

Hampstead man made the ultimate sacrifice in the breakout from Normandy

On a farm outside Hampstead, MD, Ed and Lucy Singer raised thirteen children in the 1930s. Ed Singer was a dairy farmer and also hauled milk from neighboring farms to Baltimore. World War II interrupted the Singer family's quiet life. As did other Carroll County families, the Singers rose to the war's challenge. Of the thirteen Singer children, three were old enough and entered military service. A nephew who lived with the Singers also served in World War II, as did two of Ed Singer's brothers. Although the whole family contributed to the war effort, one of the Singers' sons—Charles Wesley Singer—gave his all, killed in action 80 years ago in France during the Normandy Campaign.

Charles Wesley Singer's life began in the rolling hills of Carroll County. In his youth he worked on the family's farm. As a farmer, Singer could have sought to avoid military service as war clouds threatened in the late 1930s. Instead, in 1939, Singer enlisted in Company H, 1st Infantry, Maryland National Guard, located in Westminster, MD. Singer's unit reorganized as Company H, 115th Infantry on January 1, 1941, and on February 3, 1941, mobilized with the rest of the 29th Infantry Division into active Federal Service.

Once on active duty, the Maryland and Virginia National Guardsmen filling the ranks of the 29th Infantry Division began a long journey to distinguished wartime service. After training stateside at locations in Virginia, the Carolinas and Florida, Singer and the 115th Infantry shipped out to England in 1942 to prepare for the invasion of Europe.

While in England, Singer became hospitalized due to illness. The hospital stay provided Singer one final opportunity for some family time. His sister, 1st Lt. Valda Singer—an Army nurse—was able to visit with Singer before he returned to his unit for continued training. It would be the last time they saw each other.

Training for soldiers of the 29th Infantry Division was particularly demanding as leaders of the National Guard organization sought to prove the division's readiness. Singer and his unit prepared for a massive invasion of France, what was to be the largest amphibious operation in history.

Before the invasion, Singer was transferred to another outfit, the 116th Infantry Regiment, a sister unit composed of companies from the Virginia National Guard. Singer was assigned to the 116th Infantry's Company F.

The 116th Infantry and the Maryland regiments of the 29th Division were part of V (Fifth) Corps, assigned to land on Omaha Beach on Tuesday, June 6, 1944. Code named "Operation Overlord," the invasion is commonly known as D-Day. Omaha Beach was a heavily fortified section of the French coast with high bluffs defended by German mortars, machine guns and artillery. Mined obstacles jutted out in the surf.

The 116th Infantry sustained terrible losses in the landings. Company A led the first wave ashore and was hit particularly hard. At least two of their six landing craft were lost before even getting

to the beach and prospects for survival were grim for those in the four boats remaining. On one landing craft, all the men were killed. Many of the landing craft were riddled with German machine gun fire as soon as their ramps dropped.

Survivors on the beach found no place to take cover or return fire. The 29ers were in a perilous position—the Germans seemed to have won the day. A colonel in the adjacent 1st Infantry Division assessed the situation well, shouting, “There are two kinds of people who are staying on this beach: those who are dead and those who are going to die. Now let’s get the hell out of here!”

Additional companies poured onto Omaha Beach, including Singer’s Company F. Other units, including Marylanders from the 115th Infantry, soon followed. The soldiers wading onto the beaches of Normandy faced not only heavy German fire but gruesome scenes of carnage in the surf and sand.

Depleted units of the 29th Division slowly made their way up the bluffs and eventually pushed through German resistance at two locations, at the Vierville draw in the west of their sector and into St. Laurent further east. Slowly the Americans advanced off the beachhead, but at great cost.

Impeding the advance inland: ancient, massive hedgerows rooted in earthen barriers, dating to at least Roman times. The thick hedgerows and formidable German defenses would require a major effort by Allied forces in the weeks following June 6.

The D-Day landings were critical, to be sure, but until the Allied forces could break free from their toehold on the European Continent, the incredible losses in the invasion would be for naught. Singer and his unit would play a key part in what became known as the breakout from Normandy.

A major objective for the Allies: the crossroads town of Saint Lô. The 29th Infantry Division would battle, field by field, over twenty miles and with significant casualties, before it finally secured Saint Lô on July 18, 1944—after forty-three days of combat. Casualties were so high that some soldiers sarcastically remarked that the division commander “has a division in the field, a division in the hospital, and a division in the cemetery.”

Under Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley, American forces in the United States First Army launched Operation Cobra on July 25, 1944, to break through the German defenses at Normandy. Joseph Balkoski, a military historian and expert on American military campaigns in the European Theater in World War II, recounted the 29th Infantry Division’s mission in the operation in his book, *Beyond the Beachhead*. According to Balkoski, “First Army threw the 29th Division into the breach on July 28 with orders to cross to the west side of the Vire River at Saint Lô and follow a 2nd Armored Division column pushing south” to prevent a German counterattack into First Army’s vulnerable flank.

As part of this effort, Singer and his unit moved south of Saint Lô in the direction of the town of Moyon. On July 30, 1944, the Americans encountered fierce German opposition. According to accounts by Singer’s battalion executive officer, losses were steep that day. Casualties included Singer’s battalion commander (wounded) and company commander (killed). Singer, as a

machine gunner, was critical in directing fire at the enemy. Unfortunately, he was also a prime target for German soldiers and snipers.

In late August 1944, Singer's parents received word from the War Department that their son was missing in action in France. Then came word that Charles Wesley Singer was killed in action on July 30, 1944, near the town of Moyon, 10 miles southwest of Saint Lô, France. The Carroll County *Times* reported at the time that Singer was the first man from the Hampstead area killed in action in the war.

Singer was interred in a temporary military cemetery in France. After the war, the Army returned his remains to his parents for interment in the Wesley United Methodist Church Cemetery near Hampstead. Because of Singer's sacrifice, and the efforts of many like him, Allied forces overcame German defenses, liberated France, and eventually won the war in Europe.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings. Although historian Stephen Ambrose says that no exact figure is possible, U.S. military websites report that on D-Day alone there were 4,414 Allied deaths. Singer survived that bloody day, only to lose his life after 55 days fighting to rid the world of tyranny. Many thousands more would perish before the war's end. All service members who have lost their lives in the service of our nation—including Charles Wesley Singer—should be remembered this weekend.

Guest columnist Donald M. Graf, Jr. is a retired Army colonel and a nephew of Charles Wesley Singer. Col. Graf spent much of his career serving in the 29th Infantry Division.

Image #1 Source: Library of Congress Caption for Image #1: *Into the Jaws of Death: United States Troops Wading Through Water and Nazi Gunfire at Omaha Beach, Normandy France, June 6, 1944. Official U.S. Coast Guard photograph, retrieved from the Library of Congress.*

Image #2 Source: Singer Family Caption for Image #2: *Army Pfc. Charles Wesley Singer in 1942. Singer went ashore on D-Day, June 6, 1944, with the 29th Infantry Division. He was killed in action on July 30, 1944. (Singer family photo).*

Image #3 Source: Wikimedia Caption for Image #3: *Shoulder sleeve insignia of the 29th Infantry Division (the "Blue and the Gray Division"), worn by Charles Wesley Singer and members of his unit during World War II. Mobilized for service in 1941, the division was composed of units from the Maryland and Virginian National Guards.*