Veteran to parachute over Normandy once again, 75 years after D-Day

By Caroline Davies, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.23.19

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World War II veteran Harry Read (bottom) during a practice skydive in September 2018. The 95-year-old will parachute into Normandy on the 75th anniversary of D-Day this year. Photograph: Salvation Army

During World War II, Harry Read was one of many soldiers who jumped with a parachute into Normandy, France. He was 20 years old.

Now, 75 years later, he will board an airplane and jump again.

World War II was a huge war that took place during the 1940s. The war involved most of the countries in the world, which were divided into two groups. One was the Allied forces and the other was the Axis.

On June 6, 1944, the Allied forces, which included the United States, Great Britain and others, invaded France. The nation of France had been invaded by the German Nazis, part of the Axis. The invasion is known as D-Day and is considered one of the most important battles of the war.

When he jumps now, Read will take off from the airfield at the Imperial War Museum Duxford in England. It is part of two days of events to mark the 75th anniversary of D-Day. Read will perform

his jump over Normandy in a drop that will include another D-Day soldier, Jock Hutton from England. Hutton is 94 years old.

Remembering Friends Who Died

Read is 95 years old. "It is a stupid thing to do at my age," he said. However, he is looking forward to it. He had a practice jump in September. It was his first jump since D-Day. He thinks more about the loss than the celebration. "I will think of my mates who died."

Read is a great-great-grandfather living in England. He has a clear memory of D-Day.

He remembers getting ready for the landing. One officer said they expected half of the men would not survive, he said.

"I remember, it was a bright sunny day. And I went to a quiet place in the camp. I sat down and thought very deeply about what I was going to do." He decided he would do everything he could to live up to being a paratrooper in enemy country.

"I wouldn't surrender. I would be ready for any opportunity when it came. I settled it within my heart and within my mind," he said.

Read hopes his new jump will raise money for the Salvation Army. He has worked for the group his whole life.

On D-Day, Read had a heavy battery strapped to his leg. When he landed, it pulled him down into a swamp. The area had been flooded by the Germans and would claim the lives of almost 200 of his comrades.

In A Flooded Trench

Back in 1944, as Read's airplane flew toward Normandy, they could see a battle that looked like fireworks. "We flew into this dreadful situation," he said. His plane took a sudden turn up to the right, and he later realized it had been hit by enemy fire.

As he jumped into the darkness on D-Day, he could see ahead of them an Allied airplane going down in flames. After landing, he was alone. The pathfinders, whose job was to set up markers, had been dropped in the wrong place, he said. He had no idea where he was or where he should go.

"I had fallen into one of these deep trenches," he said. He was immediately underwater, he said.

Read got out and then pulled himself slowly from one flooded trench to another. He left behind his battery.

After an hour, he met another paratrooper. For the next 16 hours, they slowly crawled through the swamp.

Finally, they saw a farmhouse. After watching it for several hours, in case enemies were inside, they went up to knock. A welcoming farmer was inside with a group of other soldiers taking shelter.