

The Cornelius Ryan Collection of World War II Papers

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My country can never again afford the luxury of another
Montgomery success.

BERNARD, The Prince of the Netherlands,
Interview with Cornelius Ryan for the book *A Bridge Too Far*

The quotation above is just one of thousands of golden nuggets contained in the collection of research files of reporter, journalist and author Cornelius Ryan (1920–1974). This native Irishman was one of the first writers on military subjects to go beyond using official records and the reminiscences of high-ranking commanders by contacting common soldiers and civilians in order to access their personal experiences of war. Along with his skill as a writer, the anecdotes they provided him with “humanized” his books, made them best sellers and turned two of them into films. And—to prove their longevity—*The Longest Day* (1959), *The Last Battle* (1966) and *A Bridge Too Far* (1974) are still in print while the films are still shown several times a year on American television.

The Ryan Collection, housed at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, is the most heavily used collection at the Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections. Queries come in from students and faculty on campus, from researchers throughout the U.S. as well as from overseas, especially Europe. They range from relatives and descendants to casual and amateur historians to professional academicians. They ask for just a few pages from a questionnaire to dozens of pages of documents or photographs. What they all seem to want are the stories that get at the pathos of war and conflict.

This is because the Ryan Collection is one of a few archival collections related to the Second World War to house the memories of ordinary people caught up in unordinary times. Just consider these statistics:

The longest day

	American	British	Canadian	French	German	Total
People	748	212	121	20	43	1144
Questionnaires	677	134	108	0	0	969
Interviews	36	64	12	19	41	172
Accounts	12	5	1	0	0	18
Diaries	2	3	0	0	2	7
Plus 100 Photographs						

The last battle

	American	British	French	Ger. Civilian	Ger. Military	Russian	Total
People	280	75	11	158	131	35	690
Questionnaires	256	33	6	64	56	0	415
Interviews	83	34	8	143	91	28	387
Accounts	0	11	0	10	14	9	44
Diaries	2	4	2	12	6	0	26
Plus 838 Photographs							

A bridge too far

	American	British	Canadian	Dutch Civ.	Dutch Mil.	German	Polish	Total
People	452	426	1	271	14	66	12	1242
Questionn	417	422	1	250	14	52	11	1167
Interviews	69	142	0	130	7	40	8	396
Accounts	12	13	0	17	1	3	0	46
Diaries	2	17	0	24	1	4	0	48
Plus 981 Photographs								

As these figures show, for the three books Ryan had some kind of contact with over 3,000 people and he gathered just under 2,000 photographs. Plus, there are dozens of maps, copies of official documents, manuscripts, correspondence, screenplays, scrapbooks and articles. In addition, there are files containing materials from Ryan's entire career as a war correspondent,