

NJS Presents**Museums and Archives; Artifacts and Documents****In this Issue:*****NJ Company Aids D-Day Invasion*****By The Switlik Parachute Company**

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.173>

The world recently paused to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the historic D-Day landings that on June 6, 1944 began to liberate Europe from Adolf Hitler's bloody occupation. This edition of Museums, Archives, Artifacts, and Documents offers a peek into a corporate archive and explores the role one family-owned NJ company played in this momentous undertaking.

In 1907, Stanley Switlik emigrated from Poland and arrived at Ellis Island as a 16-year-old steerage passenger. While working at a variety of jobs from house painting to selling insurance and real estate, he purchased a small canvas and leather manufacturing company. The Canvas-Leather Specialty Company of Trenton was incorporated October 9, 1920, with his friends and relatives among the stockholders. The first products included collapsible hampers, golf bags, coal bags, pork roll casings, and one which would foretell a future in government contracting: leather mail bags manufactured for the United States Post Office Department. Today, one of the first of these leather mail bags is on display in the company's archives.

As "barn-storming" pilots of the day excited the public's imagination, the company began manufacturing pilot and gunner belts, designing flight clothing, and experimenting with parachutes. In the 1930s, with a new name, Switlik Parachute & Equipment Company became the largest manufacturer of parachutes in the country. Friends with many of aviation's pioneers,

Stanley outfitted the expeditions and record attempts of Amelia Earhart, Wiley Post, and Admiral Richard Byrd.

In 1934, Stanley Switlik and George Palmer Putnam, Amelia Earhart's husband, formed a joint venture and built a 115-foot-tall tower on Stanley's farm in Jackson Township, Ocean County, NJ. Designed to train airmen in parachute jumping, the first public jump from the tower was made by Ms. Earhart on June 2, 1935. Witnessed by a crowd of reporters and officials from the Army and Navy, she described the descent as "Loads of Fun!"

As war clouds grew, the firm received its present name, Switlik Parachute Company, Inc. and became a part of the "Arsenal of Democracy." In December of 1941, a small nucleus of



parachute manufacturers were called to a meeting and ordered by the Government to increase production 50-fold. Additional space in Trenton was acquired and a large work force trained. The company's productivity was so impressive that the War Department gave it the first of five Army-Navy "E" Awards in 1942.

The company was even intricately involved in the historic D-Day landings. In the days leading up to D-Day, Allied forces performed a series of operations to confuse Axis command and divert attention from the eventual landing at Normandy. The goal of "Operation Titanic" was to lead the Germans to believe the invasion of Europe would be near Pas de Calais and Norway. Operation Titanic was carried out June 5-6 by the Royal Air Force and Special Air Service, which dropped 500 dummy parachutists to deceive the German defenders into believing that a large force



had landed, drawing their troops away from the beachheads and strategic sites. Switlik Parachute Company, at this point in the war firmly established as one of the primary parachute providers to the U.S. government, was commissioned to assemble the dummies. Under a veil of secrecy, Switlik packed the fake paratroopers with a Switlik parachute, an inflation bottle, an explosive noisemaker to simulate gunfire, and a block of TNT to explode upon landing, destroying the dummy. The 500 dummy paratroopers, nicknamed Rupert, along with SAS officers, were dropped in three locations.

“Titanic I” was the simulated drop of an airborne division in the area to the north of the Seine river with drop zones near Yvetot, Yerville and Doudeville in the Seine-Maritime region and Fauville in the Eure region. “Titanic III” was the dropping of dummy paratroopers in the Calvados region near Maltot and the woods north of Baron sur Odon to draw German reserves away west of Caen. “Titanic IV” was the dropping of dummy paratroopers near Marigny in the Manche region and, as with “Titanic I,” was intended to simulate the dropping of an airborne division. Operation Titanic was probably the best-known operation of its kind, pulling the 352nd Infantry Division away from Omaha Beach, Gold Beach and the 101st airborne drop zones.

As the company’s parachutes were made out of silk, they formed an exclusive group called the Caterpillar Club. As Danielle Connelly, Consumer Marketing Manager for Switlik, explained to ABC News, “If you had to bail out of a plane and use a parachute to save your life, you are

eligible for application within this club.” The company keeps thousands of records for Caterpillar Club members, including some who jumped on D-Day.¹

At the climax of World War II, requirements dropped to zero and the company disposed of much of its parachute making machinery. This was not to last as in 1950 the Korean War began. Again, the leaders of the parachute industry were called to form the nucleus of the nation’s parachute production capacity. At the conclusion of the Korean War, surplus equipment was put in “moth balls,” to be used again during the Vietnam War.

Between all the military conflicts, the company continued the development of new products. In 1947, the “Mark II” life vest for the Navy was designed and produced. In 1949, its first inflatable one-man life rafts were developed and sold to the Navy. In 1951, a large quantity of 20-man life rafts were manufactured for the Air Force. During the Cold War, new parachute designs were developed for nuclear warheads, the space program, and aircraft deceleration. The company’s search for new products led to various types of inflatable life vests, inflatable baby cots, Arctic tents and tent liners.

Following the end of the Vietnam War, it became obvious that the company’s future could not depend on parachutes. During the 1960s and 1970s, the management of Switlik Parachute Company aggressively pursued the development of new inflatable products and markets for them. The products reflected a new emphasis on the “commercial” market and included F.A.A. approved inflatable life vests and life rafts, as well as U.S.C.G. approved life rafts. As the American military modernized, so were the “Military Specification” products Switlik manufactured. They included “anti-G” suits, anti-exposure suits, and advanced designs of inflatable life rafts and life vests.

¹ To apply for membership to the Caterpillar Club, or to inquire about records of a loved one, call Switlik Survival Products at (609) 587-3300.

Today, the diversification of products and markets, including the launch of new division, Switlik Comfort, insures the Switlik Parachute Company's future. Still a family-owned company, all products are manufactured at their 85,000 square foot facility located in Trenton.