

We Were There: D-Day, Omaha Beach

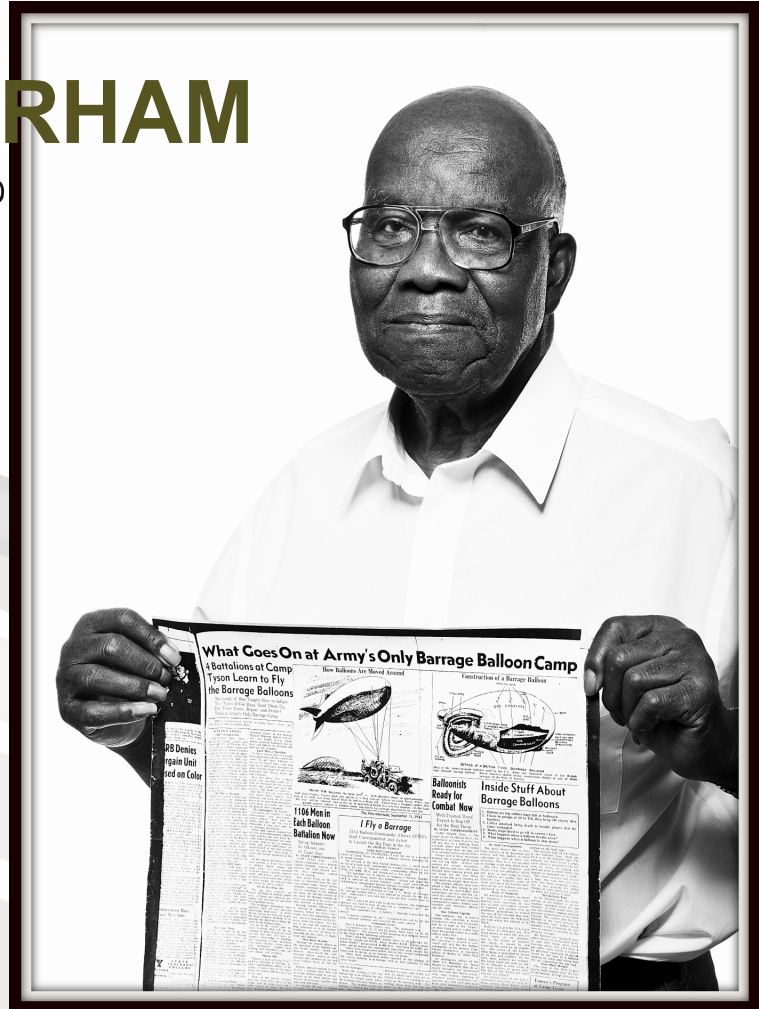
HENRY PARHAM

with Todd DePastino

I grew up in rural Greensville County, Virginia, on the North Carolina border during the heyday of Jim Crow. Segregation was a part of everyday life, and you couldn't do anything about it. I grew up knowing there were certain places I couldn't go, and certain things I couldn't do. Black people in my county, for example, couldn't vote. We weren't full citizens. That's just the way it was. That was the law.

In November 1942, I was working as a porter in Richmond for a bus company making seventeen dollars a week plus tips when I got drafted into the Army. Even though we couldn't vote, the government considered us good enough to fight in a segregated Army. Soldiering was unknown where I came from, so I was totally unfamiliar with the ways of Army life. I reported two days before Christmas, passed the physical, and then shipped immediately with several other guys to Fort Meade, Maryland. Our train got in at 3:00am, and we marched to our barracks. A sergeant announced we had until 0700 hours to sleep. When 7:00am came, that same sergeant stormed in and started turning over cots to wake men up. I thought, "Wow, what have I've gotten myself into?"

It took all of a few days for me to be assigned to a brand new unit, the all-black 320th Coastal Barrage Balloon Battalion. I had no idea what that would entail. I boarded a segregated train for the Barrage Balloon Training Center at Camp Tyson, Tennessee,



where we lived in segregated barracks and ate at segregated mess halls. Camp Tyson was enormous and set down in the middle of nowhere. The Army didn't want our balloons interfering with aircraft, so we were well outside flight paths. Also, that part of Tennessee is a place where the four winds blow. If we could handle those balloons there, we could handle them anywhere.

These balloons were huge, eighty-five feet long, tethered by steel cables, which wound around a gasoline-powered winch. We practiced inflating and launching these mini-blimps up to 12,000 feet in the air under all sorts of conditions. It was heavy, dangerous work, and one in our group was electrocuted when lightning struck his balloon.

Our initial training was to protect big coastal

cities vulnerable to air attack. After a few months, our mission changed. Our “Coastal Barrage Balloon Battalion” was re-designated as an “Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, Very Low Altitude.” That meant we were going overseas and into combat. Our balloons became smaller and more maneuverable. And we raised them to 200 feet only, anticipating dive bombing and low altitude strafing.

In an American military where most black men were restricted to driving trucks, mopping floors, and loading ships, we in the 320th battalion were proud to be among the few African Americans designated for combat. In November 1943, we lined up on Pier 86 in New York to board the HMS *Aquitania*, a luxury passenger vessel built around the time of the *Titanic* and pressed into service to

haul 8,000 troops at a time across the Atlantic. We packed into steerage, which was completely filled with stacked hammocks and canvas bunks stretched across metal frames. I passed the seven-day crossing playing poker. I didn’t get seasick, even when we ran into a fierce galestorm that tossed our enormous ship like a cork, but many of my comrades did. A depth charge was dropped against what we assumed was an enemy U-boat. We were relieved when we landed in Scotland.

Conditions were rough as we made our way south to the English coast. Our rations were skimpy, our showers cold, and our quarters heated by a half-helmet of coal a day, if that. Only marching and drilling kept us warm that long winter.

In spring, we crowded into camps along the



What Are Barrage Balloons?

Three years after Germany launched the first airplane attack in history—the bombing of Paris on August 30, 1914—British air defense forces invented the barrage balloon. The concept was simple: block enemy planes by raising steel cables tethered to lighter-than-air blimps. The higher the balloons went, the more airspace you could deny to the enemy, forcing pilots to higher altitudes and less accuracy. The cables themselves were deadly. Merely touching one with a wing could send a plane spiraling to the ground. If shot, the hydrogen-filled balloons could explode, taking out nearby aircraft.

When, on September 7, 1940, Hitler launched the Blitz—a massive strategic

bombing campaign against British cities—Britain had over 2,000 barrage balloons at the ready, and tens of thousands of men and women to deploy them, to protect ports, harbors, cities, and industrial sites. The gasbags spooked Luftwaffe pilots, who believed they were aerial mines designed to electrocute air crews. When German planes shot them down, crews often raised new ones the next day. The barrage balloons also proved effective against German V-1 rocket attacks in 1944. Almost 2,000 “strato-sentinels” curtained London and brought down hundreds of the flying buzz bombs.

The United States’ lack of preparedness for World War II included a wholesale neglect of barrage balloons. There was none at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked on December 7, 1941. Almost immediately afterwards, the Army ordered all available balloons to strategic sites on the coasts and asked that Britain send as many as they could spare.

The US military took its new barrage balloons overseas into combat and used them to protect convoys, beachheads, and any other large operation susceptible to enemy attack by air. Henry Parham of the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion was one among several thousand Allied soldiers landing on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944 whose job it was to forest the skies with floating pickets. One downside to blimps was that they gave away positions, allowing German artillerymen at Normandy, for example, to fire effectively at the armada in the English Channel before they ever spotted the ships themselves.

Although blimps didn’t disappear, the heyday of the barrage balloon ended with jet planes and sophisticated tracking technologies. The balloons themselves became government surplus, sold off to car dealers for advertising or recycled into dresses, raincoats, tarps, and tents. Few today remember when they stood watch in the skies, a critical defensive weapon of World War II.

Channel coast and waited for the invasion. We couldn't leave or communicate with the outside world. Our pay was held until we reached France. We were on edge.

We shoved off on a small transport ship on June 5. It was the first time I'd ever been around a big body of water. In the dark, I climbed down a rope ladder with thirty others into an LCVP "Higgins boat." We bobbed around for hours off Omaha Beach, waiting for our turn to land. The beach was bedlam, and everything was behind schedule. Bodies floated in the water, smoke covered everything. Finally, around 2:00pm, the ramp went down, and we were ordered off by an officer who waved a pistol just in case any of us had second thoughts. Bullets flew by and artillery shells exploded all around. I could actually hear the bullets traveling through the water next to me. How I wasn't hit, I don't know.

We went down the ramp into neck deep water. Some of the guys drowned. I helped carry one who was too short. We staggered onto the shore, which was littered with bodies and body parts, mines and obstacles. A few men went crazy when they hit the beach, paralyzed by the fear. Most of us dug foxholes and kept our heads down. But I didn't understand about the tides and dug my hole too close to the water. As the tide came in, my hole got swamped, and I didn't know whether to lay there and drown or jump up and take my chances getting shot.



A barrage balloon flies over USS LST-325 and USS LST-388 as they unload supplies at low tide, Normandy, France, June 12, 1944.

The infantry was supposed to push forward over the bluffs and to the roads beyond. But we had to stay put and raise our small balloons to protect the beach and the stream of soldiers and supplies expected to pour in over the coming days and weeks. Some of us brought balloons when we landed, but most of us waited until transports could deliver them, already inflated. By dawn the next day, the 320th had raised twelve balloons over Omaha Beach. The Germans shot some down, and we were able to replace them. Over the next sixty-eight days, we raised more and more balloons, moving them constantly, and protected Omaha Beach from enemy strafing. The Luftwaffe attacked us, but was never able to get low enough to strafe because of the work of the 320th Anti-Aircraft Battalion.

We moved on to Cherbourg in late July to fly a barrage before heading back to the United States in November. After a thirty-day leave, we assembled at Camp Stewart, Georgia, where we trained for jungle duty. We knew we were heading to the Pacific. I landed in Oahu on V-E Day 1945, and I was still there, in Hawaii, when the Japanese surrendered in August. Most of us guessed we had been slated for the invasion of the Japanese home islands. I'm thankful we didn't have to go.

For more on the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion, see Linda Hervieux's *Forgotten: The Untold Story of D-Day's Black Heroes, at Home and at War*. Published in 2015, Hervieux's book, which includes information on Henry Parham, is the first devoted to this African American unit that assaulted the enemy on D-Day.