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Posted June 2009

Sixty-five years ago, June 6, 1944, I had just turned 19 and found myself in a forty foot landing boat headed for Omaha Beach, Normandy. As Combat Engineers our assignment was to destroy the mined steel obstacles that prevented larger ships from discharging troops and supplies in shallow water. We had been circling twelve miles out in the English Channel waiting for the right tide, we had to be able to see our targets and even then working in the vicious waves made it nearly impossible to stay upright. Omaha Beach was about four miles across and a hundred yards to our left the boys from Bedford had already been pounded to death by machine guns. More than 25,000 young men took part in the first day of the invasion and for thousands it was their last day.

Before we could blow up an obstacle we had to remove the soldiers seeking shelter from the guns of the Germans that were well protected up on top of the bluff. The beach had not been bombed sufficiently to provide sheltering craters so the advance from the boats was across open flat stony ground. German 88 artillery rounds exploded overhead taking a heavy toll. The storm upended small landing boats, hundreds drowned, pulled down by their heavy equipment, bodies floated everywhere.

Our last meal had been 30 hours ago, the invasion had been stalled 24 hours by weather and we were not allowed to leave the boats. We needed sleep but that was not to be for nearly three days. I don't remember being on shore for anything during that time. Our canteens were empty and a few soldiers were assigned to fetch water and what food was available. There were no latrines or toilets within half a mile but swirling channel salt water kept us, and any wounds, more than clean. There were endless ships waiting their turn to hit solid ground...the noise was overpowering and hell could not have been worse than those days. But there was eleven more months of war yet to come and a good part of it just as appalling.

There was a time, we learned much later, when General Bradley was ready to call the invasion off, abandoning those already committed. The British had faced such a dilemma at Dunkirk but the majority was rescued when boats of every description braved the channel and the Germans that had driven them nearly into the sea. But somehow those that made it across the wide beach on D-Day had enough punch left to prevail. As more Engineer groups came ashore we were able to join the rush across France.

Another date not forgotten by those serving in Europe is May 8, 1945, the day our war ended. We awoke that morning near the bank of the Elbe River, Germany, and it was unusually quiet, no artillery, just a few of our planes in the air and they were close to the ground as though they wanted to warn us about something. We shook awake our radio man to find out what was going on, or not going on; it was as they say, "all over but the shouting." And shout we did...with the Russians. They were on the other side of the river. We were told not to go, some politics involved, but seeing them was tempting and

as we approached them they seemed friendly enough. The British soldiers did not join us...believing their Queen thought celebrating with tea was apropos. We declined their teakettles in the interest of sampling real jugs of vodka. It was a wild time. continued

Now most of those army three years has slipped away, names of fellow soldiers are difficult to conjure, faces fading, most unpleasant incidents forgotten. But I still think all young males would benefit from a year or so of basic training under the hard stare of an old cadre military man. There they would discover discipline, responsibility, and hard knocks...it helped me deal with life.