

War Era Story Project 2012

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Age: Not given

My husband Jim passed away six years ago but I would like to share his story. He was an ex prisoner-of-war and belonged to the National Ex Prisoner of War Organization. The chapter he belonged to had members who would attend classes in different schools around the Cincinnati area to tell them their stories. The enclosed is the story he had to tell.

I graduated June 1943 and was drafted September 1943. After basic training, I was sent to England to join the 29th Infantry. We went by ship the northern route to England to avoid the German submarines. The seas were so rough most everyone was seasick and could not eat. I found that I could eat when on night watch and couldn't see the high waves.

We were put with the 29th Division as replacements made up of men from Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania and a former National Guard Unit who were to be part of the D-Day invasion. Thirty-five of the men were from Bedford, Virginia, a small farming community of only about 3,200 people. About a month and a half after D-Day, the people of that community learned they had lost 22 of their 35 men. This was the biggest loss of service men per capita population from any community.

We were with the Navy off the southern coast of England at Slapton Beach, practicing getting off the ships to smaller landing craft, in addition to training in different types of artillery. We went onto the beaches of Normandy with the first wave, June 6, 1944m, about 6:30a.m. Our position was on Omaha Beach. There were so many ships, barrage balloons and aircraft, it looked as if we could walk back to England. In fact there were 5,000 ships, 11,000 planes, and 150,000 servicemen.

Fortunately, our landing craft got up quite close to the beach. Others dropped their soldiers off too soon and they were in the water over their heads, so with 60# packs on their backs, they drowned. Many of the tanks also sank to the bottom. There were 6- to 7-foot waves, so the small crafts were tossed about. The huge guns on the battleships were so powerful bombarding the shore that they caused the large ships to rock, almost capsizing the smaller boats.

Between the high and low water marks along Omaha Beach, the Germans had placed three ranks of obstacles. The first ran the length of the beach, approximately 250 yards out from the high water mark. It consisted of steel gate-like structures 10 feet high that were placed unevenly, making it hard for landing craft to avoid them. Lashed to the uprights were mines that would explode if hit by the boats.

Closer in, heavy logs with contact mines secured on top were driven into the sand at an angle so the top part faced seaward.

One of the men I met a year or so ago was a coxswain on one of the landing craft. He stated after viewing Saving Private Ryan that the first 30 minutes of that movie was just as he remembered it. The only thing he said was not right in the opening scene was that the logs in the sand were facing the beach instead of the sea. Until I saw the movie I didn't realize what I had gone through because I was so focused on getting off the beach.

The third obstructions were about 130 yards from the high water line. These barriers of three or more steel rails crossed at the center and embedded in the sand were known as "hedge hogs." These could puncture the bottom the landing craft. If the men were lucky enough to get past them, there were strands of barbed wire and thousands of buried mines. If you made it across the beach, there were 180-foot cliffs where the Germans were entrenched, pounding the beaches with mortars and machine guns.

Being tossed about I was seasick again. Most of the men were in their 20's and 30's, I was 18. The captain thought it may be less rough in the rear so had me move up. When the landing ramp went down and everyone raced for the beach, I forgot my ammo. By the time I went for my ammo and reached the ramp, it was being raised and I was pitched into the sea. Fortunately, we were in about four feet of water. However, I turned and cussed him out. Naturally he wanted to be away from shore as soon as possible.

We were expected to be off the beach within a couple of hours, but we were still there 2 to 3 hours later, attempting to work our way above the cliffs. Eventually, we realized so many men and officers of our unit never made it so, we just joined up with whoever was moving on. We fought our way along the roads for miles inland, past hedgerows so thick tanks could not penetrate them. My 19th birthday, four days after D Day occurred, was on the way.

I remember another soldier in my unit also had the name of Blake. He said to me: "don't goof up, I don't want to be embarrassed." On the march into France, he disobeyed orders, left the road and sat down on a land mine. We made it almost into the town of St Lo, which was a large communication center for the Germans. They were all over the hills surrounding the town and we walked into a large unit of them. The corporal, our only officer said surrender so we had to follow orders. I was now a prisoner of war.

From then on, after a short stay in a camp, we were marched or were stuffed into box cars (which were sometimes strafed by our own planes as they thought the trains were carrying German materiel). We were labor groups walking through France and the Sudetenland, most of it through the coldest winter in many years. We worked burying vegetables to be preserved during the winter, pushed trams carrying rock and coal out of strip mines, chopped glass out of ovens in a glass factory, and chopped ice into blocks on the rivers for the ice houses.

About nine months later, marching with the Germans as they tried to stay ahead of the Americans through Czechoslovakia, another prisoner and I managed to escape. We hid behind bales of wool during

after an overnight stay in a wool factory of a small Czech town and were found later the next morning by the townspeople. With someone who worked in the underground for the Americans, we were taken to stay with a Czech family until the end of the war, when the American soldiers came marching through.

One night, while living with the Czech family, German officers asked if they could sleep overnight upstairs where I and two others were sleeping. The officers were asked to sleep in the basement, as the upstairs wasn't large enough for them in addition to their own family. They must have been unusually sympathetic officers to agree, or we may have been POWs again. When the American Army came through town, we identified ourselves and went with them to Camp Lucky Strike. While waiting in the chow line, I passed out. It was found that I had blood poisoning running up my leg. On the ship back to the States, I was in a hospital ward. During this time I had my 20th birthday. Not too much better than my 19th, as I was overlooked for my dinner.