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9-11-1998

## UA3/4/8/4 Radio Broadcast Transcript

Dero Downing

Dan Modlin

Jack Thacker

Edward R. Murrow

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**Western Kentucky University**  
**UA3/4 Dero Downing Papres**  
**Series 8 Interviews / Oral History**  
**Item 4 Radio Broadcast Transcript**

**Contact information:**

WKU Archives  
1906 College Heights Blvd.#11092  
Bowling Green, KY 42101-1092  
Phone: 270-745-4793  
Email: [archives@wku.edu](mailto:archives@wku.edu)  
Home page: <https://www.wku.edu/library/services/archives/>  
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**Biographical/Historical Note:**

The president's office was created in 1906. The search for the fourth president of WKU began with Kelly Thompson's resignation announcement May 21, 1969. Vice President for Administrative Affairs Dero Downing indicated that he would serve if asked. The Board of Regents elected him president on August 22, 1969. He served until his retirement in 1979.

Dero Downing was born September 10, 1921 at Fountain Run in Monroe County, Kentucky, and grew up at Horse Cave in Hart County. He enrolled at WKU in 1939 where he played basketball and earned both a bachelor's and master's degree. After serving in the Navy in World War II, he returned to Western as a mathematics teacher and coach at the College's Training School. He later became director of the Training School, college registrar, dean of admissions, dean of business affairs, and vice-president for administrative and business affairs. Upon his resignation as president in 1979 Downing became president of the College Heights Foundation, a position he held until his death on April 4, 2011.

**Description:** Dero Downing and Jack Thacker interviewed by Dan Modlin regarding the D-Day invasion. Includes recordings of Edward R. Murrow and an unidentified BBC correspondent from 1944.

**Date:** September 11, 1998

**Formats:** audiotape, wav file

**Subject Analytics:**

Audio recording	Modlin, Dan	Soldiers
British Broadcasting Corporation	Murrow, Edward R.	Thacker, Jack
D-Day	Normandy, France	United States. Army
Downing, Dero Goodman, 1921-2011	Oral history	United States. Navy.
Interviews	Radio broadcasting	World War II, 1939-1945
	Sailors	

**Digital Commons Classifications:**

History	Military and Veteran Studies	Radio
Journalism Studies	Military History	
Mass Communication	Oral History	

**Accession Information:** These records transferred to the WKU Archives from the President's Office in accordance with the records retention schedule.

**Access Restrictions:** none

**Preferred Citation:** UA3/4/8/4 Radio Broadcast Transcription, WKU Archives, Bowling Green, Kentucky, USA.

**Processing Information:** Transcription by Jeanne Ocampo, 2020.

# Oral History Recording List UA3.4.8.4 ~ Audiocassette

08/27/2020

Media ID	Side	Start time	Subject
Tape 1	1	00:00:11	<p><i>Dan Modlin: The midday edition continues, I'm Dan Modlin.</i></p> <p><i>1944 Edward R. Murrow recording: Earlier this evening, the [inaudible]. Again, those were explosions overhead.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:00:20	<p><i>DM: Before the Normandy invasion of World War II, much of the allied world learned about German bombing raids against the British through the voices of correspondents like Edward R. Murrow.</i></p> <p><i>1944 Edward R. Murrow recording: Just overhead now, the burst of the anti-aircraft fire. Still, the nearby guns are not working. And the search lights now are beaming almost directly overhead.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:00:40	<p><i>DM: But that invasion of Normandy changed the course of the war and the course of world history.</i></p> <p><i>1944 Edward R. Murrow recording: There they are. That hard, stony sound.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:00:52	<p><i>DM: June 6th, 1944 marked one of the most important military operations in history. The Normandy invasion which became known as D-Day involved more than 150,000 allied troops. Today and tomorrow, we will hear about the significance of D-Day and about a training exercise which lead up to D-Day. Dr. Dero Downing, the president emeritus of Western Kentucky University was involved in both operations and he gives us his first-hand account.</i></p> <p><i>Dero Downing: Exercise Tiger was the event which took place off the southern coast of England. It was on April 27, 1944. And we were not fully aware and obviously there were reasons that they could not make generally known, the fact that it was in preparation for the upcoming invasion of Normandy and D-Day. Exercise Tiger, as far as our participation in it, in the Navy aspect of it, was confined primarily to seven LSTs. An LST is landing ship tank. It is a large landing craft, 410 feet long and has the big bow doors with the ramp. Each of the ships had 600 troops with accompanying vehicles, tanks primarily. And it became apparent that there was going to be a practice landing. We were creeping down the coast of England off of Devon and our ship, LST 515, was leading the little convoy. I learned later that we were scheduled to have had a destroyer as an escort but it turned out it was only a small trawler type of vessel that the British provided for an escort down through there. In order to reach the designated landing point which was on Slapton Sands, the coast there off Devon, we were going very, very slowly. And long about midnight, surprise attack from German PT boats. They didn't call it that. They were very similar to our PT. It was a torpedo type boat. The first indication that we had potential trouble was the lookout on the bow of our ship indicated that there had been a torpedo crossing the bow. And then all of a sudden, it was pretty chaotic. Because in the dead of the night, surprise, the attackers were far better equipped to carry out their mission than we were to counter-attack.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:03:58	<p><i>DM: Western Kentucky University military historian, Jack Thacker.</i></p> <p><i>Jack Thacker: We were carrying out a series of operations, training operations, along the southern coast of England. Some of the units were engaged in this training operation and German E-boats happened to be in the area.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:04:13	<p><i>DM: Dero Downing says the German torpedo boats were able to move very quickly.</i></p> <p><i>DD: During this encounter, there were two LSTs that were sunk. Another LST had the stern virtually shot off of it with a torpedo. It was a tragic thing because as time went on, we learned that there were 749 lives lost that night. Most of them were Army personnel. Some Navy, of course with the ships that were sunk. And we were fortunate on the fact that keen (?), we had a tremendous compliment of officers. I wouldn't classify myself as being among them because the old-timers, I thought of them as old-timers. Our skipper, the captain of our ship, John Daw (?), was 27-years-old. But he had been in the Navy 10-years. He had been a chief quartermaster on a destroyer that had been sunk at Pearl Harbor. And as a quartermaster for a number of years, that gave him the opportunity to master ship handling and navigation. And he was a tremendous fellow along with it. And he was determined that our ship was going to pick up as many survivors as we possibly could.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:05:47	<p><i>DM: For years after the attack of the torpedo boats, information about Exercise Tiger remained classified. Military historian Jack Thacker says it was very important at the time of the D-Day invasion to maintain secrecy about all operations.</i></p> <p><i>JT: We had to put ashore a huge amount of men in a very limited area. And Germans of course occupied that shore line. They could move far more men, far heavier equipment, far more material into the area if they knew which one we were going to or the point which we</i></p>

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			<p>were going to invade. As a result of that, we chose Normandy because the beaches were not suitable for invasion according to the Germans. Plus there was no nearby port and we had to have a port. What the Germans didn't realize is that we manufactured our own, what were called mulberries and gooseberries. Mulberries were these huge concrete piers that we towed over. And gooseberries were concrete barriers that we sunk underneath the water to act as break waters.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:07:00	<p>Dr. Downing says in the hours which followed the attack on Exercise Tiger, it became clear that a tragedy had occurred.</p> <p>DD: It was a horrendous sight. As it became light enough in the early daybreak to see out across the waters there off of Slapton Sands, there were bodies floating. The experience was one that brings back a lot of recollections of tremendous courage on the part of a lot of people. Again, I wouldn't count myself as being among them because, as a young ensign, 22-years-old, my role was rather minor. But the Navy and Army personnel, most of the crewman on our ship were 18, 19, 20 years of age. And the tremendous courage which they displayed that night and then later throughout the weeks and months that followed the Normandy invasion. It was a tremendous experience to observe what took place. Some of the Army personnel lost that night were experienced, seasoned, military men. And it was very, very unfortunate that even if one had been killed that night it would have been sad, but to have had the death of so many fine military personnel was a sad occasion.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:09:00	<p>DM: Dr. Downing says the use of a particular type of life jacket contributed to the loss of life.</p> <p>DD: The Army personnel came aboard. They were issued a device that was very much like a large inner tube when it was inflated. It had, if you squeezed the front as it were intended to be when you went into the water, and moved them up under your arm pits, they inflated like a large inner tube under your arm pits. But so many of the Army people, because of the discomfort of the way they wore them and that sort of thing, they tend to have them loose around their waist, like a belt. And they of course were under extreme stress and pressure as they went into the water. And when they inflated, so many of those, it would only keep afloat the mid-section and the head the feet would be down. And of course, they had a lot of heavy gear on as well. The Navy had something called kapok life jackets. It's a big grey jacket that straps around, has a big collar. So a number of people were picked up and rescued that night because of the fact that they had better protection through the type of life jacket that the Navy normally and regularly used. But even those, the water temperature was 43 degrees. And if you stay in that water very long at that temperature, it's almost impossible to survive.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:10:51	<p>10:51 DM: Tomorrow, in the second part of our series on Exercise Tiger and D-Day, we will hear more from Dr. Dero Downing and Dr. Jack Thacker. The midday edition continues. This is Dan Modlin for Western's Public Radio.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:11:13	<p>DM: The midday edition continues. I'm Dan Modlin. The invasion of Normandy changed the course of World War II and helped to bring about the end Nazi Germany. As described by a BBC correspondent in the early morning hours of June 6th, the action was furious.</p> <p>1944 BBC Correspondent recording: Here we go again. Another plane's come over. [Sound of a plane engine and gun fire.] Looks like we're going to have a night tonight. Give it to 'em boys!</p>
Tape 1	1	00:11:39	<p>DM: Today, in the second segment of our two-part series, we hear the comments of Western Kentucky University president emeritus Dero Downing who served onboard a Navy LST at the Normandy invasion.</p> <p>1944 BBC Correspondent recording: Maybe a hit plane. There he goes, he got one.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:11:54	<p>DM: First, military historian Jack Thacker of Western Kentucky University talks about the magnitude of that June 6, 1944 military operation.</p> <p>JT: This is the greatest amphibious operation ever carried out. It was the largest number of ships involved. To give you an idea, the American Navy today has, I think, 335 ships commissioned in active duty. The American Navy alone had over 5,000 ships in this invasion. Along with the British Navy was Dutch auxiliaries that were the Royal Dutch Navy operating in exile, and a whole bunch of other auxiliary craft involved. And it was a gigantic force.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:12:37	<p>DM: Dr. Jack Thacker. As mentioned earlier, Dr. Dero Downing was among those involved in that huge amphibious operation.</p> <p>DD: What we started out of Plymouth, England and were being joined by ships of all types and kinds. Throughout the night before D-Day, you realized the importance of some of those that could, because of the mission for which they had been designed and built, could move into that beach and put those troops ashore. It was about seven o'clock in the morning when our LST 515 hit the beach at Omaha, on the Omaha Beach in the Normandy invasion. And I have great admiration for that bunch of troops we put ashore, 600 troops there that morning. A good many of them had already been through a lot of experience in Italy invasions at Anzio and Salerno. And some of them had been eating out of their helmets for two years and they</p>

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			<i>were tough fighting men.</i>
Tape 1	1	00:13:45	<p><i>DM: Dr. Thacker says it was no accident that experienced combat veterans were used in the invasion.</i></p> <p><i>JT: This was an invasion that we could not allow to fail. So what we did is we took the best divisions. The divisions that had performed the best in both North Africa and Sicily. A good number of them, and pulled them out and sent them to England to prepare for the invasion. Because remember, this was really the high-point of the European theater of operation. This was the major event as far as the Americans and the British were concerned in the war in Europe, that is, the Normandy invasion. Because once we got ashore and once we established a beach head, we were convinced that it was the beginning of the end.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:14:34	<p><i>DM: Dr. Downing says the wide-spread courage of those who fought at D-Day is among his fondest memories of the action.</i></p> <p><i>DD: I have tremendous admiration and respect for them and the paratroopers. All night long as we creeping across that English Channel, wave after wave after wave of bombers, B-17s, B-26s. And then there were the transport planes and glider that some of them were towing filled with soldiers who were going to jump out of that plane behind the lines. I have great respect and admiration for them because of their courage. And we were outfitted as a hospital ship. We remained dried out there on Omaha Beach over a period of a tide in order to take on casualties. And we, in our first trip back to England after D-Day, that some 24 - 36 hours later, we took 1,000 litter cases back. Most of them were paratroopers. And unless they were injured so severely they couldn't respond, most of them talked about getting back, getting patched up so they could go jump again.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:15:57	<p><i>DM: Dr. Downing says his LST was under fire.</i></p> <p><i>DD: We were, not to the extent that we feared might be the case. Each of the LSTs, and some of the other craft, had suspended above them, we had two, one at the bow and one at the stern, like a small blimp. It was on a steel cable and it was elevated to maybe four or five-hundred feet. And it was designed to keep planes from coming in and strafing. The air attack that might have been expected didn't come. Just a sortie now and then. But the entire focus was on how to get those troops ashore. And then how to supply them with whatever equipment was necessary in order to meet the resistance that was confronting them.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:16:54	<p><i>DM: Dr. Thacker agreed that Allied air superiority was a key in the D-Day invasion.</i></p> <p><i>JT: On the day that D-Day took place, we flew over 13,000 sorties. And the German's were only able to get up about 300 planes. So we just completely controlled the skies. That meant that they were not going to be able to move anything up except at night. And we were able to knock out the bridges, the rail system and so forth.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:17:21	<p><i>DM: Dr. Downing describes the emotion in the hours leading up to the D-Day invasion.</i></p> <p><i>DD: We didn't know what was going to occur really. We knew that it was a major build up. We knew we had the full load. We had the heavy hitters. But when we pulled out into the harbor, waiting the time that we were to weigh anchor and creep out into our position in this massive convoy, a chaplain came aboard. And the captain of the ship called together down on our tank deck all of the troops that were aboard and all of the ship's compliment, 110 seamen and officers. And he read our orders. And we knew then. And we didn't know until we were loaded. We were out in the harbor. Nobody could get ashore. And the chaplain came aboard and had a brief service with prayer and reaffirmed what was going to be taking place. It was sometime after dark that we eased out into the Channel. And as we observed, the same thing was happening at all of those ports along the south coast, southern coast of England. When we were several miles from the beach, you could see on the horizon like a burning inferno where these planes had bombed throughout the evening. And there were three big battle ships. As the sun came up and you looked out, you could just see ships in every direction of one kind or another. And off the coast, there were three big battle ships. And they were throwing those big salvos into the beach, into the shore. It was pretty apparent that this was it. It seemed to me that everyone simply went about whatever task they had been assigned and did their very best to carry out that assignment without any thought as to what the danger was. I think everyone simply wanted to do what was expected. We were fortunate at that point in time in our nation that I don't know of a single individual on our ship or elsewhere who was heard at any point in time, either leading up to D-Day, during the invasion, or the month that we were there afterward, who ever questioned why we were there.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:20:10	<p><i>DM: To put the importance of D-Day in perspective, Dr. Jack Thacker comments on what might have happened in World War II if D-Day had not succeeded.</i></p> <p><i>JT: Well that would have been a disaster because it would have prolonged the war probably another six-months to a year. We would have had to reconfigure our invasion force, rethink what we were going to do. And then, it also could have had political implications. I'm not sure either Churchill or Roosevelt would have been able to withstood the challenges of their political opponents if the D-Day invasion had failed.</i></p>

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Tape 1	1	00:20:45	<p><i>DM: Thacker says the ability to move men and equipment was a key to the victory.</i></p> <p><i>JT: We had the capability of moving huge amounts material. Within a few hours, we had landed thousands of men and hundreds of vehicles. And by the end of the second day, we had more than six divisions ashore, American divisions, plus three British divisions.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:21:09	<p><i>DM: A lot of Americans who participated in the invasion in Normandy didn't live to see June 7, 1944. Dr. Downing says he has great respect for those soldiers and for the others he served with at D-Day.</i></p> <p><i>DD: Like a giant rubber band that sort of binds us together because of the opportunity that we had to serve together.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:21:33	<p><i>DM: Dr. Downing says the experience was far different from one he had known as a youngster in Horse Cave, Kentucky.</i></p> <p><i>DD: It takes some time to adjust to the reality of where you are and what you are doing and what you know at some point your mission is going to be.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:21:52	<p><i>DM: In recent months, the movie Saving Private Ryan has reminded many people about the importance of D-Day. Dr. Downing believes that movie provides an accurate portrayal of the scene on the beach at Normandy. And like one of the main characters in that movie, Downing was one of three brothers seeing action in Europe.</i></p> <p><i>DD: I can imagine how a mother who was as loving as our mother was and our father was would look for that postman when she had three sons overseas. And we feel richly blessed that my brother, Alec and my brother, Dudley and I, all three made it back.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:23:38	<p><i>DM: Our special thanks the president emeritus of Western Kentucky University, Dr. Dero Downing. Our thanks also to Dr. Jack Thacker of Western's History Department. The midday edition continues. This is Dan Modlin for Western's public radio.</i></p>