

# D-Day exhibit opening soon at Alden Library

By Kirsten Abbey

*For J2311*

Sequestered away on the fifth floor of Ohio University's Alden Library is a room with sizable see-through cases. Each one is packed with memorabilia from World War II. On one side, two weathered uniforms are featured, and there are dated papers and posters on the other side. There are display cases in the middle of the room, and inside of it is a pair of wizened binoculars. The focal point of the room is the stately wooden desk paired with a large leather chair. On the wall behind the desk is a massive, hand-drawn map of the English Channel. This is the Cornelius Ryan room.



*The visitor viewpoint of the room upon entry is pictured. The chair, desk and map all belong to Cornelius Ryan. Photo Credit: Kirsten Abbey*

The Ryan Room is an exhibit that will be opening up in the Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections. Co-curators, Greta Suiter and Alex Hines, have been working on putting this space together for two semesters. The curators described the

process of putting the room together as a long one, with lots of sorting through papers, pamphlets and historical souvenirs. "This room has seen miraculous change over time," said Bill Kimok, the university archivist and records manager. "Greta has done incredible work with this thing. It used to be a really boring room." Suiter, the manuscripts archivist for the Mahn Center, said the room was expected to be completed by the beginning of May. According to Hines, the opening reception being hosted by the E.W Scripps School of Journalism will take place on June 6. The exhibit will be open to the public Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.

The exhibit revolves around World War II, including war correspondence, helmets, newspapers and items that belonged to members of the Military Police, such as a diary. When giving a tour of the room, Suiter said, "We're gonna talk about D-Day and [Operation] Market Garden, but then also some local Athens connections and the Pacific," and that it will be "a little bit of a lot of stuff."

The description that Hines gave was similar, "A lot of this stuff isn't just from the Ryan collections, and we want to hit as many collections that we had as possible." To incorporate variety into the display, there are some outsourced items that belong to the Southeast Ohio Historical Center. For the collections they had already acquired, Hines credited Doug McCabe, who was the former manuscript archivist of the Mahn Center.

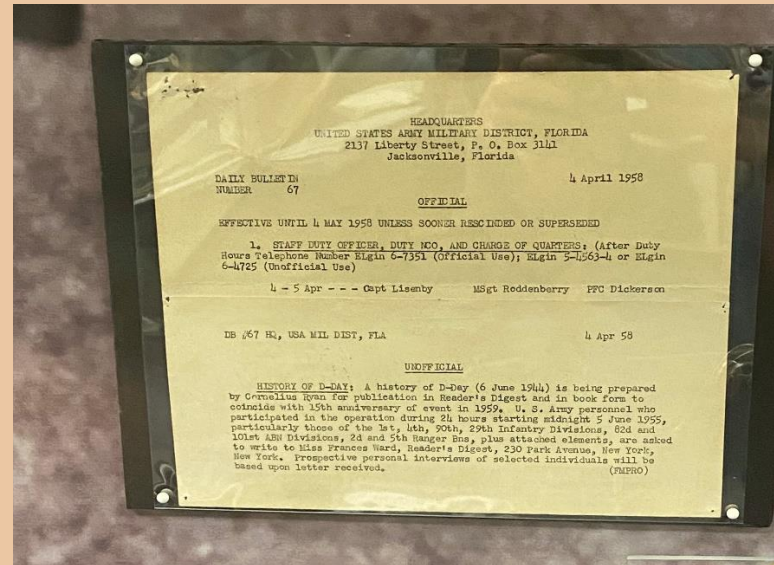
One of the pre-existing collections was the aforementioned Cornelius Ryan Collection of World War II Papers. This collection contains all of the primary documents accumulated by Irish journalist

Cornelius Ryan when he was conducting interviews for his book centered on D-Day. The papers were donated to Ohio University in 1981 by Ryan's wife, Kathryn Morgan Ryan. With thousands of entries, the collection itself is massive. In 2021, a forum was held by Suiter on the transcription of the interviews, and they are now available through the Ohio University library database.

Ryan was one of the journalists to witness and report on the storming of Normandy Beach. He would go on to write his book, "The Longest Day," which was published in 1959. Ryan's novel focused on the accounts of the veterans who experienced the day. In order to find witnesses, he sent out advertisements asking for soldiers who were a part of the invasion in Normandy. Ryan and his associates conducted hundreds of interviews, and they make up the aforementioned Cornelius Ryan Collection of World War II Papers. By reaching out to veterans, Ryan was able to obtain information not only about what happened that day, but also the thoughts and feelings of those who experienced it.

In the interviews, Ryan did not shy away from asking difficult questions, and in response the veterans gave honest answers. An example of this comes from an excerpt from an interview that is a part of the Ryan collection. Leroy A. Bassett, who was a private during D-Day, was prompted with the question "Do you recall any incident, sad, or heroic, or simply memorable, which struck you more than anything else?" Bassett replied, "I will always remember, the morning of the invasion, before we landed, I slipped up on deck of the ship. There was a [Lieutenant] there also. As far as you could see, were ships. It was more ships than one could start to count and the Lt. told me to take

a good look before I had to go back down in the ships, as never



*One of Cornelius Ryan's advertisements asking for D-Day veterans' stories is pictured. Photo Credit: Kirsten Abbey*

again in my lifetime would I see so many ships or such an occasion as this again. This stuck with me because this Lt. was killed that very day."

Hines attributes Ryan with pioneering narrative journalism by employing methods that emphasized the stories of others. Narrative journalism is a form of reporting that emphasizes storytelling to the extent that it is almost literary. Hines said that Ryan's use of first-hand perspective when writing is what made him influential in the field of journalism, "His first book, *The Longest Day*, from 1959, was really the steppingstone [for] this next generation of military historian authors and writing. Just the depth of research and the fact that it showed the human side from all sides of the conflict."

The use of storytelling in work enthralled people, "One of the neat things about this World War II collection, Cornelius Ryan's that came out in his writing, that

## Cornelius Ryan Career Timeline

1941

Ryan begins his journalistic career in London as a copy boy for Reuters.

1943

Ryan begins writing for the Daily Telegraph. His reporting surrounded the ongoings of Ireland.

1944

The Daily Telegraph sends Ryan to observe and report on the storming of Normandy, commonly referred to as D-Day.

1950

Ryan begins working in the U.S at the publication Collier's.

1959

Ryan publishes his first war history book, regarding D-Day, "The Longest Day." He uses the testimonies from veterans as a centric point, and the book became a best seller, then a movie.

1966

Ryan publishes his second book, "The Last Battle."

1974

Ryan publishes "a Bridge Too Far," while he battles cancer. This novel also became a movie.

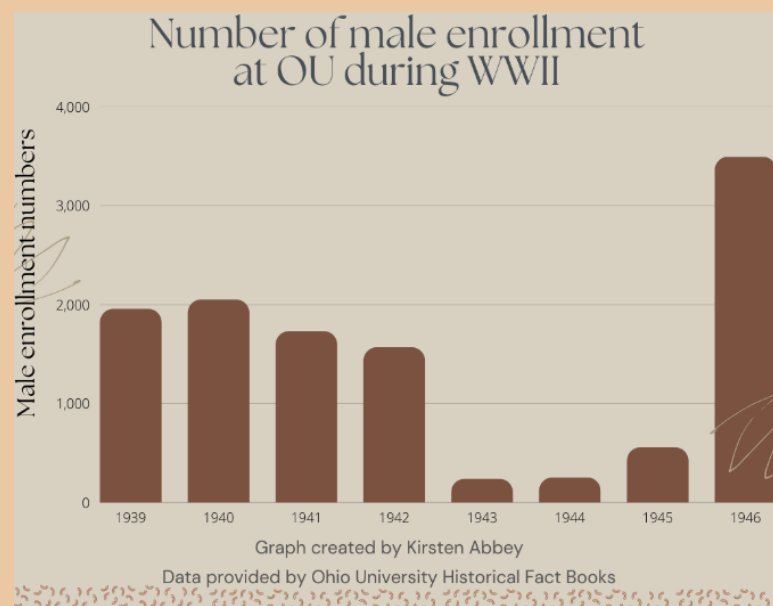
1979

"A Private Battle" is published, a book cowritten by Ryan's wife, Katherine. It focuses on his struggle with cancer.

Graphic: Kirsten Abbey

there's a way that something actually happens and there's the way that people observe it happening. They told all their stories. He's got thousands of people talking about it from their perspectives," Kimok said. Ryan's book became a national bestseller and would eventually be adapted into a film.

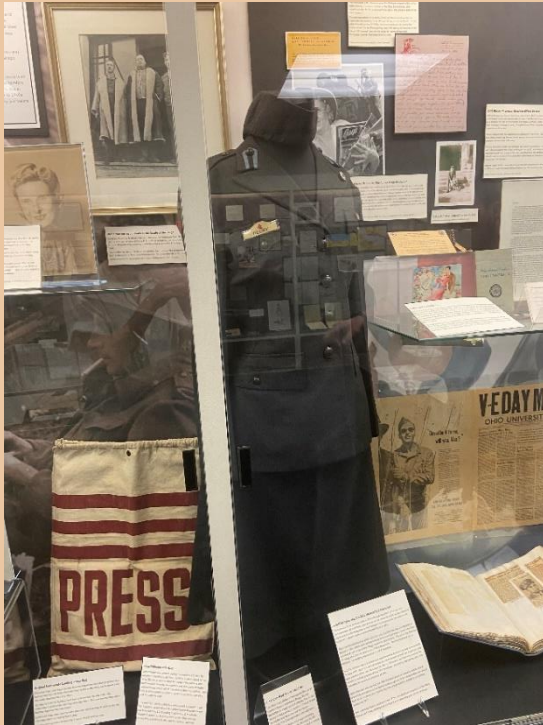
Athens, like most of the country, was impacted by World War II. The enrollment of men at Ohio University dropped as many students and professors enlisted. The campus had to accommodate for the war, "When the G.I. bill came in, they had to build a new building for the administration to help process all the new students that were coming in," Kimok said.



In an effort to integrate the history of Athens, John Wilhelm's belongings also have a dedicated section of the Ryan Room. Wilhelm was the founding dean of the College of Communication at Ohio University. Wilhelm was a friend of Cornelius Ryan as well as a war correspondent. Ryan received his honorary doctorate from Ohio University due to his friendship with Wilhelm according to Hines.



Their connection was also the reason that the Ryan papers were donated to Ohio University. The uniforms on display belong to Wilhelm and his wife.



*Peggy Wilhelm was married to John Wilhelm and was a member of the Red Cross. According to Hines, the two were introduced by Ryan. Photo Credit: Kirsten Abbey.*

Like many of the artifacts in the Ryan Room, John Wilhelm's helmet comes with an anecdote that the archivists are fond of. "My favorite story about the helmet is that it came back in perfect shape but now it has a big dent in it," Kimok said. "It looks like a war wound but it wasn't it was actually his kids messing around on go-carts or something and put a dent in it."

Although the content of the exhibit may be unfamiliar to some visitors, the archivists want people to come away with a deeper understanding of the elements of World War II. "I would love for people to just have a wider knowledge of what the conflict was about because a lot of people will just watch *Saving Private Ryan*, or the *Band of Brothers*, which are wonderful pieces of film.

But that's not what the war always was. A lot of this exhibit talks about a lot of the different aspects of the war," Hines said. Guests will be able to write in a book about their opinions regarding the Cornelius Ryan Room or stories they themselves have about the war.

Miriam Intrator, the rare books archivist, describes the Mahn Center archivists' procedure as one of re-evaluating material through a new lens. "We purposefully try to collect artist books that talk about some of the subjects and topic areas that are important to all of us today but that you don't so easily find in the historical materials," Intrator said. "Issues around identity, sexuality, environmental concerns, political, social justice." The Cornelius Ryan Room took almost nine months to complete, but soon it will be open for people to come and reflect on their perceptions of the history of World War II.



*This map belonging to Ryan is hanging in the Ryan room. According to Kimok, students guess that it is Lake Eerie, but it is actually the English Channel. Photo Credit: Kirsten Abbey*

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