

Pioneer Parachute stories: Changing from silk to nylon, Adeline Gray, and Robert Hillman.





Notes by Susan Barlow, June 2019

Pioneer Parachute was founded in 1938 in Manchester by Cheney Brothers silk manufacturers. Cheneys had been supplying silk to parachute manufacturers, and then began its own parachute-making operation in the former Velvet mill along Forest and Elm Streets. They made silk parachutes there, switching to nylon during World War II, when raw silk wasn't available from Asia. Historical Society member Jim Reuter has spoken at the History Center about various aspects of Pioneer, where he worked for 53 years and is the unofficial historian. In the pictured (below) article from the June issue of *Connecticut Magazine*, Jim is quoted talking about the changeover to nylon parachutes, and about Adeline Gray, who test-jumped the nylon parachute from 2,500 feet at Brainard airport.

To read the article, go to <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/ODN/ConnecticutMag/#> and click "Back issues, search," for the June issue. The article is on page 200, so you'll have to hop to the back. Or try this link: https://www.connecticutmag.com/history/how-a-connecticut-company-s-parachutes-helped-launch-d-day/article_0b628ae0-77f1-11e9-a3b2-8390e8ec8a6c.html

Another great Pioneer story in the article is that of Manchester native Robert Hillman, one of 13,000 paratroopers who jumped into Normandy in the June 1944 D-Day invasion. An NBC reporter asked Hillman why he was so confident in his parachute, and Hillman responded, "Because my mother works for Pioneer Parachute Co., and her initials are on my chute." Hillman was a member of the 101st Airborne Division. Thanks to Karen Costantini for bringing the magazine article to our attention. Karen's father was Robert Hillman; her grandmother was the parachute inspector. Karen said, "He was in the first plane to Normandy, was interviewed by reporters, and his story about his mother being an inspector for Pioneer was made public by reporters that were also on that plane." By the way, Karen's grandfather, Ronald Hillman, worked at Case Brothers paper mill in Manchester.

Pioneer eventually moved to South Windsor, where it still makes parachutes. It's now owned by Safran Aerospace.

 <p style="text-align: center;">Article in the June 2019 edition of <i>Connecticut Magazine</i>.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Jim Reuter, spoke about Pioneer at the Historical Society's annual dinner on May 2, 2014.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Adeline Gray, first significant test jumper of a nylon parachute, June 1942 at Brainard Field in Hartford.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Robert Hillman (1924-1993), saw his mother's initials on the Pioneer parachute he jumped with on D-Day, 1944.</p>
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