

OUR CENTURY

1944

AT A GLANCE



PD FILE

American assault troops huddle behind the protective front of a landing craft as it nears a beachhead on the northern coast of France on June 6, 1944.

Bells, whistles at home mark D-Day landing

Clanging bells signaled a rare "flash" at 3:33 a.m. on June 6. The Plain Dealer's teletypes clattered out the news:

"LONDON — EISENHOWER'S HEAD-QUARTERS ANNOUNCES ALLIES LAND IN FRANCE."

At 4:30 a.m., word reached Thompson Products Inc. on Clarkwood Rd., which woke neighbors by sounding its factory whistles. By 9 a.m., everybody knew. It was D-Day.

Sohio gas stations happily distributed yellow teletype copies of Eisenhower's Communiqué No. 1 announcing the landing and the message he had given his troops, which began: "You are about to embark on a great crusade. The eyes of the world are upon you and the hopes and prayers of all liberty-loving people go with you."

The Germans put up fierce resistance, but the Allies captured Bayeux, then Caen, then Cherbourg and, on Aug. 28, Paris. Soldiers talked of being home by Christmas. In the Pacific, the biggest naval battle in history, Leyte Gulf — fought the same weekend as the East Ohio explosion and fire — left the Japanese fleet crippled.

But in November, the Germans rallied, establishing a "bulge" into the Allied lines. The Japanese fought to the death for Pacific Islands. The war was going to go into its fifth year.

Things were looking up on the home front. In May, meat rationing ended except for some cuts of beef. In August, manufacturers again were permitted to make electric ranges and a few other appliances. Servicemen were coming home to Cuyahoga County at the rate of 500 a month.

Officials began to think about the postwar city. More than half of the nation's production was war goods, and Cleveland was one of the leading defense cities. Where would the veterans work, let alone the tens of thousands who had migrated to Cleveland to work in war plants? Where would all the people live? Mayor Frank Lausche appointed a Postwar Planning Council to look into the problems.

While campaigning in Cleveland for a third term in 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt had promised it would be his last. Now, on a platform of "Don't change horses in the middle of the stream," he ran for a fourth term, having dumped controversial Vice President Henry Wallace in favor of Missouri Sen. Harry Truman. A Gallup poll in late October gave the Republican candidate, New York Gov. Thomas E. Dewey, a narrow lead, but in the poll that counted, Roosevelt carried 38 states.

Lausche, meanwhile, ran for governor, the first ethnic and first Catholic to do so. He spent only \$27,000, turning down offers of funds from the Democratic Party and unions and campaigning mainly by shaking hands at state fairs. His opponent, Cincinnati Mayor James Garfield Stewart, spent \$988,000. Yet, while Republican Dewey won Ohio by 11,500 votes, Democrat Lausche won the governorship by 108,000. He went on to win four more terms as governor and two six-year terms as U.S. senator.

Player-manager Lou Boudreau won the American League batting title with an average of .327, and set a fielding record for shortstops with .978. But the Indians didn't have much else to offer, finishing in a tie for fifth.

The Rams still were absent from the football field, but in September came word they would have a rival after the war. Arthur "Mickey" McBride was awarded a franchise in a new league to be called the All-America Football Conference. Clevelanders didn't miss pro football: A crowd of 83,000 saw Ohio State beat Illinois 26-12 at the Stadium and 52,000 watched Cathedral Latin defeat Lincoln 33-0 in The Plain Dealer Charity Game.

Bill Cook had been promoted to general manager of the Barons and his brother Bun succeeded him as coach. The team won the Western Division of the American Hockey League behind the high-scoring line of Lou Trudel, Tommy Burlington and Les Cunningham. Alas, the Barons lost to the Buffalo Bisons in the championship round of the Calder Cup playoffs.

War-time controls were wearing thin: The Mechanics Educational Society defied orders to go back to work at five plants. The Army took over one of them, Cleveland Graphite Bronze. The Cleveland Transit Union came within five minutes of another illegal strike.

Thousands of gallons worth of gasoline coupons were found missing from Ration Board No. 6 in what turned into a national scandal.

Gas explosion rocks East Side



PLAIN DEALER FILE

After the explosion: Above, a scene on E. 61st St., which one reporter thought resembled a city bombed during the war. At left, concerned family and friends crowd around a hastily set-up information and registration desk to find out about their loved ones. It took 20 city fire companies to get the flames and smoke from the East Ohio gas explosion under control. The explosion and fire killed 130 people, and injured hundreds more.



Hundreds hurt and killed; rescuers help dig out survivors

By Fred McGunagle

The sky was fire. The Earth shook. Houses burst into flame. People turned into human torches. Flames leaped 2,800 feet in the air. The streets exploded, sending manhole covers spinning hundreds of feet into the sky.

For several days in 1944, part of Cleveland knew the terror cities in Europe and Japan were experiencing. At 2:40 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 20, the proud Slovenian neighborhood northeast of E. 55th St. and St. Clair Ave. was turned into an inferno by the explosion of a tank of liquefied natural gas at the East Ohio Gas Co.

"We ran out of the shop and the fire was right above us, about as high as a three-story house. The grass and the weeds in a vacant lot across the street were burning. I thought my shoes would melt right off the street," said a woman who had been in her husband's barber shop on St. Clair Ave.

"Suddenly, it seemed like the walls turned all red," said a woman from Carry Ave. "I looked at the windows and the shades were on fire. Just like that. The house filled up with smoke. Then I go out and see the fire all around."

Workers in nearby plants were knocked from their feet by the blast. Birds flying overhead fell dead. Telephone wires burst into flames. Telephone poles burned like candlesticks.

A worker at White Motor Co., half a mile away, said, "We saw a big balloon of fire spreading over the whole neighborhood. We ran there and saw neighbors helping men over the fence at the gas plant. Some had their clothes all blown off and their skin hanging in shreds. Fire was everywhere."

What The Plain Dealer described as "the greatest fire-fighting force ever assembled here" rushed to the scene. As it did, a second tank exploded, spewing burning debris on nearby homes. Smaller explosions were occurring all over the neighborhood as houses burst into flames from the inside; thousands of gallons of liquid gas had run into sewers, expanding in volume as it turned into gas, spread beneath the streets and seeped into buildings. The city ordered everyone from E. 40th St. to E. 105th St. to extinguish all fires.

Twenty of Cleveland's 30 fire companies responded, leaving only 10 to guard the rest of the city. The intense

heat kept them at a distance. Civilian defense forces, set up in case of a bomber attack, found their training invaluable. Medical teams from Lakeside and Huron Road hospitals sped to the area. The Red Cross sent 35 doctors and 50 nurses. Crile General Hospital sent 15 doctors and nurses and an ambulance. Victims were rushed to a dozen hospitals and a medical center set up at the WAVES headquarters in Hotel Allerton.

The fires all around lighted the scene in the evening as the firemen slowly fought their way toward the center of the inferno. Hundreds of people crowded the county morgue across from City Hall hoping for news of their relatives. The throng included wives of factory workers whose husbands had stayed to help but, with utilities out, couldn't call home. Coroner Samuel Gerber and his staff worked through the night as bodies arrived, most too badly burned for identification.

The Red Cross rushed cots to nearby schools for the people unable to reach their homes. Husbands and wives, kept from the fire area, frantically searched the shelters for each other and for their children. By morning, 83 people officially were

listed as dead with another 100 still missing. The Red Cross was seeking housing for 630 people.

Not until midday did firefighters bring the fires under control. Reporter William McDermott walked the burned-out area and was reminded of bombed cities in Europe: Men in military uniforms were carrying stretchers to ambulances, shop windows were blown out and "a sinister, tawny cloud of smoke and light" hung over the area.

Workers carefully emptied two 50 million-cubic-foot tanks, which somehow had held up despite the intense heat. Officials reassured residents that there was no danger, but loud thunder during the day brought a flurry of calls to newspapers from people who thought they had heard more explosions. Slowly, the list of missing grew smaller, though many still were feared dead in the ashes of their homes.

Some of the residents were allowed to return on Monday; a few found their houses untouched. There was a shortage of bread because nearby bakeries lacked gas. So did 39 war plants, some of which sent workers home. On Tuesday, the rest of the residents returned to salvage what they could.

Mayor Frank Lausche appointed a panel to investigate the disaster and urged the City Planning Commission to work out a plan for rebuilding.

Anton Grdina, president of the Slovenian American Bank, declared: "Our neighborhood has been turned into a hell. Now is the chance for the City Planning Commission to turn it into a paradise."

The final count showed 130 had died, one more than in the Cleveland Clinic disaster of 1929, but 44 short of the number killed in the 1908 Lakeview School fire in Collinwood. More than half, 73, were East Ohio employees. More than 200 people required hospital treatment, including 23 firefighters. Seventy-nine houses, two factories and more than 200 autos were destroyed, with 35 houses and 13 factories partially destroyed.

Windows had been blown out as far south as Superior Ave. Total damage was between \$6 million and \$8 million. East Ohio eventually paid \$3 million to property owners and a half-million dollars to its employees or their survivors. The investigating panel found that the tank that exploded first had been built a year earlier under wartime restrictions, which limited the amount of steel used; it concluded belatedly that natural gas storage tanks should not be in residential neighborhoods.

The area was rebuilt under Grdina's leadership and a number of those who had lost homes moved back. Only the area where the tanks stood was left. It is now Grdina Park.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.



PLAIN DEALER FILE

Workers remove debris in their hunt for bodies at the meter works unit of the East Ohio Gas Co. plant.

LOOKING AT A YEAR

Jan. 27: The U.S. government reveals that thousands of captured American soldiers died from cruel treatment at the hand of their Japanese captors in what becomes known as the Bataan death march.

Feb. 29: Gen. Douglas MacArthur's troops begin their assault on the Admiralty Islands.

March 19: Nazis begin a new round of terror in Hungary, dispatching thousands of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz.

April 9: Gen. Charles deGaulle assumes command of the French military forces.

June 4: Allied forces recapture Rome.

June 6: D-Day arrives as Allied forces invade the northern coast of France.

July 21: Democrats select Harry Truman as President Franklin Roosevelt's running mate.

Aug. 25: Allied troops liberate Paris.

Oct. 25: Making good on his

promise, MacArthur and his troops return to the Philippines.

Nov. 7: Roosevelt is re-elected to a fourth term, defeating New York Gov. Thomas Dewey.

Born: Rajiv Gandhi, Diana Ross, Michael Douglas, Angela Davis.

Died: German Gen. Erwin Rommel, American cinematographer Billy Bitzer, bandleader Glenn Miller.