days earlier.

"The planning was just superb and the amount and the accuracy of the planning was just staggering," he says. Brown, a retired Ford industrial relations manager, says his job was to help protect Juno beach from enemy aircraft. He took off at about 11.30 a.m. with thousands of fighter pilots who flew in a stack formation ranging from about 457 to 4,570 metres (1,500 to 15,000 feet) in altitude. Brown was assigned to the lowest altitude and he managed to keep an eye on activities below as he flew over.

"The English Channel seemed to be solid ships from the shore of England to the beachhead. It was such an awe-inspiring thing to see the number of ships taking part and to see the number of aircraft taking part. The sky was full of airplanes."

When Brown arrived at Juno, he says there were no enemy aircraft so he was able to sit back and watch the "performance" below as he patrolled the beach.

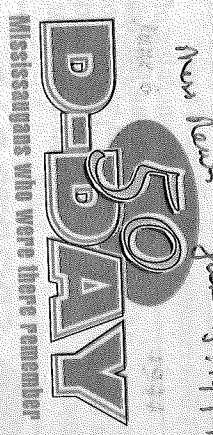
Offshore, he could see several Allied battleships firing salvoes at enemy fortifications just beyond the beach and other Allies building an artificial harbor off the beach to unload troops and supplies. He could also see enemy troops moving in to intercept Allied soldiers.

"But we couldn't deviate from our assignment and shoot them. That was the job assigned to Typhoons (another type of aircraft). Our job was to protect against enemy aircraft."

Some soldiers dropped on the beach, but Brown says he couldn't tell if they were shot or just ducking to avoid being shot.

Ren Henderson, 76, an Australian-born Spitfire pilot, also witnessed the invasion. Henderson — a flight lieutenant with Royal Air Force Squadron 56 — says he helped escort a 74-kilometre (46-mile) stream of more than 450 twin-engine Albatrosses which were towing gliders from Littlehampton, England to Ouistreham, France at the Orne Canal.

"It was quite exciting and we saw them (Allies) towing sections of the Mulberry Harbor off the Canadian and British beaches."



"We saw the whole scene underneath. It was just an unbelievable sight. We'll never see anything like that again."

Don Campbell, another Mississauga resident, says he made five return trips to France in single-engine Typhoons on D-Day. The flying officer began at about 5.30 a.m. and finished at about 6.30 p.m. He was on loan to the Royal Air Force from the Royal Canadian Air Force.

"We were looking for German tanks, rail transportation vehicles — anything we could see to try to keep them (enemy) from bringing supplies in that could be used against the Allied forces."

Campbell says he helped destroy some supplies and at one point had to return to England after being hit by enemy fire.

"I came back with eight or nine holes in the wings and the fuselage of the aircraft. You couldn't help it because they were firing all sorts of things."

But Campbell, 73, a grandfather of two, says he wasn't frightened. He was already accustomed to warfare after flying on missions into France and Holland for 4½ years prior to D-Day.



Cecil Brown, seated at right, waits for the signal to "scramble" at the Royal Canadian Air Force 403 Squadron airfield at Tangmere in 1944. The other Spitfire pilots are (from left) Mac Gordon, Harry Boyle, Jim Preston, Bill Whittaker and Peter Logan. Inset, Brown poses with his aircraft.