

Ottawa soldier was among first Canadians on French soil on D-Day



[Andrew Duffy More from Andrew Duffy](#)

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Mervin Jones is photographed in his Perley and Rideau Veteran's Health Centre room. Jones was a Second World War paratrooper who landed on June 5, 1944 behind enemy lines with the Canadian Airborne.

Darren Brown / Ottawa Citizen

Gatineau-born Mervin Jones was among the first Canadian soldiers on French soil in the early hours of June 6, 1944, the fateful date of Operation Overlord — an invasion known to history as D-Day.

Jones, then 21, was a newly-minted member of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, recruited for his French language fluency. He parachuted into occupied France, behind Nazi Germany's Atlantic Wall, at 1 a.m. as part of a contingent of 500 Canadian paratroopers attached to the 6th British Airborne Division, which was tasked with the job of protecting the eastern flank of the Allied invasion force then steaming across the English Channel towards Normandy.

Jones didn't give himself much chance of surviving the day's action.

"I said, 'Mervin, I don't think you'll see your 22nd birthday. That's exactly what I said to myself.'"

Jones not only survived D-Day, but he has lived to see another 70 birthdays. Today, he's in Normandy to take part in commemoration ceremonies to mark the greatest seaborne invasion in history — and the beginning of Western Europe's liberation from four years of Nazi occupation.

For Jones, it's also a chance to honour those paratroopers who didn't mark another birthday.

"I want to see the great job we did so many years ago with the loss of so many," he told the Citizen during a recent interview at the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre.

"That's the hard part: we lost a hell of a lot."

We had no damn food

Mervin Jones was born into the Great Depression in Hull, Quebec. And although his memory of the war is fading under the onslaught of age, his memory of his earliest years on Rue Saint-Florent remains powerful.

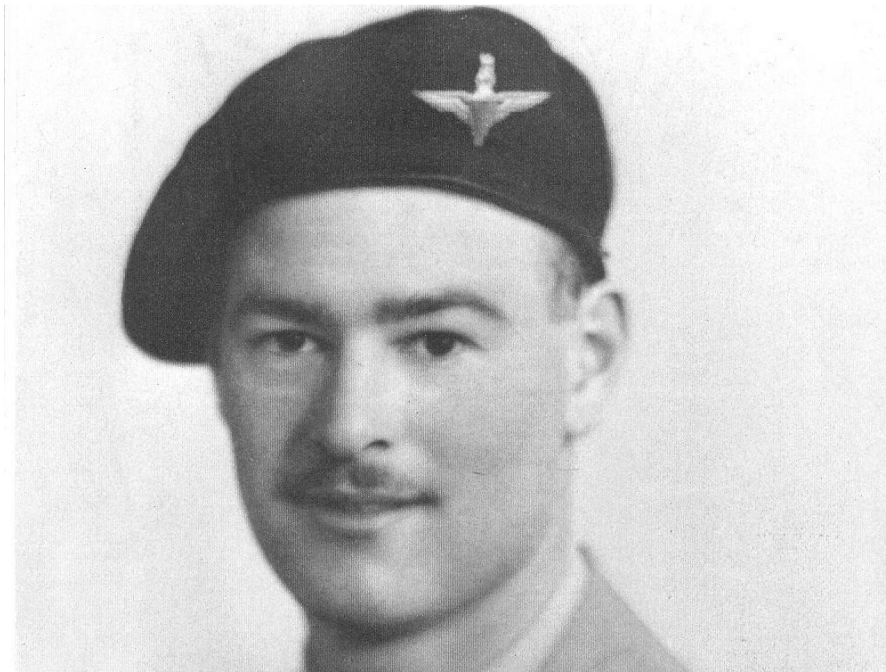
"We had no damn food: just what the city gave us," he says. "It was a son of a bitch. We were always hungry."

His father was an unskilled labourer who struggled to find enough work to feed his wife and four children. Jones was eventually sent to the Shawbridge Boys' Farm, north of Montreal, where troubled and orphaned youth were trained to be farmhands. Jones said he was sent there "for raising hell" as a teenager.

He enlisted in the Canadian Army as soon as he was eligible in May 1941. "It was enjoyable: we had three meals a day," says Jones, who would remain in the army for the next 32 years.

I wanted to get off the ground

Jones did his basic training in Cornwall — "They took the kinks out of me," he says — then went to England in 1942 with a Canadian artillery unit assigned to coastal defence.



Mervin Jones, now 91, had his basic training in Cornwall.

He became the unit's dispatch rider. His job was to collect from headquarters the identification codes for Allied aircraft — they changed every day at sunset — and distribute them to coastal batteries to help them sort out returning bombers from enemy planes. Late in 1943, during one of his dispatch rides, he swerved to avoid a truck that had slammed on its brakes. His motorcycle wedged between the truck and a pole.

The accident tore up his right knee and sent him to hospital. It was while he was recuperating that he saw a notice soliciting French-speaking soldiers for the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. Eager for action, Jones applied and won the job. "I wanted to get off the ground," he says.

He was activated by the battalion after an abridged training course. On June 5, 1944, he joined other paratroopers inside a guarded camp where they were briefed on their D-Day mission.

It was an adventure

Jones boarded a transport plane late that evening along with 19 other Canadian paratroopers. The flak started as soon as the plane reached the French coastline. Over the drop zone, the first ten paratroopers plunged into a night sky lit by tracer fire. They were jumping from about 500 feet to limit their exposure to ground fire with 30-kilograms of ammunition, grenades, rations and other supplies strapped to their backs.

When it was his turn, Jones clipped his ripcord onto a cable and tensed for the 'go' signal. But a hand on his shoulder held him back as the plane banked steeply to make another approach to the drop zone.

“I found out after, if I had jumped out, I would have landed in the minefield,” he says.

There were other dangers, too. The Germans had flooded huge areas of French countryside; the swamps swallowed some descending paratroopers. Others were killed by German patrols or hard landings.

For Jones, it would be his first and only combat jump. “I didn’t have time to think about it: I was just high enough for the chute to open,” he says.

Once on the ground, the scattered paratroopers had to find each other in the dark with help of handheld gadgets the men knew as “crickets.” One click and two in reply meant they were on the same side.

Jones landed in a field and connected 20 other paratroopers. They seized the strategically important crossroads at Le Mesnil early that morning, and dug in to prepare for a German counter-offensive.

Other members of the Canadian battalion supported an attack on the heavy guns of the Merville Battery that posed a threat to landing forces, and cleared a German machine gun nest from a French château. The Canadians also destroyed bridges over the Dives and Divette Rivers to prevent German reinforcements from reaching the beaches.

The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion accomplished all of its D-Day missions.

“It was an adventure,” Jones says, “but it was harsh.”

Jones’ war ended in August 1944 when he aggravated an injury incurred in a training jump. He returned to Canada the following year with a British war bride, Bridget Howes, whom he had met in London.

Jones later served in the Korean War. With his wife, Bridget, he raised four children while continuing his military career as a warrant officer in Soest, Germany, CFB Gagetown and CFB Valcartier.

D-Day by the numbers:

156,000 troops

3,500 ships

1,500 tanks

12,000 aircraft in support

10,000 dead, wounded and missing in action

946 Canadian casualties